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**The Poetics of Site:  
Reading the Spaces of Experimental  
US Women Poets**

**Claire Hurley**

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### Introduction: Locating Sites of Agency

With this more substantial shelter about me, I had made some progress toward settling in the world. This frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystallization around me, and reacted on the builder

—Thoreau, *Walden* 57-58

The architectural dwelling is not merely something that we inhabit, but something that inhabits us

—Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior* 5

Men have no trouble claiming a place, say a whole city, while women seem content with a room of their own

—Elaine Equi, interview with Susan Gevirtz, Susan Howe Archives, 201  
Box 69, Folder 6

In July 2013 I found myself on the doorstep of Lorine Niedecker's tiny one room cabin in rural Wisconsin. A true country backwater, Blackhawk Island lies at the intersection of the Rock River and Lake Koshkonong — a varied terrain of rich florals, ferns and oak trees. Strolling around this lush woodland, the wildlife of Niedecker's poetry came alive: I heard the 'noisy' birdsong of herons and sandhill cranes, saw the sunlight dance through willow trees, and experienced the shifting watery world of spring floods ('I rose from marsh mud', *Niedecker: Collected Works* 170). But what struck me most was the isolation of the Blackhawk Island community from the neighbouring town of Fort Atkinson and how the beauty of the immediate environment could not mask the poverty of the working class folk that still survived there.<sup>1</sup> My generous tour guide Ann Engelman, from the Friends of Lorine Niedecker group, confirmed that not much had changed on the island since the poet had died in 1970. Most of the buildings were dilapidated or derelict. The few remaining residents were determined, like the poet, to stay there.<sup>2</sup> Upon entering her cabin, its size and rustic interior were startling. Whilst none of Niedecker's belongings remained, the brick chimney still stood awkwardly in the centre of the room and there were floodwater marks still visible on the exterior walls. Despite its meagre appearance, I knew that this room was somehow sufficient for the poet to write in. Witnessing her writing

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<sup>1</sup> Blackhawk Island is over four miles from Fort Atkinson, a distance that Niedecker would walk everyday during her years as a hospital cleaner.

<sup>2</sup> As Niedecker's biographer Margot Peters makes clear, the poet was wedded to Blackhawk Island for her whole life: 'Even when marriage took her to Milwaukee for six years, she camped in apartments she never considered home' (8).

conditions first-hand only reinforced my wonder: *how* did Niedecker compose such daring and original poetry from within *this site*?



Photograph of the exterior of Lorine Niedecker's cabin on W7309 Blackhawk Island Road, Wisconsin. Taken July 2013.



Photograph of the interior of Niedecker's cabin, with the main picture window looking out onto the maple trees outside. Taken July 2013.

To imagine, to conjure and to construct one's own creative space has been the task of women writers since Virginia Woolf's pivotal account of the female literary tradition in *A Room of One's Own*. While she claimed back in 1929 that, 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write', the specifics of that writing space — how it functions both materially and in shaping the writing produced there — has yet to be explored in twentieth century poetic practice (6). Following on from Woolf's provocation, this thesis examines how three female poets — Lorine Niedecker, Barbara Guest and Susan Howe — inhabit specific writing sites. In so doing it asks the following questions. What does it mean for a poet to occupy a certain kind of space? How can the work be read as generative or representative of such a site? What does their rendering of such spaces reveal about the topology of the female American avant-garde? By attending to the particulars of Niedecker's cabin, Guest's studio and Howe's archive as compositional sites, my work considers the intersections between lived, imagined, and textual spaces. I argue that sustained attention to the sites of writerly composition will catalyse a richer sense of what it means to inhabit poetic space.

This thesis started its life as an interrogation of literary space from a different vantage: through the social. It began by considering how the experimental female poet positions herself within and against her (male-dominated) avant-garde community. As Ann Vickery remarks in her seminal work, *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing*: 'for a woman poet, the question of position-taking is heavily loaded' (49). In her book, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, Maggie Nelson outlines the reasons behind this, claiming:

Men lead movements and argue with each other over the present and future of poetry, ensuring that they all get more space in the so-called discourse. It's like they're still doing all the real thinking. We're geniuses, they say, and then go back to arguing with each other... It's also a fact that the ways in which poetry gets published... not to mention the whole idea of a literary movement, the academy, the avant-garde, are all male forms.

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What quickly emerged in my research on US women poets was a familiar narrative of marginality, of resistance to patriarchal codes, of loss and critical

neglect.<sup>3</sup> In *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*, Elizabeth A. Frost concurs, stipulating: '[Experimental] women poets have so often felt silenced and have so often been excluded from a place in American literary history' (xvii). But, as the preeminent feminist critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis powerfully argues, 'What alters that story is a feminist emphasis on the agency of writers, on the choices (even among narrow options...) that allow a person to construct an oeuvre' ('The Anonymous'). Rather than privilege male literary theory, read these female poets against their more famous male counter-parts, or as peripheral to avant-garde movements, I wanted to find a route into the underlying agency and autonomy of these writers. As Alicia Ostriker posits in her groundbreaking study, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, 'women's poetry... has a history. It has a terrain' (9). My approach to mapping the terrain of female poetic spaces was to consider the experimental female poet on her own terms.

My thesis attempts to encounter these poets on their own ground — in their own sites of occupancy. It argues that for the female experimental poet in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the compositional site — namely the workroom that the poet occupied — functions as a critical foundation for the evolution of her poetics. It is in this space that poetic female agency can be located: it acts as an autonomous zone for imaginative freedom and a site for generating female possibility through writing. As Guest articulates, '...having this studio has given me a "form" — my own place' (Guest Archives. Uncat MSS 402, Box 25). By situating the poet in her own compositional space of writing, often-elusive abstract poetic practices are localised within actual, physical workspaces. This draws attention towards the quotidian specificity of inhabiting a writing room, but also to the metaphysical space generated through the processes of inhabiting the page. While I attend to a broad set of concerns around the gendering of real and poetic spaces, the specificity of each poet's site is testament to an anti-essentialist feminist discourse, which resists formulaic binary structures. I argue that each poet 'rejects the notion of an essential, shared female identity' and instead critiques the gendered cultural landscape in which she finds herself (Frost *xii*). Niedecker,

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<sup>3</sup> Contributing to a reading of Niedecker as an ignored figure of Objectivism, Guest as wrongly marginalised in accounts of the New York School and Howe as an outsider to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing felt unfittingly pessimistic, and left little room for promoting female poetic agency.

Guest and Howe are distinctive poets, who operate at different moments of the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century to reveal diverse literary and political concerns. What these three female poets share is a passion for linguistic experiment, an investment in shaping literature of female potentiality, and, as this thesis will establish, a keen rendering of their own particular *poetics of site*.

\*                      \*                      \*

The topography of the poetic site has still to be fully conceptualised. Lytle Shaw began tracking the significance of US poetic sites in his 2013 book *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics*. Shaw chronicles how avant-garde poetry in the 1960s and 1970s moved away from an investment in actual places, locations and sites, and towards ‘language itself as a site’ (236).<sup>4</sup> While I am indebted to his study for promoting the visibility of actual worksites in American poetry, Shaw’s study privileges the methodology of poetic ‘fieldwork’ — particularly as on-site ethnography/ historiography — as he presents site-based poetic work centred on non-domestic, foreign locations (Olson’s Mayan ruins, Robert Creeley’s Bolinas, Robert Smithson’s New Jersey). In *Fieldworks* a site is a place travelled to, usually away from home, separated from daily experience. Shaw’s invocation of the term ‘site’ is therefore partial: my thesis takes a markedly different approach to what counts as a poetic site and how these can be read. Functioning as a feminist counterpart to Shaw’s study, in examining the *female* poetics of site my thesis opens up an entirely different set of concerns. What I propose is a new conceptualisation of the poetic site in literary study.

My thesis explores poetic sites that are grounded in the quotidian spaces of literary composition — the rooms inhabited by women poets for researching, thinking and writing. While there is some time devoted to the mobilised poet working ‘on-location’, particularly in Howe’s ‘Thorow’ (written while a writer-in-residence at Lake George), there is an emphasis on the domestic site as embodying the daily experience of space. In Niedecker’s cabin, Guest’s studio and Howe’s Connecticut home there resides a demand for domestic sites to be taken seriously. Far from being habitual however, each poet indexes the strangeness in

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<sup>4</sup> While Howe is invested in language as a site, she is also interested in physical spaces – the site of Lake George, her domestic compositional spaces and the page as a material site.

living and working in particular domestic spaces, uncovering the innate foreignness of our own intimate surroundings. Guest performs 'fieldwork' within the space of the home — she dedicates herself to analysing the domestic space as if it were an alien site. In all three poets, the domestic site proves slippery and difficult to roundly conceptualise: as the space most regularly occupied it is highly familiar and yet appears impossible to pin down in writing. While many poems emerge from within the domestic space, such writings are by no means domesticated. As Shaw contends: 'the very term 'site'... implies a not yet domesticated location' (*Fieldworks* 235).

This concentration on domestic sites does not undermine the principles of site-based aesthetics established in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed in theorising the site we must turn to the seminal work of artist Robert Smithson, who was an important figure in conceptualising the term. In 1972 Smithson made a series of distinctions between what he termed a 'site' and a 'non-site' (152–3). He characterises the 'site' as having 'open limits,' of providing 'scattered information,' as being an 'edge,' a 'series of points' and of 'indeterminate certainty' (152–3). He further defined the site as 'some place (physical)' and the non-site as 'no place (abstract)' (152–3). Principally then, a site is a position from which to glimpse the world. While it cannot be demarcated or delimited precisely, a site is a frame, a space that conditions experience of the external. The site, in its specificity, its accurate-ness, its fixed position — its static and delimited spatialised form — functions in opposition to, or in tension with the unbounded imaginary of the poem. The experimental poem, in its enactment of abstraction typifies Smithson's 'no-place': it is a non-site of closed limits. This tension between the site as physical and the poem as abstract is generative. If the site is constructed of 'indeterminate certainty' (certainty of location, indeterminate meaning), then the poem operates through 'determinate uncertainty' (determinate language, uncertainty of meaning) (Smithson 152–3). The poem is conditioned and mediated through its compositional site, while the site is rendered and disclosed through the poem. But rather than abscond into abstraction, as Shaw contends, 'greater specificity to "site"... seems always to promise greater, more immediate grounding of an art practice in the real' (236).

\* \* \*

My study of poets' sites contributes towards a nascent field of literary inquiry. In Shaw's *Fieldworks* he draws upon two distinct categories of study, the poetics of place and site-specific art, in order to examine the trajectory of poetic spaces in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He suggests that the exchanges between site-specific art and the poetry of place facilitated 'new vantages from which to see the intertwined histories of their own disciplines and to recast them in relation to their neighbors' (5). By placing these two histories together, Shaw charts 'a genealogy of the rationales and conceptual models that have driven Post-war poetry and art toward site-specificity' (10). *Fieldworks* establishes William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson as creating 'the dominant ethnographic and historiographic vocabularies for the poetics of place' (44). The poetry of place is well established within the discipline of literary study in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and usually recognises urban, rural and regional locations as key spaces of poetic experience. 'The concept of place' argues Lawrence Buell, 'gestures in at least three directions at once — toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affect or bond' (63). As Shaw writes, 'At the level of writing, then, place making might be understood as a process of appropriation whose ultimate function is to ground experience and stage identity' (6). Place-based poetics take up an especially important role in US literature. As Olson pronounces in 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You': '(o Gloucester-man,/ weave/ your birds and fingers/ new, your roof-tops,/ clean shit upon racks/ sunned on/ American/ braid' (*Maximus* 7).

Yet, as the above extract demonstrates, there are good reasons to suggest that the poetry of place is a masculine territory. The gendered qualification made by Olson is telling. In invoking the spirit of the 'Gloucester-man', Olson seeks a specifically male place-based companion and renders a hyper-masculinised landscape. As Howe documents, 'If there is Woman in Olson's writing (there aren't women there), she is either "Cunt," "Great Mother," "Cow," or "Whore"' (*Birth-mark* 180). In the history of experimental US poetry, this masculine poetics of place proves to be not the exception, but the rule. In an American lineage tracing back to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman through Williams and Olson, there is a budding relationship between the demands of place-poetry, with a politics of ownership, expansionism and the enactment of

dominant masculinity. This male lineage of poets fall into, what DuPlessis would term, 'patriarchal poets' (*Purple Passages* 1). Within this male tradition, there is little room for gendered thinking. As DuPlessis powerfully argues in her chapter 'Olson and his Maximus Poems': 'vital women's work does not appear in Olson — work at home, sustenance farming... the net effect of his selective socio-economic vision is to lose women, erasing them as workers and members of the polis' (*Contemporary Olson* 138). In this male tradition of place-based poetics, women are marginalised, or forgotten altogether. Shaw's book reiterates this exclusion. In his conception of a poetics of place in *Fieldworks*, male poets dominate the field of study; Shaw's text considers only male poets for seven of its nine chapters. Furthermore, there is little critical discussion of the relationship between place, site and gender. In presenting Williams and Olson's poetics, their totalising claims to rendering place are not read in terms of masculine authority, but rather as general interests in land, history and epistemology.<sup>5</sup>

In the work of 20th century female poets, such claims to place are markedly rebuffed; the concepts of land and history are acknowledged as emerging from masculine theorisations, which often exclude or ignore female experience. Howe in particular brings to the fore the issues of nation building, emplacement and particularly the troubling history that US poets have had with the American landscape. Howe renders these problematic histories in all of their complexity, continually disrupting narratives of place, reading such accounts as modes of neo-colonialism. The reality was plain: women could not own land in the US until 1857 and were denied access to many public institutions, including university libraries, until as late as 1957. Given the repressive legal restrictions that prevented women from attaining any formal attachment to place, consequently, for women poets, writing the poetics of place was rendered impossible. Through a gendered understanding of place, it quickly becomes clear that all spaces are politically territorialised zones, often exclusionary of the female sex. As the poet Elaine Equi commented in an interview with Susan Gevirtz: 'Men have no trouble

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<sup>5</sup> In other recent accounts of Olson's poetics, particularly in the collected essays *Contemporary Olson* edited by David Herd, the legacy of Olson's 'gendered view of culture' is not offered up as redeemable (17). As Will Montgomery rightly argues, Olson is an important model for Howe, particularly in his use of archives, but his feminine trace is registered as 'the presence of absence' by Howe herself (*Birth-mark* 180).

claiming a place, say a whole city, while women seem content with a room of their own' (Howe Archives, MS 201, Box 69, Folder 6). In this thesis the idea of place is therefore shifted in favour of site. The chapters consider how each poet constructed a detailed, specific and localised poetics — a poetics of site that is explicitly linked to the broader gendering of space. The investigation of poetic sites, I propose, becomes a distinctive arena for feminist inquiry.

\* \* \*

In my opening chapter on Niedecker, I argue that her cabin on Blackhawk Island becomes a robust grounding in the formulation of her poetics. To ground is to 'give (something abstract) a firm theoretical or practical basis' (*OED*). The cabin, as her primary compositional site, gives her abstract poetry a practical foothold. Niedecker's poetry is explicitly 'of the ground' — she registers home-grown vernacular, local politics and ecological change through her distinct position (*Collected* 100). I discuss how Niedecker's interrogations of site confront the complexities of spatial/ environmental interaction: what is the basis for our interaction with the outside world? How does this interaction get enacted through literature? The cabin, I argue, functions as the filter through which her eco-poetics and radical Marxism take shape; it is a site of resistance to the real-world pressures of capitalism and cultural commodification. However, instead of reading the site as dislocated or isolated, I present evidence that the cabin is enmeshed in the community of Blackhawk Island — it becomes a space for localised ethical struggle. In her research into the indigenous displacement and colonial history of Blackhawk Island, I contend that her settlement on this 'little plot of earth' is never stable or fixed in her poetry (Niedecker Archives, Box 23, Folder 2). Instead Niedecker conveys ambivalence toward inhabiting such contested space, as in her verse she challenges the conception of private property, as well the economic precariousness of land/home ownership. Yet in moulding her-own physical premises, the cabin emerges as a model of sustainability. This ascetic lifestyle extends to her writing, which enacts a bare, unembellished aesthetics of condensed substance. Although a tiny site, this chapter argues that Niedecker's cabin commands expansive poetic and political potentiality.

In my second chapter on Guest, I turn to the visual arts to examine the poet's compositional site — the studio. Through detailed archival research, I trace Guest's self-inscribed position writing in the studio — a critical discovery that has been so far undocumented. I chronicle Guest's turn towards the visual arts for aesthetic stimulus and sustenance. From her location in the studio Guest was able to contend with significant moments of art history and shifts in culture. She worked to legitimise herself as an artist, I argue, by positioning herself within the artist's domain — she engages in valuable acts of self-creation by writing in the studio. I also discuss Guest's collaborations with her visual artist contemporaries and how such partnership enabled a re-investigation into the medium of the page as a literary space. Crucially, Guest's studio was a professional workspace *and* a domestic room. My chapter presents evidence that her home life and creative involvements became irrevocably imbricated. I propose that this overlapping of supposedly separate spheres — the domestic space with the creative space — provides a moment of radical emergence for the woman artist. I propose that Guest's poetry *is* her political act; it conjures and enacts a substantial site for women's praxis. In breaking out of the boundaries of the static interior room, Guest's studio becomes the site in which imagination can extend itself. The chapter draws out her lifelong evolving articulations of space, showing Guest to be, as I argue, a great modern poet of space.

In my final chapter on Howe, I orient her poetics through her sustained engagements with archives. By inhabiting the roles of poet and teacher, archivist and performer, historian and artist, her work operates at the intersection between the private/reclusive and the public/exterior. In Howe's commitment to the archive, her ethical grounding leads into her aesthetic transgression. But unlike Niedecker and Guest, who write from within a singular compositional site, each of Howe's poetic inhabitations can only be compared through their relative temporariness. She has numerous physical working spaces — including her workroom at home in Guilford, Connecticut, her cabin at Lake George and the various archives she uses. Due to this provisionality of sites, the first section of the chapter considers the historical, political and contextual reasons why, as a contemporary writer, Howe cannot remain entrenched in stable singular location. Howe operates as a poetic nomad, I argue, roaming through real and

textual spaces, drifting into undocumented linguistic zones. Her procedure *within* the archive is also necessarily nomadic, as Howe places herself within the US tradition of the interloper — itinerant and precarious. Each site then, is only ever a temporary *refuge* for the poet, a key term I use to underpin her occupation of spaces. The second part of the chapter considers, in detail, some of Howe's sites, including her physical working spaces, the book, the page and even the word as settings ripe for inhabitation. Sites can no longer be considered as discrete independent units here, but oftentimes inter-connect, overlap and converge. Finally, in her recent work, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*, I consider how she revolutionises the concept of the archive to validate female historical experience. By trespassing into the male domain of the archive, I argue, Howe is able to transform and reclaim the space to re-materialise the female position in history.

\* \* \*

The history of female poets operating in particular compositional sites goes back to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and the inaugural poetic transgressions of Emily Dickinson. A foundational figure in the emergence of a US female experimental tradition, Dickinson has long been mythologised as an eccentric recluse, confined and concealed within the chambers of her home in Amherst, Massachusetts.<sup>6</sup> But the Dickinson Homestead, particularly the interiors of her domestic dwelling-place, provided a crucial grounding to her formulations of poetic spatiality. Diana Fuss chronicles the significance of Dickinson's compositional space in, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them*, where she states: 'All but a handful of Dickinson's poems are, in fact, written in the Homestead, the majority composed in the poet's bedroom, the most private chamber of the antebellum interior' (25).<sup>7</sup> For Dickinson, the house itself became the primary

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<sup>6</sup> In her Ph.D. dissertation, "*Bound---a Trouble---*": *Emily Dickinson and the Archive*, Jessica Beard forcefully argues for situating Dickinson within her editorial practices, and understanding these practices as a narrative that have come to shape and define the poet. She locates the myth of Dickinson's narrative of confinement and concealment as manufactured by Higginson's initial account of Dickinson as reclusive, provided in his introduction to her first edition which was published in 1891 as *The Poems of Emily Dickinson edited by two of her friends Mabel Loomis Todd and R.W. Higginson*. Here the poet is constructed as isolated and enclosed, a characterisation which would go on to be definitive for both the poet and her work.

<sup>7</sup> Adrienne Rich was one of the first feminist critics to register the significance of Dickinson's lived space, as she explains: 'Probably no poet ever lived so much and so purposefully in one house; even, in one room' ('Vesuvius at Home').

site of her poetic enquiry. As Jean McClure Mudge argues in her study *Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home*, 'Dickinson's image of house or home... is perhaps the most penetrating and comprehensive figure she employs' (3). The house is a favourite metaphor of Dickinson's to present the space of poetry as a repository for experience. She frequently draws upon her domestic entrenchment to open out the relationship between real and imagined space. In 1871 she writes: 'Remembrance has a rear and front/ 'Tis something like a House —', where the house functions as a container for recollection, but also memory itself is spatialised in domestic terms (*Poems* 845).<sup>8</sup> In Dickinson we have an early example of a female poet recognising a decisive correlation between the physical dwelling place and the autonomous writing space. Dickinson's 'room of one's own' enabled deep contemplation of her own interiority, which she explores through an architectural lexicon. As Fuss contends: 'Long before Gaston Bachelard began exploring the lyrical recesses of the architectural dwelling, Emily Dickinson was intimately involved in mapping her own "poetics of space"' (14).

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<sup>8</sup> In referencing Dickinson's poetry I will not be using the Franklin numbering system, as is the custom in Dickinson studies. While I make reference to the Franklin edition, I offer the first lines of the poem as the identifying marker.



Photograph of Dickinson's Homestead, Amherst, Massachusetts, taken August 2013. Her bedroom on the second floor occupies the corner of the property and the two windows on either side.

In a letter to close friend Elizabeth Holland in January 1856, Dickinson writes: "They say that "home is where the heart is." I think it is where the *house* is, and the adjacent buildings' (*Letters* 324). In a characteristically Dickinsonian twist she reconfigures the cliché to espouse that 'home is where the house is', putting direct emphasis on the house itself, not as a comfortable symbolic dwelling place, but as the physical site of inhabitation.<sup>9</sup> Dickinson repudiates the abstract metaphor of the heart — denoting love, care, and comfort — replacing it with a re-materialisation of the real, tangible space of the house. For Dickinson, home is house and house is home. In her poetry, she often mobilises the space of the domicile to construct expansive meanings. In the poem 'Volcanoes be in Sicily' the speaker brings the exotic into her own immediate environment, reversing the dichotomy of near and far. She writes, 'I judge from my Geography—/ Volcanos nearer here' suggesting that her own mind is more potent than any

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<sup>9</sup> This twist opens up more questions: even if home is where the house is, what does it mean to be 'at home' in your house and at home in 'the adjacent buildings'? Do poets have to be 'at home' to write?

global travel (*Poems* 609). The final line reads: ‘Vesuvius at Home’, as Dickinson argues that the explosive potentiality of poetry emerges from within the space of the domestic (609).<sup>10</sup> While confined within the chambers of the house, Dickinson was imaginatively eruptive.

In *Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home*, McClure Mudge argues that Dickinson’s ‘consciousness of space, especially enclosed space... dominated her sensibility’ (7). Yet so often in her poetry there are instructive tensions between ideas of enclosure and autonomy, of physical restriction and imaginative boundlessness. Dickinson writes continuously about the relationship between interior and exterior, claiming: ‘The Outer-from the Inner / Derives its Magnitude / The Inner-paints the Outer’ (*Poems* 451). Furthermore, Elizabeth Grosz argues that Dickinson’s poetry is invested in exploring ‘how movement can still exist within a bound environment, and how these moments of space traversal... seem to be the place where “A Prison gets to be a friend” (111).<sup>11</sup> Howe goes even further, reading Dickinson’s inescapable physical enclosure, locked within the space of the house, as critically productive for the poet: ‘This self-imposed exile, indoors, emancipated her from all representations of calculated human order’ (*My Emily Dickinson* 13). Howe explicitly links the autonomous site of writing ‘indoors’ with the space for literary innovation. It was from *within* the site of the domestic that Dickinson was liberated from literary tradition and orthodoxy and could freely radicalise language, grammar and poetic form: it was Dickinson’s Homestead that enabled her experimental poesis.

It is this explicit correlation — between the material site of composition and the origination of innovative poetics — which makes Dickinson a foundational figure in my thesis. She becomes, in the following chapters, the central American poet for an evolving feminist poetics of site. Indeed, the ghost of Dickinson has continually haunted my research. The contingency of her verse defies the enclosure of fixed meaning-making and her aesthetics of space still yield exciting revelations, particularly when read against her 20<sup>th</sup> century associates. As such,

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<sup>10</sup> This is reminiscent of Bachelard statement that: ‘A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space’ (47).

<sup>11</sup> Rich recounts in ‘Vesuvius at Home’: ‘Her niece Martha told of visiting her in her corner bedroom on the second floor at 280 Main Street, Amherst, and of how Emily Dickinson made as if to lock the door with an imaginary key, turned and said, “Matty: here’s freedom”’.

Dickinson's poems are referred to throughout the chapters, often working as effective counterparts to newer poems by Niedecker, Guest and Howe. This move, to position Dickinson as central to an emergent tradition of female poets, is crucial to my argument. As Howe argues, 'Yes, Dickinson is in the canon. But she is treated as an isolated case, not as part of an on-going influence. In poetry the line usually goes from Whitman through Stevens and Pound, on through Olson to Duncan to Creeley' (*Birth-mark* 168). My thesis works to reintegrate Dickinson back into the lineage of US experimental poetry. However, there is not time to rehearse or reiterate her considerable poetics of space here.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Dickinson is a centrifugal force in this thesis: she operates as the origin for a genealogy of feminist poets who occupy and investigate a range of compositional spaces.

My chapter on Niedecker promotes the aesthetic relations with Dickinson, including smallness, seriality and the fabrication of homemade manuscript collections, as well as considering the two poets' construction of private/public subjectivities through correspondence. In my chapter on Guest, Dickinson appears as a key agent for the transformation of the domestic space through literature. Finally, I argue that Dickinson becomes a primary site of engagement in my chapter on Howe. In her seminal text *My Emily Dickinson*, Howe dwells in the Dickinson archive, she reads from the Dickinson library, but most commonly Howe lives on the page with Dickinson, minutely and meticulously drawing out the exegesis of her manuscripts. Dickinson was read by all of my poets. Through her experimental praxis and her distinct inhabitation of site, she creates a sovereign female space in poetry. In drawing out the 20<sup>th</sup> century lineage of Dickinson's spatiality, her oeuvre provides a foundational framework in which to read a new tradition of 20<sup>th</sup> century US experimental female poetics.

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Since the early 1960s there has been increasing critical attention paid to spatial theory, culminating in what has been termed the spatial turn. As Russell

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<sup>12</sup> A chapter of this thesis could have given time and diligence to Dickinson's inhabitation in her homestead. However this work has already been done, most notably in Fuss' *The Sense of an Interior* with her detailed account of Dickinson's residence. Also, such focus on a 19<sup>th</sup> century poet would not be fitting for this project, which considers the poetics of site emerging in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

West-Pavlov observes about Henri Lefebvre, spatial theory has increasingly moved towards an understanding of space not as ‘a container, but rather, the very fabric of social existence, a medium woven of the relationships between subjects, their actions, their environment’ (19). Most prominently it is male theorists, including Martin Heidegger, Lefebvre, Gaston Bachelard and Edward Casey who have dominated the spatial field of study. But as West-Pavlov notes, emerging after the lacuna of racial, gendered, and economic cultural critiques of space in the early 1990s and in response to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of nomadism and ideas of non-territorialised space, there was a return to the material specificity of space — through an interrogation of its localised spatial sites (12). For example in Jennifer Johung’s, *Replacing Home: From Primordial Hut to Digital Network in Contemporary Art*, she examines the specific sites of art production, arguing that while “place” may no longer be sustainable category, negotiating spatial boundaries and recognising constructions of artistic place-making are essential to understanding contemporary art practices. My thesis contributes towards this return to spatialised specificity, as each of my sites are treated as geographically singular and non-representative. As such, there is little significance placed on wider spatial theory in this thesis, as broader conceptualisations of space don’t speak to the exactitude of my female poets’ sites. The spatialised poetics of Niedecker, Guest and Howe are not ‘specimens of literature or art to provide instantiations’ of wider theory’ as Shaw argues (‘Site-Specific’ 5). Rather there is a ratcheting up of specificity in this thesis, in response to the demands of the discipline specificity of poetry and the discrete localised specificity of compositional sites. Niedecker’s cabin on Blackhawk Island enmeshes her in the fabric of working class socio-political experience, while Guest’s position in the studio locates her spatial sensibilities through the visual arts. Howe, on the other hand, is invested in the history of space — its national landscapes and how these are memorialised through archival sites. Economic class becomes one of the key differentiators between the three women, as, relative to Niedecker, Guest and Howe occupy positions of comparative privilege. Existing in a state of continuous financial precariousness, Niedecker’s isolated cabin becomes symbolic of her wider exclusion and disenfranchisement from poetry and culture at large.

While male spatial theorists like Bachelard and Casey are referenced, my work seeks to address the particularity of *female* experiences of space. It has therefore been a feminist choice, rather than a scholarly oversight, not to rely on male spatial theory. Sara Ahmed has written explicitly of the feminist decision to work against an established male intellectual genealogy by disregarding normative citational practices.<sup>13</sup> She argues:

Even when feminists cite each other, there is still a tendency to frame our own work in relation to a male intellectual tradition. And there is certainly an expectation that you will recognise your place through giving your allegiance or love to this or that male theorist.

‘Making Feminist Points’

In solidarity with Ahmed’s thinking, this thesis opts out of framing the experimental female poetic work through a male theoretical tradition.<sup>14</sup> Instead my critical approach, both in subject matter and research methodology, is to treat each of my poets as a spatial theorist in her own right, who is capable of articulating a new conception of space through her poetics. This gives agency back to the poets themselves, an essential aspect of my feminist practice. As Ahmed states:

Citations can be feminist bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings. My citation policy has affected the kind of house I have built.

*Living a Feminist Life* 16

If this thesis is building another kind of dwelling — a refuge for exploring experimental female poetry on its own terms— then female iterations must form the foundation.

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My project arises from the awareness that space is never neutrally inhabited, as all sites are gendered. A key aspect is the male/ female divide between public

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<sup>13</sup> Howe has also written of the choice to actively oppose the clout of patriarchal literary forms. She notes: ‘The tradition of dead fathers weighs heavily on writing that passes itself off as a liberated field. So much of it comes down to an idea of power, that while inflicting blows on literary and political authority only circles back to its own despotic centrality’ (*Birth-mark* 170).

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed also notes: ‘When I was doing my Ph.D., I was told I had to give my love to this or that male theorist, to follow him, not necessarily as an explicit command but through an apparently gentle but increasingly insistent questioning: Are you a Derridean; no, so are you a Lacanian; no, oh, okay, are you a Deleuzian; no, then what?’ (*Living a Feminist Life* 15). This has also been my experience, and it is only with the intellectual work of feminists like Ahmed, that I have had the courage to reject framing my thesis in such male terms.

and private space, which has been drawn throughout history.<sup>15</sup> In a study of 18th century US material forms of memory, Susan Stabile writes that ‘as polar opposites, men and women represented the two spheres of architecture: exterior and interior, public and private’ (26). Public architecture might include institutional or public buildings and workspaces, while the private could encompass homes and creative sites. Traditionally the woman’s domain has been the domestic,<sup>16</sup> particularly since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century when men started going out to work, although we shall see how this is complicated by forms of domestic labour.<sup>17</sup> As well as being associated with the private sphere, women have historically been excluded from public spaces, including educational sites and political institutions. Woolf seeks refuge in ‘a room of one’s own,’ as she was kept out of public spaces coded as male: ‘[I thought] of the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out’ (24).<sup>18</sup> Thus Rachel Bowlby argues that escaping the enclosure of the home has been a central aspect of feminism:

the rejection of domesticity has seemed a principal, if not *the* principal, tenet of feminist demands for freedom. The home figures as the place where woman is confined, and from which she must be emancipated in order for her to gain access to a world outside... which offers possibilities of personal and social achievement that are not available within its limited sphere.

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Yet this version of feminism reifies the public/ private divide, reinforcing the idea that the domestic is inferior. In particular, Bowlby denies the possibility of creative and political action *within* the home, as well obscuring the potential for

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<sup>15</sup>The notion of gendered spaces dates back to ancient Greece and the Greek word *oikos* (ancient Greek: οἶκος), which refers to three related but distinct concepts: the family, the family’s property, and the house. Traditional interpretations of the layout of the *oikos* in Classical Athens have divided it into men’s and women’s spaces, with an area known as the *gynaikon* or *gynaikonitis* associated with women’s activities such as cooking and textiles work, and an area restricted to men called the *andron* (*OED*).

<sup>16</sup> Beard points out that despite being associated with the domestic sphere, in 19<sup>th</sup> century America ‘women did not own the houses they were bound to’ (32).

<sup>17</sup> In *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity* Rosemary George defines the domestic as: ‘the domestic implies spatial arrangements in which certain practices of reproduction (children as well as certain modes of production) are situated. As a primary site at which modernity is manufactured and made manifest, the domestic serves as a regulative norm that reconfigures conceptions of the family from a largely temporal organisation of kinship into a spatially manifest entity’ (3).

<sup>18</sup> Women are *still* denied access to certain public spaces, increasingly online, where trolling prevents and restricts female expression.

social interaction from a domestic position. As Antoinette Burton argues in *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India*, ‘domesticity has traditionally been viewed as outside history,’ excluded from official or institutional narratives (20).

This thesis works to reclaim the domestic site as a central space for poesis, which helps to deconstruct the public/private binary and reimagine the home as a politicised space.<sup>19</sup> If, as second wave feminism has taught us, ‘the personal is the political’, then what does the site of the personal — the domestic — as it is figured, revealed and constructed by female poets, disclose to us? In the coming chapters, the home space and workspace of the poet interpenetrate, as the domestic site and writing room are commonly one and the same. By paying attention to the sites of composition, the poetic act, I argue, can illuminate the domestic in all its complexities. My three female poets all document the home, acting as agents and actors in the socio-political imaginary, contributing to an exigent consciousness of the space. Furthermore, each poet works to complicate any facile notions of what the home has come to represent. As such, poetic labour helps to expose the exigent potentiality of the domestic.

As Rosemary George argues in *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity*, there is scope for a fundamental review of domesticity in the contemporary moment (4). Similarly Seyla Benhabib observes that in the Humanities and Social Sciences, ‘a renewed affirmation of the value of the private sphere is afoot’ (214). In conjunction with these thinkers, I suggest that poets may be in a good position to, ‘recast domesticity as a launching pad for radical reflections on material conditions’ (Benhabib 10). As Hannah Arendt usefully articulates:

The fact that the modern age emancipated the working classes and the women at nearly the same historical moment must certainly be counted among the characteristics of an age which no longer believes that bodily functions and material conditions should be hidden.

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<sup>19</sup> In his study *American Experimental Poetry and Democratic Thought* Alan Marshall also argues against the public/private binary in US literature. He claims that politics was domesticated in much canonical 19<sup>th</sup> Century US literature. He cites Emerson, Hawthorne and Henry James as examples whereby the politics of the domestic take precedence, as an ideology is formed which moves away from the public sphere and into the private.

Here, the interrelation between female liberation and the emphasis on ‘material conditions’ are made explicit. Arendt herself was notoriously indifferent to feminism, yet what she suggests is that to grasp how the distinction between the public and the private has been collapsed is an inseparable task from negotiating other critical conditions, such as the material conditions of work. This includes, I posit, female labour *inside* the home — including domestic work and childcare — but also the act of writing. As Benhabib asserts, the ‘recovery of the public world is impossible and unlikely without a parallel reconstruction of the private sphere’ (215).

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My attention to writing sites has at its centre the material conditions for poetic production. The impact of the formalist movement of New Criticism, with its emphasis on close-reading literary texts as self-contained, self-referential aesthetic objects can still be registered in the academy. Such enclosed reading sanctions an amnesia and erasure around the difficult truths of literary creation, which endorses a patriarchal view of literary history. As Woolf reminds us, ‘...one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in’ (41). My work seeks to recognise the tangible reality of the writing situation. Grosz concurs, stating: ‘texts as being [are a] result of the social, institutional and conceptual spaces that provide the conditions of their possibilities’ (103). While there is renewed critical attention to some aspects of materiality, the compositional space itself has been broadly overlooked. As Fuss stated back in 2004 (and little has changed since): ‘while much has recently been written on the material instruments of writing (pen, paper, machine), virtually no attention has been paid to the material space of writing as a whole’ (14).

Michel de Certeau argues in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that, ‘space is a practiced place’ (5). The central space that each poet occupies — whether cabin, studio, or archive — becomes a ritualistic practice in the forms of poetry conceived there. As Gaston Bachelard describes in *The Poetics of Space*, ‘how we take root, day after day, in a “corner of the world” is of primary significance (4). As these poets take root in a particular location, site-inhabitation becomes a

mode of auto-ethnography —registering and constructing female experiences of space. This thesis contributes towards a feminist theorisation of space, particularly focused on how women imagine, create and inhabit space. But it is also invested in how the poets capture the minutiae of daily existence, rendered through the creative act. This relationship between spatiality and materiality is a crucial underpinning of my research, as my poets negotiate broader conceptions of space *and* the quotidian experience of site.

Yet there is no sense in which these poets' sites exist in a vacuum. As Howe firmly advocates when lecturing on Dickinson, although she was heralded in the twentieth century as, 'The Madwoman in the Attic', Dickinson was, in fact, a voracious reader ('My Emily Dickinson'). Despite her geographical seclusion, Dickinson's site — her homestead in Amherst — was open to the world through reading.<sup>20</sup> Similarly each of my poet's sites do not represent separation from the external environment, but rather demonstrate how autonomous creative space can co-exist with cultural and historical emersion. Discussing the work of artist Robert Smithson, Shaw makes this clear:

[Smithson did] not treat these "sites" as discrete geographic or historiographic entities. Instead, to be specific to them is to engage also the array of discourses (geology, travel writing, science fiction, aesthetic treatises, pulp narration, literary criticism) through which such sites might be framed.

*Fieldworks* 9

To be specific to discrete sites, according to Smithson, means engaging with neighbouring disciplines. This is especially true of my three poets, who each gain proximity and access to cross-disciplinary studies through their unique emplacement. Niedecker is able to interrogate politics through her entrenchment in a working class community: Guest's position in the studio enables her meditations upon visual art: Howe summons and excavates US history through her archive dwelling. Such proximity is most generative when it coincides with a re-examination of how poetry interacts with this adjacent discipline. As Shaw proposes in *Fieldworks*: '[such sites] allow poets new vantages from which to see the intertwined histories of their own discipline and

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<sup>20</sup> Howe cites *King Lear* and Robert Browning's 'Childe Roland To The Dark Tower Came' as key texts behind 'My Life had stood', and so successfully reintegrates Dickinson back into literary history; not as an anomaly, but as an integrated writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ('My Emily Dickinson').

to recast them in relation to their neighbours' (5). Shaw therefore affirms the value of attending to, what he terms 'site-specificity' because of 'its ability to overcome the stark opposition between Theory and Historicism by rethinking the relation between the empirical and the discursive, by locating meaning not merely in discrete locations but in the discourses through which those locations have historically been framed, and thus shifting the question from "What does it mean?" to "Where does it mean?" ('Site-Specific' 2).

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This exploration of poetic sites has demanded a certain kind of methodology — to re-trace, as much as possible, the actual physical compositional spaces inhabited by the poets. Literary fieldwork has led me to Guest's doorway, Howe's archives and Dickinson's house (now museum).<sup>21</sup> Yet measuring the value of such ventures has been tricky. Exploring Niedecker's cabin was instrumental, but there was no transcendent moment while visiting Dickinson's bedroom — the place where many of my favourite poems were composed. Similarly, walking around Guest's old neighbourhood in Greenwich Village was fascinating, but it didn't reveal much about her experiences in the early 1950s, residing in a cold-water apartment on Christopher Street. This fieldwork offered up absorbing embodied experiences, but as a concrete research epistemology was difficult to calibrate, or easily record — it relied upon my experiential encounter with the site, rather than the poet's. Instead, archival research has been crucial to my project as a whole. It is the discourse emerging alongside, or through the site that takes precedence. Shaw agrees, as in discussion of Smithson's work he suggests: 'The fascinatingly rough edges of his linguistic paths suggested that the discourses through which we see or site objects are every bit as important as sculpture critics' clichés about unmediated phenomenological presence or physicality' ('Site-Specific' 5).

In October 2013, while leafing through Guest's uncategorised archive collection at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, I recognised the value of archival research. In her combination of abstract associative verse and biographical mystery, Guest had been, for many years, unlocatable to me. But here in her archive, the poet's life and work were laid bare. Suddenly I had

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<sup>21</sup> See 'Annex 1: Notes on Fieldwork and Research Sites' for a list of the locations I visited.

unmediated access to Guest's personal documents: her family photographs, her intimate correspondence, her grocery lists and dry-cleaning bills, as well as her handwritten manuscript pages, poetry drafts and typed notes.<sup>22</sup> To encounter the residues of the poet's artistic labours in this way was revelatory — this repository offered itself up as a site of cultural knowledge and as a receptacle for storing and framing a picture of the poet at work.<sup>23</sup> In the coming three chapters of this thesis, the archive is the site that underpins the poetic explorations of Niedecker, Guest and Howe. As a valuable place for my ongoing research, the archive became the principal space that would materialise the US experimental female poet.

Above all, the content of this thesis had been conditioned through my encounters with the archive. As Shaw illustrates, when discussing the work of Williams: 'the problem of analogising or capturing a place in language, enacting it rhetorically, must be seen in relation to cultural, institutional receptacles for storing and framing art: museums, galleries, archives, libraries' (*Fieldworks* 34). This 'problem' of 'capturing a place' can equally be felt in representing a site. It is the 'archives' and 'libraries' that store and frame how we can register a poetic site in the contemporary moment. The documents contained within a particular archive necessarily shape how we come to read that poet.<sup>24</sup> As Jacques Derrida theorises in *Archive Fever*: 'It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place' (2).

During my literary excavations the relationship between what would surface in the archive and what would remain concealed was endlessly fascinating.

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<sup>22</sup> Much of Guest's archive remains uncategorised, as the bulk of her materials are housed within large overstuffed boxes, which contain an assortment of personal artifacts and literary treasures. This imbrication, between the poet's life and her work is arresting. For example, it was not uncommon to find a letter to Guest from Frank O'Hara, beautifully articulated, with an original poem attached, alongside receipts, bills and other household paraphernalia.

<sup>23</sup> Having access to Guest's archive was a privileged position, which certainly framed my critical mediation of the poet. However, such access cannot always be afforded to researchers. It is the methodology of the archive, necessitating slow, meticulous, detailed research, which offered up as useful a framework as the documents themselves.

<sup>24</sup> Trips to various archives revealed the structural inequalities faced by women poets. Contemporary poet Howe fared best, with her well maintained papers held at the Mandeville Special Collections Library at UC San Diego. The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale have held many of Guest's papers since 1993, yet the majority of these remain uncategorised, and so tricky to navigate. Most shockingly, Niedecker's collection at the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Texas is held under another name — that of her literary companion Louis Zukofsky.

Faced with dead ends, undefined scraps and illegible handwriting the route into and through a poet's archive often demands that the literary critic don the mantle of the detective. Derrida reminds us that the archive is both a shelter and a commandment. While the archive will come to limit and frame its contents, it also demands assemblage. As he posits in *Archive Fever*:

In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner. The archontic principle of the archive is also a principle of consignation, that is, of gathering together.<sup>25</sup>

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With infinite directions, layers and contingencies, the act of 'gathering together' the heterogeneous materials of a poet's archive demonstrates both the boundless palimpsest of the poet and the signature of the assembler. Derrida defines consignation as that which 'aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration' (3). While my research focused on poetic sites, this was only one corpus in a myriad of archival possibilities.

Negotiating and subverting the 'patriarchic function' of archives, as Derrida puts it, has also been central to my feminist methodology (2). Instead of conceiving of archives as inert repositories, axiomatically associated with historiographical androcentrism, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist scholars are recalibrating the possibilities of the archive. As Antoinette Burton asks in *Dwelling in the Archive*:

What counts as an archive? Can private memories of home serve as evidence of political history? What do we make of the histories that domestic interiors, once concrete and now perhaps crumbling or even disappeared, have the capacity to yield? And, given women's vexed relationship to kinds of history that archives typically house, what does it mean to say that home can and should be seen not simply as a dwelling-place for women's memory but as one of the foundations of history — history conceived of, that is, as a narrative, a practice, and a site of desire?

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Burton is outlining a new vision of what can be considered an archive — including, in her argument, the domestic home. Burton's argument has strong resonances with my thesis, as I suggest that my poets similarly 'used domestic

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<sup>25</sup> In my chapter on Howe I discuss, in greater detail, how Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic model might be usefully applied to the network that an archive opens up.

space as an archival source from which to construct their own histories and through which to record the contradictions' (Burton 5). Here the concept of the archive folds back onto itself, as I argue that each of my poets read their own site as a form of archive.

This is most acutely realised in Howe's poetics, as ephemera from the domestic space become evidence and source material for literary creation. Expanding the definition of official historical documentation, Howe collapses the value structures of historiography by offering up the sense of the home itself as an archival structure. This collapse is significant, as Burton argues that 'private memories of home... claim a place in history at the intersection of the private and the public, the personal and the political' (4). In the home as archive, we have another breakdown of the public/ private binary. This subversion is also found in Dickinson, as Beard indicates that 'home spaces were also utilised as archival spaces in Dickinson's writing' (31). Moreover, claims Beard, 'Dickinson's collecting and preserving activities [are] themselves artistic interventions into the archive' (13). It is this sense of agency that resounds when consulting each of my poet's repositories. Here the archive becomes a space of poetic refuge, entrusted by the poet herself to future scholars.

The archive is also crucially a site of materialisation. This is manifested in documents pertaining to the act of making poetry — notes and drafts that materialise the process of poesis. Dickinson is again a central figure for exposing poem-making to the mind of the reader. From the handwriting of her manuscripts, to the terminal instability of her drafting and variant words, Dickinson's compositional practice is now regarded as a vital part of her poetics. Dickinson scholars, including Howe, have demonstrated that through displaying the variation and contingency inherent to her artistic practice, the poet foregrounds shape-shifting and mutability as modes of female defiance. Beard's study proves the ground-breaking insights that can be uncovered 'when we shift our focus from the historical person of Emily Dickinson as the housebound poet, to the work in manuscript as house-made and house-preserved' (27). While Dickinson's poems are house-made, they are not housebound. Beard opens up Dickinson's versions of distribution to include 'the way they circulated inside the

home and to other homes in letters' (27).<sup>26</sup> Through a materialist analysis, Beard challenges the 'construction of the secluded poet in the enclosed home' and instead performs readings 'that resist enclosure, suggesting movement, revelation, and play in constrained spaces' (86).

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DuPlessis argues in *Blue Studios* that the making of poetry is not conditioned only by the linguistic signifiers on the page: 'Asking gendered questions of the ideologies and social situations of poetry as a mode of practice constitutes an opening into the deepest apparatus of *poesis*' (136). This shift towards the materiality of poetic production has emerged most explicitly from the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers. Invested in Post-Structuralist theory, the US language poets privileged the materiality of the linguistic signifier as codified from within a certain social environment. My research on poets' sites extends beyond the materiality of the signifier, to identify and accentuate the social situation of poetry originating from within a specific lived environment. In art historian Marsha Meskimmon's, *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics*, she links this emphasis on materiality in feminist aesthetics to feminist critical practice (6). For female poets in particular, where material conditions of production have largely been ignored or rendered invisible, I argue that the lens of materiality could help develop our understanding of avant-garde *poesis*.

Kristen Kreider raises important materialist questions in her study, *Poetics and Place: The Architecture of Sign, Subjects and Site*, asking: 'how the qualities of material substance can contribute to symbolic meaning' (4). In Kreider's study, her analysis moves from the domain of poetry to that of visual art, as she expands 'the meaningful capacity of physical material' that is recognised as poetic (3). Following Kreider's example, my thesis contributes towards a feminist materialist analysis by investing in the wider symbolic meaning of a text, treating the whole poetic object as readable. This does not amount to a purely materialistic approach, but reveals how the material qualities of the work can generate meanings in relation to, or in addition to, the linguistic signs at

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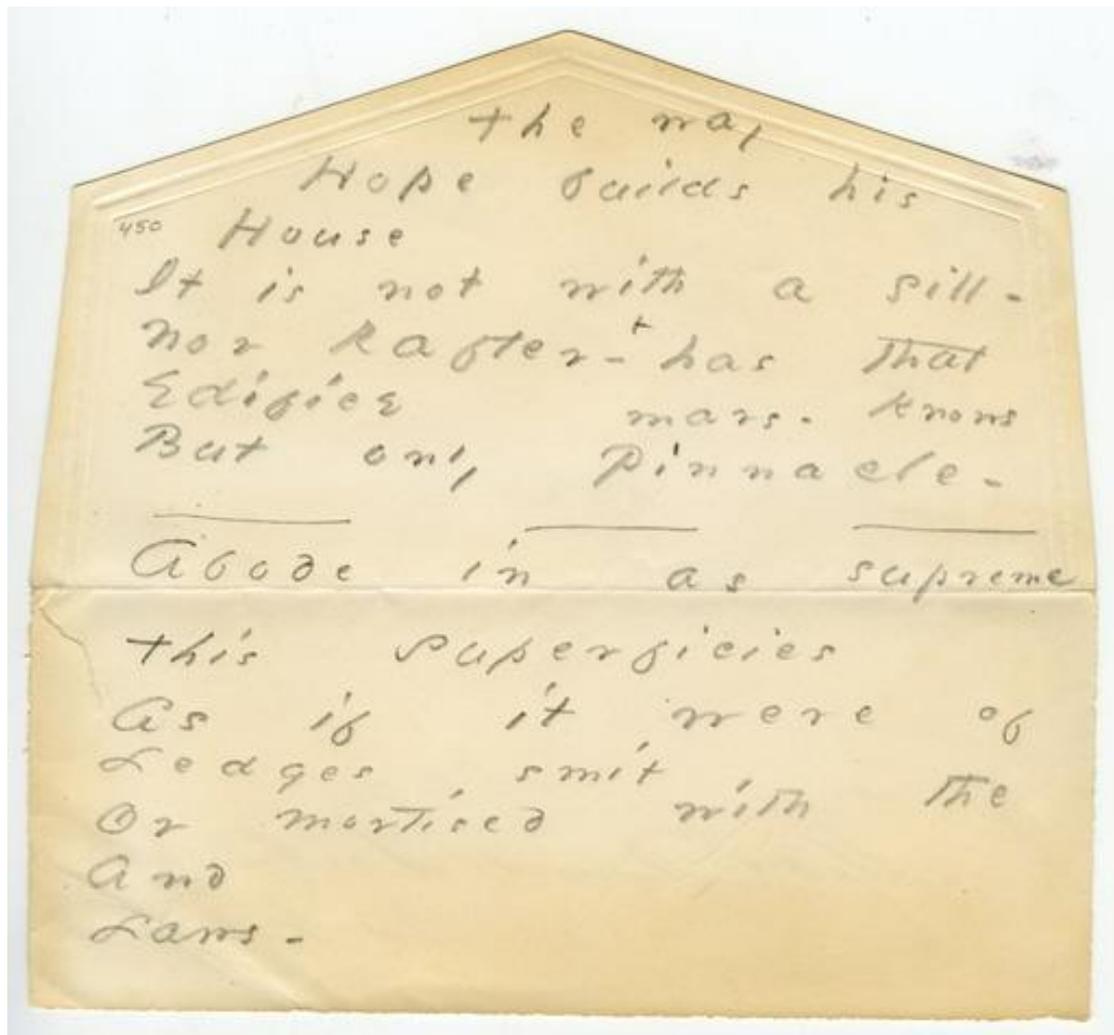
<sup>26</sup> In exploring Niedecker's *Homemade/ Handmade* poems, my reading also takes into consideration the importance of their circulation, as gift books sent directly to close-friends of the poet.

work (Kreider 4). My chapters investigate the literary material forms generated from a particular site — through an analysis of what I call each poet's distinctive *site-production*. A crucial arena of my thesis is therefore to understand the intersections between lived environments and textual space creation. This demands an investment in corporeal specificity: my research privileges the tangibility of the site in which my poets worked *and* the materiality of the page as site. The title for this thesis, *The Poetics of Site*, therefore expands to encompass the spaces of material forms — the creation of site productions upon the page. Correspondence, the manuscript page, linguistic variation, page space, the revision process, visual art and the hand-made book will all be considered as visible examples of *site-production*.<sup>27</sup> Through these examples, we can witness how the poet expands her limited physical space through her multifarious textual inhabitations.

This apparatus for reading poetic spaces has been crystalised through Dickinson scholarship, which considers the whole range of manuscripts available— including fascicles, unbound sheets, letters, drawings, mixed media collages, scraps and other miscellaneous documents — as valuable poetic documents. As Howe comments, 'No one has been able to fathom Dickinson's radical representations of matter and radiation — such singularities of space, so many possibilities of choice' (*Birth-mark* 181). Such singularities of space can also be found in the poetics of Niedecker, Guest and Howe — particularly when we consider a similar variety of poetic documents. An excellent manifestation of Dickinson's material-spatial form can be seen in 'The Way Hope Builds His House,' which I will analyse to demonstrate how linguistic and material readings can inform and support one another.

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<sup>27</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, I have attempted to reproduce the visual aspects of the poet's writing, including emphasis, underlining, spacing, misspelling and grammatical structures.



The way Hope builds his House  
 It is not with a sill -  
 Nor Rafter - has that Edifice  
 But only Pinnacle -

Abode in as supreme  
 This superficies  
 As if it were of Ledges smit  
 Or mortised with the Laws -

*Envelope Poems 63*

Written around 1879, this poetic scrap is housed at the Amherst College Archives & Special Collections and is included in Marta L. Werner and Jen Bervin's 2016 edited collection, *Emily Dickinson: Envelope Poems*. Addressed to 'Mrs. Edward Dickinson and Family', Dickinson took an envelope and carefully tore away parts of it to form this unique shape (63). The poem exists in no other drafts. It perfectly synthesises the content of the poem, describing the space of hope in architectural terms, with the materialisation of the poem — the shape of

the envelope unfolded to resemble the outline of a house. Like “‘Hope” is the thing with feathers/ That perches in the soul’ this poem offers a new definition and explication of the feeling of hope (*Poems* 140). It is not ‘built’, argues Dickinson, or constructed incrementally: ‘It is not with a sill – / Nor Rafter –’. Rather the strong ‘Edifice’ of hope (edifice here standing for a solid structure, and a complex system of beliefs) is erected as a ‘Pinnacle-’. Hope emerges as a peak — as the apex of human nature, with little supplementary feeling. This argument is materialised in the form of the poem, as the unfolded envelope has, at its tip, an analogous pinnacle. But as the second stanza makes clear, the fact that hope appears unsupported — emerging out of thin air — gives it no less potency. ‘Abode in as supreme,’ states Dickinson — we inhabit hope with absolute intensity. The next line, ‘This superficialities’ can be read in various ways, perhaps indicating the superficiality of hope (its duplicitous surface nature) or instead, taking into account the Latin legal definition as, ‘anything which is placed upon and attached to the ground, and most commonly refers to a building erected on land owned by another,’ suggesting that hope is built on occupied ground. While hope may be, as the poem admits, nothing more than a surface emotion, we should dwell in it as if it were robustly constructed within us: ‘As if it were of Ledges smit/ Or mortised with the Laws –’. Again, the material form of the envelope directly supports Dickinson’s claim. The unfolded envelope creates a singular surface paper — it occupies two-dimensional space, yet it represents a three-dimensional object— a house. Just as the envelope can be extended into the shape of a house, hope may appear thin and insubstantial, but can extend itself through projection. In generating her own poetic space, Dickinson combines philosophical enquiry with material composition. Not only does she describe fictional, imagined space — the space of hope — but also embodies the spatialisation of hope through the physical materiality of the page.

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Given the lacuna of female experience within literary history, generating and constructing such radical textual space is perhaps a requirement. In *The Birthmark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, Howe registers this lacuna when she discloses: ‘for women of my generation there was no ground’ (170). There is a clear relationship here between an absent female genealogy

and intellectual nomadism; without a female tradition to write into, Howe had to make her own tracks through the literary landscape. Within the notes of her archive, Howe also jotted down this pertinent nursery rhyme:

There was an old woman  
 Called Nothing-at-all,  
 Who lived in a dwelling  
 Exceedingly small;  
 A man stretched his mouth  
 To its utmost extent,  
 And down at one gulp  
 House and old woman went.

Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 69, Folder 1

This rhyme narrates how even with private property ('a dwelling'), without formal recognition ('Called Nothing-at-all') the woman and her house are engulfed by male consumption. Poet Caroline Bergvall crystalised the pressures of writing into the vacuum of female literary history in conversation with Marina Warner in 2016, where she asked: 'how do we write the self into existence? How do we shape a space for women in the world? How do we form in absence? How do we form out of absence?' Such questions are paramount to the female poet in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In response, my thesis proposes that Niedecker, Guest and Howe engage in modes of self-construction enformed through their spatial inhabitations — both physical and textual. To *re-materialise* female experience, we must recognise and validate material forms of space. To disengage from male linguistic authority, reinserting women into literary history, we must re-inscribe their real material presence in the world.

This material presence in the world is *located* in each of my poets' sites. From within the space of the domestic, Woolf asserts the power of creative enactment: 'For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics' (83). Starting with Dickinson's homestead, the domestic room, moving onto the cabin, the studio and the archive, the sites under consideration transform from 'a room of one's own', opening outwards, becoming more fluid and expansive. No longer singular bourgeois dwellings, sites become communal spaces in Niedecker, imagined spaces in Guest and arrive at public sites in Howe. As Shaw suggests, 'the

promised concreteness of places and sites begins at a micro level' but inevitably moves to a macro level (*Fieldworks* 5.). A house, a backwater community, and an archive — each of these discrete spaces opens out into a larger domain. Although each site is distinct, it is not necessarily geographically definite. While Niedecker's cabin existed in a singular locus point, fixed in geography, Guest's studios moved across the city, across the country and through the domestic sphere. Howe too occupies a range of sites. The archive, as her intellectual home, exists in multiple locations, but shares a common theoretical grounding. The relative mobility of each site becomes one lens by which to register how poetic space evolved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Niedecker's rootedness can be registered against Guest's relative itinerancy: she found comfort in the ability to construct and reconstruct versions of her studio in every abode, transplanting and maintaining her aesthetic conditions via her reproducible studio model. Alternatively, Howe, who sought to remain entrenched in her Connecticut home, instead pursued mobility through her textual inhabitations — her work remains aesthetically unsettled, formally peripatetic. Such comparisons demonstrate a trajectory of female poetic sites throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century — from fixed location, to mobile site, to textual restlessness.

Beyond the geographical remit, in each poetic site we witness how the female poet *conjures* the space in which she seeks to exist: invoking a utopian space within and against fixed spatial limits. The conceptualisation, production and daily habitation of the site is therefore an act of radical transgression — in making her own space to exist the female poet validates her position in literary history. Such conjuring mirrors the very essence of poetic production, as (paraphrasing Bob Perelman) Stephen Collis claims: 'poetry may stand in a place we recognise, but it aims to enact a space that does not yet exist. To aim at or enact such spaces requires a capacious and elastic imaginary. It requires compression and a spatially mobile language' (*Barricades* 14). Bachelard makes similar claims in *The Poetics of Space* noting: 'The poetic image is an emergence from language... By living the poems we read, we have then the salutary experience of emerging [...] these acts of emergence are repeated; poetry puts language in a state of emergence, in which life becomes manifest through its vivacity' (xxiii). As poetry surfaces from the material conditions of production, it

is poetic language that emerges and grows. Therefore poetic language is not only 'a dwelling place' as Heidegger suggests in 'Building Dwelling Thinking' — an immobile site that must stay in place — but also an evolving, outreaching potentiality (347). Poetic language provides the vehicle for female emergence — for an outgrowth beyond the domestic sphere, for a voice whispering into the wider world. As Bachelard claims, 'poetry appears as a phenomenon of freedom' (xxiii).

It is within the space of poetry, claims Dickinson, that liberation can be enacted. 'They shut up in Prose' announces the poet, 'They put me in the Closet' — yet through the emancipatory quality of the poetic utterance: 'Captivity... No more have I' (*Poems* 206). In Dickinson, confined poetic space transcends itself through the ceaseless variability of words, through the elastic imaginary. Howe is attracted to Dickinson's voice that is 'poised, sometimes quite unknowingly, on the uneasy edge between the enclosed and the boundless' (*My Emily Dickinson* 110). This duality is what also gives potency to the poetics of Niedecker, Guest and Howe — existing in that interstitial space that opens up between being physically confined and imaginatively boundless: the space of poetry. Dickinson's poetic interiors are infinitely expanding and expansive: 'The Brain – is wider than the Sky –' (*Poems* 269). What the confined space really offers up then is transcendence. As Howe quotes from Allen Ginsberg in *My Emily Dickinson*:

a fly buzzing when you died like Emily Dickinson brings you back mindful  
to the room where/ you sit and keep breathing aware of the walls around  
you and the endless blue sky above your mind

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Or as Dickinson writes:

I dwell in Possibility –  
A fairer House than Prose –  
More numerous of Windows –  
Superior-for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –  
Impregnable of Eye –  
And for an Everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –

The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –

*Poems 215*

Dickinson's poem constructs private, secret, secure spaces, chambers 'impregnable of eye' — but such enclosed interiors open onto limitless expanse: 'the gambrels of the sky'. Dickinson's poetic space is autonomous and simultaneously open-ended: her architectonics of poetry presents the inviolable interior as the original site of creativity. To 'dwell in possibility' is the task of every serious female experimental poet. *How* that dwelling is made possible will be the subject of the next three chapters.

**The Cabin: Grounding Lorine Niedecker's Poetics**

I'm not young  
and I'm not free  
but I've a house of my own  
by a willow tree.

'In moonlight lies,' *Collected* 135



Photograph of Niedecker's Cabin, W7309 Blackhawk Island Road, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. Taken July 2013.

Another flood come and gone. This time not in my house. Muskrats grinding their catch just outside [...] in the middle of the night — a heavy door with cracks. Now it's the greenest grass possible, yellow warblers and the smell of honeysuckle bushes and as Ian might say: I canna leave my home.

Letter from Niedecker to Cid Corman, May 8, 1962. Corman Collection

these walls thin  
as the back  
of my writing tablet.

'Property is poverty—', *Collected* 195

In the summer of 1946 Lorine Niedecker's father, Henry Niedecker, bought a 'do-it-yourself' log cabin from a catalogue and built her first private home (Peters 91). Situated at W7309 Blackhawk Island Road, it was just yards down the lane

from the family house. The cabin comprised a single room: within the four walls was a brick chimney, a space heater, a tiny kitchen with hot plate and small sink, a daybed, a desk, a Windsor chair, a drop leaf table, a cedar chest and Niedecker's 'immortal cupboard' of books (Peters 91). To characterise Niedecker's dwelling as rustic would be an understatement: with no electricity, no hot water and no telephone, the poet's residence was so far removed from the avant-garde culture of New York City, it was almost unrecognisable.



Photograph of the interior of Niedecker's Cabin, with new furniture not owned by Niedecker. Taken July 2013.

Despite this life measured by material lack, the parameters of this cabin would offer Niedecker something, as yet, conspicuously absent in her life: the space to read, to think and to write. As Margot Peters explains in her ground-breaking 2011 biography of the poet, in securing her own premises, Niedecker was excused from familial obligations (her mother had been diagnosed with chronic heart disease in 1943), secured economic independence, and, most importantly, was granted creative autonomy. '[After 1945],' Peters notes bluntly, 'her poetry came first' (78). As an imaginatively enabling dwelling-place, Niedecker's cabin was vital. As a site for the production of experimental poetry, it was unique.

### Section One: The Cabin

Little poetry survives of the period between 1945-1948, as Niedecker began home-making in her new abode and continued to work as a stenographer and proof-reader for the regional journal *Hoard's Dairyman*. It was much later, between 1952-1953, that she began a selection of poems that took her cabin home as their principal focus. In 1955 Niedecker reflects on her new position:

I sit in my own house  
 secure,  
 follow winter break-up  
 thru window glass.  
 Ice cakes  
 glide downstream  
 the wild swans  
 of our day.

*Collected 167*

The opening line establishes Niedecker's emboldened sense of home ownership: she inscribes these lines from within her 'own house'. The poem operates as part of an on-going contemplation of how the cabin as site conditions her poetic universe. This brief verse reveals the embedded complexity of Niedecker's sense of dwelling-in-space.<sup>28</sup> The poem, like the cabin, exists in stasis; while the outside world changes through the seasons, Niedecker herself remains indoors, 'secure' and sheltered from the winter outside. This sense of fixity is contrasted with the mutable scene outside, where 'Ice cakes/ glide' on the river running 'downstream' past the residence. Here, we have a glimpse at the limitations of Niedecker's own real and imagined poetic inhabitations. The cabin, as a sanctuary and refuge *from* nature, inescapably restricts, or mediates, the experience *of* nature.

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<sup>28</sup> The cabin could be seen as reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard's hermit hut, which he discusses in *The Poetics of Space*. A similar site in terms of its solitude, refuge and as a place of 'destitution' Bachelard links the space of the hut with a childhood desire for a private nest to hide away (32). While Bachelard's idea of the hut may intersect with Niedecker's cabin, she very quickly extends and complicates this image in her own poetics of site.



Photograph of the view out of the picture window of Niedecker's Cabin. Taken July 2013.

The 'window-glass' serves as this mediator, able to present the exterior world but also forcing a separation from it. There is a question around *how* the window is performing this mediation in the poem, as the process by which the 'Ice cakes' creatively transform into 'wild swans' is indeterminate. The crucial Niedecker term here is 'thru' — what is happening to nature 'thru' the changing seasons? What access to nature do we have 'thru' the glass? What is the process 'thru' which shards of ice get re-configured as swans? The trajectory of the poem, through nature as it happens (seasons), to the mediator of nature (windows), and finally to our imaginative rendering of nature (ice-swans) uses the locus point of the cabin as its fixed grounding. While the cabin facilitates this contemplation, the verse also exposes the confines of the cabin — its physically 'secure' walls. As such the cabin is creatively enabling and limiting simultaneously.

An earlier draft version of the poem, sent to fellow writer Edward Dahlberg, opens with two additional lines: 'Time moves, no, / explodes, / I sit in my own house, / secure,' which heightens our sense of the cabin's placement,

independent from the natural world around it (Dahlberg, Box 23, Folder 2).<sup>29</sup> These additional lines give the impression that, for Niedecker, *all* experience is filtered through the structure of the cabin. While exterior temporality might 'explode' with speed, the cabin is able to register that speed, whilst remaining unaffected by its ravages. This implies that Niedecker's cabin exists somehow out-of-time; while history and politics play out around it, the poet remains exempt and autonomous within her site. In this version, the cabin is resistant to the landscape, able to withstand nature and remain 'secure'. In reality though, that security was illusory; Niedecker's cabin was wholly vulnerable to her environment. It was prone to serious flooding due to its location near to the mouth of Lake Koshkonong on the Rock River. It was freezing in the winter owing to Niedecker's shortage of heating oil and it was blisteringly hot during the summer. In a letter to lifelong correspondent Louis Zukofsky in May 1954, Niedecker acknowledges the fragility of her living situation: 'Tornado warnings here — one yesterday evening but I stayed put in my peanut shell cottage' (Zukofsky, Box 25, Folder 2). The cabin, as enabler and endangerer, embodies this sense of contradiction that grants Niedecker the creative independence she craves, whilst leaving her exposed to the ravages of the weather. The final lines of 'I sit in my own house', edited away by Dahlberg and adopted by Niedecker in her 1956 version of the poem, confirm this incongruity: 'I'm a fool/ I am wise' (Dahlberg, Box 23, Folder 2). If the cabin signifies the duality of freedom and fragility, it is enhanced by Niedecker's own oppositional mode of interiority, as both foolish and 'wise'. This takes the poem full circle — from the secure cabin outwards, into the transformative power of nature — then back inwards, into the complexity of Niedecker's poetic mind.

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<sup>29</sup> In his reply to Niedecker's letter, Dahlberg advises her to remove these first two lines, which she then does (Dahlberg, Box 23, Folder 2).



Polaroid photograph of floodwaters around the cabin c. 1956. Niedecker Collection Hoard Museum.

To read the cabin merely as a metaphor for Niedecker's interiority would be a radical oversimplification, particularly here as we move from a sense of interior security ('secure'), to latent complexity ('I am a fool/ I am wise'). Yet a growing insecurity develops in the poet as she recognises the power of her immediate environment, or the mutability of 'winter['s] break-up'. What is certain is that with its proximity to, and precarious position within the natural world, the cabin becomes a centripetal force in Niedecker's emergent poetics. Immersed in the natural world of Wisconsin, in *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, Quartermain surmises that 'after early experiments with Surrealism and other Modernist strategies, her poetry took as its theme the rural culture and landscape' (161). Critical work on Niedecker has often focused on these aspects of her poetry. As Michael Davidson argues in 'Life by Water: Lorine Niedecker and Critical Regionalism,' she was initially recognised as a regional poet, which left her in a kind of 'pastoral limbo' (4). Rachel Blau DuPlessis points out that few critics and fewer feminists have understood Niedecker's importance ('The Anonymous'). She was 'barely anthologised' and until recently was little published ('The Anonymous'). As Niedecker told Dahlberg in 1955, on the

occasion of four poems being published by Robert Creeley for *Black Mountain Review*: 'this would make my sixth publication in ten years!' (Dahlberg, Box 23, Folder 2). However, Jenny Penberthy's valuable editing of *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* in 2002 has inaugurated a fresh interest in her poetry. The book assembles Niedecker's few published collections, as well as circulating many poems for the first time.

The last fifteen years have yielded the most substantial breakthroughs in appreciating Niedecker's wide reaching poetic and political significance. Indeed as her reputation has been largely forged since 2002, DuPlessis terms this curious process a form of critical 'unerasure' ('The Anonymous'). She has been slowly re-inscribed onto the literary map and pulled in multiple directions. When facing assimilation into particular literary groups, Niedecker proves recalcitrant. In the introduction to her collected essays on the poet, *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, Elizabeth Willis foregrounds her difficult positioning within various poetic movements. Willis poses the question, 'Where — or how — should contemporary readers place Lorine Niedecker?' (*Radical* pxiiv). Despite numerous appropriations — as a folk poet, Objectivist, regionalist, eco-poet and Surrealist — Niedecker exceeds the critical parameters in which she is placed. The argument here is that it is precisely her site of production, which is to say her cabin that shapes such aesthetic singularity.

This chapter will explore Niedecker's distinctive poetics of site, considering how her physical dwelling in the cabin and her textual inhabitations on the page wrought a complex and, as yet, understudied poetics. The cabin as site becomes a robust grounding in Niedecker's oeuvre, as it functions as the filter through which Niedecker's political positioning, her environmental considerations, and, as will be argued here, her poetics are rendered. Although a small space, in Niedecker's verse the cabin contains expansive poetic and political potentiality. Poems address issues such as the cabin's intimacy with nature and her local community, self-reliance, materiality and labour. Each of these areas will be explored in more detail throughout the chapter. At the core of Niedecker's emplacement is the interstitial relationship between the poet and the site. How do the two relate? What is that space between the two? How is each rendered

through literature? Following in the Dickinsonian tradition, I argue that we can learn about Niedecker's private sense of self and her broader sense of political dissent by interrogating the poet's interior. Additionally, Niedecker registers the cabin as constituent of an actual geo-physical, geo-political place. As such, the chapter will also consider the colonial history of her particular space and investigate how Niedecker problematises land-ownership in light of this history.

When approaching Niedecker's site there are many paths that one might take: tracking her radical politics, her forms of auto-ethnography, her latent feminism, or considering her eco-critical framings. Eco-studies has already privileged Niedecker as a revolutionary voice, so the second half of this chapter will seek to expand our understanding of the relation between her ecology and her typology. In exploring some of Niedecker's less well-trodden critical paths, I concentrate on materialising the links between her site, her writing process, her poetics and the physical form of her writing. In the latter part of this chapter Niedecker's writing will move beyond the singular site of the cabin, and expand to investigate the spaces of Niedecker's material forms. It will argue that she makes powerful cultural interventions through her representational and textual space-making, or her creation of sites upon the page. Correspondence, the manuscript page, linguistic variation, page space, the revision process, visual art and the hand-made book will all be considered as visible examples of Niedecker's distinctive *site-production*. I borrow my methodology from recent critical studies used to expand and re-define Emily Dickinson's oeuvre and poetics, principally a close-focus on the poet's archive, utilising correspondence, manuscripts and fascicle series to formulate new poetic readings.<sup>30</sup> For Niedecker studies, this materialist analysis will provide an innovative and, as yet, untapped critical resource.

Such materialist readings go further than close reading in the traditional sense, which can overlook Niedecker's verse due to its deceptive simplicity. Brief yet slippery, each poem often purposefully obfuscates the reality of a complex and sophisticated set of intricate thematic and textual concerns. By paying attention to individual poems, and particularly to their tangible form on the page, this chapter will seek to draw out a number of new and variant readings of well-

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<sup>30</sup> Materialist readings were pioneered by Susan Howe in *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), Sharon Cameron in *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (1993) and Jerome McGann in *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (1993).

known and unfamiliar poems.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, as Niedecker draws poems into a complex seriality, I read them alongside and against one another, rather than considering them in isolation. Akin to Dickinson's use of the fascicle, Niedecker's sense of poetic seriality also plays upon ideas of temporality, mutability and contingency — often enclosed within a singular poetic object.<sup>32</sup> This is most notable in her *Homemade/Handmade* books, which construct a visually child-like, but aesthetically rich poetic object. Thus I consider the *Homemade/Handmade* books in particular as art objects, or artist's books, as they should be read as holistic creative pieces, which incorporate language, visual form and tactile materiality. In this way, we can begin to open up Niedecker's world of sites: living remotely in her cabin, we can witness how she expands her limited physical space through her multifarious textual inhabitations.

### **Rendering Blackhawk Island**

To get at Niedecker's sense of site, we must first consider her wider landscape of Blackhawk Island in Wisconsin. Niedecker's poetics confront the complexities of spatial/ environmental interaction: what is the grounding for our interaction with the outside world? How is this interaction imagined through literature? How can this interaction ever be mutually beneficial? Decades before eco-literature was recognised as a distinct discipline, Niedecker's cabin operated as a model of sustainability — a living enactment of an eco-poetics — as she used her residence to ground her poetic technique. In the digital magazine *Edge Effects*, Steel Wagstaff recently wrote about the origins of the term eco-poetics:

The word itself is an amalgam of two Greek words: *oikos* [household or family] and *poiesis* [making, creating, or producing], so that *ecopoetics* quite literally means the creation of a dwelling place, or home making.... [Jonathan] Bate defined ecopoetics as a critical practice in which the

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<sup>31</sup> Learning to read Dickinson, slowly, meticulously, repeatedly, has invariably improved my reading of Niedecker. Thanks to Prof. John Shoptaw and his Berkeley class on Dickinson for this lesson in patience.

<sup>32</sup> Sharon Cameron's important text *Choosing Not Choosing* (1993) established meaningful connections between works that were grouped together by Dickinson in her sewn together fascicles. It is important, as it is the first of its kind to look to what kinds of relationships poems might have between them. As a study that resists the poem as an individual unit of meaning in Dickinson studies, it is unparalleled. It does, however, cease its material investigations of the fascicles at the level of their gathering and places thematic boundaries around each one, rather than extend its material investigation into the remit of the fascicle as homemade book object.

central tasks are to ask 'in what respects a poem may be a making ... of the dwelling-place' and to 'think about what it might mean to dwell upon the earth'

In another letter to Dahlberg in 1955, the same year that she wrote 'I sit in my own house', Niedecker is preoccupied with these questions about how to dwell upon the earth and how to translate the space of Blackhawk Island into the space of the poem. She writes:

I wish I could do the birds, worms, plants of my little plot of earth here in the manner of the first explorers landing in Virginia and with my own human setting, mental furnishing etc. ...all the Greeks, your Bible people, everyone and all ideas strained, pointed to this. I might get 8 lines! An intellect, yours, Louie's, could do it on my earthworms!

Dahlberg, Box 23, Folder 2

The poet exhibits a keen sense of aesthetic responsibility towards rendering her region. She expresses a desire to represent 'my little plot of earth here' in an accurate and pioneering fashion, like the 'first explorers landing in Virginia'. It is characteristic of Niedecker that she registers herself as a pioneer, the primary poet of Wisconsin, whilst concurrently undercutting this conviction with self-deprecation, 'an intellect, yours, Louie's, could do it on my earthworms!'.<sup>33</sup> While praising Dahlberg and Zukofsky's 'intellect', such intelligence can be read pejoratively. In a later poem from 1964 entitled 'LZ's' (short for Louis Zukofsky), contained within her *Homemade/ Handmade* poems, Niedecker clarifies her position on the intellect, stating: 'As you know mind/ ain't what attracts me/ nor the wingspread/ of Renaissance man' (*Collected* 206). Instead it is her unique 'mental furnishing' as Niedecker terms it, that qualifies her to 'do the birds, worms' and 'plants' through poetry. In her letter to Dahlberg, Niedecker affirms that her own poetic 'do[ing]' may actually be sufficient, and even preferable. The task she sets herself, to translate the environment into verse, has been 'pointed to' as a central concern by artists throughout civilisation. This gives added weight to her lament that: 'I might get 8 lines!' As the strange, unrecognised poet operating outside of the metropolitan centres of aesthetic experimentation, Niedecker's lack of publishing avenues were a real frustration. But this public disregard was coupled with internal integrity. She describes herself as

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<sup>33</sup> This internal contradiction is similar to her earlier assertion that: 'I am a fool/ I am wise' (Dahlberg, Box 23, Folder 2).

possessing, and being possessed by the landscape: 'my earthworms', 'my little plot of earth here', 'my own human setting'. Her cabin's emplacement within the rich, distinctive landscape of Blackhawk Island made Niedecker uniquely qualified to express the space.

In searching for poetic material Niedecker habitually uses objects and situations found in her immediate proximity. Lexical patterns in her work recur: water, flooding, birds, fish, botany and characters from her local neighbourhood. The Objectivists were committed to a poetry created within 'a context based on the world' ('Prepositions' 15). George Oppen renders this idea poetically in 'Of Being Numerous', when he writes, "There are things/ We live among "and to see them/ Is to know ourselves"" (73). Niedecker, perhaps more so than any other Objectivist poet, constructs a poetics of lived experience in the environment. As Matthew G. Jenkins observes, Niedecker does not 'reach out', but rather, 'hunkers down' into experience (31). For example, in the poem 'I said to my head', written in 1946, Niedecker writes about the task of looking for artistic stimulus. 'Write something', the speaker demands, then looks around and concludes: 'dear head, you've never read/ of the ground that takes you away' (*Collected* 100). The 'ground' of her site on Blackhawk Island becomes the substance that can ignite creative transformation. Niedecker's writing is primarily 'of the ground', she writes of the 'fern spray' and 'frosted windshields', the aspects of her own locality (*Collected* 100).



View of Rock River frontage, from Niedecker's acre lot (around seventy feet from the cabin). Taken July 2013.

Two lines by Zukofsky are instructive in better understanding Niedecker's evolving relationship with the landscape. First Zukofsky proclaims that the poem is a record of 'the most immediate projections of the real' and second, he states that it must offer up 'The fact *as it forms*, that is not as it is cooked by the imperfect or predatory or sentimental poet' (*Poetry*). Niedecker's Objectivist poems aim to reduce 'the discrepancies between the world out there and the literary constructs that seek to represent it'; so to reveal, in Zukofsky's terms, the 'already existing, splendidly adequate fact' (Penberthy 32). Much of her work, including the later long poems 'Lake Superior' and 'Wintergreen Ridge' from 1968, would seem to comply with this Objectivist framework, aiming to operate as proximate linguistic renderings of particular landscapes. Such poems seek to find a voice for the water, for the land and for the animals of Blackhawk Island, as if they could speak for themselves.

Penberthy labels the desire for this unobtrusive relationship between the poet and their material as a 'hallmark' of Objectivism (32). Yet in Niedecker's fluctuating poetics, we often witness a break with this tradition, as she

complicates this attribution of directness as central to Objectivism. Penberthy argues that Niedecker's poetry shows little of the 'clean lined detachment' of the central Objectivists (55). Rather, her verse is 'shot through with personality' — her characters and situations are ebulliently alive (55). Niedecker becomes fascinated by the gap that exists between the world and the word, as well as in the role of the poet in occupying that space. In her oeuvre interactions between the mind and the environment are continually shifting — sometimes imagination shapes the external world, but at other times the environment overtakes the mind. It is often her poetic self that subtly exposes the impossibility of direct representation. Through her invocation of the lyric 'I', which is never an overt presence, but rather a quiet observer, almost unnoticeable, she shrewdly reveals her material presence within the world she inhabits. For example, after an explication of the ecology in 'Lake Superior', she closes with: 'The smooth black stone/ I picked up in true source park/ the leaf beside it/ once was stone', reminding us that the provocation for such musings has come from the hand of the poet herself (*Collected* 236).

Removed from the metropolitan centres of literary experiment, Niedecker's concerns were markedly different from those of her avant-garde counterparts. As Ruth Jennison identifies in *The Zukofsky Era: Modernity, Margins, and the Avant-Garde*, Niedecker's emplacement in Wisconsin meant that 'her access to the living avant-garde was almost entirely mediated by sustained epistolary engagements' (24). In 'I've been away from poetry', written circa 1955, we witness the drawbacks of Niedecker's physical and mental isolation. An earlier version, sent to Dahlberg with variant lines, reads:

I've been away from poetry  
many months

and now I must rake leaves  
with nothing blowing

between your house  
and mine

I must scratch green

*Collected* 157

The poem records Niedecker's creative dry spell, between 1945 and 1948, and suggests that a lack of correspondence was partially to blame. With 'nothing blowing/ between your house/ and mine', i.e. no winds delivering motivating letters to the poet from her cosmopolitan friends, she must look elsewhere for inspiration.<sup>34</sup>

The speaker offers two ways to end this artistic deficiency: to 'rake leaves' and to 'scratch green', both instigated with 'I must' to convey the urgency of the endeavour. There is a constant doubleness in Niedecker, between the directness of the thing — the actual 'leaves' that need 'raking' outside Niedecker's house (as the season is presumably autumn, so the wind has blown the leaves off the trees) — and the implied metaphor. Here the mind also needs raking, or shaking up, to reinvigorate the imagination. This duality is instructive, as we can equate external, physical labour (leaf raking) with internal creative upheaval (mental raking); the poem opens up the relationship between exterior and interior versions of labour. But the poem does not simplify Niedecker's position. Physical exertions (the domestic task of raking leaves) apparently serve to delay the opportunity for mental exertion, with the 'I must' here signifying the force of household obligation. Alternatively, the poem could be advocating that physical activity might incite inner activity. In her later years as a hospital cleaner, Peters reports that Niedecker 'wielded broom, mop, and rags with no sense of debasing herself. Work was work' (126).

In this poem, Niedecker is certainly playing with the Whitmanesque ideal of creative inspiration outlined in 'Leaves of Grass', where he affirms: 'I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of summer grass' (6). While Whitman 'lean[s]' and 'loafe[s]', modelling a relaxed attitude towards achieving poetic vision,

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<sup>34</sup> This sense of creative solitude is also found in the Dickinson poem:

To own the Art within the Soul  
 The Soul to entertain  
 With Silence as a Company  
 And Festival maintain

Is an unfurnished Circumstance  
 Possession is to One  
 As an Estate Perpetual  
 Or a reduceless Mine

*Poems 442*

conversely, Niedecker's verbs, 'rake' and 'scratch,' encourage active labour. There is nothing laidback about her approach to nature poetry; she does not wait for inspiration to find her, but instead she enacts a dynamic, even forceful exertion upon the land. The line that captures this force of exertion is: 'I must scratch green'. Green may mean the landscape, the environment, or nature — but multiple definitions of 'scratch' should be considered, to register the complexity of her eco-poetics. The Oxford English Dictionary<sup>35</sup> defines it as:

1.a. A mark or furrow produced by the grinding contact of two substances; a shallow linear incision.

This form of 'scratch' may mean that Niedecker seeks to achieve *contact* between two forms, namely herself and the environment.

b. A rough or irregular mark made by a pencil, paint-brush, etc.; hence, a light sketch, a hasty scrawl. Also *fig.*; esp. in phr. *from scratch*, from a position of no advantage, knowledge, influence, etc., from nothing.

The 'scratch' brings to mind the pencil marking of Niedecker working on paper. Meta-poetically, 'scratch[ing] green' could signify the process of marking the page with regional content.

2. a. *slang. no great scratch*: of no serious importance, of no great value. So *to scratch one's head*, as a gesture indicating perplexity.

3. a. *trans.* To make slight linear abrasions on (a surface of any kind). Also *fig.* Esp. in phr. *to scratch the surface (of)*: to make only slight progress in understanding, taking effective action (on), etc.; not to penetrate very far (into). OED

These versions of 'scratch' indicate a lack of value being placed on the act. I 'scratch green' can be read as Niedecker enacting humility, that she is merely 'scratching' at the surface of the task, and is unable to penetrate any deeper into the landscape.

b. To furrow (the soil) very lightly for the purpose of cultivation.

5. *fig. a.* To struggle to make money, to 'scrape'. Also *trans.* to scrape up (money). Now *dial. exc. transf.*: *to scratch for oneself* (orig. U.S.), to fend for

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<sup>35</sup> The dictionary was clearly important to Objectivist poets, witness Louis Zukofsky's specification of *Funk & Wagnalls Practical Standard Dictionary* (1930) and *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1917) as sources for 'Thanks to the Dictionary'. There is not, however, a critical convention regarding which dictionary to cite in relation to Niedecker's work. In this case, while an American dictionary might perhaps be more appropriate, the fact that the OED lists US variants would seem to make it an appropriate source.

oneself; *to scratch (around) for* (something), to struggle for, to labour to achieve or find, to experience difficulty in acquiring, etc.

*OED*

Finally ‘scratch’ can denote cultivation of the land. This brings us back to the act of labour, of how Niedecker was able to ‘scratch out’ or ‘scrape’ a living on Blackhawk Island. This account of ‘scratch’ implies a reciprocal relationship with her environment; she works to enrich the land through her poetry, while the environment helps Niedecker to be self-reliant.<sup>36</sup>

By 1970 with the writing of the deeply disillusioned poem ‘Foreclosure’, Niedecker returns to her earlier lexicon, employing the term ‘Scratch’ in a new, more violent context. The poem reveals Niedecker’s ongoing financial struggles, as it outlines the foreclosure of a house from her father’s small estate.<sup>37</sup>

Tell em to take my bare walls down  
my cement abutments  
their parties thereof  
and clause of claws

Leave me the land  
Scratch out: the land

May prose and property both die out  
and leave me peace

*Collected 291*

In a Dickinsonian fashion, this poem functions as an extension of, and antagonist to, earlier Niedecker poems that privilege the sanctity of private property — ‘I sit in my own house’, being but one example. Instead, this poem records an aggressive attack on the legislation of land ownership, as Niedecker derides the legal language that is forcing her sale and rebuffs the politics of proprietorship. The opening, ‘Tell em’, in a direct petition to the mortgage brokers, sets up the central distinction between the direct language of prose and the complexity of poetic utterance. As Marie-Christine Lemardeley notes, ‘The legal contract seems an encroachment upon her desire to write’ (14). Here legal rhetoric, or in fact any direct ‘prose’, is equated to the dominance of property, as the poet affirms:

<sup>36</sup> My use of the term ‘self-reliance’ here does not come out of an Emersonian tradition. Instead I locate Niedecker’s sense of self-reliance as emerging from a Dickinsonian model, which is explored in detail in Section Three: The Niedecker Interior.

<sup>37</sup> After her father’s death in 1954 Niedecker inherited a number of properties on Blackhawk Island, in varying degrees of disrepair. She rented out these houses, and began to sell them off when her financial circumstances worsened.

'May prose and property both die out'. What we are left with, in this absence, is the other latent equivalence in the poem: poetry and land. In a recent Poem Talk Jessica Lowenthal, Michelle Taransky and Dee Morris joined Al Filreis to discuss the poem. They concurred that the ending suggested that prose is to property, as poetry is land (without ownership) (Filreis et al). The ratio reminded the group of Dickinson's 'I dwell in Possibility,' which describes poetry as a 'fairer house than prose' (*Poems* 215). Niedecker takes on this issue of property and fairness, or justice. While Dickinson is constructing a house of imagination, 'numerous of Windows/ superior for doors,' with a 'Roof' made of 'sky', Niedecker's poem is, by contrast, entirely house-less (215). She tells the broker to 'take my bare walls down', as she concedes her property to the debt-collectors. While Dickinson envisions a private poetic dwelling-place, Niedecker's imagination is left outdoors, un-housed in the wilderness.

All she requests is the remaining plot. 'Leave me the land', the speaker pleads, asking that 'the land' be 'scratch[ed] out' from the sales agreement. Here Niedecker's basic need to 'Scratch out' a living has proven unsuccessful. During an earlier foreclosure in November 1962, she writes in a letter to Zukofsky: 'The world has got me where I live — no one understands *my position* in all this' (Niedecker Papers, Box 25, Folder 3). It seems that despite her desire to live autonomously, the world outside was able to infiltrate into Niedecker's site. Morris goes further, suggesting that the lines 'Leave me the land/ Scratch out: the land', can be read as the speaker giving up all claim to her plot (Filreis et al). This is a radical move, as she relinquishes the possibility of claiming ownership over the environment. This reading also emphasises self-correction; she makes a demand, 'Leave me', and then in the next line changes her mind, 'Scratch out'. This quick-fire mutability, within the space of two short lines, demonstrates the internal conflict of Niedecker's predicament. Resigning her proprietorship, the speaker seeks a quiet life in the wild, as she concludes: 'leave me peace'.

In the scheme of the poem, foreclosure is equated to legal prose, portioning up language into manageable units and closing off meaning. What the poem offers as an antidote to this restriction is to expand the poetic fields of meaning through homophones and sound play. Niedecker employs the practice of clawing back legal terminology, this 'clause of claws', as she repossesses the language.

While the house and even the land may have been reclaimed by the bank, what remains is the language itself: 'leave me peace'. Niedecker works with this residue — her homegrown linguistic ingenuity. While prose and property can be owned and corrupted, poetic language is still an open and sharable site of exchange. The poem offers insight into Niedecker's communism; the land, like poetic language, must be collective.<sup>38</sup> It also crystallises an important tension in Niedecker's poetics of site: the tension between self-sufficiency and collectivity. There is a desire throughout Niedecker's oeuvre for both of these states simultaneously. This can be refined as the demand for complete poetic control (as registered through her intensive linguistic condensation) alongside the aspiration that the poem should be a shared, collective space of exchange.

Again we can turn to the cabin itself as a place to localise and work through these tensions. When Niedecker renounces the secure walls of her private property in the poem, she is left 'right down among em' — in the thick of it with her neighbours (*Collected* 142). As we move from 'I sit in my own house' to 'Foreclosure,' we witness Niedecker's shifting politics of site. No longer a safe retreat from the environment and its inhabitants, in her later verse the cabin as site opens up a different set of social conventions. The cabin, like her poetry, is located within a stridently working class model of community, held together by sharing and crucially by non-privacy. Situated in the bustling community of Blackhawk Island, Niedecker's cabin was far from a creative retreat, but rather, was privy to the conflicts and politics of her locale. Away from the metropolitan avant-garde scene, Niedecker could therefore be aesthetically autonomous, whilst aligning herself with her fellow Blackhawk Island inhabitants. In other words, she was poetically self-reliant and personally imbricated in the collective. Often critical of their behavior, Niedecker nevertheless was one of them — she was a part of the Blackhawk Island community. This solidarity is cemented in the lines: 'all who live here —/ card table to eat on, / broken bed —/ sacrifice for less/ than art' (*Collected* 194).

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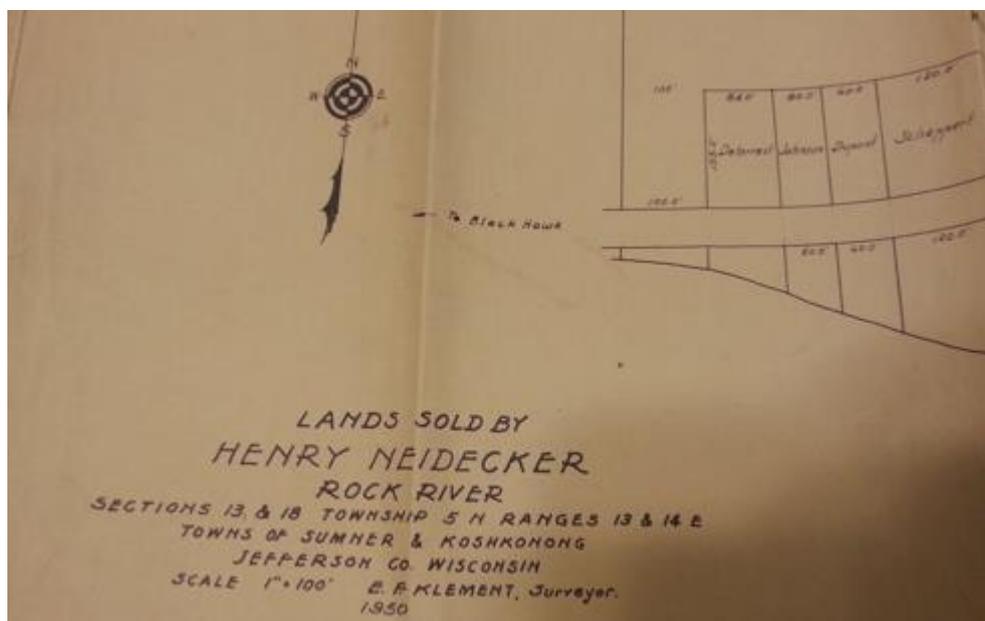
<sup>38</sup> Penberthy offers an overview of Niedecker's political alignments in her book, *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky: 1931-1970* (39).

## Section Two: Grounding Niedecker's Politics

Alongside Dickinson, one of the central misconceptions about Niedecker is that she lived a remote, secluded existence, rather than living within her local community. Niedecker's comprehensive embrace of Blackhawk Island is thoroughly articulated in Peters' biography. DuPlessis also notes:

Although Niedecker may have been figuratively lonely, she was not literally isolated. I was astonished, in visiting Niedecker's one-and-a-half room cabin outside of Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, to discover that she lived year-round in a summer colony. The cabins are packed along the two sides of a road on the narrow peninsula, and she was unbelievably close, in a physical sense, to her neighbors' houses.

'The Anonymous'



Survey map of Henry Niedecker's plots on Blackhawk Island, from 1950. Niedecker Collection Hoard Museum. These images demonstrate the close proximity each plot has to their neighbour.

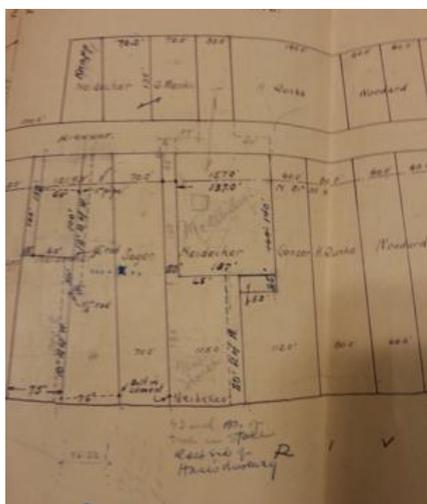


Image of the Niedecker and neighbours plots along Blackhawk Island road. Niedecker Collection Hoard Museum.

Niedecker's cabin as site opens out through its contact with the local; as well as being highly permeable to nature and the weather, Niedecker's position in Blackhawk Island was also permeable to her neighbours. Enmeshed in her working-class community, Niedecker's grandparents ran 'The Fountain House', a hotel, resort and bar on the island, while her father had his carp fishing business and later opened the Blackhawk Island Club House and Social Centre (Peters 25). Before her own cabin was built, Niedecker was used to living in and amongst friends and relations. She lived with her parents for the majority of her life (around 40 years), had a brief spell living in Fort Atkinson with her first husband, and spent time lodging with cousins in town while she was working (Peters 52). Poems written before Niedecker had her own home built in 1946 demonstrate her embedded position in the community. In one incident from 1951, recounted by Peters, she describes how, after withdrawing from a large party at her father's house, Niedecker would spot 'all the neighbours.... tear[ing] their lace curtains trying to find out what I was up to' (104).



Blackhawk Island Road, c. 1960. Niedecker Collection Hoard Museum. Note the multiple mailboxes in close proximity to one another.

Niedecker grounds her political ideas in and through her local community. Her first collection, *New Goose*, published in 1946, has been valued for its

political tenacity.<sup>39</sup> As a regional woman from Wisconsin, the fact that Niedecker was writing such incisive verse — criticising local and global political infrastructures — is testament to her daring poetics. As Ben Hickman points out in his recent study, *Crisis and the Avant-garde: Poetry and Real Politics*, as we continue to reel from ‘the deleterious effects of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression,’ now is an opportune moment to reconsider the politics of the Objectivists (8). Both Niedecker and Zukofsky had communist affiliations. Niedecker was politically active, but she declined to become a card-holding member of the Communist Party (Penberthy 39). Yet Hickman argues that Zukofsky’s oeuvre has been widely de-politicised:

Biographical facts regarding Zukofsky’s deep philosophical allegiance to Marxism and his involvement with the US Communist Party and its organs continue to be ignored by Zukofsky readers at both ends of the political spectrum. Such ideological white-washing goes back to Eric Mottram’s 1973 essay, ‘Politics and Form in Zukofsky’, which describes a poet ‘without ideological dogma’ who ‘did not plump for Russian leadership in the Thirties’ (he did).

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I argue that the problematic attachment of Zukofsky studies to Niedecker’s criticism has led to a similar de-politicisation of her poetry. For example, in her biography Peters claims that ‘ideology of any kind was antithetical to Lorine’s subtle mind’ (64).<sup>40</sup> Not only does this statement align left-wing politics with instrumentalism (something that Niedecker’s poetry always avoids) but it also suggests that the “true” poetic mind is somehow adverse to politics more generally. Such comments demonstrate the reductive, heavily de-politicised criticism that Niedecker has received. Thankfully the 1993 Penberthy book, *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky: 1931-1970*, is testament to the vast and nuanced political exchanges that occurred between the pair, as well as to Niedecker’s formative years of left-wing radicalisation.

Much recent criticism on Niedecker has centred on the ecological (not itself un-political as a subject) and yet there has been hesitancy, beyond the formative work of DuPlessis, to interrogate the substance of Niedecker’s politics beyond

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<sup>39</sup> The poems discussed here are either from the first *New Goose* publication, or associated with the *New Goose* manuscript.

<sup>40</sup> While Peters’ biography is hugely important, the sections on Niedecker’s politics and formal alignments are brief, adversary and forego any real interrogation of their significance to her poetics.

the speculative labels of ‘folk’ or ‘objectivist’. Without rehearsing the general Marxist commitments of the Objectivists which have been widely discussed, this section will unpick the specificity of Niedecker’s revolutionary principles. For Niedecker particularly, I argue, has much to teach us. In specifying her left-wing politics, it is Niedecker’s site — living alongside the working class inhabitants of Blackhawk Island — that sets her apart from her fellow Objectivists. This position, I claim, enabled her originality: she formulates her politics through the microcosm of Blackhawk Island.

The *New Goose* poems cover a wide range of socio-political issues. From cheap labour and poor housing, to debt, social hierarchy and injustice. Intensely witty and humorous, they poke fun at the ridiculousness of government policy and perform ‘serious whimsy’ in the style of her literary predecessors Edward Lear and e e cummings (Penberthy 39). Surreal images such as ‘the apse in the tiger’s horn’ are combined with nursery rhyme forms and nonsense language like ‘glee glo glum’ (*Collected* 85). In combining political scrutiny with artistic playfulness, Niedecker dissolves one of the central tensions in avant-garde practice, principally between ‘revolutionary politics’ and experimental ‘aestheticism’ (Hickman 17). *New Goose* is both straightforwardly readable and politically complex: she creates her aesthetic through the local struggle against Capitalist inequality. What is most striking on re-reading these poems is the extent to which they deal with structural deprivation. The Blackhawk Island community exists in a state of perpetual poverty, as the poems include lines such as ‘my stove’s too empty’ and ‘not enough to eat’ (*Collected* 95, 96). For Niedecker poverty was not an artistic choice, but rather a dreadful reality.

She writes of the socio-political effects of unemployment in a poem from around 1956:

A lawnmower’s one of the babies I’d have  
if they’d give me a job and I didn’t get bombed  
in the high grass

by the private woods. Getting so  
when I look off my space I see waste  
I’d like to mow

*Collected* 96

The poem centres on a classic American literary image: the lawn. Disturbing the democratic idealism of Whitman's 'spear of summer grass', as Claudia Keelan observes, 'the lawn became popular in this country at the end of the 19th century, and "came of age" with the phenomenon of the suburb (the triumph of private property) and mass marketing of the lawnmower'. If the dream of consumerism is to separate yourself from your neighbours through material possessions, the lawnmower is the machine that can materialise that separation: it demarcates private land. But crucially in this poem, as with Niedecker's plots on Blackhawk Island, that separation is made impossible through economic deficiency. Her land, like the 'space' of the poem, is undifferentiated from that of her neighbours.

The second line layers personal financial insecurity with global political unrest. During that period, as nuclear war with the Soviet Union loomed large, the threat of bombing was in the air, but the air raids of the Second World War never reached the mainland US. We might also consider how the economy "bombed" post-war, or how getting 'bombed' indicates drug-taking and getting 'high' on 'grass' as a response to financial instability. As the economy is failing and the speaker is job-less, as Niedecker frequently was, getting 'waste[d]' on Whitman's symbolic 'grass', seems like necessary escapism. There is a troubling parallel being drawn here between the enforced short-sightedness of poverty, as getting stoned makes it difficult to focus, and the 'waste' that ensues — getting 'wasted' as a form of self-annihilation. From a materialist Marxist perspective, this poem insinuates the difficulty of consciousness-raising when faced with dire economic circumstances. The final line, 'I see waste / I'd like to mow', documents the need to trim away at the 'waste' of the working-class condition; the poem conveys the urgency to gain the right tools, the 'lawnmower', in order to challenge the social order. Yet the poem ends with a disconcerting circularity. The line, 'if they'd give me a job', is the statement on which the poem hinges. Without this job and the ability to purchase such tools as 'the lawnmower', the 'grass' will grow unhampered, leaving a community of apathetic potheads with no agency to effect political change.

Other poems in *New Goose* are less pessimistic and convey an underlying solidarity felt by those living locally. Niedecker admits, 'I always thought the

people were really good' (Peters 12). The poem 'We know him — Law and Order League' (1939) describes the injustices felt by the inhabitants of Blackhawk Island. The policeman is characterised by his high social position, as he 'owns stock' and his political opposition to trade unions, 'testified against the pickets/ at the plant' (*Collected* 99). The divisions of this small community are made obvious by lines such as 'fishing from our dock', and the venom of lines like 'There he sits and fishes/...never sprang from work—/a sport' (*Collected* 99). The possessive pronouns here, the 'We' and 'our' are contrasted with this 'he' who occupies an unwelcome spot in the local landscape. Niedecker uses linguistic platitudes, but the acerbic undertones reveal the bitter feelings towards outsiders of the community. Such lines also mark the localised specificity of the poetic utterance: Blackhawk Island was an enclave that did not welcome outside authority. Niedecker's ability to register wider political dissent through the particulars of the local is paramount to the value of this collection.

### **Niedecker's Folk-talk**

Attention to local speech patterns and Niedecker's ability to transcribe the distinctive vernacular of Blackhawk Island is an important feature of the *New Goose* poems. Zukofsky saw this source as a poetic gold mine, encouraging Niedecker to read the newspaper, talk to locals and generally attend to the 'riches immediately at hand in her community' (Penberthy 41). More important than Zukofsky though, was Niedecker's own position among this folk-talk, which 'rang in her ears, demanding release' (Peters 54). Written in tribute to her verbal heritage, Niedecker's *Mother Goose* poems were principally influenced by her grandfather, 'a happy, outdoor grandfather who somehow somewhere had got hold of nursery and folk rhymes to entrance me', and her mother, 'daughter of the rhyming, happy grandfather mentioned above, speaking whole chunks of down-to-earth (o very earthy) magic, descendant for sure of Mother Goose' (Peters 22). Niedecker was constantly receptive to her social environment as she collected and refracted the linguistic materials from her surroundings. However, her poetic form is never intrusive: she eavesdrops on folk conversations, yet she never appears to outstay her welcome. As her cabin was a part of the local community, Niedecker preserves a keen sense of neighbourliness.

In 'Mr. Van Ess' Niedecker nurtures local gossip and implements a range of voices to echo the polyphony of the local. The first two lines are spoken in dialogue, 'Mr. Van Ess bought 14 washcloths?/ Fourteen washrags, Ed Van Ess?', with the subtle changes from 'Mr.' to 'Ed', '14' to 'Fourteen' and 'washcloths' to 'washrags' materialising the alternation in linguistic utterance (*Collected* 95). The tone of lines such as, 'He drinks, you know' replicates an intimate, nosy conversation, while the local dialect, 'he came into the kitchen stewed', serves to remind us of the distinctiveness of this region (*Collected* 95). The extended metaphor for this poem is entirely domestic, with 'Mr. Van Ess' being criticised for his alcoholism, financial frivolity and for his domestic abuse. Niedecker tacitly infers that 'Ed' is a violent masculine character: 'mixed things up for my sister Grace—/ put the spices in the wrong place' (95). Reading this final line as the metaphor for the damage Ed Van Ess has done to Grace, the 'spices' here stand in for bruises, and the earlier 'day we moved' infers the family trying to flee (95). While the 'washcloths' Ed is buying remain unaccounted for, we may deduce that they are either sought in penance for his behaviour – 'Must be going to give em/ to the church, I guess' – or, more ominously, will be used to mop up blood (95).

The poem appears to parody hearsay and uses a simplified rhyme scheme to create a jolly, uncomplicated atmosphere. But this triviality masks a darker social reality. 'Mr. Van Ess' is a deeply ethical poem that interrogates gender relations in the community and explores how such relations play out through oral narratives. The niceties of linguistic platitudes may cover up the truth of Mr Van Ess' character, but the underlying purpose of such chatter is significant: it functions to warn female neighbours about his violent behaviour. So Niedecker's invocation of gossip becomes a powerful weapon against patriarchal oppression. Through the poetic transmission of such local gossip, Niedecker reveals that community and solidarity is achieved between women through these verbal encounters. In the poem, Niedecker is also able to legitimise her own practice of eavesdropping. Taking the common definition of gossip as the 'casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details which are not confirmed as true', this resonates strongly with Niedecker's poetics in *New Goose*. On first glance many of the poems are in a gossipy mode: slight, superficial and seemingly insignificant. Yet just as these poems (and

gossip itself) can be initially overlooked, they both conceal a richer meaning. The whole collection operates as a kind of local gossip hub, with openers like, 'My man says', whereby commonplace occurrences accumulate and intensify into a penetrating critique of capitalist consumption, greed, and patriarchal inequality (*Collected* 97). The 'Mr. Van Ess' poem demonstrates the utter imbrication of the personal, private and the political; while Feminism was not to announce that the personal is the political until 1969, the year before Niedecker's death, her *New Goose* poems perform this mantra fluently. This magnification of the everyday is entirely purposeful, as the poem details the psychological distress of living amid such conditions of precariousness. Through the minutiae of details like the number of 'washcloths' purchased, wider socio-gender ramifications are revealed.

DuPlessis argues that Niedecker was deeply implicated in articulating women's experience, especially rural women further disenfranchised by engrained patriarchal codes and marginal locales ('The Anonymous'). Femaleness in Niedecker is inevitably a 'social marker' and the women she ventriloquises often speak from the common position of subjugation ('The Anonymous'). The women in *New Goose* are unglamorous, calling themselves 'the dung of the earth' and dissatisfied with their condition, stating: 'I doubt I'll get silk stockings out/ of my asparagus' (*Collected* 87, 103). Yet the poems never serve to universalise women's experience, or to forge any 'similarity or consensus for [a] social agenda' ('The Anonymous'). Rather Niedecker's poems 'point to the world around them and let injustices speak for themselves', in a non-discursive, matter-of-fact way, getting on with the job just like the female characters invoked ('The Anonymous'). Many poems outline women's work, with lines that describe their domestic labour, 'Gather all the old, rip and sew', and 'floods floor, pump, wash machine', while others play with linguistic and cultural conventions to deconstruct female subject-hood: 'What a woman! — hooks men like rugs,/ clips as she hooks' (*Collected* 102, 107, 108).

Through such characterisations, Willis claims that 'Niedecker celebrates the richness of folk language while acknowledging the brutality of the culture it supports' ('Possessing'). Niedecker has described the process by which she mediates this local language, disclosing, 'I'm a different character in a different

drama with almost every poem I write' (Peters 56). Due to her steadfast location on Blackhawk Island, Niedecker was able to ventriloquise various roles in the community and become a mouthpiece for local issues. However, there has been some critical discussion around the role Niedecker plays in the *New Goose* poems. Sometimes she functions purely as the linguistic messenger, remaining inaudible herself. As Maegan Evans surmises:

Critics like [Jonathan] Skinner and [Lisa] Robertson characterise Niedecker's speech and silence as mutually supportive, creating a poetics of listening. These approaches are fruitful because they take into account Niedecker's responsiveness to her aural environment and her delight in sound, while recasting her silences as active ethical responses.

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Even in those moments of apparent lyrical quietude, Evans argues that Niedecker takes an active ethical stance. More than a singular, lyric contemplation, these poems bring into sharp focus the tensions and instabilities of the community at large. Despite being a discreet, rather unsociable character in real life, in the *New Goose* poems Niedecker speaks for the Blackhawk Island folk, giving voice to those who have been marginalised.

Niedecker focuses on the microcosm of Blackhawk Island in order to reveal the macroscopic: the national scale of socio-political discontent. Writing after the Great Depression when thousands of people (including Niedecker and her first husband, Frank Hartwig) lost their jobs, severe social disharmony was not a uniquely local problem. Michael Davidson uses the term 'critical regionalism' in relation to Niedecker to indicate 'a use of locale to comment on global forces, placing indigenous peoples, local economies, and non-metropolitan spaces within the orbit of capitalist production worldwide. Cultural geographers have used critical regionalism to describe the self-conscious use of vernacular features to critique modernist universalism' (117). Never singular or atomised, Matthew Jenkins argues that, 'the bodies in Niedecker are continually enmeshed within a larger cultural context' (15). The post-depression climate created, as DuPlessis notes, 'a sense of disenfranchised social agency,' which, in turn, led to wide scale 'political outrage' ('The Anonymous')

The poems themselves open out the complexity of Niedecker's political thinking. In 'A country's economics sick' (c. 1936) the essentials of food, language and politics have become intermingled in the chaos of a failing economy: 'A

country's economics sick/ affects its peoples speech' (*Collected* 86). The people of the poem can no longer afford, 'bread and cheese and strawberries' and this deprivation has left language 'indigestible' too (*Collected* 86). This plays on the consumption of food as a metaphor for the indigestibility of political language. On Blackhawk Island, in the face of actual hunger, this rings true, as the inhabitants were left disenfranchised amid such deprivation. From within such structural poverty, 'they have no pay' is all that the country-folk are able to 'say' about their own condition: a declarative and un-nuanced statement of lack (*Collected* 86). Language and meaning have been dumbed down to the basics.

In a letter to Zukofsky in 1937, Niedecker connects the daily search for sustenance with wider political struggle. She writes that, 'The lettuce I planted on April 7 froze on April 27. So we start all over again', and a few lines further down in same letter, 'Oh me, the junction with the Reds! Did you hear [Vyacheslav] Molotov's voice on [the] radio?' (Niedecker Papers, Box 25, Folder 1). Here Niedecker materialises the convergence between food and intellectual nourishment. However in the poem just discussed, the speaker asserts a firm resolution: 'Till in revolution rises/the strength to change/ the indigestible phrase' (*Collected* 86). As this early poem demonstrates, Niedecker's politics of the mid to late 1930s was deeply rooted in orthodox Marxist-Leninist ideology, matching Zukofsky's view that 'the proletarian revolution' would be 'the savior of mankind' (Hickman 26). Hickman characterises Zukofsky's poetry from the 1930s and 1940s as a form of political 'intervention' — that poetry must intervene in the 'crisis of capitalism' — but Niedecker's approach was quite different (19). Niedecker insists that it will be the people via revolution who will usher in a new era of social equality ('Till in revolution rises'), rather than language or poetry that will intervene. This reversal is telling; while Zukofsky was focusing on ways to 'press literary history into the service of socialist revolution', or using literature to awaken the masses, Niedecker was instead facilitating the underclasses in pressing themselves into the territory of literary history (Hickman 27). 'Niedecker asserts the aesthetic value of [the] working class, [the] non-literary', claims Willis ('Possessing'). It is the local populous who must rise up and demand his or her own aesthetic and political significance. This egalitarian value structure is itself entirely radical. Zukofsky lived a somewhat

bourgeois existence in New York, while Niedecker was living 'right down among em' (*Collected* 142). Zukofsky was theorising working class conditions, while Niedecker was embodying them. The cabin as her compositional site provides the critical grounding for her political consciousness.

### **Indigeneity and Race**

Alongside refining the poetics of her proletarian class-consciousness, Niedecker was also extending her research methodologies. During her time at the Federal Writer's Project in Madison from 1938-1942, Niedecker and her fellow workers compiled the 650-page text, *Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State*. Her work on the project gave her an acute understanding of the state's history, culture and geography. This research trained her to attend to the details of original documents and this new relationship to materials informed a number of poems. She wrote 'Black Hawk Held' and poems on Increase Lapham and Asa Gray during this period. The Works Projects Administration (W.P.A) also became a practice in cooperative writing, as Niedecker worked alongside colleagues to complete the guide (Penberthy 40). This communal effort into compiling a regional history based on the particulars of the local, including researching home-grown figures, extended Niedecker's materialist approach to politics. In this way, Niedecker's politics move beyond the theoretical; she grounds her investigations of site in real, local history. This research, I argue, enabled Niedecker to explore the fractious issues of indigeneity and race. As Elisabeth Willis argues:

Niedecker's opus seems less about place in a geographical sense (she certainly disliked the notion of being a "regional" poet) than it is about knowing one's place: that is, about where the poet fits into the culture and how one travels through and within the interstices of class and regional identity – owning up to one's debased roots, whether they lead back to colonial explorers or the "natives" who pull out their fingernails, or both.  
'Possessing'

As Willis confirms, Niedecker's poetry is less about 'place' and more about the politics of emplacement. Niedecker's poetry is rife with acknowledgments that the 'territorial claims of contemporary America rest on a history of imperialist dispossession' (Parks 137). It was Niedecker's emplacement in her cabin that enabled her to scrutinise colonialism. Rita Barnard notes a 'renewed interest in Native American matters' in the 1930s, as she claims that 'the Depression decade

was a time when cultural anthropology rose to greater prominence,' and when the social sciences began to critique 'the idea of Western civilisation as a narrative of progress' (Parks 134). Barnard explains that 'from the point of view of non-Western cultures, especially, in the United States, of Native Americans, the benefits of the Machine, of technology, and of abundant commodities may appear rather negligible in relation to what they might destroy—or might already have destroyed' (Parks 134).

In his 2014 thesis, *Extending the Document: American Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Depression Documentary*, Justin Parks describes Niedecker's praxis as a form of auto-ethnography.<sup>41</sup> Parks writes of Niedecker's 'recourse to the autochthonous elements of folk cultural production', with an emphasis on her connection to the land as a 'source of authenticity', which is established through her native roots (117). However, the definition of 'autochthon' is

Originally a person indigenous to a particular country or region and traditionally supposed to have been born out of the earth, or to have descended from ancestors born in this way. Hence more generally: an indigenous person; an earliest known inhabitant.

*OED*

Niedecker is politically attentive to the fact that she is not an autochthon; in her poetics she adamantly contests any autochthonous connection to the region. Parks labels Niedecker a 'native informant' of Wisconsin, yet the very condition of her nativity — of her occupation of the land — is exactly what she confronts (131).

Through the lens of colonialism, the tenor of Niedecker's relationship with the land is heightened and problematised. 'The Clothesline Post is Set' (c. 1946) performs as a mode of auto-ethnography, able to investigate and criticise Niedecker's own position as a white woman living on Blackhawk Island. The poem reads:

The clothesline post is set  
yet no totem-carvings distinguish the Niedecker tribe  
from the rest; every seventh day they wash:  
worship sun; fear rain, their neighbors' eyes;  
raise their hands from ground to sky,

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<sup>41</sup> Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research in which an author uses self-reflection and writing to explore their personal experience and connect this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political and social meanings and understandings.

and hang or fall by the whiteness of their all

*Collected 100*

Parks notes that in this poem Niedecker 'defamiliarises the familiar "ritual" of hanging laundry out to dry by assuming an ethnographic perspective on it' (117). The American household custom of hanging washing is ironically equated to a form of religious practice. But contemporary spirituality is registered as entirely vacuous: God no longer judges the 'Niedecker tribe'. Instead it is the local neighbours who assess the efficacy of domesticity, rather than the purity of character.

The 'post' here, marking the site of the judgement, echoes Native-American totem poles. Such poles contain complex symbolic meaning in Native-American culture, but Niedecker's 'clothesline post' is, in contrast, mundane and ordinary. Like the lawnmower from the previous poem ('A lawnmower's one of the babies I'd have'), which was used to demarcate private property, this post is also used to distinguish the land — this particular site — as belonging to the Niedeckers. But, as Parks argues, 'unlike the aboriginal peoples whose practices their behaviours invoke, their claim on the land they inhabit is tenuous at best; it is as if they are held in place by nothing but the "clothesline post": a flimsy and fair-weather stake (Parks 132). The Niedeckers are just like 'the rest'; there is nothing to 'distinguish' them from the colonisers who stole this land from the native population. In fact, this poem functions to expose the idiosyncrasies of the Niedecker family and the wider Blackhawk Island community, in their attempt to perform rituals of 'whiteness' against a backdrop of colonisation.

This poem is a pioneering critique of the ideological fantasy of whiteness.<sup>42</sup> As Gregory Jay explains in his 'Introduction to Whiteness Studies,'

Whiteness Studies attempts to trace the economic and political history behind the invention of "whiteness," to challenge the privileges given to so-called "whites," and to analyse the cultural practices (in art, music, literature, and popular media) that create and perpetuate the fiction of "whiteness." ...At bottom, "whiteness" is an ideological fiction naming those properties supposedly unique to "white people," properties used to claim that they are a "superior race" and the "norm" by which others are judged. "Whiteness" is also — or above all else — a legal fiction

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<sup>42</sup> The ideology of whiteness is explored in an earlier poem, taken from the calendar selection, 'Next Week or I fly my Rounds, Tempestuous', as Niedecker writes: 'I talk at the top/ of my white/ resignation' (*Collected 55*).

determining the distribution of wealth, power, human rights, and citizenship among bodies denominated by this fiction.<sup>43</sup> The final line of the poem, 'and hang or fall by the whiteness of their all', reveals Niedecker's awareness of the fictionalisation of race in the United States. Her family and white neighbours have appropriated Native American land, as well as their customs and traditions, but they are judged by their ability to enact conventional forms of 'whiteness'. The 'whiteness' of the clothes being hung out to dry becomes an exteriorisation of the 'whiteness' of the Niedecker's skin-colour. In the poem such whiteness is also set against the violence of contemporary racism and the rise of white supremacist organisations. The final lines invoke the lynching of black people by insurgent white mobs in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The Ku Klux Klan use the motto "blood and soil" to stake their right to inhabit US land.<sup>44</sup> In making reference to the on-going racialised violence of her period, Niedecker critiques the politics of colonial landownership which function to exacerbate separatist tribalism.

The ritualisation of 'whiteness' in the poem has nothing to do with moral purity; it is merely performative. 'The clothes-line post is set', indicates that this is a stage 'set', while the phrase 'hang or fall' denotes the curtain being raised on this theatre of white absurdity, in which Niedecker is an actor. As part of the 'Niedecker tribe', as well as through her ownership of property on the island, Niedecker was inevitably afforded a certain amount of white privilege. As Elizabeth Savage describes, 'the absence of exceptionalism shown by the "Niedecker tribe" ties this lyric to Modernism's reinvention of poetic tradition';

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<sup>43</sup> Gregory Jay continues: 'Whiteness studies can be traced to the writings of black intellectuals such as W. E. B. DuBois and James Baldwin, but the field did not coalesce until liberal white scholars embraced it [around 1995], according to some who helped shape it.' While Whiteness Studies peaked around the mid-2000s, there is currently renewed activism around structural racism and inequality with the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as pioneering poetry collections about race, such as Claudia Rankine's 2014 *Citizen: An American Lyric*. There have also been recent critical reflections on the inherent racism of the experimental poetry tradition (see Cathy Park Hong's 'Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde'). Now seems a timely moment to go back and consider Niedecker's understanding of race in mid-century US poetry.

<sup>44</sup> The University of Milwaukee states: 'A Milwaukee chapter of the Ku Klux Klan was organised in 1920. Early Milwaukee Klan meetings were held in a hall over a local theater, and by 1924 the local chapter had 4,400 members and a clubhouse at 2424 Cedar Street (now West Kilbourn Avenue). The cities of Madison, Racine, Kenosha, and Oshkosh also had Ku Klux Klan chapters. Throughout the 1920s, the Wisconsin chapters of the Ku Klux Klan were a major problem for both blacks and whites. Cross burnings were a common occurrence across the state for several years and many state and municipal officials gained office because of Klan backing' ("Ku Klux Klan | March On Milwaukee - Libraries Digital Collection").

here Niedecker is merely one of the rest, neither exceptional nor unique, aligned to her white neighbours by her structural privilege (291). But unlike the typical Modernist performance of racial neutrality, whereby whiteness stands in for universal experience, Niedecker acknowledges her complicity within a racialised world; through the recognition of her personal and structural privilege, she both challenges and implicates herself within the fractious issue of racial inequality. By interrogating the concept of imagined, universal 'whiteness' in this poem and others, Niedecker participates in the poetic production of racially-aware politics, which remains a highly contentious, and unresolved issue in poetics, even to this day.<sup>45</sup>

The wider context and timeline for the poem is important, as Peters reports in Niedecker's biography. By the 1940s Blackhawk Island had deteriorated 'from a rural paradise to a blue-collar tourist destination' and had opened two resorts that 'catered exclusively to African Americans' (Peters 71). But segregation was still a powerful force in the US at this time, as Peters tells us: 'If an African American ventured into other resorts.... he might be asked at gunpoint to leave' (71). Living within this fraught political environment, race-relations were no longer an abstracted concept for Niedecker, but a daily lived experience. Such divisions would have heightened the poet's sense of her own racialised body. As Sara Ahmed confirms in her 2007 essay, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness,' 'we can consider how whiteness becomes worldly as an effect of reification. Reification is not then something we do to whiteness, but something whiteness does, or to be more precise, what allows whiteness to be done' (150).

After her father's death in 1954 and finding it difficult to work due to her failing eye-sight, Niedecker was left in charge of his small estate: namely the cabins he owned and rented out on Blackhawk Island. She discloses in a poem: 'The death of my poor father/ leaves debts/ two small houses' (*Collected* 117). Niedecker's poor economic status meant that she worked a variety of jobs, including proofreading, librarianship and employment as a switchboard operator. During the years 1954-1957 (until her job as a hospital cleaner) the

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<sup>45</sup> See the controversy around Conceptual poets Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place in their appropriation of black voices as a contemporary example of how poetry and racialised so-called 'identity' politics is still a controversial question.

rent on these small houses became her only source of income.<sup>46</sup> Peters explains that as ‘as a property owner’ Niedecker ‘dreaded selling to blacks because they put off other buyers, lowering value’ (127). This economic and ethical struggle is keenly enacted in a poem from 1955.

When brown folk lived a distance  
from my cottages my hand full of lilies  
went out to them  
from potted progressive principles.

Now no one of my own hue will rent.  
I’ll lose my horticultural bent.

I’ll lose more – how dark  
if to fight to keep my livelihood  
is to bleach brotherhood

*Collected 136*

The poem presents multiple layers of precarity. The lyric ‘I’ of the poem, standing for Niedecker’s own position, is under threat of losing the profitability of her land, if ‘brown folk’ move closer to her rental cabins. The intersections of class, race and gender that Niedecker layers is farsighted: the verse ties together ethical responsibility with economic instability, racial injustice, complicity and guilt. Niedecker ridicules herself and the classic left-wing liberal, with their ‘potted progressive principles’, as she recalls how reaching out to her black neighbours, with ‘my hand full of lilies,’ only occurs from a position of relative security.

Like in ‘The Clothesline post is set’, the poetic speaker demarcates her own white position from the opening line: ‘When brown folk lived a distance/ from *my cottages*’. Niedecker’s lyric self here makes itself known as neither universal nor representational: her white body orients itself in consideration of racial inequality, but not in complete solidarity with it. As Savage argues:

[A]nonymity or impartiality anchoring the lyric’s authority includes, especially, race neutrality, a factor taken easily as a given because of the lyric’s purported disembodiment (and, thus, skinlessness) of voice, and works much like the democratic ideal of character triumphing over colour or class. Niedecker’s poetry intervenes in this supposition to observe the lyric as racially marked, or as white and producing whiteness through its

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<sup>46</sup> Peters describes how Niedecker ‘desperately needed another job; income from the rental properties didn’t pay her taxes let alone daily essentials, and there were [her father] Henry’s debts’ (122).

pretension of colourlessness.... 'When brown folk lived a distance' refuses the lyric pretext of a racially transcendent consciousness.

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Defying the normative "colourless" lyric self, this poem functions as an intense personal scrutiny of how to ethically position oneself within a defiantly racist community.

The middle stanza of the poem appears to be autobiographical, as in a letter to Zukofsky the following year Niedecker admits: 'Two more houses have been sold to negroes between this neighbourhood and the hill, I'll try to buy a lot in Fort where I could possibly live with country and main street in walking distance and that will be that' (Niedecker Papers, Box 25, Folder 3). The tone of this letter complicates the poem. It seems there was a moment around 1957 when Niedecker considered selling her rental homes and moving into Fort Atkinson town, but it is unclear if this move was solely to improve her finances, or whether Niedecker herself did not want to rent to, or even perhaps to live amongst, the black locals. In the poem Niedecker's position is outlined as lose-lose: 'I'll lose my horticultural bent' / 'I'll lose more'. The choice available is between maintaining her much-valued ecological cabin home, or her long-standing political principles. But Savage makes an important distinction:

Importantly, the poem doesn't say no one will rent her property, just that no one of 'her hue' will — a euphemism intensifying the speaker's status as 'white understood' (because we all know who doesn't want to live beside brown people). This important distinction, not 'no one' but 'no one of my own hue,' makes the crisis clearly about the speaker's character rather than her literal economic survival.

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More than simply an enactment of 'character', as Savage describes, Niedecker's whole moral outlook is scrutinised in this poem.

The poem does not offer any simple solutions to the complexity of negotiating a racialised local economy. But it does offer a range of colours — 'brown', 'lilies', 'hue', dark', 'bleach' — to counter the black and white binary of racial prejudice (*Collected* 136). In typical Niedecker fashion, minute linguistic choices become paramount and close-reading those choices is the way to understand Niedecker's political standpoint. The principles of the speaker are characterised as 'potted': i.e. 'planted or grown in a pot'; not cultivated directly from the ground. These 'potted progressive principles' are not, therefore, naturally occurring, but are

instead appropriated from wider liberal discourse (a slight “dig” at Zukofsky, perhaps). The ‘lilies,’ offered as an insincere gesture of solidarity, are similarly up-rooted. This is a poem about how to cultivate equality more widely — about how to home-grow anti-racism in the face of widespread structural poverty. As Savage writes: ‘horticulture entails cultivating roots, which are etymologically (and metaphorically) joined to “race”’ (303). Niedecker subverts the association of roots with racial purity in the phrase ‘bleach brotherhood’. The ‘bleach’ that has used to whitewash the neighborhood, is entirely destructive to the natural environment.<sup>47</sup> Through these terms, as well as using the catchall term ‘folk’ to describe her African-American neighbours, Niedecker reveals that racism is ungrounded in her local community.

Again, it is Niedecker’s cabin site that bolsters the integrity of this investigation. The speaker’s principles are uncomplicated when ‘brown folk lived a distance’, revealing that proximity is really what is at issue. Space, particularly racially marked space, plays a pivotal role in this poem and in ‘The clothes-line post is set’. In the latter, the ‘Niedecker’ property sits directly upon historic Native American land, which returns us to the politics of land ownership. An emphasis on possession is strong in ‘When brown folk lived a distance’: ‘my hand full’, ‘my own hue’, ‘my livelihood’, while the drawbacks are individualised: ‘I’ll lose/ I’ll lose’. Similarly, in ‘The clothes-line post is set,’ it is ‘the whiteness of their *all*’ by which the Niedeckers will be judged, as the total amount of clothing, or the whiteness of their skin, is most valued. By focusing in upon the minute details of daily struggles around class and race — the amount of washing and the distance between houses — Niedecker is able to critique the wider socio-political implications. In both poems, the characters are not reified by race, but separated through their ability to occupy land; remnants of the colonial ideology work to categorise and separate those who possess from the dispossessed. The capitalist mandate for ownership, whether of land or through consumerism, is ultimately the modus operandi that has set up this intrinsic power imbalance.

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<sup>47</sup> In her astute analysis of this poem, Savage also notes: “The phrase “to bleach brotherhood” paraphrases Du Bois in the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, where he states, “[The American Negro] would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world” (39).

### **Enmeshed/ Unmeshed in Blackhawk Island**

Compared with fellow poet and political radical Zukofsky, Niedecker was doubtful about the capacity for poetry to aid in effecting social change. This hesitancy grows out of being active in the community of Blackhawk Island and her lived experience of working class adversity. She also participated in a local culture that rarely met her intellectual demands. In 1958, after reading Thoreau closely, she remarks to Zukofsky: 'I wish I had some Thoreau's living out here' (Niedecker Papers, Box 25, Folder 3). Without academic companionship, Niedecker mostly kept her poetic life to herself. In 1957 she writes regarding her hospital colleagues: 'I think they know they have a cleaning woman who is a little different from the usual, but it wouldn't do the slightest good to show them how different' (Peters 126). This was a decisive manoeuvre on Niedecker's part — to keep her poetry hidden. As she explains in a letter to Zukofsky:

I think I've arranged it that the hospital work is one world and mine at home is another.... How am I really? I'm all right. I enjoy my home and even myself sometimes. Enmeshed in nuisances of course but no real troubles. How are you really?

Letter to Zukofsky, September 2 1957, Niedecker Papers, Box 39, Folder 4

In Zukofsky's reply, he corroborates Niedecker's need to remain detached in order to think and write poetically. He twists Niedecker's 'enmeshed.... nuisances' into the idea of living 'unmeshed': autonomous and un-entangled from societal expectations (Zukofsky Collection, Box 19, Folder 5).<sup>48</sup>

Willis argues that in Niedecker's lyric disclosures, 'the poet-reporter is clearly set apart from the subjects whose speech-acts she records' ('Possessing'). While DuPlessis suggests that 'her relationship to the people is never without the judgment of an outsider: she is inside [the] social class yet outside by virtue of her artistic production' ('The Anonymous'). A poem that encapsulates this position, between being 'enmeshed' in the local community, but remaining artistically 'unmeshed' is, 'In the great snowfall before the bomb', written in 1950:

In the great snowfall before the bomb  
colored yule tree lights  
windows, the only glow for contemplation

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<sup>48</sup> I am unable to quote directly from Zukofsky's response to Niedecker, due to the limitations set by Paul Zukofsky on his father's work. Such restrictions frustrate the expansion of Niedecker scholarship and prevent a richer critical understanding of the Zukofsky-Niedecker relationship.

along this road

I worked the print shop  
right down among em  
the folk from whom all poetry flows  
and dreadfully much else.

I was Blondie  
I carried my bundles of hog feeder price lists  
down by Larry the Lug,  
I'd never get anywhere  
because I'd never had suction,  
pull, you know, favor, drag,  
well-oiled protection.

I heard their rehashed radio barbs –  
more barbarous among hirelings  
as higher-ups grow more corrupt.  
But what vitality! The women hold jobs –  
clean house, cook, raise children, bowl  
and go to church.

What would they say if they knew  
I sit for two months on six lines  
of poetry?

*Collected 142-143*

Peter Quartermain has characterised Niedecker as 'ambivalent' or 'indifferent' to her local population, but this poem contradicts his assessment, as it offers a range of strong emotional responses (162). It moves through the fluctuations of affection, disillusionment, respect, contempt, inclusion and withdrawal from the community. As Alison Caruth argues, the poem cultivates 'critical distance as well as quotidian intimacy' (53).

It opens with a comparison between the glow from Christmas trees with the glow emitted from the first nuclear explosion. This imaginative association reveals the heightened literary mind of the speaker who is able to conjure and compare disparate elements. In contrast the 'folk' are characterised as lacking such enlightenment: their 'windows' reflect artificial light, rather than internal 'contemplation'. Still the poetic subject is reluctantly implicated within this community. 'I was Blondie', she discloses, a local nickname that, in truly Niedecker fashion, is ordinary and modest. But the nickname shrewdly reveals the gender-dynamics at play, as 'Blondie' is shorthand for unintelligent,

superficial — a stereotypical “dumb blonde”. It seems that the speaker encourages this false perception, as she can utilise this misconception to her advantage. As she tells us, the locals provide the foundation to her poetics, as it is the ‘folk from whom all poetry flows’.<sup>49</sup> Performing as humble ‘Blondie’, she is able to surreptitiously exploit her position ‘right down among em’ to procure their folk vernacular. The ‘Blondie’ of the poem is therefore a double agent — a local *and* a poet — an interlocutor and an interloper.<sup>50</sup> In fact, the poetic subject is able to carry out these dual functions *because* she is undervalued and misjudged. This idea gets to the heart of Niedecker’s social persona within the collective of Blackhawk Island. She can operate within the community, appearing as one of the ‘folk’, but her poetic craft generates her sense of separation and self-reliance.

Niedecker shared this position of under-appreciation with the local women she esteems. The poem chronicles the diversity of work undertaken by women, stating that ‘The women hold jobs’, which subtly criticises the men of the area who could not “hold-down” long-term employment. She also praises the women’s ability to enact a multiplicity of roles; she contests the disregard afforded to women’s domestic tasks, affirming housework as a full-time occupation. But it is precisely the invisibility of female labour that Niedecker exploits to her advantage. While her physical work at the *Hoards Dairyman* printing press is recognised by the town, as she ‘worked in the print shop.... carried my bundles of hog feeder price lists’, her poetic labour remains hidden as she whimsically questions: ‘What would they say if they knew/ I sit for two months on six lines/ of poetry?’ Here Niedecker is again drawing parallels between tangible, highly productive manual work, and occluded or slow aesthetic labour. She reveals that her own poetic practice is long and onerous. While her writing appears spontaneous, casual, and even artless, Niedecker’s poems demand intense scrutiny: she toils away at language, condensing and

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<sup>49</sup> The next line continues ‘and dreadfully much else,’ lamenting that while their linguistic utterance is rich, they are otherwise impoverished.

<sup>50</sup> DuPlessis makes similar claims: ‘So when Niedecker distances herself from, yet collects this language, she is setting herself at a class and gender distance from her peers, unwilling to be absorbed into the same joshing easy going formulas’ (‘The Anonymous’).

crafting her verse. While her poesis might not be as highly productive as her work in the ‘print shop’, it is equally labour intensive.

The speaker of this poem does not shy away from hard graft. She does, however, draw the line at sexual exploitation. An aspect as yet overlooked by Niedecker scholarship, the lines ostensibly about her work at the print shop, ‘I’d never get anywhere/ because I’d never had suction,/ pull, you know, favor, drag,/ well-oiled protection’, also operate at the level of sexual innuendo. The interpolation of the gossipy, ‘you know’, in the middle of this section makes such innuendo likely. The position here, we should remember, is ‘right down among em’, making the poetic subject susceptible to male ‘barbarous’ advances. Sexual relations are reportedly encouraged in the *Hoards Dairyman* workplace, as there are condoms, or ‘well-oiled protection’, to prevent pregnancy. Despite being sexualised as ‘Blondie’ by her co-workers, the lyric voice remains incorruptible, telling the reader: [They said] ‘I’d never get anywhere/ because I’d never had suction’. Repudiating male harassment, the speaker carries no ‘favor’ or ‘pull’ with management. As an early example of the sexual politics of the workplace, the poem reveals an insightful and pioneering cultural critique. There is an imperative to remain on her own terms, and not be susceptible to her debauched environment. Ultimately then, while living ‘right down among em’, Niedecker retained a sense of self ‘protection’ in order to achieve poetic ‘contemplation’. Grounded in her cabin on Blackhawk Island, she had the lived experience of local political issues while maintaining a critical distance in order to write poems. Straddling two worlds, the site of the local and the space of the mind, Niedecker constructs a poetics that does justice to her internal and external inhabitations.

### **Section Three: The Niedecker Interior**

— *All my surfaces are hard, all my interiors quiet and relocating.*

Niedecker to Zukofsky, June 16, 1959. Zukofsky Collection, Box 25, Folder 3

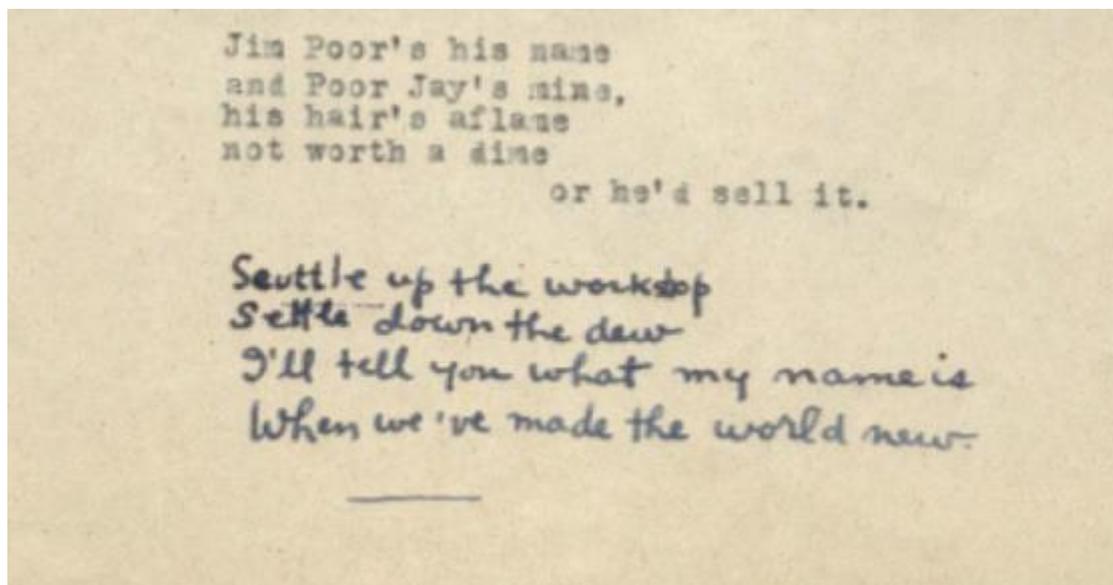
As a poet who valued self-protection, the site of Niedecker’s interiority — her unique ‘mental furnishing’ as she terms it — offers up manifold research potential. Yet the particulars of her complex sense of poetic interior have gone widely unexplored by Niedecker criticism. This is probably because the poet herself offered very little in the way of articulating her own poetics, her methods

of working, or her sense of herself as a poet. To explore Niedecker's interior, we must turn to the two major sources that scholars have access to: namely the poems themselves and her remaining correspondence.<sup>51</sup> These sources reveal the complexity of Niedecker's subjectivity as it is constructed through the literary act. Her letters often reveal her identity being strategically performed, while her poetry can register a greater depth of self-investigation. Yet, like Dickinson, Niedecker was invested in exploiting literary genres, particularly epistolary writing. She blurs the boundaries between the performative disclosure and poetic utterance, to obfuscate any facile notions of literary selfhood.

It is well established that Niedecker was reclusive, taciturn and reserved. In an early letter to Harriet Monroe, in February 1934, she discloses: 'One's fear is people — going social' (Penberthy 36). This personal reticence extends to her poetry:

Scuttle up the workshop,  
settle down the dew,  
I'll tell you what my name is  
when we've made the world new

*Collected 87*



Example from Niedecker's *New Goose* manuscript, with 'Jim Poor's his name'

<sup>51</sup> Niedecker's correspondence is patchy at best. Upon her death she requested that her husband, Al Millen, destroy her remaining correspondence. Additionally after their tumultuous first decade, Niedecker and Zukofsky dedicated time to erasing the personal intimacy of their letters, leaving only a few scraps from their first ten years of correspondence.

typed, and 'Scuttle up the Workshop' handwritten beneath. Niedecker Papers, Box 33, Folder 6.

In this manuscript example, the speaker's personal evasion is heightened through her distinctive handwriting.<sup>52</sup> The poet is present textually, as her hand has visibly written the typography, but the lyric subject is determined to remain evasive. She will not even unveil her name, a designation that is utterly arbitrary. Niedecker's poetic model, however, is not Shakespeare, but Dickinson, who writes:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you – Nobody – too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!  
How public – like a Frog –  
To tell one's name – the livelong June –  
To an admiring Bog!

*Poems 166*

Like Dickinson, there is a reluctance in Niedecker to disclose anything at all about the private self. Instead, she claims in a letter to Jonathan Williams in August 1965, 'I'm a different character in a different drama with almost every poem I write' (Penberthy 35). Many of the *New Goose* poems are 'shot through with personality', but the poetic speaker herself remains elusive (Penberthy 35). Playing with personae and extending her 'tendency towards self-dramatisation', any real sense of self in Niedecker's first collection is not easy to locate (Penberthy 35).

Niedecker nourishes self-contained privacy. Unlike other poets of the period — including Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Ted Berrigan and Zukofsky — who, through the mechanisms of self-promotion, recognised the cachet in curating a public identity to enhance their poetic career, Niedecker entirely repudiated this practice.<sup>53</sup> As she articulates in a letter to Clayton Eshleman: 'No, No, No! —

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<sup>52</sup> Cid Corman noted in a letter to Gail Roub: 'I never saw her handwriting — with its immaculate clear modest script — without at once feeling a twinge of pleasure — at whatever she has to say... She is both unpredictable and characteristic' (Arnold).

<sup>53</sup> See Libbie Rifkin's pioneering *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-garde*, for a detailed examination of the wider cultural implications of shaping a (male) poetic career.

Please do not print my letters.... I do not want to be known by what I say outside poems' (Penberthy 125). During her lifetime, Niedecker did not actively seek out a literary career, even refusing to give interviews. As she explained when approached for a poetry reading in 1965, 'I fight shy of that kind of thing' (*Between Your House* 77). DuPlessis contends that 'fighting shy' could be a Niedecker 'motif', describing her as 'shy, resistant, reluctant *and* what one might call "fighting shy," that is, 'presenting her shyness and maneuvering it' ('The Anonymous'). Peters' biography affirms that Niedecker would choose when to appear timid. During her time at the Federal Writers' Project, an account given by close-friend Vivien Hone 'belies Niedecker's famous shyness' as the poet arranged a large Thanksgiving feast for friends and associates (Peters 65). Instead, claims another friend Edwin Honig, introversion was 'a mask she wore to avoid certain people, rather than an affliction' (Peters 65). Resistant to poetic culture at large, DuPlessis makes the case that Niedecker 'embraced, worked towards, and improvised playfully on the condition of anonymity as a gesture of career building' ('The Anonymous'). As DuPlessis notes, this adoption of anonymity was not in opposition to achieving literary fame. Rather, as Evans argues, it centered on 'quietness, obliquity, and even self-effacement as integral to her poetics' (126).

To understand the context for this self-effacement, we must attend to the complexity of the Niedecker—Zukofsky relationship. Niedecker's well-documented initiation into Objectivism began in February 1931 when she read the Objectivist issue of *Poetry* magazine.<sup>54</sup> Niedecker first went to New York to meet Zukofsky between November and December of 1933, and maintained correspondence with him for the rest of her life. But their relationship has often been critically cast as 'tutelary' argues Penberthy, with Niedecker dismissed as Zukofsky's 'acolyte' (3).<sup>55</sup> Carl Rakosi described Niedecker's 'adulation' for Zukofsky in a letter to Oppen, and she has been considered a 'loyal disciple' of

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<sup>54</sup> A home-grown American movement, Objectivism's aesthetic epistemology centred on how objects come to bear meaning in the modern world. Dissenting from increasingly hegemonic Modernist methods, the Objectivists practiced new ways to consider the world through poetry.

<sup>55</sup> For example, as Penberthy points out, in the introduction to *From This Condensery: The Complete Writing of Lorine Niedecker* edited by Robert Bertholf, we are told: 'The early letters to Zukofsky are those of a daughter writing to a father, a fledgling poet to a mentor' (3).

Zukofsky in her attraction to Objectivism ('The Anonymous'). Their remaining correspondence confirms that Niedecker was often effaced in order to promote Zukofsky's work. She spent much of her life deferring to Zukofsky. In August 1955 she wrote to Dahlberg: 'So good of you to write me for material. I'm enclosing what I have on hand.... By far the most important for readers would be my 18-page essay on the poetry of Louis Zukofsky. I wonder if you'd want it' (Dahlberg, Box 23, Folder 2). Setting aside her own desire for publication, Niedecker puts Zukofsky before herself, in a classic act of female self-effacement.

This complicates the possibility of 'anonymity' as a method for 'career making', as outlined by DuPlessis ('The Anonymous'). It is the job of the feminist critic, DuPlessis reminds us, not only to locate female agency in decision-making, but also to unpack the complex gender-power dynamics at play. Research on Zukofsky and Niedecker has sidestepped their complicated, often exploitative relationship. It has yet to critique the manipulative control that Zukofsky maintained over Niedecker throughout her life. As her mediator to the avant-garde, Zukofsky abused his position by making significant demands of her. She worked for him for free, typing his poetic manuscripts, despite being impoverished and working many hours at various low paid jobs. Peters reports that she frequently sent the Zukofsky family money, which 'Zuk said, they used for an occasional movie and dinner' (122). Furthermore, Zukofsky insisted that the pair burn their early correspondence, which presumably included content that revealed Zukofsky's demand for Niedecker to have an abortion in the mid 1930s.

However, accurately researching their complex relationship is currently impossible, as Zukofsky's son Paul was given his father's copyright, which he held to ransom.<sup>56</sup> Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Zukofskys continued to impede Niedecker's poetic career, by restricting what could be published on the pair. Penberthy works hard to rebalance the picture, but, as yet, there has been no possibility of an objective comparison on the influence that each poet had upon

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<sup>56</sup> See Paul Zukofsky's 'Copywrite Notice', in which he catalogued his distaste for those who have a 'misguided interest in literature, music, art' and might want to work on his father's oeuvre as 'self-interest' to which he responded with a decisive "'do not trespass" sign where LZ aficionados may see it' (z-site).

the other. At present we must defer to the Niedecker expert Jenny Penberthy, who after studying the archival and currently un-publishable correspondence between the couple, insists on labelling their poetic enterprise 'a joint endeavour' (24).

### **Coded Agency: Niedecker's Correspondence**

It is in their correspondence that Niedecker's hidden agency can be located, as she artfully constructs her public performance. The construction of self in her letters is meticulous, nimble and incisive. As Zukofsky states in an undated fragment, 'your letters are your best writing' (Zukofsky Collection, Box 19, Folder 4). Penberthy agrees as to their intrinsic value, if not the status within Niedecker's oeuvre, suggesting that 'letter writing was her subsidiary art' and moreover that her correspondence often folded into her poetic work (8). As Penberthy relays, 'Her news from home often proved to be a rough draft on its way to the condensed nugget of the poem' (8). Like Dickinson, who blurred the genre boundaries between letter and poem, Niedecker too relished the epistolary form as a mode to enact the contingencies of literary form. Furthermore, for this socially retiring poet, letter writing enabled new modes of collectivity without leaving the site of the cabin. As for Dickinson, epistolary forms facilitated Niedecker's participation in vibrant cultural exchange without renouncing poetic autonomy.

Niedecker's writing is often playful, slippery and occasionally duplicitous. In letters to the Zukofsky family in the late 1950s for example, she signs off with, 'To your tenth floor cliff dwelling from my knot hole in the woods', in one letter, and, 'from my tree not so high as your tenth floor' in another (Zukofsky Collection, Box 33, Folder 4). During this period the Zukofskys lived at 30 Willow Street in Brooklyn, New York. They had a large house with views of the harbour, but they did not live on the 10th floor, as the building is only four stories high.

Recd Sept 29/17

Dear Paul: Needeckal  
 I want to send you this enclosed  
 bit before I get involved in trees. It's  
 not that we're descended from monkeys  
~~but~~ that we become so in order not to  
 damp off in the leaves. Happy birthday.  
 Italian Home mailed today for all  
 of you jumpers over continents.  
 To your tenth floor cliff  
 dwelling from my knot-hole  
 in the woods. —  
 Louine

Zukofsky Collection, Box 33, Folder 4.



Photograph of the Zukofskys' house at 30 Willows Street, Brooklyn, New York. Taken May 2015.

It is significant that Niedecker sets herself apart from the Zukofskys based on their different dwellings. Seemingly innocuous, Niedecker calls her cabin, a 'knot hole in the woods' and a 'tree' in contrast to the Zukofsky's privileged 'tenth floor cliff dwelling'. As a parting remark, the undercurrent of Niedecker's meaning is clear: she is 'not so high' as the Zukofskys, inferring that she lacks their importance, but it also implies that she is not so high and mighty. Modesty here masks sharp criticism. Niedecker manoeuvres herself into a position of self-deprecation to shrewdly attack the bourgeois Zukofsky lifestyle. This duality of humility and acerbity is a potent double-attack upon her so-called "mentor". Far from the model student, Niedecker can both perform that role and undercut it through her mischievous wit.

In another example, Niedecker plays with her identity as Zukofsky's pupil. In a letter to Kenneth Cox in 1966, Niedecker writes, 'I literally went to school to William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky' (Penberthy 23). While placing herself in the role of schoolgirl, she also simultaneously positions herself *within* the tradition of Williams and Zukofsky, two contemporary heavyweights of the poetry world. She is non-threatening, conceding their superlative tutelage, but also present in their poetic domain. In this late letter, Niedecker has perfected the art of self-deprecation as a means of self-promotion. She would foster this identity in letters to other male poets. She insists to Jonathan Williams in 1970, 'I probably have a folk base and even LZ knew it many years ago, that so far as I can see it might actually be my only claim to any difference between most poets and meself' (Penberthy 4). Playing down her abilities by performing self-deprecation, she invites compliments from her correspondents. These extracts also intensify her poetic uniqueness: her singularity as a writer. Niedecker makes the conscious decision not to fit within the Objectivist school, or follow in the Surrealist tradition. Instead she labels herself as a 'folk' writer, impossible to assimilate into a particular avant-garde movement. While other Objectivist contemporaries also valued singularity (most notably Oppen), Niedecker raises the bar. She positions herself as artistically and geographically unprecedented and unparalleled — matched only, perhaps, by Dickinson in her enactment of creative singularity. Her unique site in the cabin cultivated this singularity.

What emerges when we consider the various shifting identities Niedecker adopts through her correspondence is her mobilisation of adaptation, discretion and play. In another letter to Dahlberg, she fluctuates between extreme reverence and complete self-determination. In 1955 she writes:

Dear Edward Dahlberg:

Well, the enclosed does make a whole "inward landscape". Omission of middle lines of "February almost March" is the way you want it? - and of last two of "I sit in my own house" and second stanza of "In Europe we grown a new bean"....

It is so good of you to tell me so kindly what I lack.

Dahlberg, Box 23, Folder 2

This oscillation between obsequious gratitude and assured artist confidence marks this as a fascinating example of her outward and inward sense of herself as poet. Outwardly she defers to Dahlberg's judgement, whilst inwardly she knows better. Compare her self-inscribed sovereign 'whole "inward landscape"' with her specious compositional 'lack'; Niedecker tells Dahlberg that her internal poetic world is whole, while her outer world (publication, acknowledgment) is lacking — needs support. This letter, among others, demonstrates her consciousness of precarity: she desperately needs publishers and promotion, but she wants to remain creatively autonomous.<sup>57</sup>

Niedecker's agency and self-confidence is necessarily coded, or hidden. For instance, in response to a picture of the author printed with Zukofsky's *Some Time*, Niedecker suggests, 'They can put a creeping mint for me when I have a book' (Penberthy 235). The suggestion that her jacket photo should be 'a creeping mint' plant is unassuming, but it works to disguise the conviction of the statement, 'when I have a book'. Divergent and oftentimes contradictory strategies for literary survival collide and merge in Niedecker's correspondence; reverence slides into exaggerated praise, which then becomes covert criticism. Whatever the strategy, the end goal remained the same: maintain a presence in the poetic world in order for her poetic talent to one day be recognised.

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<sup>57</sup> This problem of getting published was something that she shared with Dickinson. In an unpublished fragment from 1951, Niedecker concedes, 'Well, ED (I just remember, that's Emily Dickinson and so we'll keep it. for her. (...) what happens to these people?' (Niedecker Papers, Box 25, Folder 1). As this extract demonstrates, the future of both poets was unknown, unknowable. Conserving a place in history for their poetry was of the greatest importance for both women: '... As you know, I'd be happy if a book of my own poems could come out by some publisher somewhere before I die', Niedecker discloses to Cid Corman, just five years before her death (*Between Your House* 65).

**'nothing in it/ but my hand': Niedecker's Self-reliance**

This sense of personal and poetic autonomy was shared with Dickinson. Indeed there are multiple parallels that can be drawn between the pair.<sup>58</sup> While most critics make some comparison between the writers, based primarily on their similar, isolated household set-ups, there has been relatively little work that draws out the complexity of their relation. Their formal poetic confluences include: linguistic brevity and concision, parataxis, slant rhymes, no formal titles for poems, drafting and revision processes, collecting poems into informal groupings or fascicles, the heightened significance of the manuscript, lacking formal publication for most of the oeuvre (and instead utilising letter writing as a creative act).<sup>59</sup> Notwithstanding these various parallels, in an article for *Jacket*, Gloria Frym rejects the Dickinson/ Niedecker equivalence:

The analogy to Dickinson seems part of an attempt to construct some sort of meta-genealogy of 'women poets,' potentially distancing Niedecker from historical context and lessening her relationship to those Objectivists with whom she may rightly claim association. Carl Rakosi summed up the difference between Dickinson and Niedecker: 'Of course, Lorine was absolutely objective, whereas Dickinson dealt in subjectivities.'

Such an identification of Niedecker with the Objectivists has its own limitations, principally that, as illustrated in this passage, there has been a reluctance to consider the scope of Niedecker's 'subjectivities'.

DuPlessis argues that Niedecker was a poet 'deeply implicated in the Objectivist nexus,' but also points out that she considered herself to be 'on the periphery' of the group ('The Anonymous'). Even in her most sincerely Objectivist poems, there is an undercurrent of recalcitrance. While Niedecker read her fellow Objectivists veraciously, in her own work she continuously 'modified [the Objectivists'] terms' (Heller xii). Evans considers the issue of subjectivity to be the point of contention (150). In *Sounding Silence: American Women's Experimental Poetics*, she argues that: 'In its fixation on objects and its scrupulous avoidance of the subjective, Objectivism is not able to accomplish what, for Niedecker, is essential to art: interiority and self-exploration' (Evans

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<sup>58</sup> Niedecker's investment in Dickinson is evident. On November 27th 1960, in a letter to Zukofsky, she states, 'At 57 I have two people ED and LZ, after a lifetime almost, of reading' (Niedecker Papers, Box 39, Folder 4).

<sup>59</sup> Rather than attend to the multiple formal commonalities between the poets, my consideration here will be around their formulation of poetic subjectivities.

150). The Objectivists have been characterised as disinterested, even hostile to exploring the mysteries of the self, with Zukofsky dismissing the unconscious as a product of history and acculturation (DuPlessis and Quartermain 11). But in *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, DuPlessis and Quartermain point out that some Objectivist work, like that of George Oppen, was interested in 'blending inside and out' (11). These same critics conclude that: '[Niedecker] interpreted Objectivist practise as having to focus its materiality of objects in the real world to express intensities of interior feeling' (DuPlessis and Quartermain 11).

Attempting to access every level of experience to understand our innate nature, the Surrealist movement provided a valuable counter narrative to Objectivism. The Surrealists offered 'tools for looking inward that were stringently denied by [some of the] Objectivists', explains Evans (151). Niedecker's early work is saturated with Surrealist influences. She visited Salvador Dali's one man show in New York at Levy's in 1933 and published the Surrealist inspired 'Promise of Brilliant funeral' the following September (Peters 128). She also wrote 'Progression' and 'Canvass' in a Surrealist style. Both DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain agree that Niedecker differs significantly from other Objectivist poets because her work 'has a distinct, liberatory, pre-Objectivist phase of Surreal writing' (10). This interest outside of the rigidity of Objectivism can be viewed as 'muted criticism' of Zukofsky, argues DuPlessis ('The Anonymous').

However, beyond her early experiments, Niedecker's poetry does not adhere to the 'flowing, expansive expressiveness' model of the unconscious as outlined in Surrealism (Evans 162). Instead, I argue, she turned to the poetry of Dickinson, a poetic forebear whose intricate renderings of female self-hood became crucial to Niedecker's construction of subjectivities.<sup>60</sup> The affinities between these two women poets do not, as Frym suggests, 'attempt to construct some sort of meta-genealogy of "women poets,"' which ignores Niedecker's own 'historical context'. Despite the century between them, the central questions for both poets remained the same: how to be a woman poet in a patriarchal world, how to maintain personal autonomy despite exterior pressures and how to be

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<sup>60</sup> Dickinson occupied a central place in Niedecker's 'immortal cupboard' of writers (Peters 75).

read on your own terms. The effort to read Niedecker through and against the Dickinsonian model is twofold: firstly it follows Marjorie Perloff's lead in arguing that, while Niedecker's work portrays Objectivist/ Surrealist tendencies, it possesses 'a personal stridency that looks beyond the stylistic habits of her male counterparts to the specific problems of her own situation', namely, her gender (88). Secondly, it registers the formal affinities between the pair, reading their construction of a poetic self as directly emerging from the limitations of the page space.

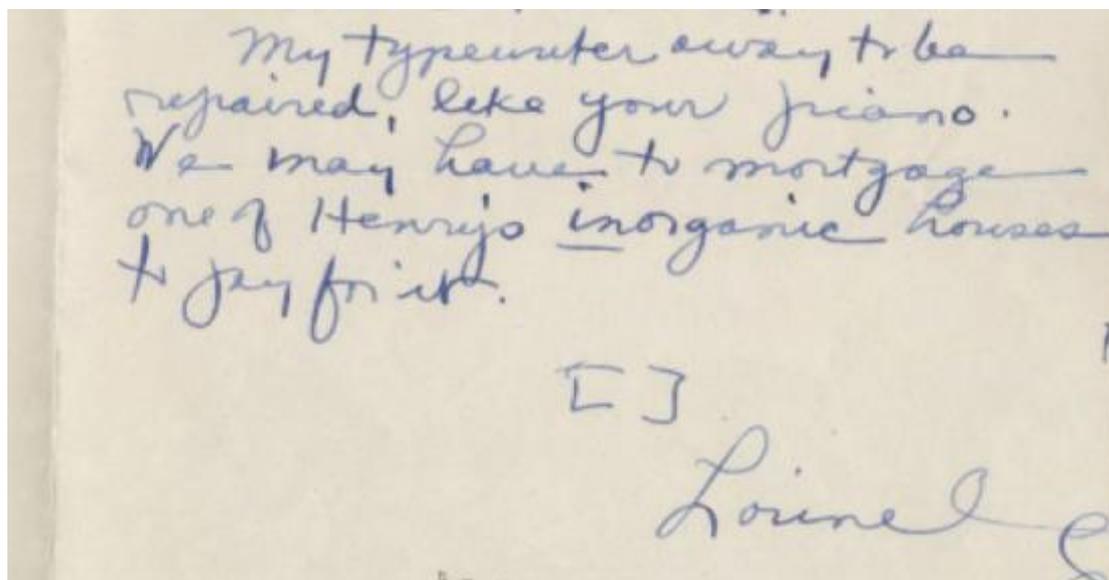
Niedecker's enactments of interiority owe much to the Dickinsonian idea of solitude and self-reliance. Before her marriage to Al Millen in May 1964, Niedecker described herself as 'I who needed no one -' (Peters 133). However, unlike Dickinson, who relied upon continued emotional and financial family support, Niedecker's determined self-reliance was unsupported and precarious. The poet was fiercely independent financially, refusing alimony from her first husband Frank Hartwig, despite on-going money worries (Peters 69). Her poor economic status meant that she worked a variety of jobs, including proofreading, librarianship and employment as a switchboard operator. After the death of her parents, her poverty increased: her cabin did not have plumbing until 1962 and she frequently lacked the money to heat her home. In 1959, she describes being 'settled and sitting and heating myself occasionally with the organ-stove' (Niedecker Papers, Box 25, Folder 3). During the same period, Niedecker could not afford writing paper, so instead she scribbled on the backs of bills, on envelopes and on scraps of paper (Niedecker Papers, Box 25, Folder 3). Thus the prime difference between Niedecker and Dickinson's autonomy was based on class. As Alan Marshall argues, 'Niedecker puns on the hidden affinity of owning and being on one's own, sees that security is also economic, even when it seems purely existential' (138). As such, Niedecker contests and expands Dickinson's idea of self-reliance, constructing a poetics out of her lived experience of financial and aesthetic isolation.

A poem that encapsulates the complexities of self-reliance, economics and precarity is 'You are my friend—', written in 1960, and revised in 1961 (*Collected* 189). Perloff argues that the final lines, 'nothing in it/ but my hand' point towards the poet's self-sufficient sexual pleasure through masturbation (91). But

Penberthy's careful editing in the *Collected Works* reveal an earlier draft in which such a reading is brought into question. The first draft opens with: 'Why do I press it: are you my friend?', an anxious question directed from self to other (*Collected* 421). While Perloff asserts that the speaker rejects friends or lovers for absolute independence, this earlier draft exposes a more vulnerable poetic speaker — a speaker whose weaknesses are laid bare in her apprehensive questioning (90). Here, emotional self-reliance is detached from economic independence. There is a demonstration of friendship and care through the physical actions exhibited by the other: 'you bring me peaches/ and the high bush cranberry/ you carry/ my fishpole' (*Collected* 189). But unfortunately for the poetic speaker, these actions do not equate to romantic love, as her hand has 'nothing in it' (that is, no hand to hold) 'but my hand' (*Collected* 189). The speaker's hand may be empty, but it is full of latent desire. She is reaching out for the other — but rewarded with gestures of friendship. The implicit contrast is between the friend who can offer materials or care and Niedecker who can offer nothing but herself, through 'my [empty] hand' (*Collected* 189). Again, looking to the revised version we can uncover a sharper angle on this situation, as the speaker states, 'The trouble of the boot on you, friend' (*Collected* 421). Twisting the saying, "the boot is on the other foot," when an advantage has been reversed, Niedecker's draft line implies that the friend holds all of the power in their relationship. This power imbalance is the poem's real focus. In the draft version, Niedecker offers another romantic cliché, "the ball is in his court", to summarise her current predicament (*Collected* 421). While the earlier version makes this imbalance more explicit, the later draft performs Niedecker's enigmatic style more effectively, with her final line, 'nothing in it/ but my hand', signifying her lack of material wealth, her desire for companionship, and her hand at work on the page simultaneously. The empty hand symbolises the different aspects of Niedecker's self-reliance: while she is economically precarious, she does not seek financial provision, but only emotional support.

For Niedecker, this emotional and aesthetic support came principally from Zukofsky. Yet, recalling Dickinson's famous line, 'Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant,' there is a familiar obliqueness and confidentiality in the correspondence between the pair (*Poems* 494). In their letters there is almost a code language

being employed, as the two share in secrets to which the general reader has no access. This enigma is symbolised in their intimate non-verbal sign-offs — through the open brackets that close most letters.



Zukofsky Collection, Box 22, Folder 7

This open bracket – ‘[ ]’ – is an enclosed space of contingency and emotion, recalling the confined walls of the cabin. It signals what cannot be said in words, but is known in sentiment. Rich in meaning unknowable to anyone beyond Niedecker and Zukofsky, it performs as an intimate sharable space for the pair, as well as a stark reminder of exclusion for anyone eavesdropping on their correspondence. Coming at the end of Niedecker’s informal, open conversation with Zukofsky, it enacts the limits of Niedecker’s inner legibility. The open bracket shows us that there are elements of her correspondence that should remain hidden, undisclosed and illegible to the public. This mode of obliqueness, of language that we can register, but that remains unknowable, is a common Niedecker trope. In her letters, Niedecker withholds the full legibility of her interior self to foster the same enigmatic persona that has come to define Dickinson’s career.

This inscrutability emerges in Niedecker’s work through the distinctions between legibility, authenticity and truth. Throughout her correspondence, Niedecker cultivates a trustworthy mode of expression based on her humble background and education, which frames authenticity as integral to her creation of self-hood. For example, when Niedecker tells Edward Dahlberg, ‘I’m just a sandpiper in a marshy region’, we believe her (Dahlberg, Box 23, Folder 2). This

authenticity performs as an honest, heartfelt disclosure, leaving little room for doubt or suspicion on the part of the reader. Yet this constructed sense of authenticity often disguises the truth hidden beneath. The early poem 'Progression' uses the phrase, 'what I am and why not' (*Collected* 31). The result is that Niedecker can appear authentic even when she is lying: she appears to be 'what I am', so that few look beneath the surface to 'why not'. There is a hiddenness to her writing, just as she conceals herself in the cabin. This topic has not been observed by critics, who tend to regard the poet's commentary on her own work as straightforwardly indicative of Niedecker's thinking and practice. What has been largely overlooked is her masterful evasion and misdirection. Niedecker, I argue, can never fully be taken at her word: she is always telling it 'slant' – confessing much, but telling little. While DuPlessis has labelled Niedecker 'anonymous,' we could call her duplicitous.

Such misdirection and duplicity nourishes one of Niedecker's most valuable possessions: concealed inner autonomy. This autonomy was generated through Niedecker's poetic site of the cabin in particular. Here her poetic practice was uninterrupted by the distractions of wider avant-garde culture-making and, moreover, within the cabin, Niedecker could construct her image within literary society. Take, for example, the way she presents her compositional process when writing the poem 'I Married' (1965-1967). She tells fellow poet Cid Corman:

Just a few minutes ago rather spontaneous from a folk conversation and I suppose some of my own dark forebodings. We shd. try to be true to our subconscious? Sorry it is another *I* poem. My god, I must try to get away from that.

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The poem reads:

I married  
in the world's black night  
for warmth  
          if not repose.  
At the close –  
someone.

I hid with him  
from the long range guns.  
          We lay leg  
          in the cupboard, head  
in closet.

A slit of light  
 at no bird dawn –  
     Untaught  
     I thought  
 he drank

too much.  
 I say  
     I married  
     and lived unburied.  
 I thought –

*Collected 228*

One of the key questions arising from this poem, but also from Niedecker's account of its genesis, is: can we take Niedecker at her word? Can we believe that what she tells us is honest?

Looking at the letter to Corman, who was a key literary agent and promoter of Niedecker at the time, we can begin to unravel Niedecker's subtle deception. She discloses the circumstances of the poem's composition, emphasising its 'rather spontaneous' emergence from 'a folk conversation'. Yet on closer reading, the so-called "folk" dialect (reflected plainly in other poems) is entirely absent here. 'I Married' uses precise English and is highly crafted so it cannot be termed 'spontaneous'. Furthermore, it harbours the language of literary heritage: namely the lexicon of Dickinson (explored in more detail below). The central issue becomes plain: why does Niedecker deliberately divert our attention away from the true account of this poem's creation? Why does she disguise its genuine origins? Such questions get to the heart of the poet's sense of interiority, as well as revealing important aspects of her poetics. In such self-presentations, Niedecker wilfully conceals the complexity of her poetic thought, claiming rural spontaneity, rather than thorough rumination, as the grounding of her poesis.

In reality, the poem comes straight out of a rigorous relation to Dickinson. 'I Married' is superficially about a marital relationship, but when read alongside several of Dickinson's poems, it reveals intimate scrutiny about the interior self – about partnership, enclosure, and self-sufficiency. Through its shared lexicon, the poem operates as a conversation with Dickinson, or even an argument. This indentured lexicon is not immediately obvious, but discloses its meaning with patient reading. Niedecker's line mid-way through, 'at no bird dawn', references one of Dickinson's most utilised symbols — the bird — and brings to mind her

poem which begins: 'The Birds begun at Four o'clock—/ Their period for Dawn—' (*Poems* 229). Another, more explicit reference, is found in Niedecker's 'A slit of light', which directly references Dickinson's famous line, 'There's a certain Slant of Light' (*Poems* 142). The variation between 'slant' and 'slit' is important: slant indicates 'taking an oblique direction or position; to deviate from a straight line' (*OED*), and slit suggests, 'a straight and narrow cut or incision' (*OED*). Niedecker's distinction from Dickinson can be located in this subtle linguistic change; while Dickinson's poetics emphasise oblique derivation, Niedecker chooses concision.

Dickinson's poem 'There's a certain Slant of Light' is characterised by the agony of 'internal difference': her transcendent experiences of nature are experienced singularly, by her alone (*Poems* 142). Niedecker's poem 'I married' echoes this problem of creative independence, as the 'slit of light' goes unrecognised by her partner. The following line, 'Untaught', confirms the growing distance between the married couple, as the speaker's mental capability is clearly greater than her husband's. A careful reading of Dickinson affirms this idea, as in her theory of artistic perception she proclaims that, 'None may teach it', implying that the condition of poetic interiority is ultimately un-teachable (142). Like the Dickinson poem, 'I married' infers that 'internal difference' exists, despite the advent of formal marital union. However, the Dickinson poem that 'I married' most closely relates to is 'My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun' (*Poems* 341). Niedecker's poem plays out a parallel version of companionship. In Dickinson we have a complex master/ servant relationship, where the narrator of the poem is given agency through her engagement with a dominant male figure. In Niedecker this male "husband" figure is afforded far less power; the repetition of the 'I' of the subject virtually erases his presence: 'I thought', 'I say'. The twice recited 'I married', instead of the normative "we married" establishes the poetic subject as entirely self-reliant. Niedecker's second stanza, beginning, 'I hid with him/ from the long range guns', mirrors Dickinson's second stanza, 'And now We roam in Sovereign Woods/ And now we hunt the doe —' (*Poems* 341). Yet Niedecker's hiding is directly contradictory to Dickinson's roaming. This roaming points towards an escape into exteriority; Dickinson's speaker leaves the 'Corners' of the domestic space, and is 'carried.... away' into the outside

wilderness. Alternatively what we see in Niedecker is the insistence upon sheltering, through the word 'warmth', and concealing in 'hid'.

In order for the poetic subject to evade outside forces, those 'long range guns', she selects a mode of self-enclosure encapsulated in the lines, 'leg/ in the cupboard, head/ in closet'. This echoes Niedecker's much earlier poem 'Progression' (1933) which, claims Jennison, invites us to 'rethink the gendered alignment of interiority with retreat, and exteriority with advance' (24.). As in Dickinson's poems, enclosure presents challenges as well as possibilities. Niedecker's description of old age as 'At the close-' reminds us of the imminent tomb-like enclosure of the grave. Similarly the imagery of the 'cupboard' and the 'closet' presents a cramped, domestic space, not unlike Niedecker's cabin. However, the reason behind Niedecker's preference for enclosure is revealed in the last stanza, as the statement 'I married' leads to the qualification, 'and lived unburied./ I thought — '. By living a constricted marital life, the poetic speaker has been afforded different luxuries, such as the means to live in 'unburied' creativity.<sup>61</sup> The characteristic Dickinsonian dash that ends the poem provides the final nod to her predecessor, as Niedecker invokes the possibility of Dickinson-style autonomous interiority from within the space of marriage.

This mode of withdrawal — from the world at large, if not the actual reality of Blackhawk Island — operates as an effective form of resistance in Niedecker's writing. As Lee Upton suggests in his book *Defensive Measures*, 'Defence depends on establishing distance, a boundary, and as such defence is most recognisable as a device that creates the illusion of distance' (21). The cabin as site was key in enacting this withdrawal from the wider world. Niedecker rarely travelled, instead entrenching herself on-site in Blackhawk Island. Such fixity enabled the poet to form a defensive position, as she could determine the boundaries between herself and others. This sense of self-protection is also registered in Niedecker's verse, as despite using familiar language and simplistic rhyme schemes, the reader is often held at arm's length, establishing a protective distance between herself and her audience. These 'mechanisms for shielding', as Upton designates them, become a key tool in Niedecker's poetic arsenal (15).

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<sup>61</sup> In a letter to close friend Gail Roub, dated May 9th, 1967, Niedecker notes that her preferences for writing poetry are: 'Solitude yes, but not confinement' (Niedecker Collection, Hoard Museum).

But this form of public shielding was not without its consequences. ‘So this was I’, written in November 1951, four months after her mother’s death, captures the complexity of hiding her inner life:

So this was I  
 in my framed  
 young aloofness  
 unsuspecting  
     What I filled

eager to remain  
 a smooth blonde cool  
 effect of light  
 an undiffused good take,  
     A girl  
     Who couldn’t bake

How I wish  
 I had someone to give  
 this pretty thing to  
 who’d keep it —  
     something of me  
     would shape

*Collected* 133

The poem uses the image of a woman looking in the mirror to explore the relationship between the external and the internal self. The female subject here is ‘framed’ by the mirror, reading her superficial external appearance, as ‘a smooth blonde’, and trying to reconcile it with her internal discontent. It chronicles the frustration with playing the role of a ‘good take... girl’, as her reflection registers the surface-level expressions of being likable, submissive but lacking depth. The mask has grown into the flesh, as beneath the surface lies only emptiness, a hollowed-out self that is unrecognisable to the speaker.

This poem operates in conversation with earlier works. It signals to the ‘Blondie’ of ‘In the great snowfall before the bomb’, written just a year earlier. In that poem the speaker is able to brush off her ‘Blondie’ nickname, as she withdraws into deep poetic contemplation. But in ‘So this was I’, her blonde hair colour is ‘an effect of light’, supporting the image of the woman as un-substantive and ephemeral. It also recalls the much earlier poem, opening, ‘There’s a better shine/ on the pendulum/ than is on my hair’, written in 1936. The hair here is less shiny, unencumbered by societal pressures of beauty, existing, as it were,

out of time. By contrast the light upon the narrator of 'So this was I' is 'undiffused', or in scientific terminology, 'specular' and directly absorbed. The 'undiffused good take,' suggests that she is directly immersed in her environment, as a straightforward good-time girl. Moreover, she reflects back what others want to see, as in her letter to Dahlberg: 'It is so good of you to tell me so kindly what I lack'. She's also described as 'a girl/ who couldn't bake', indicating that she is either undomesticated, or unable to conceive children and thus unwomanly. It is this lack that seems to 'shape' the identity of the female speaker. A lack, perhaps, also recognised in the back-catalogue of the poet. Niedecker seems to be invoking her own poems, looking for substance, only to reject their apparent triviality. The poem, 'What horror to awake at night', written in September 1951 (just two months earlier) incites a similar sense of dejection with the refrain: 'I've spent my life on nothing' (*Collected* 147).

Ultimately the character of 'So this was I' is searching for both internal substance and external recognition. 'How I wish/ I had someone to give/ this pretty thing to/ who'd keep it —', implores the speaker. The simple phrase, 'this pretty thing,' referring to the face of the female subject, also invokes the poem as artefact. She is searching for someone to cherish and preserve the poem — 'keep it' — as a way of materialising the substance of the internal self. While Dickinson relied upon her literary worth being recognised after her death, Niedecker hopes to 'shape' a poetic career to form 'something of me' in the here and now. This contrast between the immaterial, external reflected self: 'framed', 'light', 'undiffused' is set against the real task of materialising inner substance, 'what I filled', 'something of me/ would shape'. Dickinson entirely sacrificed her public self to live in her poems, and in questioning how to materialise the inner self, Niedecker's only answer also seems to be — through the poetic act itself: 'who'd keep it/ something of me/ would shape'. By a reader 'keep[ing]' the poem, and preserving it into futurity, Niedecker implies that her poetic self could be formulated in the process.

### **Containing/ Retaining the Self**

If Niedecker's poems operate as a container for experience — a space in which the self and the world can be conserved — then the shape of that container, its dimensions, volume and capacity must be examined. Marshall stipulates that for

Dickinson, the entire house becomes a container for experience: ‘the image of the house reflects her remarkable sense of self’ (143). In contrast, Niedecker’s container for the self and for memory is far smaller. As we witness in this well-known poem from the *New Goose* collection:

Remember my little granite pail?  
 The handle of it was blue.  
 Think what's got away in my life—  
 Was enough to carry me thru.

*Collected* 96

Niedecker transforms Dickinson’s memory house into a ‘pail’ — a bucket of limited capacity to hold experience.<sup>62</sup> And scale in this poem is important, as memory is shaped through a tiny object: the pail operates as a vessel for extensive remembrance.

The purpose of Niedecker’s poem is to query the basis of retention — how do we retain things, contain things, remember things and hold onto them? She is also concerned with that which cannot be held: what gets away. A pail can be used to hold and transport water, but it is only a temporary container. Like memory, the pail’s function is both to enclose and to flush it away its contents. Thus Parks claims, ‘the granite pail stands in the economy of everyday items proliferating throughout Niedecker’s work for the partial object, a cipher for the unlocalisable sense of loss that provides the elegiac ambiance of these poems’ (148). He continues, ‘Put differently, the granite pail is an empty container, a receptacle into which any number of objects can be imaginatively placed’ (148). Niedecker treats such objects as loaded subjects. In the poem’s concluding lines, she suggests that even though the pail has been lost, its absence has been inconspicuous: ‘Was enough to carry me thru’. Alongside the idea of retention is the notion of sufficiency — what can be ‘enough’. Despite the loss of this totemic object, there has been enough left over for the speaker to persist. The substance of this sufficiency is contained in the word ‘Think’. Whilst losing the ‘little granite pail’, the speaker is still able to ‘Think’ and indeed to ‘Remember’ — two characteristics vital for the perseverance of poetry. In her analysis of the poem

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<sup>62</sup> Dickinson’s large, bourgeois homestead is also transformed by Niedecker in a letter to Zukofsky in Nov 25, 1952, as she says: ‘Henry is putting up a mailbox for me... I’m thinking of living in it... and putting my house out as a mail box’ (Niedecker Papers, Box 25, Folder 1).

DuPlessis agrees, arguing that: ‘Remember and think guide the meditation, remember addressed to a listener, think addressed to the self’ (‘The Anonymous’). Niedecker claimed, ‘I conceive poetry as the folk tales of the mind and as creating our own remembering’ (Penberthy 88). In her use of folk materials, she presents the mind as a collective resource, a place in which to collect and redistribute the objects of experience. This is present in Niedecker’s other symbolic objects from *New Goose*: ‘Pa’s spitbox’, ‘Misses Dorras.... silkalene’ and ‘Mr. Van Ess’.... 14 washcloths’ (*Collected* 101, 88, 95).

Later, in the *For Paul* collection, the idea of the poetic receptacle would be revisited. In ‘He lived – childhood summers’, the poem concludes: ‘He wished his only daughter/ to work in the bank/ but he’d given her a source/ to sustain her – /a weedy speech,/ a marshy retainer’ (*Collected*, 170). DuPlessis has noted that in this poem ‘retainer’ is a term that ‘[can] travel laterally across a dictionary definition, assimilating all definitions to the poem. Retainer—in apposition to “speech” or oral language—is a richly allusive word involving some thing or person she is able to keep or hold in her possession, keep in a particular place, keep in mind, or remember, or hire for a fee’ (‘The Anonymous’). Niedecker defines herself as a ‘weedy retainer,’ playing upon the latent economic holdings she has, the cabin and land itself being Niedecker’s retainer. Niedecker’s mind is also capable of retaining or preserving her surroundings through poetry. These examples demonstrate that forming a retainer or container of experience through poetry was paramount for Niedecker. Thus, I argue that the container becomes one of three integral elements to her poetics, including: water (fluidity), container (holding) and solidity (grounding). Each of these ideas emerge through the lens of the cabin; they are interlinked but discrete and construct a triangulated process, occupying a foundational place in Niedecker’s poetics of site.

The locus point of these areas of poetics is Niedecker’s cabin. The cabin stands next to the Koshkonong River, contains Niedecker and is the grounding for her creative explorations. While other critics have already explored Niedecker’s watery forms (particularly Evans, DuPlessis and Skinner) in such poems as ‘My Life by the Water’ and ‘Paeon to Place’, emphasising her flooding of connectives and her uses of the relational qualities of language, Niedecker’s grounding — her

generation of poetic solidity, has been unappreciated. As the poem ‘So this was I’ makes apparent, formulating a substance for the self and grounding that self in its particularities of site, became a key objective. As she explicitly tells us in ‘Poet’s work’, her ‘trade’ was ‘to sit at desk/ and condense/ No layoff/ from this/ condensary’ (*Collected* 194). To condense is to increase the density of a substance, or to make something solid — which is a crucial maneuver for Niedecker. It is to this mode of materialisation that this chapter will finally turn, in order to observe how her poems are formed and physically crafted in the cabin.

### Section Three: Materialising Sites

#### “the real potato”: The Substance of Niedecker’s Poems

In a letter to Edward Dahlberg, dated Sept. 26, 1955, Niedecker praises her correspondent for his appreciation of the substance of life:

Another besides Louie who knows — ‘the real potato’. Thank you, your honesty, my good lines and my poor ones. It’s hard to make a poem.

In view of the problems you mention, I shouldn’t be sending you the parts of spuds enclosed but until I hear that you absolutely cannot go on with your plans, I’ll wish you had seen these. More like the migrating warblers I saw from my window this morning than anything, these are going to a warmer climate tho you may not be able to publish.

Dahlberg, Box 23, Folder 2

Niedecker’s compliment to Dahlberg that he too knows “the real potato” offers a concrete insight into the grounding of her poetic thinking. This “real potato” could be paraphrased as ‘real poetry’, particularly as later Niedecker affectionately identifies some lines as ‘parts of spuds’. The poet is enriching Williams’ mantra, ‘No ideas but in things’, into an even more tangible refrain: the poem as potato (17). If as Williams suggests, poetry should focus on objects rather than abstractions, Niedecker is honing the Objectivist ideal here with her use of the poetic potato. This emblem is repeated in a poem published in *Origin* July 1961: ‘May you have lumps in your mashed potatoes.... /Don’t melt too much into the universe/ but be as solid and dense and fixed/ as you can’ (*Collected* 149). As these lines suggest, the sturdiness of the potato, the fact that even when ‘mashed’ it can retain its bulk, is a perfect metaphor for Niedecker’s poems. Niedecker will never allow herself to ‘melt too much into the Universe’;

her language is ‘solid and dense and fixed’ as it sprouts directly from the ground of Blackhawk Island.

This solidity becomes a crucial Niedecker motif. As early as 1933, in another letter to Zukofsky, she writes: ‘[Henry] Poincaré [the French mathematician] says something to the effect (in the science of hypotheses) that: were there no solid objects in nature, geometry would be impossible. Ditto poetry’ (Zukofsky Collection, Box 19, Folder 8). In this extract Niedecker relates solidity to mathematics, but later, like with “the real potato” her sense of what is substantive becomes less abstract and more local and familial. In a letter to Zukofsky in 1945, she describes:

Last night we were sitting here and I was reading and B.P.’s [her mother’s] voice came out of the void: “Some good binding material here.” I looked and saw nothing. Finally she explained that Henry had bought home bananas, potato chips, cheese and crackers. How do things stack up and cohere by you?

Penberthy 134

Despite its breezy, jovial tone, this extract is significant. Niedecker writes how ‘B.P.’s voice came out of the void’, which provides the first non-substance, or immaterial feature of narrative, as well as her confession that ‘I saw nothing’. Interestingly, it is Niedecker’s mother, and not Niedecker herself, who demonstrates a primary poetic sensibility. The ‘good binding material’ of ‘bananas, potato chips, cheese and crackers’ offered up by B.P. is heavy, stodgy and filling sustenance — it will certainly bind together in the stomach. The process by which these foods bind together, how they make contact through digestion, leads Niedecker to consider how she might emulate this method in her poetry. The ‘binding’ of substances attaching themselves together, is compared to how language can bind itself to the real world. But there is not a straightforward answer, as she asks Zukofsky, ‘How do things stack up and cohere by you?’ Just like “the real potato,” Niedecker ruminates on how to render experience into solid poetic form.

This desire for poetic substance is often conflated with the need for subsistence. Written around the same time as ‘May you have lumps in your mashed potatoes’ in around 1952, the poem below considers the conflict between poetic directness and material sustenance:

You know, he said, they used to make

mincemeat with meat,  
it's raisins now and citron – like  
a house without heat –

I'll roof my house and jump from there  
to flooring costs. I'll have to buy  
two doors to close two openings.  
No, no more pie.

*Collected* 155

Working through complex associations of linguistic directness (meat), similes (houses) and metaphors (openings) this poem operates through a socio-economic and a meta-poetic register. It is through the meticulous interrelation between these two registers that Niedecker makes radical claims about the political and social reach of her poetry. Through an Objectivist framework, Niedecker would seem to be seeking out the real thing in this poem — just the authentic mincemeat (meat) filled pie. The 'raisins and citron' are presented as a substitution of the real, a metaphor for the original designation of 'mincemeat'; disconnected, sweetened, more palatable perhaps. At its opening the poem seems to be asking whether the poet can use language that is entirely direct, free from metaphor and substitution; in other words, can we put the real meat back into a mincemeat pie? But as the speaker demands this directness, a simile is utilised: 'like a house without heat'. Through this simile, Niedecker negates the possibility of poetry without substitution and comparison. However if 'raisins' and 'citron' are 'like' a heat-less home, is this technique of poetic substitution an inherently impoverished condition: cold and unwelcoming?

In the second stanza, Niedecker modifies the simile, as the speaker declares: 'I'll roof my house'. These next lines become about the transformation of the impoverished condition. The narrator is now going about making the house habitable, insulating it from the outside. The important factor here is the process of making — the labour of roofing. In poetic terms, Niedecker is making the indirect thing (the raisin, the cold house) bearable, liveable. Where the central metaphor (i.e. the meat for directness) has been derailed, instead a new metaphor is summoned (the house). The 'two openings' that occur in the final lines are the two metaphors leading out in different directions — the house and the mincemeat. But the speaker still seeks the potential closure of these gaps, and final autonomy by buying 'two doors' which can close off these openings.

Does the ending close off the potential for substituted metaphorical experiences? The final line, 'No, no more pie' would suggest that poetry is overstuffed with meanings, both direct and metaphorical. The closing off of meanings ('two doors') combined with the utter rejection of poetic objects ('no more pie') points towards the irreconcilability between aesthetic representation and actual poverty. Why worry about the semantics of mincemeat when you don't even have a roof over your head?

Becky Peterson reads the poem in terms of bodily physicality and literal deprivation:

The body is central to the conflict the speaker is having in this poem, as his comparison between food and houses is explicitly concerned with basic human bodily needs: hunger and shelter. A sense of an empty or lifeless body pervades the images of the cheapened pie and the un-roofed, un-floored, un-heated house—these absent resources threaten the speaker's ability to sustain himself.

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This poem performs at the limit of aesthetic fortitude. While it sets up a rich meta-poetic world, it ends abruptly, forcing the reader to confront physical and practical reality. As Willis explains, 'Niedecker repeatedly reminds us of poetry's status as both a labour and a luxury' ('Possessing'). Living, as Niedecker did, a precariously wrought existence, where economic survival was never guaranteed, the poem suggests that living without — without food, without warmth — can amount to living within a literal poetics of poverty. In this pared down world, the initial reflection that 'they used to make/ mincemeat with meat' become superfluous, redundant. In a very real way, this poem highlights the stakes of poetry for Niedecker.

As Peterson states, 'For Niedecker, poetry is at the crux of debates about use and uselessness, work and leisure' (117). In an apparent turn away from the indulgence of the poetic imagination, the verse critiques the real, socio-economic system ('a house without heat—') but also interrogates the place of the poem as a source of sustenance ('no more pie'). As DuPlessis notes, 'poetry moves material from the axis of selection/substitution to the axis of contiguity/combination by the principle of equivalence' ('Dickinson Electronic Archives'). The substitution here is from literary metaphor to actual poverty — with the issue being of its supposed 'equivalence'. How can poetry ever be

contiguous with real world deprivation? The poem is both necessary (through political critique) and redundant (through poetic imagination). Similarly it both negates itself and validates itself through its written presence. Its strength emanates from these irreconcilable poles: it is a poem about the uselessness of poetry in the face of actual hunger and homelessness.

In a much earlier poem, Niedecker conveys a similar disillusionment with the efficacy of poetry in times of socio-political crisis. Written during the Great Depression, she writes: 'Nothing nourishing,/ common dealtout food;/ no better reading/ than keeps us destitute' (*Collected* 112). There is 'nothing nourishing' for this speaker to eat, or to read, as the rations of 'common dealtout food' are equivalent to bad literature. What is keeping 'us destitute' is the poor quality of food, and equally the poor equality of reading, perhaps indicating that 'better' reading might in fact remedy the situation. This ambiguity about whether reading does in fact cause, or solve destitution is left unresolved. Does reading provide any kind of sustenance? Or is reading futile if you are physically destitute? Again, it is Niedecker's working class emplacement on Blackhawk Island that gives legitimacy to these articulations — her embodied, lived experiences of poverty in the cabin. Despite the conflicts, Niedecker elects to continue writing poetry and in her later collections she works to close the gap between literal and poetic sustenance.

### **The Sustenance of *A Cooking Book***

Sent as a Christmas gift from Niedecker to Maude Hartel in December 1964, *A Cooking Book* was printed in 2015 in a small batch of 250 copies by Bob and Susan Arnold. Previously unpublished (and not included in Penberthy's extensive *Collected Works* from 2002) the booklet is a prime example of Niedecker's expertly crafted poetic gift books. The publishers tell us that 'the book has been transcribed line for line from the holographic text — to retain Lorine's feeling for the small page— notebook/ memo space' (67). This meticulous spatial transcription offers up Niedecker's words and pages as individual units for consumption — just as she intended. The book is wonderfully playful as it combines anecdote, poetic utterance, domestic performance and linguistic dexterity with actual recipes and cooking instructions. Not just aesthetically pleasing, the book is also a practical guide to

Wisconsin cuisine. Each poem is also a recipe, tit-bit, or cooking suggestion: the language operates at multiple registers (poetic, gastronomic) and for multiple purposes. This conflation, between the aesthetic and the functional, connects with Niedecker's earlier food/sustenance poems that doubted their own use. Finally, in this small, humble, unpretentious gift book Niedecker has found a way to resolve the previously irreconcilable poles of poetry and hunger: the book is quite literally sustaining mind and body.

On the first page, Niedecker states that her husband Al, 'Reads while he eats./ Away from the table: I eat books' (21). Al can undertake the two processes at the same time (reading, eating) whereas Niedecker's intake of literature is all-consuming. This sets up the central contrast of the text, between the 'poet' Lorine and the everyman Al. While Niedecker admits, 'I don't know much about the subject of cooking,' which 'should entitle me to write a book about it', she also states, 'But Al seems to know about cooking' (18, 21). So Al will handle the food, and Lorine the writing. But like with her mother, as with her wider appropriation of the folk dialect, Al is also unknowingly lyrical. The book is rich with the couple's disparities in education and taste, yet this is the foundation for much of the poetic material. Niedecker notes: 'Al at the Art Center/ after seeing a lot of abstract/ paintings. Ah, here's one —/ now we're getting somewhere —/ watermelon and rutabagies!' (35). Just like Niedecker and her Objectivist contemporaries, Al too favours the tangible — the "real potato" rather than pure abstraction. Niedecker's citation of Al's comments justifies her grounded form of poetics, illustrating that her ideas for poetry come directly out of the folk. As Al and Lorine perform scenes of everyday domesticity, we become aware that Niedecker's poetic material comes straight out of her immediate household. Midway through the book Niedecker quotes from Al that, 'People should eat simple, everyday, nourishing things like boiled dinners' (29). *A Cooking Book* is the literary equivalent of a 'boiled dinner': simple, everyday and poetically nourishing.

Most of the stimulus for the text comes from Al. In the section 'First, *Bacon!*' he offers up his treatise on the meat: 'Al: Seldom empty a fry-pan/ of its bacon grease, let it stand/ to be used again... Use bacon grease to flavour/ vegetables, i.e. green beans' (24). These lines are instructional, pragmatic: to save waste and

washing up, re-use the bacon grease. On the facing page we receive Niedecker's literary response to this notion of recycling: 'We got as far as to say:/ Why not put green beans/ into Salisbury steak' (25). The pronoun 'We' here is telling, as it unites the couple behind a singular poetic identity. The pair collectively push at the limits of what can be said and enacted through poetry: 'We got as far as to say'. This exercise in literary/culinary production is enabled through the dual enterprise of the poet (Lorine) and the chef (Al). While Lorine is writing up, Al is undertaking the action of the poem — chatting, cooking, and participating. The action and the writing of the poem therefore become inseparable — preparing dinner and preparing verse are presented as cooperative, reciprocal engagements. As Robert Smithson discusses, 'Writing should generate ideas into matter, not the other way around' (155). The hope with this gift book, as with all cookery books, is that Niedecker's words will be transformed into useful, edible material — she is literally enabling the formulation of new matter through her poetic instruction.

The tone of this gift book is light and lively, but it also accentuates Niedecker's nimble wit and vigorous intelligence. Food is treated as metaphor, 'Bacon strips with oysters —/ Devils on horseback', and metaphor as food (26). Such incisive linguistic dexterity is Niedecker's literary bread and butter. Poetic agility is combined with syntactical utility, as the lexicon is basic, but the meanings are bountiful. The verses move through spirited fluctuations, contestations and multiple contingencies: Al suggests to 'cook a *chunk* of ham alone—' while Lorine recommends, 'I: Warm up slices or bits/ of ham (left over) in split-pea soup' (28). Between the married couple, nothing goes to waste. Just like the spare and uncomplicated language of her poetry, in cooking Niedecker selects pared down but nutritious offerings. The book is a master class in savouring every morsel, of food and of speech, as longstanding recipes and old remedies are discussed, adapted and reused.

The centre for these culinary discussions is her house on Blackhawk Island.<sup>63</sup> In the Epilogue, she provides the following description:

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<sup>63</sup> By this time in 1964, Lorine and Al had completed building their house on the same plot as the cabin. While it was under construction, the married couple lived in Milwaukee, visiting the cabin at weekends.

Be it noted: on Saturday July the 18<sup>th</sup>, 1964, there was baked on Blackhawk Island a catfish with bacon fat (and celery & onions) and served up before the man of the house. Too rich. Baking soda ensued. The Fall, one could almost say, of the House of Bacon.

*A Cooking Book 63*

The collaborative effort of *A Cooking Book* is crystallised with Niedecker acknowledging a ‘the man of the house’: she is no longer living, or writing solo. Finishing this modest book with comical intertextuality relating to Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ reminds us that Niedecker is writing herself, as well as Blackhawk Island, into a substantial American literary tradition. This site, where catfish was carefully prepared for a Saturday dinner, was a ‘rich’ place indeed.

### **The Poetics of Material Conditions**

Maintaining her home on Blackhawk Island, as well as keeping up numerous epistolary friendships, became of the utmost importance for Niedecker, particularly in the last decade of her life. In 1961, before her marriage to Al and let down by potential partner Harold Hein, Niedecker admitted in a letter to Louie and Celia Zukofsky: ‘Lonesome is such a physical thing’ (Peters 148). That loneliness is made physical here demonstrates the significance of form for Niedecker. But Niedecker’s writerly form — how she materialises her experiences through the manuscript page, has so far been critically undervalued. While Frym has stated that ‘for Niedecker, the visual experience of the words on the page is almost as important as the music and thought they evoke’, there has been little exploration of that visual experience. In a letter to Corman from 1961, Niedecker admits: ‘I wish I weren’t so obsessed in my writing with form, a set form, sometimes it helps and then again it hinders’ (*Between Your House* 55). This ‘set form’, or the architecture of the poem (how it is built and how it unfolds) is defined by Niedecker’s word patterning on the page.

There are several occasions when she draws a direct comparison between her compositional writing site (the cabin) and the page. In 1962 she writes:

these walls thin  
as the back  
of my writing tablet

*Collected 194-195*

The thinness of her cabin walls is equated with the flimsiness of her writing material. Niedecker does not invoke writing paper, but instead a 'writing tablet', referring to the traditional wax tablet, usually made of wood, on which characters were engraved in wax with a stylus. Used as a reusable and portable writing surface in Antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages, writing by engraving in wax required the application of much more pressure and traction than would be necessary on parchment or papyrus. This sense of materialising poetic labour by engraving language upon a surface echoes Niedecker's phrase 'I must Scratch green', and her enactment of writing as a dynamic, even forceful exertion. The reference to a 'writing tablet', which presumably Niedecker did not own, emphasises the tactile and haptic nature of her inscriptions, as well as their provisionality. The wax tablet is primarily a drafting apparatus, suggesting that Niedecker views her writing practice as contingent and impermanent.

The poem as a whole is about inversions, as we notice in the opening lines: 'Property is poverty—' (*Collected* 194). Her 'walls' are as thin as '*the back/* of my writing tablet', indicating that the wax tablet has been reversed and is being read backwards, meaning the words are inverted. The legibility of the inscription is therefore questionable, which bolsters the Niedecker's simile, that her site is as fragile as our ability to read her poems. Her walls, like her poems, are thin: flimsy, weak and vulnerable to deterioration from outside forces. The spatiality of this phrasing is also important. If her 'walls' are like 'the back' of her writing surface, then the back of the writing tablet is like her exterior cabin walls — suggesting that the front of the writing surface is akin to Niedecker's interior walls. It is as if the walls themselves become the surface on which Niedecker is inscribing her poetry; she is writing on the inside of her cabin, while her writing appears inverted, illegible to those outside of her cabin. This poem implies that Niedecker is literally writing her environment — her poetic surface is the walls of her cabin.

In her earlier *New Goose* manuscript she also conflates material conditions with textual space. In 'To a Maryland editor, 1943' she requests that her poems should be printed frugally: 'The enclosed poems are sepa—/rated by stars to save paper' (*Collected* 110). Not only is Niedecker setting up an eco-critical grounding by declaring that her poems are small in size 'to save paper', she also

suggests that the form itself is dictated by material limits. This interplay, between linguistic and material surfaces, offers poetic traction. The poem literally breaks words apart ('sepa—/rated') to save space, and to fit within the confines of the stanzaic and page confines. This is a good example of Niedecker's poetic and materialist fusion: the word 'separated' has been broken apart on the page, conveying a literary and formal fragmentation. The word itself is portioned up ("sepa-/rated"), but the enjambment between the two lines creates a fluid continuity — they are formally connected and co-dependent. Like her 'enclosed poems' that appear distinct and separate ('enclosed' here, indicating both lying within, and self-containment), Niedecker reveals that her poetry is also, invariably linked through her inclusion of the dash in the middle of 'sepa—/rated'. As elsewhere, Niedecker is having it both ways here, telling us that her poems are 'enclosed' discrete units, while formally enacting their interrelation.

'To a Maryland Editor' thus presents a key Niedeckerian materialist strategy: to say one thing, and do another. This strategy works effectively because Niedecker is adept at hiding her poetic labour. Her construction process is rendered almost entirely invisible: she does not tell us her working out and she does not leave many poetic drafts for critics to pore over. Rather, she creates a solid poetic object that appears fully formed. As DuPlessis states, 'The facade of inability, artlessness, and the almost unspoken hint are very feminine strategies' ('The Anonymous'). But this inconspicuousness of poetic labour is precisely a facade. Niedecker consciously disguises her literary graft to reflect, perhaps, the wider invisibility of female domestic labour. However, as already observed, there are moments when she lets slip and tells us, quite emphatically, that writing takes time: 'What would they say if they knew/ I sit for two months on six lines/ of poetry?' (*Collected* 143). 'The poem', Zukofsky reminds us, 'should be a job' (Heller 6). Niedecker agrees, as she presents her poetic work as a full time occupation, 'No layoffs/ from this/ condensary' (*Collected* 194).

This lateral swing, from pronouncing pure artlessness, to utter literary concentration, demonstrates the politics of women's work, as well as a wider critique of labour forms. Niedecker is highly aware that only female toil that *is made explicit* is recognised. So Niedecker commends concrete female resourcefulness, like in the poem '*Hand Crocheted Rug*' where the recycling

procedure of patch working is celebrated: ‘Gather all the old, rip and sew’ (*Collected* 97). Here the work is active, handmade and manual. Willis notes Niedecker’s ‘modernist attention to the processes of making’ and claims that ‘for a significant portion of [the local] population, making one’s own clothes would hardly have been at odds with making one’s own poems’ (*Radical* xvii). Niedecker did both, making clothing (oftentimes out of necessity rather than desire) and sending homemade gifts of handkerchiefs and tablecloths to the Zukofsky family.

Marshall claims that for Niedecker, ‘poetry emerges as another kind of housework’ (141). During her lifetime, artistic work becomes more manual, physical and labour-intensive. While at the linguistic level her work appears artless, her profession as a poet-worker is made explicit through her turn towards material craftsmanship. John Harkey, editor of the 2012 facsimile edition of Niedecker’s *Homemade Poems*, describes the conditions which prompted the poet to begin this autonomous form of self-publishing in ‘Usable Dimensions: An Afterword’.<sup>64</sup>

In October of 1964, having no other book prospects on the horizon for the poems she’d written during the first year of her marriage, Lorine Niedecker took action and assembled her own—a book of thirty poems inscribed into the pages of a dime-store sketch pad, whose front and back she had covered in wrapping paper. She carefully handwrote the small poems in blue-inked cursive, placing each one on its own unnumbered sheet of paper

This *Homemade* collection, along with two other versions entitled *Handmade Poems* sent to Zukofsky and Williams for Christmas 1964, are the only copies Niedecker made. Penberthy includes the poems in her *Collected Works*, but there are good reasons why these particular poems should be read and critiqued in their original form. As Harkey explains,

Only when *Homemade Poems* is encountered as it was first constructed—with its meticulous handwriting, deployment of text in page-space, and the elegant austerity of its rhythmic interplay between discrete poems and liberal, charged blank spaces—can it articulate its fullest range of challenges and possibilities.

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<sup>64</sup> The edition was published through The City University of New York’s (CUNY) Center for the Humanities, as part of Lost and Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative.

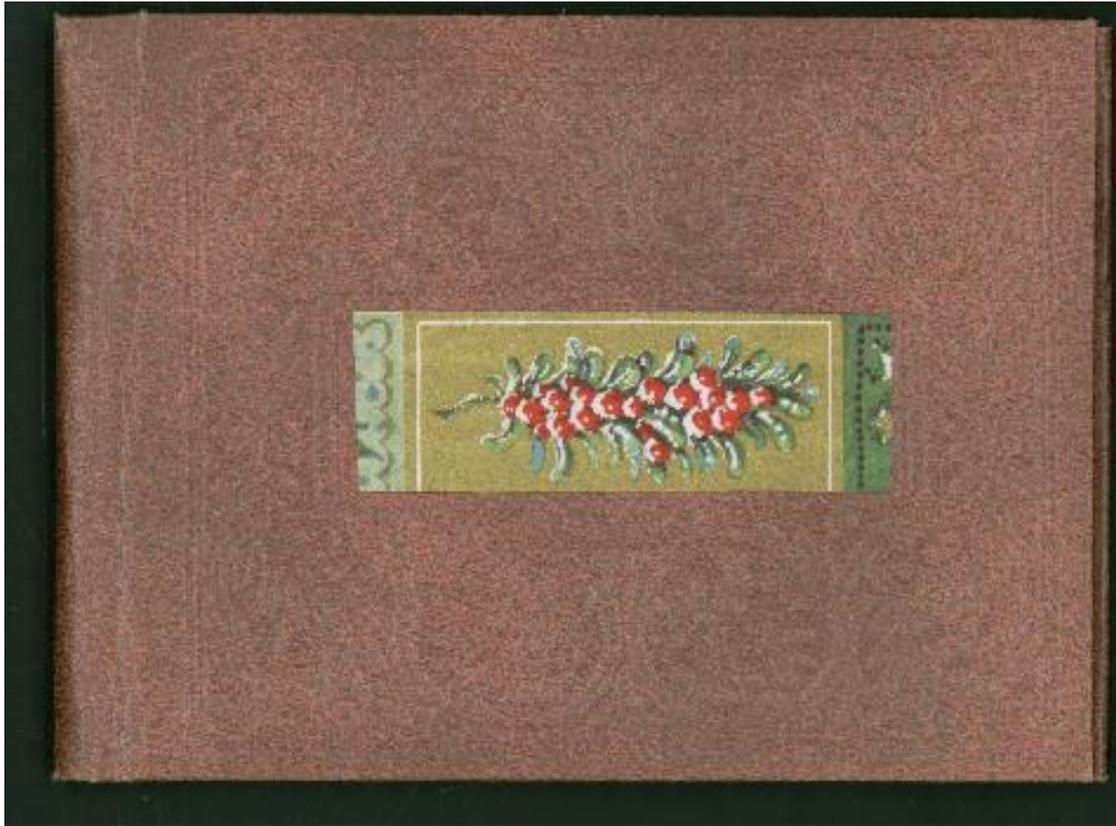
The book is thus a multimodal composition that demands a multimodal response.<sup>65</sup>

By reading the *Handmade/Homemade* poem collections as art objects, rather than as abstracted linguistic practices, we can interrogate Niedecker's synergetic interrelating of language, form and textual materialisation. In an echo of the manuscript fascicles of Dickinson (constructed and sewed together as hand-bound scripts), this practice plays into the subversive female tradition of home crafting. Invested in meaning-making beyond the poetic, Niedecker is engrossed in representational and textual space-making. As she transfers her own site of Blackhawk Island onto the space of the text, she creates a technique of *site-production*. My analysis will focus on the gift book given to Zukofsky, Niedecker's *Handmade Poems*.<sup>66</sup> Despite the work's child-like and unassuming simplicity, meticulous critical attention is necessary to study the text's deft domestic artistry. Sight, sound and touch are all required to fully appreciate this work, as we witness the page as a visual realm, hear her devotion to verbal play and feel the textures of her manual labour.

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<sup>65</sup> Despite the great work Penberthy has done in collating the poems in her *Collected* edition, as well as all the important drafts and changes made by Niedecker, seeing the whole book first-hand is a unique experience. I was lucky enough to research the *Homemade Poems* sent to Corman, housed at the New York Public Library, as well as the *Handmade Poems* gifted to Zukofsky, contained within the Niedecker/Zukofsky archive at the Harry Ransom Centre.

<sup>66</sup> *Homemade Poems*, which was sent to Cid Corman, is a slightly larger book, covered with wrapping paper of a circular design. Operating in a nearly identical format to her *Handmade Poems*, page one opens with a remarkably similar watercolour sketch of Niedecker's cabin on Blackhawk Island.



Front cover of *Handmade Poems*. Niedecker Papers, Box 33, Folder 6.

The book is very small (housed in a 6 X 4.5 inch notebook) and the front cover has an embossed, tactile surface, with flowery patterned engraving on the burgundy front cover. Made for Louie and Celia Zukosky for Christmas 1964, its scale is characteristic of the poet, who revels in miniature aesthetics. Up-cycled from a cheap notebook, Niedecker has cut out a small holly design (perhaps from Christmas wrapping paper) and glued to the front. Not particularly artful or expertly crafted, the reclaimed notebook confers pragmatism and functionality, akin to her much earlier work, 'Next Year or I Fly my Rounds, Tempestuous' (1934), where she pasted her handwritten poems over the printed text of a bi-weekly calendar (*Collected* 41). As shown in *A Cooking Book*, this commitment to recycling — to the salvaging and reprocessing of materials — illustrates the material enactment of her ethics.



The opening page of *Handmade Poems*. Niedecker Papers, Box 33, Folder 6.

Pasted onto the first page of the book is a delicate, although unsophisticated, watercolour painting of Niedecker's home and the surrounding environment, dated September 1964. At the bottom of the page Niedecker writes, 'WHERE WE LIVE' in capital letters, with her initials printed on the right hand side. The path at the top right hand side of the page seems to be leading off into the sky. While the house itself is painted neatly, the image conveying uncomplicated contentment. Quintessentially child-like and welcoming, it frames the poems to come; each has been inscribed from within this plot of land on Blackhawk Island, the demarcated site of creativity. Carefully handwritten and laid out, each poem takes place over a single, or double page spread and was constructed to fit within the space of the notebook. The first poem opens:

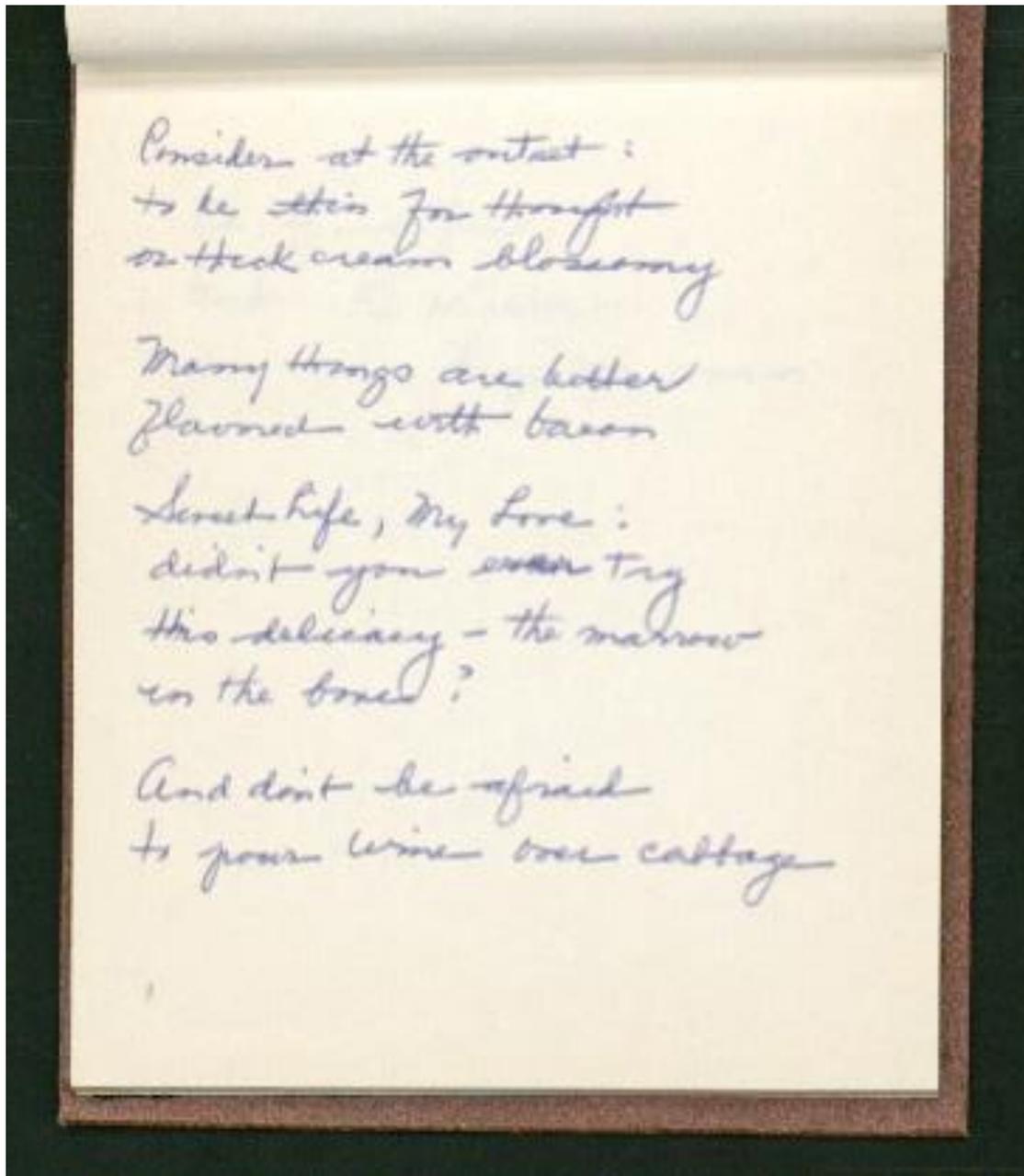
Consider at the outset:  
to be thin for thought  
or thick cream blossomy

Many things are better  
flavoured with bacon

Sweet Life, My Love:  
didn't you ever try  
this delicacy—the marrow  
in the bone?

And don't be afraid  
to pour wine over cabbage

*Collected 200*



'Consider at the outset', page one of *Handmade Poems*. Niedecker Papers, Box 33, Folder 6.

The opening line of the collection elicits a pause for thought. As Penberthy notes the phrase 'imitates conventions of logical discourse that leads us to expect quite a different poem' (83). The options delivered thereafter, 'to be thin.... or thick cream blossomy' refer back to the earlier poem 'Property is poverty', and the lines 'these walls thin/ as the back/ of my writing tablet'. However, the leanness of the speaker's thought is now favoured over the alternative: 'thick cream'. Thus Niedecker is correcting her previous version of thinness, as she implies that the poem's housed within her *Handmade Poems* will be stridently thin — stream-lined against the politics of capitalist excess, trimmed of

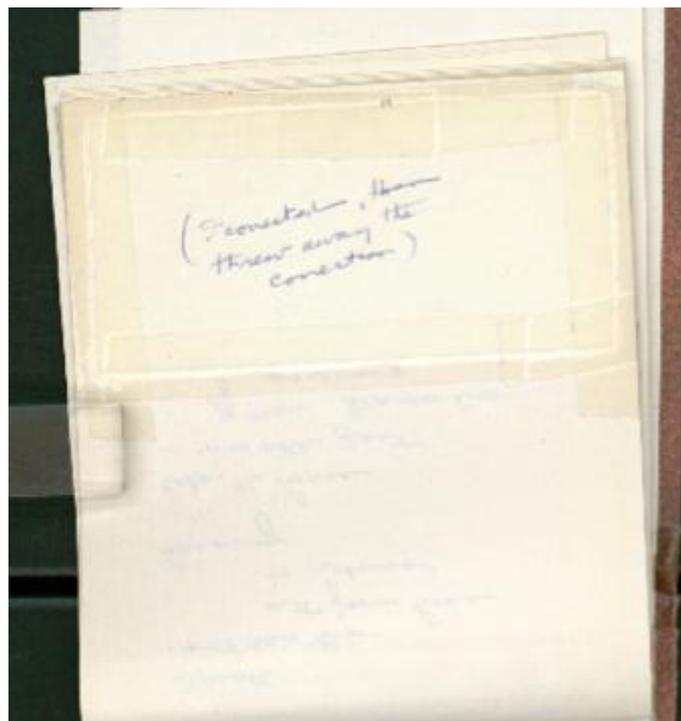
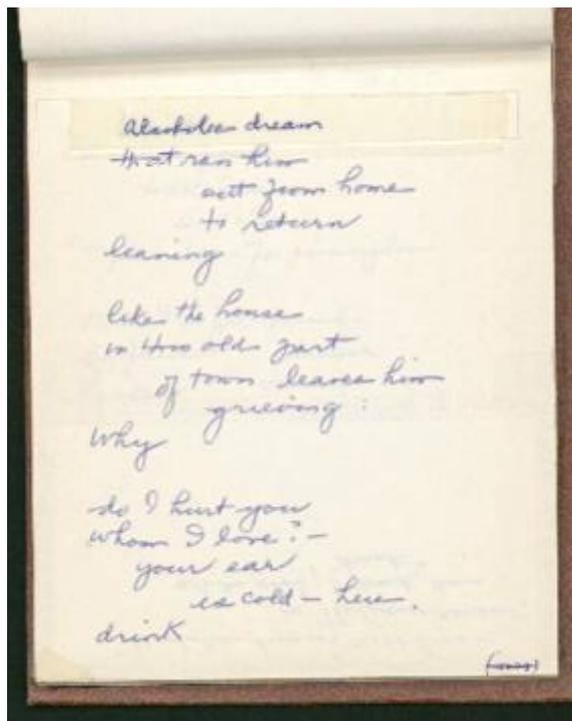
gluttonous fat or flowery language. Instead she will deliver a poetics of leanness. But like 'the marrow/ in the bone', her poems are strong — containing a core of interior rigidity — and also essential for survival. This internal strength is constructed through the interplay of her own previous literary references. The food metaphors are not accidental, as she harks back to the ideals of substance and subsistence from previous poems. The lines, 'Many things are better/ flavoured with bacon' alludes to her references to bacon in *A Cooking Book*, while the dramatic change in register and tone, from philosophy to food, recalls her earlier synthesis of the elevated with the quotidian. As such, the *Handmade Poems* become a patchwork of Niedecker's previous writings, as she stitches her earlier poetic utterances together.

Zukofsky's copy of *Handmade Poems* is particularly illuminating, as Niedecker includes notes and commentary about the text. After 'Santayana's' she records her hesitation on the next page: 'I won't use this — almost entirely his own words' (Niedecker Papers, Box 33, Folder 6.). Similarly the poem 'LZ's' includes the note on the adjacent page: 'never to be sent out if you say so' (Niedecker Papers, Box 33, Folder 6.). Here Niedecker's recycling of language has the potential to offend her recipient (Zukofsky), as she has borrowed his words to construct the poem.<sup>67</sup> But this process of drafting and self-correction is given heightened prominence in this handmade book. The third poem, 'Alcoholic Dream', has a note pasted over twice with card and cellotaped all around so that the original inscription is no longer visible.<sup>68</sup> What lies beneath this correction is a variant title for the poem, 'Drink dream'. The process by which Niedecker undertakes this revision is revealing.

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<sup>67</sup> See Penberthy's *Niedecker and Zukofsky: The Correspondence* for a full account of the extent to which the two poets borrowed from one another.

<sup>68</sup> The correction has been taped over so meticulously that a light box was necessary to glimpse the variation.



'Alcoholic Dream' and the following page from *Handmade Poems*. Niedecker Papers, Box 33, Folder 6.

On the adjacent page to the poem, Niedecker remarks '(I corrected, then/ threw away the/ correction)', referring to her revision of the previous title (Niedecker Papers, Box 33, Folder 6). But this process is doubled in on itself, as she 'Corrected' and then 'threw' it 'away', indicating that the original title for 'Alcoholic Dream' remains (that is, it was 'Alcoholic Dream', corrected to 'Drink Dream', then that alteration was discarded). This note on re-drafting brings multiple versions of the same poem into existence. Registering the layering of inspiration and mutability, this reminder of drafting makes the "final" poem feel unfinished and contingent. Akin to Dickinson's inclusion of variant word choices, Niedecker alludes to alternate forms of the poem. Significantly, it is the visible labour of corrections that Niedecker materialises, using extra card and cello tape to emphasise the manual process of revision that she undertakes. This collection is precisely "homemade," as it makes visible the labour of its own construction.

While Peters claims that Niedecker called the poetry 'homemade' or 'handmade' in order to defer to her new husband Al Millen, 'not wishing her professionalism to intimidate him', it is exactly this notion of "professionalism" that Niedecker repudiates (188). She showcases her handiwork as a riposte to industrialisation, commercialisation and mass production. Constructing only

three books, each version is entirely unique and impossible to replicate. A celebration of personal crafting, the book is a tangible enactment of authenticity — the ultimate demonstration of poetic anti-professionalism — showing off how a poem was made, down to the materials used to fashion it. While critics, including biographer Peters, claim that Niedecker ‘backed away from political and economic content’ in her later poems, her *Homemade/Handmade* texts operate as small-scale acts of political dissent (192).

Indeed, her self-fashioned books critique the ideals of market value. As Niedecker wrote on a postcard to Zukofsky from October the same year, ‘I’m sending later something of no money value for xmas so you don’t to me. See?’ (Niedecker Papers, Box 33, Folder 4). Niedecker claimed a poetic space alternative the literary marketplace, creating a literary object that worked against the value system of capital. As Jennison argues, ‘Objectivism’s emergence marks the American avant-garde’s first conscious engagement with a Marxist analysis of the commodity form’ (15). Niedecker’s investment in non-commoditised poetic forms extended throughout her whole literary career, but is acutely felt in the number of poetic objects she creates; she does not create a singular, auratic version of the book, but three distinct versions. While a single text could be considered authoritative, each different version offers subtle variation, whilst still being rare and untainted by mass-production. Educated ‘by the commodity’s tyrannical ambience in the households of lived experience,’ the gifts also perform a politics of non-commodification through their material construction (Jennison 16). Whereas the commodity masks the exploitative labour that produced it, Niedecker leaves the process of her making starkly visible in this late collection.

As the book becomes a form of home-making for Niedecker, her cabin is mobilised from its entrenched site on Blackhawk Island: it moves through time and space sheltered within the refuge of the poem. As she writes in the 1967 poem “*Shelter*”: ‘my sense of property’s/ adrift’ (*Collected* 246). In her *Homemade/Handmade* collections, her most valuable asset is sent adrift, as the poems are sent through the mail to new readers in new locations. Her final site — the site of her poetry — remains adrift; no longer fixed in position, it is

unanchored, floating freely without mooring.<sup>69</sup> As such, the material site of the cabin is united with its abstracted meanings: they are able to co-exist on the page. Niedecker works to draw together these two disparate poles — the metaphorical place and the material site — and creates a third space, as the book becomes a new site ripe for exploration. Niedecker’s cabin is not only rendered linguistically and visually through the drawings, but also *materially* through the homemade book as a dwelling space. This third space opens up a shared site where she can encounter and co-habit with the reader. This sense of sharing, of formulating her own intimate community, enriches Niedecker’s radical politics.

Her giftbooks work against traditional processes of literary transmission, as she defies normative, mass-produced publishing and distribution in favour of intimate, direct forms of poetic dissemination. The tangible experience of intimacy invoked through the *Homemade/Handmade* books, helps to alleviate the tension between Niedecker’s craving for self-sufficiency and her desire to operate as part of a collective. As an embodiment of her poetics of site, the books function to synthesise the two contradictory impulses. They materialise the cabin as an autonomous poetic site, whilst reaching out to her literary community. Enacting this ethics of shared communality, the books create a poetics of site that reaches outside of itself. As Niedecker commented to Corman, ‘poems are from one person to another’ (121).<sup>70</sup> Niedecker’s *Homemade/Handmade* poems are therefore also epistolary — handed directly

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<sup>69</sup> This is reminiscent of Dickinson’s famous love poem, ‘Wild nights’, which presents romantic love as mobile and ultimately unmoorable:

Wild nights - Wild nights!  
 Were I with thee  
 Wild nights should be  
 Our luxury!

Futile - the winds -  
 To a Heart in port -  
 Done with the Compass -  
 Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden -  
 Ah - the Sea!  
 Might I but moor - tonight -  
 In thee!

*Poems 120*

<sup>70</sup> This is reminiscent of Bachelard’s idea of poetic transmission, as the art must pass from one person to another. Moving out into the world, this is the process of the poem’s emergence (41)

from one person to another. Discussing this with Corman in October 1964, Niedecker reveals:

I somehow feel compelled to send you the product of the last year, just to keep in touch. I know you're not printing. I even brave school kids' paint to show you where we live! It's been - a year! I wish you and Louie and Celia and I could sit around a table. Otherwise poetry has to do it.

127

For Niedecker, keeping 'in touch' with friends was paramount, and meant literally maintaining that sense of 'touch;' her *Homemade/Handmade* books are corporeal and tactile. Niedecker senses that her book will be passed from hand to hand, creating a haptics of reading.

To conclude with reference to Dickinson, Niedecker's shared, co-habitable poetic space in her gift books directly contrasts with her poetic ancestor. As Dickinson writes:

I cannot live with you –  
 It would be Life –  
 And Life is over there –  
 Behind the shelf –  
 [...]
   
 So We must meet apart –  
 You there – I – here –  
 With just the Door ajar

*Poems 314-315*

In Dickinson's bereft poem, the space between the two characters is unassailable. The possibility of togetherness is negated, but there is hope in the linguistic twist of 'meet apart' in the gap of the doorway.<sup>71</sup> As Marshall suggests, Dickinson chooses to 'dwell in-between — in the very doorway' (p. 107).

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<sup>71</sup> In the context of this poem, that the only place the two can meet is with 'the Door ajar' recalls the fact that most of Dickinson's relationships existed as purely epistolary. The door would be the place where letters would fall onto the doormat, with the 'door ajar' indicating that Dickinson was not completely enclosed and autonomous, but did let in some exterior influences occasionally.



Niedecker at the door of her home, March 1966. Niedecker Collection, Hoard Museum.

Unlike Dickinson, who cannot physically overcome the divide between herself and others, Niedecker materialises this ‘meet[ing] apart’ in her homemade gift books. Unable to reside close to her friends, she crafts a poetics whereby those geographically separate are still able to ‘live’ alongside her in her poems. Operating from her remote cabin on Blackhawk Island, Niedecker emphasises this intimacy through distance — she materialises a shared space in her poems where she and her readership can figuratively ‘meet apart’.

### The Studio: Barbara Guest's Artistic Space

...to invest ideas with form, and animate them with activity, has always been the right of poetry...

—Samuel Johnson, in Barbara Guest's *Forces of Imagination* 9

...having this studio has given me a "form" – my own place.

—Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 402, Box 25

In an early poem, 'The Brown Studio', published in *The Open Skies* in 1962, Barbara Guest articulates how her aesthetic hinges on the physical space that she inhabits. It opens:

Walking into the room  
     after having spent a night in the grove  
     by the river  
 its duskiness surprised me.

*Collected* 45

Then later we are told:

I believed if I spoke,  
 if a word came from my throat  
 and entered this room whose walls had been turned,

it would be the color of the cape  
 we saw in Aix in the studio of Cézanne,  
 it hung near the death's head, the umbrella,  
 the palette cooled to grey,

if I spoke loudly enough,  
 knowing the arc from real to phantom,  
 the fall of my voice would be,  
 a dying brown.

*Collected* 46

Guest's poem is explicitly situated within 'The Brown Studio'. This position, the speaker tells us, gives rise to her reflections on the colour of the walls, the atmosphere of the room, and to the quality of her poetic utterance. The studio is saturated in 'duskiness' which impacts the cadence of the speaker's voice: 'the fall of my voice would be, / a dying brown'. Timothy Gray singles out this poem in his book, *Urban Pastoral: Natural Currents in the New York School*, suggesting that 'Guest shows how working quarters affect her own aesthetic process' (78). This is both true and also a fundamental underestimation of the significance of the setting. More than simply *affecting* her aesthetic process, I argue, here poesis is *conditioned* by the space; the poem chronicles how poetic perception is

directly responsive to the contours of the immediate environment. The 'sombre', 'grey' and 'brown' shades of the room are absorbed by the poetic voice. There is a transmission of the 'emptiness' of the bare 'black stove, the black chair,/ the black coat' onto the studio occupant. .

But if this poem is about physical emplacement, it also depends upon imaginative transference — how the poetic subject is able to transcend and transform the space in which she finds herself. As the speaker discloses: 'the walls had been turned'. By an internal process not quite defined, her words have come to resemble 'the color of the cape/ we saw in Aix in the studio of Cézanne.' Here, the speaker has recalibrated her vision to embrace that of the artist Paul Cézanne. Suddenly the image of Cézanne's own studio emerges: 'the cape [...] hung near the death's head, / the umbrella, / the palette cooled to grey'. This image reflects Cézanne's actual studio in Aix-en-Provence, open to the public since 1921 and a place, we might well imagine, that Guest would have visited during her summers in Europe. The room therefore expands to include an imaginative layering of sites — of her studio with that of Cézanne's in France. Through this layering, the threshold between psychological projection, artistic vision, physical space and linguistic utterance is contested. In fact, such layering functions to collapse these distinctions: the mind bleeds into the room, the site overlays the aesthetic and colour determines the voice — an experience tantamount to synaesthesia. Yet the speaker is hesitant to articulate this process. She repeats, 'if I spoke' and 'if a word came from my throat,' revealing an underlying reticence. This reticence is registered through the impossibility of 'knowing', encapsulated in the line, 'knowing the arc from real to phantom'. The 'real' here, I suggest, is Guest's physical position in the studio; the 'phantom' is the poem that arises from that position. Even without explicit vocalisation, what Guest expresses in this poem is the transformative potentiality of being in the studio space. There is an emergence, an 'arc', from studio to poem. While this arc from 'real' space to 'phantom' poem is inevitably elusive, difficult to pin down, nonetheless what the poem clearly indicates and what this chapter argues is that the studio is the locus of Guest's poetics: it is the central point from which her poetry ripples outwards. Despite being a poet who embraces abstraction, Guest's

physical site — writing in the studio — enabled her associative and transformative verse.

Guest first received critical attention in the 1960s alongside her New York School counter-parts: Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler and Kenneth Koch. Together with her poetic contemporaries, she developed close ties with Abstract Expressionist painters. Due, in part, to her continual transactions with the visual arts, Guest's poetry eschews direct representation and straightforward confession for an abstract, associative verse. In this chapter I consider how the site of the studio shaped Guest's evolving poetic methodology. Her *recondite*, *luminous* poems employ a broad range of aesthetic techniques: blending contemporary references with echoes from past literatures, mixing imagery with philosophic reflection and allowing words to follow the laws of music.<sup>72</sup> This hybrid practice lays art, music and theory alongside Modernist traditions and places poetry at the intersection — at the juncture of desirable interchange between subjects. I also seek to trace Guest's evolving articulations of space during her publishing career (1960 – 2008) to indicate how her poetry develops, over the decades, to generate an expansive and unique poetics of space. While there has been an increase in critical response to Guest in the last decade or so, for many years she went unappreciated and understudied. Hence I argue in Section Three that Guest should be valued as a great modern poet of space.<sup>73</sup> Proceeding thematically rather than chronologically, the chapter considers the practices that emerged from Guest's studio as they appear, re-appear and develop over her whole career.

Guest has no book-length study and no biography: the details of her life are, at present, publically cryptic. Therefore some of what follows gives an outline of the poet herself: her friendships, her familial responsibilities, her economic circumstances and her living conditions. Such factors, I argue, are essential to understand the material conditions of poetic production. The narrative of Guest's

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<sup>72</sup> Guest had a phrase for her luminous recondite poetry: '*clair-obscur*' (*Forces* 32). From the French which translates as obscure light, and means 'the mysterious side of thought'. Guest explains in 'Poetry the True Fiction' that '*clair-obscur*' could well define the imagination (*Forces* 32).

<sup>73</sup> See Sara Lundquist's seminal account, 'The Fifth Point of a Star: Barbara Guest and the New York 'School' of Poets,' *Women's Studies* 30, no. 1 (February 2001) which chronicles Guest's long-term critical erasure.

life that I put forward will significantly extend current critical perspectives, which will assist in shaping and defining the poet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My research was grounded in the Guest archive. The majority of her collection, held at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, remains uncategorised and most of her papers unstudied. As such this chapter reveals new discoveries about the poet: principally through correspondence, photographs and unpublished poems. In Section Four I consider how these documents help to reconstruct our image of Guest, as well as positioning her and her studio within an emergent female avant-garde coterie. The task presented by the archive was how best to frame these extensive materials. What surfaced organically was the fundamental significance of Guest's own poetic frame — she wrote often and vividly of the importance of her own writing space. To understand how Guest develops her poetics of site, we must first identify the specifics of her space: the studio.

### **Section One: Guest's Studio**

In conversation with Kathleen Fraser, Elisabeth Frost and Cynthia Hogue in 2004, Guest reveals the particulars of her creative space:

I was fortunate in that I was able to rent an apartment away from my home as a writing studio, where I could really go inside... I do think you have to get away. I think it's the real solution. The way a painter goes into the studio to work.

Guest et al

Guest not only asserts the indispensability of a sovereign compositional space for the female writer, but the specificity of her separate 'writing studio'. From its earliest citation in correspondence from 1947, to its later manifestations up until her death in 2006, Guest termed her creative site her 'studio'.<sup>74</sup> In a letter to close friend Russell Powell in 1988, Guest described her feelings towards her new studio in New York, which she shared with the daughter of H.D., Perdita Schaffner.<sup>75</sup> She discloses, 'I thought when I came into this brownstone and saw this beautiful high-ceilinged room with the polished floors... that I had found a

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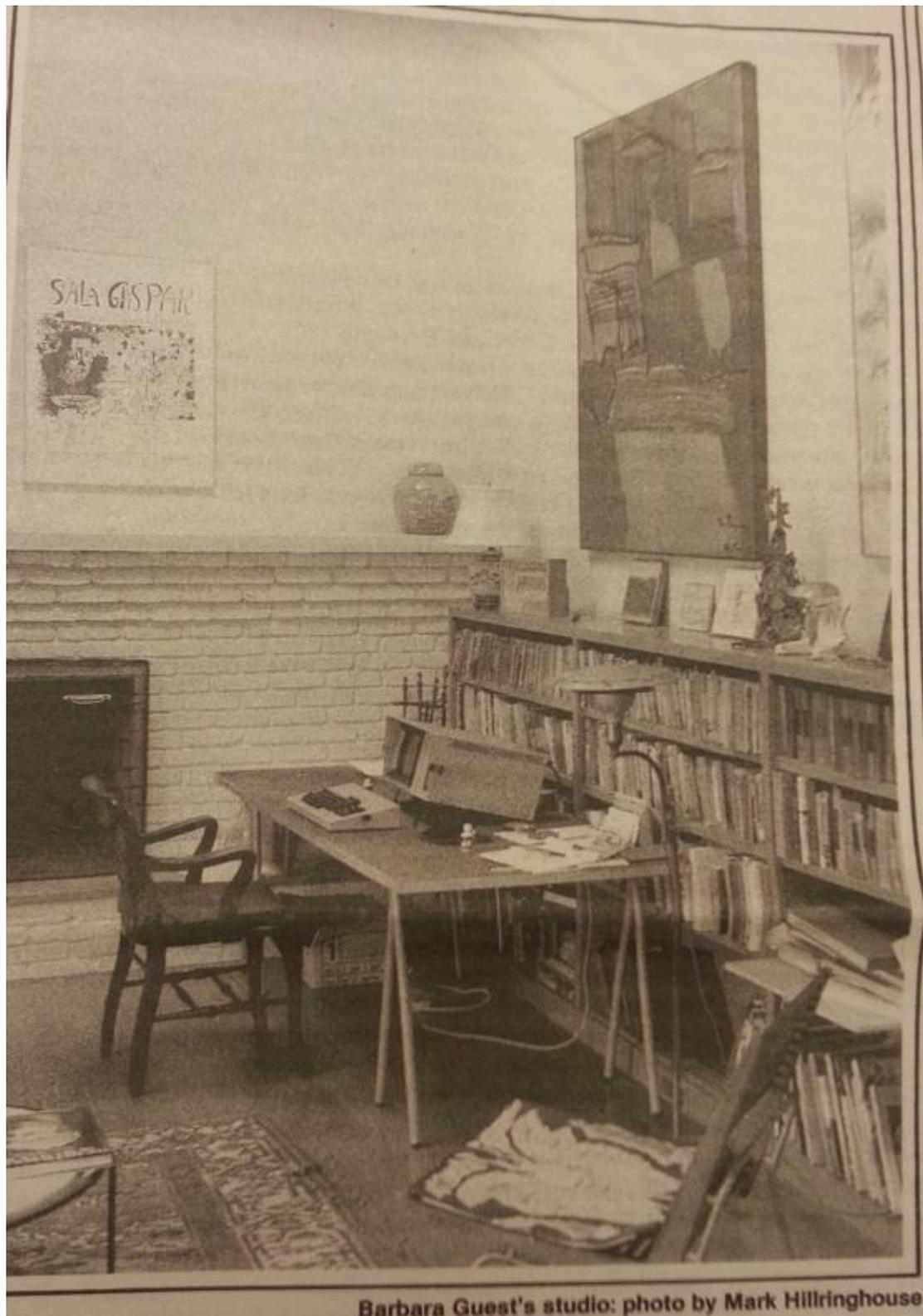
<sup>74</sup> Friends and colleagues were aware of Guest labelling her writing room a studio. For example, in 1959, fellow poet James Schuyler writes to Guest: 'It's a very good thought, thinking of you in your studio, primed with the energy and inspiration to write' (Guest Papers, Uncat MSS 271, Box 14). Here Schuyler designates Guest's studio as a generative space, full of vitality and optimism for future poetic achievement.

<sup>75</sup> Hilda Doolittle was an important influence for Guest. She dedicated several years to completing a biography on her entitled, *Herself Defined: H.D. and Her World*.

home' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 402, Box 25). The purpose of this chapter will be to explore how, over her 60-year career, Guest demarcates the studio as the place where she felt at 'home' in her writing.

Through this unique inhabitation two key questions emerge: what does it mean for a poet to embrace and occupy a traditionally artistic space? And how can the poetic work be read as representative of such a site? While Guest's involvement with the visual arts has been examined by prior critical studies, her position in the studio has so far gone undocumented. This is a singular label: as far as I am aware, no other poet has self-inscribed his or her writing site as a studio. For this reason, I propose Guest's literary work demands an interdisciplinary lens. Using Guest's archive collection we can begin to re-trace the theoretical and practical meanings behind creating poems in the studio and consider the wider intersections between gender and space in artistic/poetic practice. In merging the disciplinary boundaries of literature and visual art, Guest becomes a valuable case study for exploring the poetics of site.

Unlike Lorine Niedecker, who inhabited a singular geographical site on Blackhawk Island for most of her life, Guest was a highly mobile poet. She moved continuously throughout her life, in and around New York, then to Europe and finally to Berkeley, California. Untied to a particular geographical location, Guest's sense of site was also mobile. What was maintained throughout her shifts of site, however, was her distinctive understanding of her writing space: the preservation of the studio model. Living in different apartments and houses, Guest continually transformed her writing site into a studio, preserving her sense of a private writing space. Tracing Guest's various workspaces has been difficult, due to the poor condition of her uncategorised archive collection. Nonetheless, what is clear is that the material form of Guest's studio changed over the course of her writing career. It evolved from a simple desk in the corner of a shared interior, to the occupancy of a single room within the household, to renting a separate apartment (away from domestic obligations) and finally to the inhabitation of an entire house. As such, I will consider a range of Guest's studios from across time periods and across different locations.



Barbara Guest's studio: photo by Mark Hillringhouse

Newspaper Cutting of Barbara Guest's Studio. Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 947, Box 10.

This photograph taken in 1991 by interviewer Mark Hillringhouse, depicts Guest's studio in Southampton, Long Island. Here we catch a glimpse of the material form of her space: the books over-spilling on the shelves, the wooden

chair and the large rectangular desk. Most significant are the paintings covering her walls. For centuries, artists have treasured the space of the studio to define, craft and perform their artistic identities. The question is, why did Guest label her compositional site a studio at all, when she was not making visual art, but rather writing poetry? Another letter to Powell clarifies Guest's position. From the studio she occupied on 94<sup>th</sup> street in Manhattan, sometime in the 1970s, Guest writes:

Here in the studio with the doors open onto the little terrace, high views of dirty N.Y. with coal dust, ashes, floating in, and hot.... But having this studio has given me a 'form' — my own place.

Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 402, Box 22

When considering Guest's oeuvre, the concept of 'form' is central. The indication here is that the form of the studio has occasioned Guest's poetic form: physical inhabitation has guided textual production.

Before we can explore the wider implications of Guest's studio model, it follows that we must first demarcate the particularity of Guest's space: the specificity of its form. As Robert Storr wittily articulates, the announcement of an artist that, 'I am going to the studio', can mean going into any number of discrete spaces: the living room, the spare bedroom, the attic, the basement, or the floor of a warehouse (Jacob and Grabner 49).<sup>76</sup> Carolee Schneemann concurs, stating: 'The studio has been specific as a landscape or small as a kitchen table' (Jacob and Grabner 154). Guest's studio was housed within a variety of spaces, and transformed over the course of her writing career. But the central and abiding feature of Guest's studio was the presence of visual art.

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<sup>76</sup> The studio can take myriad forms, as workshop, laboratory, factory, sanctum, home, retreat and social network.



Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 11.

This photograph, taken sometime in the early 1950s, shows Guest at her Apartment at West 106<sup>th</sup> Street, Manhattan. It is likely that the photograph presents Guest in her most rudimentary studio space, a small desk in the corner of a shared living room, but what is most noticeable are the paintings that still permeate the space above her writing desk. Like her visual artist colleagues, Guest surrounded herself with works of art to replicate the environment of an art studio. In a much later moment, during an interview with Hillringhouse in 1991, he remarks, ‘Now tell me, you work under these great paintings’ (Guest Papers Uncat MSS 947, Box 10). The paintings she owned at that time were a Grace Hartigan over her desk, a Mary Abbott, as well as work by Larry Rivers and Fairfield Porter. In response, she tells us, ‘That’s part of my poetry, these paintings, because they’re a part of my past,’ drawing an intrinsic link between the paintings above her, and her writing occurring beneath them (Guest Papers Uncat MSS 947, Box 10).

That artistic past is revealed in correspondence from 1955, where Guest reflects on the establishment of her first separate studio space: her very first

'room of one's own' (Woolf 6). She happily announces in a letter to Powell: 'now I've opened up the "studio" (actually only a fairly small other room)' (Guest Papers, Uncat MSS 402, Box 22). Despite only being a small secondary room, this independent zone facilitated a hugely productive period in Guest's poetic career. *The Location of Things*, Guest's first collection, was published in 1960, when Guest was aged 40 and had remarried the wealthy military historian Trumbull Higgins. It was thanks to his financial stability that they moved uptown to 1148 5th Avenue in 1955, after the birth of their son Jonathan. This new apartment was very spacious, recalls close friend Kathleen Fraser, with ten rooms all of a grand, elegant scale (125). We might infer here then, that Guest is simply being modest in describing her studio to Powell as 'small'. The high ceilings were more reminiscent of European architecture, describes Fraser, and Guest's workspace was filled with 'incredibly beautiful paintings' (125). Such details mark out Guest's newfound economic and class privilege. Unlike Niedecker, who lived in a rustic one-room cabin, after 1955 Guest lived an auspicious lifestyle that placed her in the upper echelon of New York society. Coming from a working class background, Guest exhibited a conscious desire up be upwardly mobile: her studio became the physical demarcation of her advancement in status.

Even so, how can we read Guest's writing room as a studio, when physical artwork was not being produced? Bruce Nauman, a contemporary mixed-media artist, makes some explicit claims about how the artistic space cultivates the creative identity:

If you see yourself as an artist and you function in a studio and you're not a painter.... if you don't start out with some canvas, you do all kinds of things — you sit in a chair or pace around. And then the question goes back to what is art? And art is what an artist does, just sitting around the studio.

Jacob and Grabner 44

Nauman explains that the actions of the artist in the studio become almost irrelevant — you can 'sit in a chair' or 'pace around' in a different space and you would not be making art. It is the space, rather than the activity, which defines the art-making here. By advocating art practice as simply *being* in the studio, Nauman makes a claim for the legitimacy of the art-making space. In Guest's studio there were no paints or brushes, but there was creative activity occurring. The rest becomes superfluous, as Guest authenticated herself as an artist by

positioning herself within the artist's domain. Nauman's work inverts the traditional function of the studio, as it is no longer a place where the artist produces art, but 'the space in which the artist him-or herself is created, produced, perhaps, as art' (Jacob and Grabner 45). Here the studio space comes to invent, and define the artist, and through this process of self-creation, the artwork itself is made credible. Guest too performs a version of valuable self-creation, of artistic self-construction, by writing in the studio. As Howard Singerman observes, 'the lesson of the ready-made is not that anything can be called art, but that by designating an object as such — by re-contextualising it within a specific space, or indeed by merely placing it within the right kind of "room" — the work is made legitimate (Jacob and Grabner 76). Guest's position, particularly as a female artist in mid-century New York, was similarly made legitimate through her choice of room: her self-inscribed studio workspace.

Furthermore, Hillringhouse argues that Guest worked towards 'the same idea of space, sparseness, and openness' as her visual artist colleagues in the New York School (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 947, Box 10). In their discussion, Guest agrees with Hillringhouse's assessment, adding:

I've been in so many painters' studios and I envy all their space and light and so I set up here, I suppose in imitation of them. I've learned so much from them, I might as well learn about space

Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 947, Box 10

In this extract Guest directly links her physical workplace with aesthetic ideas of space. By working in a studio she reproduces painterly working conditions, which enables her to access visual and theoretical ideas of spatiality. She continues later in the interview:

I don't think writers put enough demands on their surroundings. It's almost as if they're afraid to do it, as if it were indulgent and detracts from the mysteriousness of their occupation. And there's always a little bit of the sense of punishment that writers have, not to deserve anything larger than a place to put pen and paper. Whereas painters demand it. They don't always get it, but *they live in this space*.

Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 947, Box 10

Guest asserts that painters 'demand' certain artistic conditions, in order to fully 'live in' the energy of their compositions. Copying the example set by painters, it follows that to inhabit poetic space she also puts certain 'demands' on her surroundings. As Jean Lescure asserts: 'An artist does not create the way he lives,

he lives the way he creates' (Bachelard xxix).' Through her studio occupation, it is this *lived* experience of space — physically, imaginatively and textually — that marks out Guest as a crucial example of the poetics of site.

**'The sheen of her body only survives': Woman in the Studio**

Writing in the studio qualified Guest to contemplate the strained history of the artist's workplace. At the onset of her poetic career in New York in the early 1950s, the studio was culturally conditioned as a masculine space. This was the decisive moment of Abstract Expressionism and male painters dominated the art scene, labeled 'the machine in the studio' (Jacob and Grabner 32). Creative activity during this period was recognised as vigorous male experimentation housed in large bare warehouses. The early Abstract Expressionist studio was perceived as a decidedly male domain. Yet, historically, the studio was a site for social and cultural deviation. It was here that male and female models from the lowest classes and in various states of undress, would mingle with wealthy and well-respected patrons and artists (Ringelberg 2).

In 'The Nude' (1989) Guest considers the difficult gender relations that play out in the studio space. In the poem's opening the studio is an established masculine environment: 'The artist attaches himself to the shadow', while 'his model... reminds him of attitudes'. The characters of this scene are explicitly gendered from the onset (*Collected* 238). As the verse unfolds we witness the problematic sexual dynamics developing between the painter and his model. The male artist is characterised by his 'desire elemental... to savor the skin of the body', as the inspiration and composition of the painting are fuelled by sexual dynamics (*Collected* 240). Here the male gaze of the artist entirely defines the representation of the female body: 'The figure is a nominal reminder' (239). The nude model begins as merely a 'shell', 'Curves, syllables of grace,' which the artist can define and shape into his desired image (239). The figure of the nude serves as a projection of the artist: 'The narcissism of the artist escapes into a body... And interior where his own contour is less misty' (239). The external physicality of the female body becomes a vessel for the interiority of the painter — the artist's mind is transferred into 'The body of the model, the lift of her torso/ the extension of limbs, fold of skin' (239). The painter entirely occupies the bodily space of the model; any subjectivity or agency of her own is entirely diminished.

But while ‘The painter desires the image he has selected/ to be clothed in the absolute silk of touch’, his solipsistic image cannot ‘Express reality beyond the tenure of the brush’. The physical ‘body of the model’ remains un-representable in paint. A ‘severe distance’ emerges between ‘her realism’, and ‘his anxious attempt to define it’ (239-240). Ultimately the painter cannot encounter the female figure in herself. Instead he ‘borrows from art to cover her nudity’; ‘He searches the world to... confine the fluid nude’ (240). Male art practice continues to govern female representation.

This interaction between artist and model is presented as historic and even archaic. ‘Studios are the stations of reminiscence,’ the speaker says: this gender imbalance is as old as figural art itself (*Collected* 238). Guest goes back to Greek myth, reminding us that ‘As the swan entered Leda’ she suffered a traumatising and invasive act (241). Such invasion is comparable to the painter, who occupies the space of the nude’s body and enacts the violence of female representation. In the poem, all female representations by men are tarnished by this encounter; the female body itself becomes a contested site. However, the poem ends with a utopian female emergence — the nude figure has become a landscape: ‘There is no figure. This is landscape’ (242). The contested site of the woman’s body has been transformed into abstraction. ‘He has not drawn her, / the sheen of her body only survives’, concludes the poem, as both characters are finally given a voice. This shift in perspective demands a recalibration of the figures of painter and model. In the closing stanzas they have become equal participants in artistic creation, working collaboratively to finish the painting as ‘he adds sunset tint/ She reaches for ombre, noir’ (243). The model ‘turns herself into a star’ — enforming herself through non-figurative, gestural abstraction. By the end of the poem, the studio is no longer a patriarchal environment, as the female has asserted her agency as an artist.

Guest’s own studio similarly transformed gender relations. In ‘The Nude’ it is abstraction that accounts for the transubstantiation of artistic agency. Analogously, Guest gained this sense of agency by writing abstract, non-representational verse in the studio. Like in the poem, this was the space where she found her poetic voice. This is reminiscent of life-long friend and colleague Mary Abbott, who helped define Abstract Expressionist practice in the late

1940s. The bold, gestural strokes of Abbott's paintings embody the energy and mood of inhabiting the studio. Abbot described her process as '[t]he intensity of Living Nature through myself — using the medium, paint, color and line defining the poetry of living space'(Barcio).<sup>77</sup> This *lived* experience of space — on the canvas and in the studio — recalls Guest's sense of site. For both women, finding the space to live as a female artist was imperative. In 'The Nude', as with Guest and Abbott's real workspaces, there is an affirmation that the studio is ripe for female occupation. Challenging the machismo of the Abstract-Expressionist studio, Guest re-territorialises the space for female inhabitancy. This occupation was both an abstract and a practical exercise; in writing *about* and writing *in* the studio, Guest worked to reshape and redefine the space for women artists.



Mary Abbott in her Studio, c.1950.

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<sup>77</sup> In this statement Abbott suggests that ideas emerging between visual art and poetry were reciprocal. This idea is explored in more detail in Section Three: The Studio as Method: Modernism, Visuality, Space.



Mary Abbott, sitting by her painting of 1964 *Red Presence* (named and owned by Guest). Guest is on the sofa. Photograph taken in summer 2003 at Guest's home, 1301 Milvia street, Berkeley. Guest Papers Uncat MSS 947, Box 8.

## Section Two: The Domestic

To understand how the studio functioned as a feminist space, we must unpack the relationship between the studio and Guest's domestic life. In a letter from 1985, Guest divulges her earliest memories about moving to New York in 1946 and living in a building in Greenwich Village with other artists. It was here that she met Tanya and Maurice, a bohemian couple living in the opposite apartment. Guest recalls:

I would watch Tanya carry the paintings of Maurice to dealers and friends to buy, and I would smell the wonderful stews that were kept simmering on the studio stove... And I considered the way they lived the only way for artists to live, art surrounded by domesticity, and a shrewd determination on the part of Tanya, which even I could note. It was true survival.

Guest Papers. Uncat. ZA MS. 271, Box 9.

Guest's early poetic career was also defined by this idea of 'art surrounded by domesticity', as her home life and creative involvements were entirely imbricated. Evidence of this imbrication can be found throughout her archival materials: on the back of an invitation to Franz Kline's new exhibition opening in March 1956, for example, Guest had scrawled a shopping list: '2 bread, 2 milk, half a pound of cheddar cheese.... Thursday, fish, salad, rolls, melon, Friday —

Spaghetti with clams, avocado salad, cheese' (Guest Papers Uncat. ZA MS. 271, Box 9). Until the 1970s Guest's studio was contained within her household. As such, she expands our understanding of site to include daily overlapping of creativity with domesticity. Particularly in her early poetry, the location of Guest's studio within the space of the home becomes an important aspect of her aesthetic.

Buried in Guest's uncategorised archive, I recovered the unpublished poem 'Latitudes'. As yet, it has received no critical attention, but it brings into focus the increasingly interwoven nature of Guest's early experiences of domestic regime and artistic procedure. It reads:

Latitudes

We were looking for flowers,  
For their essences often curtains  
Sketching a window.

We were looking for the red green blue  
Of a substitute country.

The mind travels over it penciling in  
The routes, especially ponds  
And shapes like laughter.  
In the distance disguised as canvas  
We leave our usual motors  
To rely on this arm to guide us.

Yet ignoring landscape it says:  
"Odd rhythms become domestic."

Crayons deposit skin on faces  
Cheekbones follow them out of the alert  
Rooms into shadows,  
And flowers are resting in the shadows  
Near the conversations.

She drops a hint a child  
Gathering it up and the curtain  
Falls because it is night time,  
The decline of stretching,  
The hour of cushions  
And bringing together  
Of poles once named oppositions,

Then later we discovered

Metamorphosis was their difficult answer.

Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 402, Box 14.

'Latitudes' was written in 1996, but evokes a prior cultural moment (the 1950s) when women's lives were being measured and shaped through emergent creative practices. The poem begins by looking through a window, out onto the landscape beyond, and trying to covert this image onto a canvas. The initial imaginative investigation is towards the external, but as the artist is trapped within a domestic site, the mind must make up for what the eye cannot observe, as 'The mind travels over it penciling in/ The routes.' The perspective changes dramatically as we move through the stanzas, and we are drawn back from the window, through the curtains and into the peopled rooms of the home. This change in perspective, from the exterior to the interior scene, is crucial. Despite, 'looking for the red green blue/ of substitute country', or looking outside for generative stimulus, we are told: 'Odd rhythms become domestic'. There is inspiration to be sought from *within* the home. This recalibration of artistic value is decisive; Guest posits that domestic scenes are as valuable as external outlooks. 'Ignoring landscape,' the speaker opines, can inaugurate an appreciation and de-familiarisation of the interior. Moreover the title 'Latitudes', meaning 'breadth, width' but also 'freedom from narrow restrictions' indicates that the domestic site may in fact *facilitate* this artistic freedom. This emphasis on domesticity evokes the paintings of Jane Freilicher, June Felter and Nell Blaine, who, despite the wave of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s, were increasingly drawn towards still life and interior scenes. As Tim Keane writes in 'The Other World Within This One: On Jane Freilicher': 'Her pictures seem to be oblique self-portraits of the painter blissfully alone in a room of her own'. In her reviews for ARTnews Guest was a key defender of June Felter's work, an artist male critics often dismissed as a painter of the bourgeois. Rather, Guest demonstrated that Felter's paintings were of daily life — her domestic circle, family, friends — and deserved attention precisely for their modest interior evocations (*Dürer* 6).



Jane Freilicher in her studio, 1984.



Jane Freilicher, *Studio interior*, 1982.

In the fifth stanza of Guest's poem, the domestic space, that should be normative and recognisable, is rendered strange by unusual word order and inverted imagery ('Crayons deposit skin on faces/ Cheekbones follow them out of the alert'). The 'rooms' become 'shadows,' faded memories of their previous occupancies, and darkened by realisations of their untapped potential. Suddenly a child is present, and it quickly turns into night. This move into evening stimulates the poetic voice to recognise that, 'poles once named oppositions' were now '[brought] together'; the domestic space, once considered in opposition to artistic inspiration, has been transformed by its underlying creative traces.

This overlapping of supposedly separate spheres — the domestic space with the creative space — provides a moment of radical emergence for the woman artist. No longer considered as opposing environments, the task now becomes that of 'Metamorphosis', a transformation of the domestic into the aesthetic, materialising the potentialities of the interior scene, and the female artist's ability to capture it. Unlike her visual artist colleagues, throughout her career Guest's studio was a domestic room, transformed into a creative space through her imaginative occupation. The concept of metamorphosis, of changing states and evolving environments, is a clear theme even in Guest's early poetry. In the poems discussed so far, 'The Brown Studio' and 'Latitudes', there is a desire to transform material conditions through the poetic act. Another poem that evokes the transformative potentiality of the domestic space is 'Direction', written in 1968. It opens:

Let us give up our trips  
to pace to and fro here as easily  
the foreignness of these leaves  
the untranslatable silences, the echoes

*Collected 75*

The poem begins with a plea, to remain at her studio at home, rather than travelling abroad.<sup>78</sup> Yet it is not for stability that the speaker seeks local

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<sup>78</sup> After her marriage to Trumbull Higgins in 1955, the couple travelled routinely during his breaks from lecturing responsibilities. As Guest notes, every year in the 1960s the pair summered in Europe, including five trips to Paris, and two to London. In a letter to Rachel Blau DuPlessis Guest reveals, 'Travelling was not, as some believe, an inheritance from my unbelievable uprooting as a child. It was due to the restlessness of my husband' (Guest Papers, Uncat. ZA MS. 271, Box 14).

inhabitation, but because the site of the domestic remains an uncharted, foreign space full of ‘untranslatable silences’ which she seeks to express.

As the poem moves onwards the studio becomes a site for luminous journeying:

The light is not idle, it is full of rapid  
changes we can call voyages  
if we like, moving from room to room.  
How representative of us this thoughtful  
weather that has travelled the water  
to reach us, the touch of a certain side  
of the skin when we open the window.

*Collected 75*

While the domestic space is physically static, it is never ‘idle’; the ‘weather’ is continually changing and the shifts in light become ‘voyages’. Such ‘rapid changes’ are characterised as equivalent to external travel. The poem is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson in that it describes the possibility of movement within an enclosed space. Minor domestic actions, like moving through rooms, opening doors and windows, are presented as vital invocations. The close of the poem pursues an archeology for the abode:

On our own soil that is an excavation  
desolate as the place whose name  
we must never pronounce.

*Collected 76*

The domestic site is creatively undiscovered, Guest suggests, so the poet’s task is to perform an ‘excavation’, mining into its cavernous history. In this poem she registers the mysteries of the homestead, but as with ‘The Brown Studio’ she infers that full disclosure is impossible — the household exists in ‘silence’ and cannot be wholly articulated. Instead Guest reveals an echo — the traces of inhabitation — that suggests the innate foreignness of our intimate surroundings. As with ‘Latitudes’ Guest evokes a *home-scape*, advocating that the domestic site is a vast space to be mapped and embodied through writing.

Committed to such mapping, Guest’s poetry reveals a fascination with the vocabulary of personal and domestic dwelling places. There has already been some critical attention paid to Guest’s preoccupation with the domestic. An article by Erica Kaufman for *Jacket* in 2008 addresses the deconstruction and

reconstruction of domestic space in Guest's early work. Kaufman identifies the new poetic architecture established by Guest, as she outlines the poet's re-examination of the demarcations of space for domesticated women of the 1950s. Kaufman even opines that Guest was able to 'reclaim gendered space' in her poetry. While offering a fascinating introduction to Guest's domestic poetry, Kaufman's analysis is brief and considers only her first published volume, *The Location of Things*, published in 1960. An important early poem that introduces Guest's fixation on domestic space is 'Escape' written in 1945. It opens in an interior space: 'After so many hours spent in the room/ One wonders what the room will do' ('Three Poems'). It compares the normative stillness of a domestic abode, where 'Such long inaction is unnatural,' with the movement and interruption of the street outside, 'Outside, the street has silver cars.... equipped and ready/ for departure' ('Three Poems'). In contrast with Frank O'Hara, who has been hailed a great poet of the street, in this poem Guest demonstrates that she is a great poet of the home.

Developing the street/ home opposition, riding in a car is described as 'brief and quickly swallowed,' offering up a steady stream of variable experiences, but the speaker posits: 'Why not accept the waiting and forgo/ The known?' (Guest and Bernstein). While the Italian Futurists had already celebrated the kinesis of the machine, the house remained an unknown 'ghost' to women in the 1950s — inhabited but not understood ('Three Poems'). Therefore, the title of the poem, 'Escape', does not refer to an escape from domesticity, but rather an escape into the imagination. The poem concludes: 'You should not wait for the walls/ To speak. Go into the bathroom,/ Turn on the faucet, and swim into the street' ('Three Poems'). Rather than viewing the domestic residence as void of creativity, as with 'Latitudes' and 'Direction' imaginative action can be undertaken to transcend the domestic space. These three poems are linked through their emphasis on position taking within the domestic site; that is, Guest infers that such a site can be transformed by how we orient ourselves within it. In the closing moments of this poem, the 'house' has changed into 'the street', blurring the boundaries between the two environments ('Three Poems').

Linda Kerber's essay, 'Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History', argues that a similar process of re-integration

between discrete gendered zones is well overdue (9). While Post-structuralism reads all sites as contestable and multivalent, the idea that private spaces are feminine, while public spaces are masculine, still dominates. The issue here is twofold: firstly that (female) private spaces are critically devalued and secondly that such gender binarism exists at all. We are 'imposing a static model on dynamic relationships,' Kerber argues, if we continue to accept a standard 'in which authority has traditionally validated itself by its distance from the feminine and from what is understood to be effeminate' (9). In understanding the value of Guest's studio, the private/ public binary is unsettled. The gendering of space is brought into question when we consider her studio as a literary workspace *and* a domestic room. In material terms, the studio was both a distinct zone for creativity, as well as for the first half of her career, an extended sector of her own household.

In reconciling her domestic and working spaces, Guest undermines the invisible borders of gendered zones to present the studio as a more complex site. She demonstrates that domestic work, such as childcare, but also the act of writing, are good examples of female labour *inside* the home. As such normative poles of masculinity and femininity are reconfigured and realigned in Guest's studio. As a poet, a mother, a society wife and avant-garde innovator simultaneously, we often see these roles intermix in Guest's work. Inescapably, the discrete spaces of Guest's world began to collapse in the 1950s. With the studio within her household, domestic obligations and poetic practice became intermingled activities. This spreading out, or diffusion of experiences is akin to Helen Frankenthaler's invention of colour-field painting. Frankenthaler's process of staining instigates a spilling out and oversaturation onto the canvas: paint spills over the piece freely and without restrictions. Such unfurling is entirely to be desired; like Frankenthaler, Guest revels in the movement and circulation such a process of diffusion generates.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Madame Matisse*, 1983.



Helen Frankenthaler among her paintings in her New York studio, 1956. Life Magazine.

### **Lacking Congestion: Towards a Sovereign Creative Space**

Despite successfully merging the domestic with the creative in her early poetry, over time Guest became frustrated with how her poetic work was

interrupted by household duties.<sup>79</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s she complained bitterly to her life-long friend and correspondent, Russell Powell, about 'having to hold up a house' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 402, Box 22). While she was interested in the aesthetic potentiality of the domestic space, Guest resented her mandatory role as housewife. Childcare would prove the most substantial marital duty, as she concedes in another letter to Powell (undated, from around 1953): 'Hadley now goes to nursery school which is marvelous for her and even better for me — leaving me a 9 to 4 schedule of the daytime for work and preoccupation. I feel almost like an automatum now, and not a ma' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 402, Box 22). This temporal freedom, from 9-4 when her young daughter was at nursery illustrates the fleeting time Guest had to write poetry in the early 1950s. Even as her children grew up and demanded less of her attention she was still frustrated by domestic responsibilities. She discloses in an interview for 'The Herald' in 1971, 'At any rate, of course domestic interruptions often confuse a certain train of thought. In other words the household is not planned around me' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 24). In the same interview she also makes the following disclosure:

I never liked anything domestic. Well now I've discovered that all this mystique about the kitchen is for the birds... a lot of women I know are becoming freer as they grow older because they are being freed of domestic responsibilities... to continue their own creativity

Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 24

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<sup>79</sup> Guest's home life was far from straightforward. She was married three times, had children by two different fathers, and moved home and travelled endlessly with her third husband, Trumbull Higgins.



Guest with her daughter, Hadley, 1953. Photo by Willa Percival. Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 20.

Such familial interruptions prompted Guest to seek a studio *separate* from her domestic dwelling. In the early 1970s she rented another apartment in New York (on 94<sup>th</sup> street), which she visited daily and which she also called her studio. This was the first time Guest would work outside of the home, and it was here that she wrote a number of collections including *Moscow Mansions*, *The Countess from Minneapolis* and her novel *Seeking Air*. As she explained to Powell in 1988, 'I feel that I have spent enough time in domesticity of sorts and want the work and the thought to be paramount. Trumbull wants to be the thinker and he needs as always a social secretary and I have resigned' (Guest Papers Uncat MSS 402, Box 25). By the late 1980s, Guest was no longer willing to forfeit her creative agency to fulfill societal expectations. Maintaining an entirely separate space for poetry making became essential to Guest, who endeavored to rent a separate studio for the rest of her married life.

In an interview from 2004, when questioned about her creative space, Guest emphasised her need for separation:

Elisabeth Frost (EF): Cynthia just mentioned Woolf's famous phrase,<sup>80</sup> and I wonder whether it remains particularly urgent for women — who are often surrounded by others' domestic needs — to have the space.

Cynthia Hogue (CH): And to dare to have that courage, isn't it, to separate oneself.

Barbara Guest (BG): Yes, because you cease being a good mother. Automatically. I was fortunate to have had somebody to be there, with the children in the apartment<sup>81</sup>. But it certainly separates you from home. At first, I did try to write at home. I remember there was an extra room and I tried to write at home. But the work was just awful.

CH: Because your concentration kept getting interrupted?

BG: Yes. And also I didn't want anything around me, and I still don't. I didn't want anything that brought congestion.

EF: Do you have a space here now?

BG: I have that room now. It's small, but I've written a lot of books in it. I like it small.

Guest et al

Whilst Guest states that artistic autonomy is not incompatible with motherhood, by maintaining a separate studio away from domestic interruptions she insisted that her creativity was not renounced in place of childrearing. That separation is characterised as a space lacking 'congestion'. By giving her poem-making a physical frame, a place in which she went to work, she authenticates her position as a serious writer, for whom poetry was not a dalliance, but a full time occupation.

Later in that same interview, Guest explicates this essential condition of removal:

I was fortunate in that I was able to rent an apartment away from my home as a writing studio, where I could really go inside. A friend rented it for me, and I think that the separation was crucial, that I was able to get away to write.<sup>82</sup>

Guest et al

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<sup>80</sup> 'A woman must have money and a room of one's own if she is to write' (6).

<sup>81</sup> During her third marriage to Trumbull Higgins from 1955-1990, the couple were well off financially. Hadley Haden-Guest reports that Trumbull's mother had 'three or four million dollars', and would help her son with money. After the death of Trumbull's father in 1955, he bought the apartment at 1148 5th avenue for \$40,000. Both Hadley and Jonathan were privately educated (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 27).

<sup>82</sup> It is unclear which friend rented this studio for Guest, but her social network and close family were instrumental in facilitating her the time and space for creative engagements (particularly her daughter Hadley-Haden Guest who lived with her mother from 1993 until 2006).

Guest makes clear that it was the privilege of inhabiting her own separate space where she could 'really go inside'. Here the studio is a vital external space that enables Guest's internal poetic contemplation. This emphasis on interiority is a familiar trope in much of Guest's poetry. In his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky outlined his pre-requisite for painting to allow the artist to express their internal lives in abstract terms (3). While Guest claimed that 'all poetry is confessional', suggesting that all artistic output is, at some level, autobiographical projection, her own self-representations are often abstract and oblique rather than provocative and conspicuous (*Forces* 12). She has written that it is the poem, not the poet, whose autobiography matters; it is the poem that demands attention, and subtly reveals its intimate 'self' (*Forces* 17).

Her choice to remain mysterious was extrapolated in a letter to Peter Riley, in April 1997. Guest compares her poetics with those of Baudelaire, writing 'Baudelaire demanded a dose of "bizarrerie", but that should certainly convey its message, and not be concealed. Perhaps my bizarrerie lies in the privacy of the details of my life, rather than a confession of my emotions, which, indeed, are what my poems are all about — with certain physical details of scenery' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 14). Here Guest asserts that private emotions deeply inform her poems, but that she would rather maintain an evasive approach to the specific details of her own history. Guest elected not to disclose her personal life to the public during her long literary career. As Sara Lundquist has observed, 'privacies have been crucial to Guest's sense of herself as a poet' (14). In interviews, she was often evasive about her identity. As Susan Howe comments to Lyn Hejinian after interviewing Guest for her WBAI radio program in 1978, 'She is very closed and shy. Very nervous. Covering what really goes on... I like that' (Hejinian Papers, MSS 74 Box 4, Folder 18).

Guest's decision to disguise the details of her interiority is mirrored in her decision to avoid explicitly representing her studio in poems. Nicolai Cikovsky claims that 'the artist's studio is a special subject, quite unlike any other. Most of all, it is special because it is a depiction of that personal, usually private place where art is made, a subject that allows a privileged experience of where artistic creativity occurs' (Ringelberg 4). Depicting one's studio could be a form of self-advertisement, which artists have cashed in on, including Henri Matisse and Roy

Lichtenstein. In mid-century New York, the studio became a valuable subject for painting, as we can see in the work of Jane Freilicher and Nell Blaine. However, unlike some of her female artistic colleagues, Guest neglected to depict the particulars of her working conditions. Self-documentation such as photos of Guest's working spaces should be distinguished from self-representation, as there are no poems that concretely outline Guest's studio site. Ringelberg opines that this apparent inattention may be a clear feminist tactic: 'female artists may have been reluctant, consciously or unconsciously, to define this space themselves, or they may have been desirous of hiding the space *as they saw it* from view' (78). Just as Guest's articulations of selfhood favor concealment, her private workspace is also removed from the immediate public gaze.

By affording a separation from domesticity and also a place to conceal her interiority, what crucially the studio also offered was a sovereign creative space. The idea of artistic sovereignty was very important for Guest.<sup>83</sup> In her essay on 'Imagination', Guest quotes Pasternak's view that: 'One must live in sovereign freedom like king, never surrendering to temporal authority or traditions however deeply rooted' (*Forces* 14). Her own qualification immediately after the citation — 'That is, one must live out of oneself' — is revealing (*Forces* 14). To live out of oneself, implies both an extension of self, and implicitly, a duality of selves.<sup>84</sup> For Guest 'living out of oneself' is linked with 'the inner kingdom of the imagination' (*Forces* 14). Here the rhetoric of sovereignty is applied with a clear

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<sup>83</sup> Sovereignty is also a critical term for Susan Howe, as she dares her reader in *My Emily Dickinson* 'to leap from a place of certain signification, to a new situation, undiscovered and sovereign' (85).

<sup>84</sup> This brings to mind another poem by Dickinson, which similarly articulates this idea of dualistic selves:

Me from Myself - to banish -  
 Had I Art -  
 Impregnable my Fortress  
 Unto All Heart -

But since Myself - assault Me -  
 How have I peace  
 Except by subjugating  
 Consciousness?

And since We're mutual Monarch  
 How this be  
 Except by Abdication -  
 Me - of Me?

purpose, as it is the sovereignty of the imagination which is most precious. Yet, perhaps, living in the imagination can occur ‘out of oneself’. Imagination can be organised spatially argues Guest, writing that ‘Imagination has its orderly zones’ (*Forces* 15). She insinuates that like ‘liv[ing] out[side] of oneself’, the imagination can exist in hidden regions of the mind, sheltered from quotidian experience, and usefully categorised into disparate zones of creativity. As she explains: ‘[Imagination] is not always the great tumultuous sea on which we view a small boat. It can lie behind hedges, hide in boxes, even suffer the touch of exile’ (*Forces* 15). While the image of the ‘small boat’ on a ‘tumultuous sea’ may offer an explicit and panoramic image of the imagination at work, Guest privileges the unexposed, and the hidden territories of the imagination: hiding in boxes, lying behind hedges, or even suffering temporary exile. Hence Guest’s practice of artistic sovereignty was not a fully exposed display of authority, but rather a constructed (‘orderly’) and oftentimes concealed mode of being as a female poet.<sup>85</sup> Concealed from public view, Guest’s carefully established private studio space was crucial in facilitating her construction of artistic sovereignty.

### **Section Three: The Studio as Method: Modernism, Visuality & Space**

As a sovereign creative space, the studio became the location where Guest could experiment with a range of literary forms — including the ballad, the ode, the elegy and particularly ekphrastic poetry. She also wrote a number of plays that were staged, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as a novel, *Seeking Air* and a biography of the poet H.D. Throughout these formal transitions, Guest was explicitly aware of the tradition she was entering into — her writing in all modes evinces a keen sense of knowing its own tentative positioning within and against established literary history. Throughout her diverse outputs, Guest’s sensory character remained constant: she was undoubtedly a visual writer. She acknowledges that her creative education began with the arts, ‘I grew up among painters,’ she tells friend Germana Fruttarolo in a letter from 1986, ‘That is I grew older and wiser’ (Guest Papers. Uncat. ZA MS. 271, Box 9). In her talk, ‘The Shadow of Surrealism,’ the poet highlights the influence of visual artists upon her

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<sup>85</sup> As Guest wrote in a notebook, ‘Poetry is in the ruins, in the sacred places — Hidden’ (Guest Papers. Uncat. ZA MS. 271, Box 9).

evolving literary aesthetic in the milieu of New York in the late 1950s. Guest explains painters experienced far greater freedom than poets: 'First I noticed these painters had a lot more joy than did the poets. They were more playful! Their ideas were exploding on the canvas and they had a sense of freedom the poets were only beginning to learn from them' (*Forces* 102). Capitalising on the liberation of this cultural moment, Guest carved out her career as a painter's poet. Alongside her New York School contemporaries, she was part of the mid-century coterie that appropriated visual methods and processes into the realms of poetry.

Her fascination with abstraction can be traced back to the early Modernist painters who first wrenched the visual away from mimesis. Wassily Kandinsky was an important artistic forbear, and in 'The Shadow of Surrealism' Guest directly connects her studio with that of Kandinsky. She explains:

Once I sublet an apartment overlooking Union Square. I came to dislike the cold north light of the apartment and I admit I was unhappy while I lived there. However, the owner's library included several books on Kandinsky. There was one book that quoted him on the necessity in art for an "inner sound." To me, this is the essential "noise" of poetry. Another book showed photographs of Kandinsky's Moscow apartment. The artist, his ideas, and his dwelling place became a solace to me.

One day looking down on Union Square from the apartment, the sudden realization arrived that Union Square looked remarkably like the Moscow park seen from Kandinsky's apartment.

Several years passed and I moved near the south side of Union Square. I walked over to Union Square one day and looked up at my former apartment. The building now seemed to resemble the old photograph of Kandinsky's apartment. That evening I began to write a poem about the last evening Kandinsky had spent in Moscow before going into exile. I called the poem 'The View from Kandinsky's Window.'

*Forces* 54

The poem, 'The View from Kandinsky's Window' (1989) presents Kandinsky on the precipice. We perceive the artist on his final night in Moscow, about to depart his apartment and retreat to Europe, where he would participate in the inauguration of abstract art. Guest is drawn to this exigent moment, the instant before a shift in culture has occurred. The significance of this poem comes from the imaginative layering of Kandinsky's studio, with that of the poet. It begins:

An over-large pot of geraniums on the ledge  
 the curtains part  
 a view from Kandinsky's window.

*Collected 212*

Then mid-way through the poem, we are told:

At Union Square the curtains are drawn  
 diagonals greet us, those curves and sharp city  
 verticals he taught us their residual movements.

*Collected 213*

What we get from these stanzas, and from Guest's elucidation in 'The Shadow of Surrealism', is an emphasis on the residual objects in her studio, such as the books on Kandinsky. She tells us that, 'The artist, his ideas, and his dwelling place became a solace to me' (*Forces* 54). As Guest begins to identify with Kandinsky and his aesthetic processes, her immediate surroundings are recalibrated through his abstraction. She highlights the 'Diagonals' which 'greet us', and 'those curves and sharp city/ verticals he taught' (*Collected 213*). Through Kandinsky's artistic vision, Guest perceives her external environment anew, as the archetypal shapes of Kandinsky's canvases begin to overlay scenes of New York. There is a reciprocal gaze occurring here, of Guest 'looking down on Union Square from the apartment' and later 'look[ing] up' at the apartment from the square below. The window provides the interface, from the internal to the external and back again. This movement from inside to outside is a familiar pattern in Guest's poetry (see 'Latitudes' previously discussed). Yet representations of the exterior world outside of Kandinsky's apartment in Moscow are not privileged in the poem, as we are told, 'The park shows little concern with Kandinsky's history' (*Collected 213*). Instead it is the interiority of Kandinsky's vision, as perceived through the framing of his window onto the square below, which is important for Guest. The poetic speaker opines, 'We have similar balconies, scale... degrees of ingress' (*Collected 213*).

It is the site of the two artists that Guest reads as equivalent: the position from which they enter into, or negotiate, the framing of their work. The overlapping of their physical dwelling-places underlines their similar aesthetics. Like with Cézanne's studio, Guest achieves artistic correspondence through shared physical and imagined artistic space. The repeated return to other artist's studios is marked in Guest's oeuvre. In layering her site with that of Kandinsky, Guest is

afforded access to his artistic process. Kandinsky's abstraction then colours her own poetic practice. As the poem illustrates, the studio becomes the lens through which their shared aesthetic can be understood. In this section I argue that the studio is also the lens through which we can understand key aspects of Guest's poetic production. The studio affords a sharper sense of her poetic process, including her relationship with Modernism and visual art, as well as providing a clearer image of her conceptualisations of poetic space.

Through Guest's position in the studio, she was able to contend with Modernist art as well as literary tradition from an authoritative position. The poem 'Roses', written in 1973, bears out this unique orientation:

*'painting has no air . . .'*  
— Gertrude Stein

That there should never be air  
in a picture surprises me.  
It would seem to be only a picture  
of a certain kind, a portrait in paper  
or glue, somewhere a stickiness  
as opposed to a stick-to-it-ness  
of another genre. It might be  
quite new to do without  
that air, or to find oxygen  
on the landscape line  
like a boat which is an object  
or a shoe which never floats  
and is stationary.

Still there  
are certain illnesses that require  
air, lots of it. And there are nervous  
people who cannot manufacture  
enough air and must seek  
for it when they don't have plants,  
in pictures. There is the mysterious  
traveling that one does outside  
the cube and this takes place  
in air.

It is why one develops  
an attitude toward roses picked  
in the morning air, even roses  
without sun shining on them.  
The roses of Juan Gris from which  
we learn the selflessness of roses

existing perpetually without air,  
 the lid being down, so to speak,  
 a 1912 fragrance sifting  
 to the left corner where we read  
 'La Merveille' and escape<sup>86</sup>

*Collected* 128-129

This graceful poem moves through several Modernist precedents. It is a meditation on a poem written by William Carlos Williams, 'The Rose', which was itself indebted to a painting by Juan Gris, entitled *Flowers* which was owned by another poet, Gertrude Stein.



Juan Gris, *Flowers*, 1914.

<sup>86</sup> The final line reads "'La Merveille" and breathe' in other versions of the poem.

The painting hung at Stein's salon at 27 rue des Fleurus — a key site of the Parisian avant-garde. Looking at a rose, such a symbolic object in painting and poetry, Guest traces back its 20<sup>th</sup> century lineage — through Williams' Objectivism and Gris and Stein's Cubism. This is a typical Guestian maneuver, to look back towards Modernist traditions and reimagine other possible pathways.

Guest rebukes the opening statement, quoted from Stein, that 'painting has no air'. This version of painting, as performed by Gris' Cubism, does appear to lack aeration: the surface is entirely flat, condensed, with the elements on the table — roses, newspaper, coffee cup and pipe — so reduced in area that they overlay one another. Despite the Cubist aspiration to render multiple angles of vision, the painting appears entirely level. Guest goes on to argue 'That there should never be air/ in a picture surprises me'. For her, it is only a certain mode of painting, like this one by Gris, which can be described as airless. Gris' layered objects, stuck to the canvas inert and immobile, expose this 'stickiness' — the airless, stifling quality of the painting. Such stickiness also implies Gris and indeed Stein's urge to stick with airless Cubism, without giving space to alternative Modernist aesthetics.

As with Kandinsky, Guest is returning to a moment of rupture: a turning point in art history. The question posed by Guest then is not only, what happens after cubism — i.e. what is the status of post-modernism — but rather what other routes are there within Modernism, which have generally been ignored? Guest consistently affirmed herself as a Modernist poet, so while she is actively encountering something that has already been encountered, she is looking for new potentialities within that history. While Guest confirms that it 'might be quite new to do without that air', she accepts in the second stanza that, 'there are certain illnesses that require air, lots of it'. Here newness does not equate to aesthetic beauty, and by her own logic, Guest wants to explore other kinds of poetic value. Ultimately the poem does not look to other poets to incite new openings but rather to visual artists. Guest seeks to find oxygen 'on the landscape line' — and it is on that threshold between poetry and painting that she situates herself. By addressing Modernist precedents, Guest navigates the shifting parameters of her own artistic culture. The studio as site is the intersection where these histories collide and are reconfigured. Through her adoption of the

studio, Guest legitimises her place in the exchanges between word and image that informed her contemporary culture.

**‘The measure by which one art form works upon another’: Merging Mediums**

In her essay ‘The Shadow of Surrealism’ Guest explains that above all she sought to understand from painters ‘the measure by which one art form works upon another’ (*Forces* 52). Like Rainer Maria Rilke who, ‘wanted to find out how the painter worked *so that he might apply Cézanne’s discoveries to his own work*,’ Guest also wanted to get at painterly methods in order to exploit them in her poetic practice (*Forces* 53). Her studio site afforded her *access* to such painterly techniques: writing in the artist’s domain gave Guest contact with visual methods. As she explains, she would not ‘question’ the meaning of the paintings: ‘I did not ask what it means, or how the paint was applied, the color chosen’ (*Forces* 53). Rather she sought to understand ‘what permits this particular piece of work’, in order to ‘*borrow [the] method from the master*’ (*Forces* 53). The studio enabled such artistic appropriation; learning from and applying the great painterly strategies of spatial manipulation, shading and colour, Guest worked to transfer the sensuality of painting onto the space of the page.

Her ekphrastic poetry illustrates the process of translating painterly inspiration into verse. In ‘The Shadow of Surrealism,’ Guest elaborates on failed attempts to render the Matisse painting *Goldfish* (1912) into poetic form. She began by endeavoring to convert a direct stimulus, as she tells us: ‘I put a poster of this painting on my wall and looked at it daily’ (*Forces* 53). Whilst she could recognise Matisse’s ‘solemn intellectual problem,’ she was unable to transform his ‘sensual interior’ into the context of her own poem, ‘Water Kingdoms’ (*Forces* 53). A magazine later rejected this poem, Guest reports.<sup>87</sup> It is perhaps this attempt at direct contemplation (‘looked at [the painting] daily’), which ultimately fails her. However, Guest was able to turn this unsuccessful venture into a novel outcome.

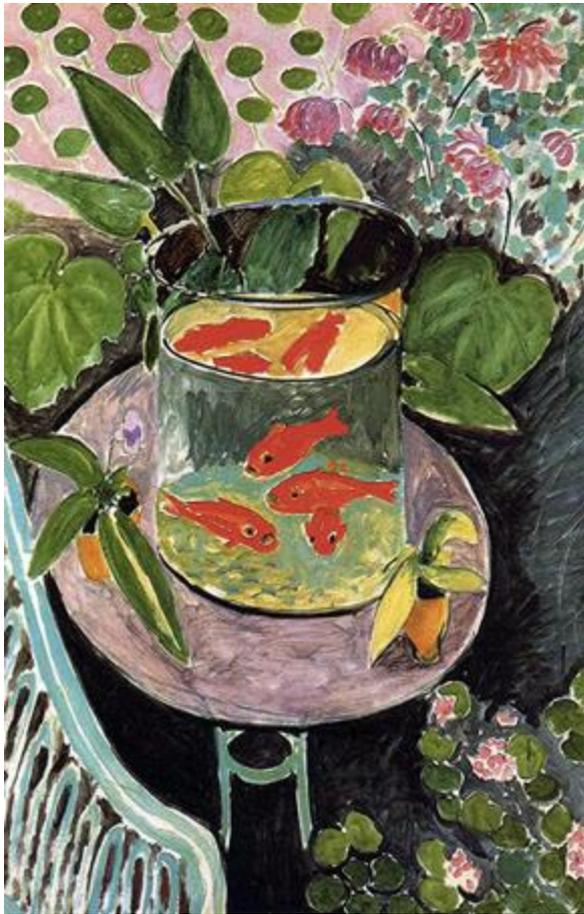
With a sidelong look at the Matisse goldfish on the wall, I began to reconsider the poem. In the Matisse poster, the goldfish are placed in their bowl on a table. The table appears in another Matisse painting... *The Rose Marble Table*. I had cherished a fondness for this painting and had

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<sup>87</sup> The poem ‘Water Kingdoms’ does not appear in any of her published collections, or in her *Collected Poems*, so was presumably discarded by Guest.

attached it to my life. Now I began to consider the table. I became more intimate with the painting and progress of Matisse. The poem is called 'The Rose Marble Table.'

*Forces 53*



Henri Matisse, *Goldfish* 1912.

Henri Matisse, *The Rose Marble Table* 1917.

Guest reveals key moments of creative clarity here. The first and perhaps the most significant, is the 'sidelong look' Guest now gives to the original 'Goldfish' painting. This shift in perspective is critical: Guest's poetic strategy moves away from direct and immediate contact with the artistic source, and towards a slanted viewpoint. This angle leads her away from the initial catalyst, the *Goldfish* painting and towards an adjacent offering, *The Rose Marble Table*. Interestingly however, it is not Guest's distanced perspective that makes this latter poem ('The Rose Marble Table') successful, but her emotional affection for the second painting. Whereas with the *Goldfish* painting, Guest relied solely on intellectual concentration to shape her poetic response, personal identification marks her second output. Additionally, it is Guest's physical movement around the space of the painting that occasions this reconsideration. By altering the space between

herself and the painting on the wall, Guest identifies a new focus: the table. Intrinsically then, it is the set-up of her spacious studio that permits this shift of attention. Again it is the material conditions of Guest's studio that condition her aesthetic output.

The poem itself, 'The Rose Marble Table' (1989), is a lively example of Guest's signature ekphrastic procedure. In no way does the poem attempt to render the painting. Rather it engages in a conversation with the original, asking questions of Matisse, and probing at the edges of his craft. Certain elements are familiar from the paintings: the 'octagonals' recall the shape of the table, while the 'orange/ smiles' evokes the goldfish from the first Matisse (*Collected* 224). However, in both of the canvases there is a clear central image, the goldfish or the table, while in Guest's poem our attention is continually refocused. Stanza one begins in the Matisse garden, 'Adoptive day replenished by shadow,' but by stanza two we have moved into the 'sea' and towards more metaphysical reflections on transitions and transcendence, 'that passage from ice to shallow' (*Collected* 224). Guest may have used Matisse as a catalyst, and borrowed his title, but the poem's undulations flow freely away from his enclosed garden space. It is perhaps this sense of creative disruption that is the point, as stanza four opens: 'Gentle disruptions on certain days ruminating in/ clear water, thoughts trailing' (224). The poem privileges this 'Gentle disruption'. Just like Guest's 'sidelong look', the process of ekphrasis benefits from an indirect and "trailing" sense of translation. The poem celebrates modes of measured transition, as 'glass changes into foam' and 'combs drop into fur'. There is a heightened awareness of such gradual transformations, like 'the spread of trained water' (224). It is perhaps this unforced, gradual approach to changing forms that Guest suggests is useful in ekphrastic poetry.

While Fraser describes Guest as an observational bystander in her characterisation of the poet's form of 'painterly witness,' this poem reveals Guest's ability to both experience visual art and to disclose its workings (33). 'The Rose Marble Table' does not translate mediums, but rather conjures a voice for the painting itself. It manifests the esoteric, abstract sensibility that the canvas might utter of its own existence. Ultimately it is the solid and unalterable edifice of the marble table that proves impossible to convert into abstract verse,

as the lyric speaker interjects in the seventh stanza: 'Creative soul you hesitate, I with my hand/ on the rose marble table, like you a difficult creature' (*Collected* 224). The mind of the poet is made present, as the autonomy of the painting voice is revealed as unsustainable. The table in the poem, like in the paintings, becomes the point of contention. The shifts in verse take place around the unaltered table, which, like the Matisse paintings, remains unchanged despite its placement in the natural environment.<sup>88</sup> The materiality of this object proves too rigid to be transformed by Guest's plastic form. It is this plasticity, this mobile sense of imaginative contingency, which characterises Guest's ekphrastic style. It was in the studio that she could 'borrow' the methods of visual art and experiment with transitions between one form and another (*Forces* 53).

Guest envied the medium of painting, as paint can be formulated into any given shape and texture. The same cannot be said of language, which functions through its signifying capacity and ability to represent exterior reality via the intricate play of lexical markings upon the page. A poem that addresses this tension is 'Passage,' written in 1973. Framed as an elegy for John Coltrane, the poem meditates upon the limitations of artistic mediums. 'Words/ after all/ are syllables/ just' the poem opens (*Collected* 130). Guest goes on to compare the linguistic unit of the syllable with the finite colour pigments of a paint. Added into the mix of the poetic texture are Coltrane's experiments with free jazz and collective musical improvisation. The poetic speaker begins to conflate these artistic practices: 'you put them/ in their place/ notes/ sounds/ a painter using his stroke' (*Collected* 130). As the poem proposes, this was a key moment when artistic mediums began to merge. Reflecting this, the space of the poem becomes a canvas — words are spread across its surface like paint ('polyphonic') — and the sound of the poem is heightened to a level of musicality: 'We were just/ beginning to hear' (130). Guest's poem becomes an exercise in associative language, as she is learning from and re-materialising the experiences of free jazz and abstract painting in the verse.

But as Guest attempts to render the diversity of these artistic mediums in 'Passage,' we are continually reminded that *it is a poem* that we are reading.

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<sup>88</sup> The static nature of the table, with nature in movement around it, echoes the Wallace Stevens' poem, 'Anecdote of the Jar' (97).

Towards the end we are offered an *'Envoi'* presumably to Coltrane (*Collected* 130). But this address never emerges. Instead, the *'Envoi'* functions as a marker of language: Guest points out the linguistic mode of the poem itself, as the envoi works as a hyper-conscious enactment of Guest's own compositional structure. Similarly her later statement, 'Sweet difficult passages/ on your throats/ there *just* there', self-reflexively registers the difficulty of much of Guest's poetry (*Collected* 130). Despite attempting to articulate poetic-artistic mergence, Guest's web of language becomes almost entirely self-referential, speaking to the processes of linguistic composition rather than the visual arts or music. This is demonstrated through the repeated use of the word *'just'*; a word that reinforces the syllable as a linguistic component: 'For the moment *just*/ when the syllables/ out of their webs float' (130). Also Guest's invocation of the French language mid-way through the poem, *'C'est juste'* underlines the materiality of the language she is using, further accentuated by her playful inclusion of the word 'French!' later on (130-131). Without being able to fully operate through a painterly or musical modality, 'Passages' still highlights the transitions, or 'Passages' which allow the exchange from one art form to another. Like a 'caterpillar edging/ to moth' the poem registers the transformative potentiality of art forms (131).<sup>89</sup> In her choice of the studio as her compositional site, Guest locates herself in this liminal cultural space, operating between literature, art and music. Here she was able to explore the passages — the channels and pathways — opening up between discrete disciplines.

### **White Space: The Materiality of the Page**

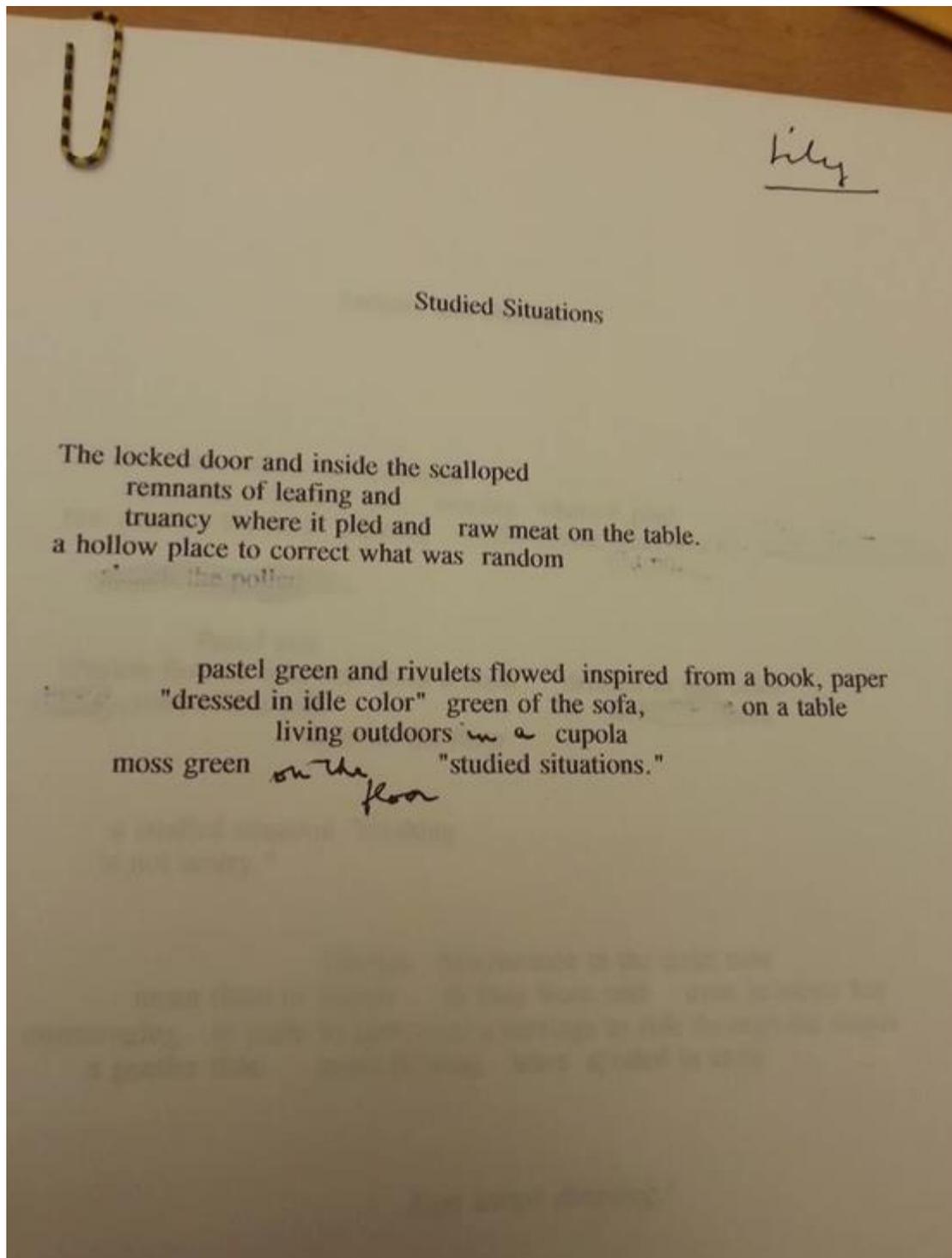
Operating within the studio space also motivated Guest to reflect on materiality. As her colleagues experimented with canvas and paint, Guest explored the primary materials of poetry — of words attached to a surface.<sup>90</sup> Key to this investigation was the materiality of her compositional form, which changed over time with technological developments. She began by handwriting poems on paper, and quickly moved to typing up her verse using a typewriter. As

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<sup>89</sup> Guest also stresses the idea of metamorphosis in her previously discussed poem, 'Latitudes'.

<sup>90</sup> Guest was a pioneer at recognising the material qualities of language; she investigated the medium of the page as a literary space. It is due to this pioneering of language as a material that many L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets took a keen interest in Guest, and attempted to resuscitate her career in the 1990s after her lack of critical attention.

she explained to Hillringhouse, 'I always work on unlined paper' (Guest Papers, Uncat MSS 947, Box 10). Using plain paper, Guest was not confined by line segments and could utilise the entire space of the page, treating it like a canvas.



Guest Papers, Uncat MSS 271, Box 24.

This poem draft of 'Studied Situations' (unpublished) reveals Guest's compositional practice. It is the typewriter itself that is mediating the poesis; the



is a vital development in Guest's evolving poetics of site: as the physical architecture dissolves, it is re-materialised through poetic language. The building is granted textual space in the poem's surface. The line, 'Vanish Vanish *Building*' is followed by, 'Except here' (*Collected* 133). Although the building may physically disappear, it will persist through poetic legacy. Here material space is exchanged for imaginative enactment, as by cataloging this building upon the keys of her Olivetti, Guest preserves a relic of the past. Yet Guest ushers in a playful tone in her 'ode' to her 'Olivetti'. Whereas nightingales and Grecian Urns may have inspired John Keats, Guest's ode is directed towards her typewriter — the machinery of her poesis.

After Guest moved to Berkeley, California in 1993, the poet had her most productive period, completing ten poetry collections in her last fifteen years of writing. This vital poetic output was intimately tied to her mode of inhabitation, as she explains: 'This is the first year since the death of my husband that I've been able to go at my own pace, to go on writing here at any hour or any time I want to.... Formerly, I had to go to a place to write and I had to finish by a certain time. Now I inhabit the house in a different way. I think this may be changing my work' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 947, Box 10). Eventually the entire house became Guest's creative studio. Such autonomy dramatically impacted her aesthetic, as her later poems exhibit far greater spatial freedoms. The collections, *Quill, Solitary Apparition* (1996), *If so, Tell me* (1999), *Rocks on a Platter* (1999), *Symbiosis* (2000) and *Miniatures and Other Poems* (2002) all present the spacing of words on the page as equally important as lexical meanings. It is here that mediums truly merge, as linguistic significance is symbiotic with visual and spatial representation. This interdependence between the word and its physical presence on the page complicates the boundaries between artistic modes.

I will examine Guest's poetic treatise: *Rocks on a Platter: Notes on Literature* (1999) as an example of Guest's distinctive site production, as the visual, spatial and textual combine to generate an embodied poetic form. As the title suggests, this poem offers up Guest's words, or 'rocks,' as mobile entities upon a 'platter' (*Collected* 427). The mixed metaphor of natural fossilised materials alongside man-made objects is characteristic of the linguistic twists within the poem. Guest places incompatible phrases alongside one another to heighten the semantic

disjunction. The image of rocks being arranged on a platter functions well to illustrate Guest's motives, as words will be tossed and re-positioned in this poem to seismic effect. On page one we hear, 'Rock, platter, words, words.../ mammoth teeth' (*Collected* 427). The 'mammoth teeth' symbolise the archaic nature of such formal manipulations — of symbols positioned on a surface — reminiscent of ancient cave paintings. However, much like the extinct 'mammoth,' this outmoded sense of form has become lost, forgotten or disregarded. The poem introduces numerous genres into its fabric, from the short story, to the voices of unknown far-off narrators, to the ancient epic 'Ovid' (*Collected* 445). There is a trope of colonial storytelling, of newfound discovery: 'Ship/ shoal rocks/ to approach this land raving!' (*Collected* 445). While Guest may be (re)discovering the synergy between word and image, like colonising new land, she acknowledges the native dwellers: signs and symbols are as primal and intertwined as the early communities which formed them.

Above all this poem is about form. As Kristen Kreider observes in *Poetics and Place: The Architecture of Sign, Subjects and Site*: 'artworks that combine poetic, artistic and spatial aesthetic strategies are capable of communicating symbolically as well as through the signifying capacity of physical material in order to address situations and events that lie beyond comprehension, things that resist verbal representation alone' (2). Getting to grips with Guest's symbolic signification found within her verbal/spatial assemblage is crucial for a holistic understanding of her poetic practice. As Charles Altieri comments, 'every part of a [Guest] work of art has its own significance' (83). Introduced on page one of *Rocks on a Platter* is the phrase, 'Dreams set by/ typography' (*Collected* 427). The whole poem is dream-like, with words and stories appearing on the page, "afloat with the telling" (*Collected* 432). Forms of coherence become fluid — they are states we move through, as semantic relations are drawn across several pages. Yet each moment has a distinct worldliness and there is something tangible beneath the surface, as we begin to peel back the layers of textual reality. The 'typography' and spatial placement become the means by which Guest renders the story. We experience the loud demands of capitalisation ('PHANTOM') as well as the quiet revelation of italicised passages ('*Flotsam of appearance*') (*Collected* 440, 443). Words swim on the surface singularly, or are

supported by dense paragraphs of narration. Yet this fragmented, disjointed word patterning is not discomfoting. Rather than inferring a broken-ness, Guest's visual style 'resembles/ evasion', recalling thoughts passing away into unreachable regions of the mind (*Collected* 432). Amid this shifting landscape Guest reminds us that we are, 'In a room/ "not alone"'; her ethereal lyrical presence leads us onward (*Collected* 432). This 'attraction to distance and disappearance' is unveiled as an implicit aesthetic strategy towards the end, as the poem questions how to attach language to a surface and make it dwell there (*Collected* 439). A speaker discloses: 'He has written out a plan and glued it to the text' (*Collected* 438). The adhesive behind this poem is the inter-dependence between verbal signification and visual presentation. Through this symbiotic enactment, *Rocks on a Platter* represents a fully inhabited poetic form.

**'Poetry extended vertically, as well as horizontally': Guest & Space**

In 'The Shadow of Surrealism' Guest further unpacks this overlapping of separate mediums, revealing: 'in that creative atmosphere of magical rites, there was no recognised separation between the arts.... One could never again look at poetry as a locked kingdom. Poetry extended vertically, as well as horizontally' (*Forces* 51). It was the advent of Modernism, Guest opines, that truly opened out poetry's 'locked' potential. The mergence between different art forms made room for new voices to be summoned and Guest reads this creative transgression in spatial terms, 'vertically' and 'horizontally,' as the dimensions of the poetic utterance were stretched (*Forces* 51). That Guest describes this process *spatially* registers her deep preoccupation with the idea of space itself. As Guest explains in another interview from 1996: 'I grew up in the febrility of Modernism. I love Constructionism and Cubism, all those isms... The ideas of space in Modernism' (Guest Papers, Uncat MSS 402, Box 6). As previously noted, this sense of space was shaped through her inhabitation of the studio, as she described to Hillringhouse:

I've been in so many painters' studios and I envy all their space and light and so I set up here, I suppose in imitation of them. I've learned so much from them, I might as well learn about space.

Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 947, Box 10

In setting up her writing space 'in imitation' of painter's studios, Guest physically occupies a light, spacious environment and from within that environment she can learn about spatiality. In this way, the studio operates as a frame through which Guest can investigate broader conceptualisations of poetic space.

In a letter from Jascha Kessler, another New York based poet, he verifies Guest's investment in space. He notes, 'our differences, dialectical, stem from our sensual orientations: you would be a person whose breath, heart and breast, and perhaps bowels, move to the rhythm of certain spaces that you perceive through the eye, and so you work with surfaces, tactilely even' (Guest Papers. Uncat. ZA MS. 271, Box 9). Kessler describes Guest's 'sensual orientation' as both visual *and* spatial; he reports that she is able to transform the physical spaces she perceives through her poetic labour. This embodied sense of inhabiting space, physically and textually, is reminiscent of Charles Olson's sense of poetic space, his prominent 'composition by field', as outlined in his influential manifesto 'Projective Verse II' (1950). But it is interesting to note that Guest makes no reference anywhere in her poetics to the significance of Olson's spatial theorisations, instead stating in a letter to Ann Lauterbach: 'I am particularly sensitive to any suggestions that I might have learned, omnipotent as I am, from another poet (Olson) whom I do not read' (Guest Papers. MSS 736, Box 2).<sup>91</sup> Instead of learning from her poetic contemporaries, Guest again looks back towards earlier Modernist precedents to draw on their ideas of space.

In an early poem, 'The Blue Stairs' published in 1968, Guest gives voice to the spatial dimensions of Modernist praxis (*Collected* 61). Functioning as an homage to the iconic 'cobalt' stairs at the Stedelijk museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Amsterdam, the poem records the 'upward/ platforms' that the stairs offer to artists and visitors alike (61). Housing iconic paintings from the early Modernist period, the collection includes work by Kandinsky, Matisse, Van Gogh and Cézanne. Guest emphasises the practical use of the stair design, 'Being humble/ i.e. productive/ Its purpose/ is to take you upward', as it is the

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<sup>91</sup> In another letter to Lauterbach, Guest describes her first encounter with the poet: 'I spent eight hours with Olson, whom I had never met before in Spoleto talking, dancing and holding hands. We fell into each other's company as the most natural companions in the world... and were careless of a possible disaffection of poetics' (Guest Papers. MSS 736, Box 2).

architecture which mediates the artistic experience (61). The stairs are used to 'substantiate/ a method of progress' as they physicalise the stages of artistic advancement; to walk up the stairs is to enter an elevated artistic domain (61). However, the stairs also function as 'interpolation', as they become symbols for 'the problem of gradualness' (61). Structurally the stairs are made through 'heavy and pure logic' of even steps, constructing an image of gradual advancement (61). But this uniformity fails to reflect the great leaps of artistry in Modernist practice. Despite the potential for misrepresenting the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century art, Guest celebrates the stairs as a marginalised part of Modernism's 'republic of space'; they function as the unacknowledged apparatus for artistic transcendence, creating the opening in which anyone can ascend to an elevated plain (61). Taking inspiration from a neglected Modernist space — the stairs leading to a gallery, rather than the artwork itself — Guest privileges the physical environments that shaped the period. This re-alignment of significance extends and de-limits Modernist notions of space.

The later collection, *Quill, Solitary APPARITION*, published in 1996, operates as a celebration and farewell to those 'ideas of space in Modernism' that Guest treasured (Guest Papers, Uncat MSS 402, Box 6). Discussing the poem 'Leaving MODERNITY', Guest comments, 'There is a sadness that does give a believable density to the poem ['Leaving MODERNITY'], I'm sad about its departure' (Guest Papers, Uncat MSS 402, Box 6). The poem itself circles around ideas of departure; it catalogues "'a vanished equipment'", the mechanics of Modernity in decline, but the possibility of 'leaving (without ending)' (*Collected* 333). Through its visual spacing on the page, with isolated phrases floating across the surface of its mostly white pages, there is a melancholic identification that Modernism's spatial potency is drawing to a close. While it laments the memory of '*White Border, White Shapes, Black Square*', and the natural order '*between space and form*', there is a resolve to depart from, but not forget, these compelling emblems of Modernism (333). Guest's poem privileges the idea of departure — 'Leaving' — as a fluid pathway leading from Modernism onwards into unknown territories; the poem closes with the image of '*Modernity/ on the roadway*' (*Collected* 356). As 'The Blue Stairs' extended original Modernist spatial ideas

upwards vertically, here Modernist transgressions lengthen horizontally: 'on the roadway'.

These examples demonstrate that Guest sought the extensive enlarging of poetic space. Her lecture 'Wounded Joy', begins:

The most important act of a poem is to reach further than the page, so that we are aware of another aspect of the art. This will introduce to us its spiritual essence. This essence has no limits. What we are setting out to do is to *delimit* the work of art, so that it appears to have *no beginning and no end, so that it overruns the boundaries of the poem on the page*

*Forces 100*

As Guest theorises, in order for the poem to demonstrate its 'spiritual essence' it must overrun the 'boundaries of the poem on the page'. Gaston Bachelard speaks of a similar process in *The Poetics of Space*, claiming that 'the poetic image radiates' (xxiv). Guest was undeniably a poet of spirituality, an element of her poetics that has generally been underappreciated. As she asserts in 'Poetry the True Fiction', 'There [must be] a spirit within the poem to elevate it, to give it "wings"' (*Forces 29*). She clarifies these terms, stating:

I would like you to understand that I am using the words 'spirit,' 'vision,' 'halo' because I wish to lift us upward away from the desk of a projected poem. I want to emphasize that the poem needs to have a spiritual or metaphysical life if it is going to engage itself with reality

*Forces 28*

There is a desire here that the poem be elevated above pure materiality, 'away from the desk' and towards 'a spiritual or metaphysical life'. Guest argues that in order for a poem to have a life beyond the page, it had to extend itself and it had to become, in Guest's terms, 'wing[ed]'.

She continues this line of enquiry explaining that that one does not enter a painting's space, but rather the space 'thrusts itself forward' toward the spectator (*Forces 55*). Guest extends this idea to the spatiality of the poem — through the combination of positive horizontal and vertical space a third space is realised — a third dimension is 'thrust forward' and extends outwards towards the reader. This extending zone creates a communal site — a third terrain in 'corners and angles' in which we are able to locate 'crucial experiences of the past' (*Forces 55*). As DuPlessis points out 'elements inside a poem.... all gaze at each other, as well as at the viewer' ('The Other Window'). In this way the poem becomes '*delimited*', it now reaches out beyond the spatial limits of the page into

the psychological arena of memory (*Forces* 55). In accessing ‘crucial experiences of the past’ through poetry Guest is able to evade spatial limitation by extending it temporally, across time (55). Space and time intersect to construct ‘specific spots’ or nodes of memory that recollect past experiences (55). An example of this can be seen in ‘The Brown Studio’ previously discussed, as there is a ‘photograph’ in the poem, which is able to encapsulate the atmosphere of the room it represents through documenting a memory (*Collected* 46). The poem, Guest suggests, works in the same way — it can record past experiences, and materialise those experiences for the future.<sup>92</sup> Guest continually emphasises the residual in her poems (as with the books on Kandinsky) as such objects become the vehicle whereby she can usher in experiences of the past. What is left behind, the memory or the residue, is then pushed ahead, ‘thrust... forward’ in the poem. Thus, Temporality becomes another site in which Guest can play, transform and re-order experience.

Peter Gizzi, the editor of her *Collected Poems*, argues that this desire to ‘delimit’ the poem ‘spatially *and* temporally’ characterises Guest’s work (‘Introduction’ *Collected* xvii). In Guest’s poetics, space is expanded in every direction — horizontally (as in ‘on the roadway’ in ‘Leaving MODERNITY’), vertically (as in ‘The Blue Stairs’) and through depth, as Guest articulates that space becomes elevated, beyond the two dimensions of the page when it achieves ‘spiritual essence’ or becomes ‘wing[ed]’. The combination of these three dimensions can be witnessed in nodes of poetic time, which Guest describes as a communal site found in ‘corners and angles’ which house ‘crucial experiences of the past’.

This delimitation also extended to the work-environment, as Guest explains in ‘Shifting Persona’:

In writing concealed within a limited physical environment, as in the work of Jane Austen, the threat of claustrophobia hangs over the whole body of novels. In order to relieve this environmental tension, the writer with her strokes of genius elevates the characters above a physical dimension, so that although their persons appear to inhabit a closed drawing-room they are actually removed from the interior to the exterior

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<sup>92</sup> The photograph in this poem is able to account for absence, as we are told ‘Of course you weren’t there, but a photograph was’, suggesting that a photograph can materialise personal absence in its temporal form (*Collected* 46).

as they move beyond their limited space through the projection of the author.

*Forces* 38

Using the same example as Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, of Jane Austen and her 'limited physical environment' (as Woolf documents 'most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions'), Guest argues that Austen was able to elevate her characters beyond this physical limitation through 'the projection of the author' (Woolf 64). In her novels Austen's rooms are stretched and environments extended: her method for character elevation, argues Guest, was to remove them 'from the interior to the exterior'. Like Guest's poems that oscillate in perception between the internal and the external (as seen in 'A View From Kandinsky's Window' and 'Latitudes'), she urges that this process can facilitate movement 'beyond their limited space'. Guest affirms this idea in 'The Beautiful Voyage', arguing that 'to arrange its dimensions the poem stretches (looking outwardly and inwardly), thus obtaining a plasticity' (*Collected* 78). It is this stretching, or in Guest's term 'plasticity', that is the ultimate goal of poetry, as she continues: 'Plasticity, strive for noble Plasticity' (*Collected* 78). Guest relates this 'plasticity' to the bounds of the imagination, as such a process "stretches the imagination without disabling it" (*Collected* 78). Achieving formal 'plasticity', enabling the work to extend beyond its textual confines thus allows for a greater imaginative stretching. Hence spatial plasticity is mutually beneficial, it can look outside the confines of the page to achieve 'elevation' and simultaneously aid in 'stretching' the imagination further. This process becomes cyclical, as the greater the imagination stretches the greater the plasticity ad infinitum. Guest's cyclically enabling poetics of extensive spatiality opens up the text to its fullest dimensions, ushering in spirituality, memory and wider imaginative vision into its ebullient surfaces. Such ideas position Guest as a radical poet of space, whose thinking in this area has yet to receive the attention it deserves.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> DuPlessis has described the 'shocking erasure' that Guest's poetic reputation has suffered ('The Other Window'). Despite being a wife, a mother and a poet, Guest was not welcomed second-wave feminists in the 1970s. Essentialist feminist groups distrusted experimental poetics, DuPlessis explains, and so Guest was generally excluded from women's poetry anthologies ('The Other Window'). Guest was overshadowed by women poets, like Denise Levertov and Adrienne Rich, whose work was more straightforwardly political and feminist. This perhaps explains Guest's omission from Florence Howe's influential anthology of twentieth-century poetry by

## Section Four: The Studio as Network

### 'closer to you': Forming a Female Coterie

Alongside facilitating Guest in formulating her poetics, the material conditions of her studio were necessary for the poet to establish herself on the avant-garde scene. As a *female* literary experimenter, Guest has described how difficult it was to ensure that her work and her status as a poet were taken seriously. She was highly conscious of her precarious position in the New York School of Poets — as a lone woman surrounded by men. She was, Elisabeth Frost claims, 'redolently aware of being both "object" and peer to her male contemporaries' (71). DuPlessis has pointed out the generally 'cavalier attitude' of predominantly male avant-garde communities towards their female counterparts ('The Other Window'). In the interview for 'The Herald' in 1971, Guest singles out the bias against women writers that she encountered. She laments: 'One thing I think women come up against... It happens to me quite frequently at dinner parties, someone will come up to me and say "Are you *still* writing poetry? Oh how nice." No one ever says to a man "Are you still writing poetry?"' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 24). This brief anecdote, provided at the pivotal moment of the emergence of second-wave feminism, highlights the harsh gender inequality that Guest faced, even by friends and colleagues.<sup>94</sup> It is clear that her experiences as a woman, and for a time as a single mother, separated her from her male colleagues.

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women, *No More Masks! An Anthology of Twentieth-century American Women's Poetry* and for the troubling absence of any discussion of Guest's work from *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, Alicia Ostriker's panoramic investigation of American women's poetry. Unlike other women poets slighted by the literary mainstream, Guest has not yet, with the notable exception of DuPlessis, Lundquist, Frost and a few others, been embraced or promoted by feminist scholarship. DuPlessis points out that Guest suffered both from the tendency of avant-garde groups to marginalise their female participants, *and* from the inattention accorded to women whose poetry deviated from 'personal-political naming' ('The Other Window'). As such, Guest was twice displaced. It is these factors, according to DuPlessis, which have contributed to Guest's comparative lack of prominence after that first most intense decade or so ('The Other Window').

<sup>94</sup> Guest was also frustrated with the ways that her literary career was framed — primarily in terms of her domestic circumstance. In a letter to her friend Jena in July 1994, Guest observed:

[My introduction] read 'Barbara Guest is married and has two children. She lives...' In the case of the male poets, not a single spouse was mentioned, but there followed a short career notice. I have, as you see, brooded over this for years, and rightly... This is an example of the inconstancy one endured.

Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 14

This experience of difference was common in both the literary world and throughout the visual arts.<sup>95</sup> Guest's daughter, Hadley Haden-Guest, has described how artists like Mary Abbott had to be 'tough', and 'serious', to be incorporated into the masculine domain of Abstract Expressionist painting. If you could not contend with this demand to be 'tough', and exhibit certain traits of "masculinity", the reception of work often suffered (Haden-Guest). This was the case with Helen Frankenthaler, suggests Laurie Duggan, who was deemed too sensitive and too feminine to have any command in the "macho" world of abstract American painting. The 2016 exhibition, 'Women of Abstract Expressionism' held at the Denver Art Museum, has taken seriously this issue of marginality. As Judith Godwin rightly suggests: "There were so many good women painters, [but] they were not recognised. Now is that because they were *just* "women"? It must be, because they were good painters' (museum).

Right alongside this experience of marginality, Guest felt a keen sense of solidarity with her fellow women artists. An important moment came in 1957, when she won a place at Yaddo, an artists' retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York. Guest savored the seclusion that Yaddo offered, describing her separate writing studio on the third floor as 'a lovely octagonal room with eight big windows looking out across the lawns to the Vermont mts. A big work table and wicker chairs, very airy and spiritual' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 402, Box 22).<sup>96</sup> During her months at Yaddo, Guest worked alongside Nell Blaine, famous as a gestural colourist of soft interior scenes. Blaine was an integral member of the Second Generation of the New York School painters, alongside Larry Rivers, Fairfield Porter and Jane Freilicher. Guest has described the 'cautiously growing friendship' that emerged between the pair, which 'grew stronger' as it was 'held together by the now apparent working ties of our profession' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 14). Both women were given a large studio to work from, and from this site Guest composed her poem, 'Parachutes My Love, Could Carry Us Higher'.

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<sup>95</sup> The sociability of the New York scene centred around the Cedar Tavern, a bar and restaurant in Greenwich Village, which was an important incubator for the experimental.

<sup>96</sup> 'The best, for me,' Guest admits in the same letter, 'is that I don't have any household responsibilities — I can actually be free' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 402, Box 25).



Nell Blaine's studio at Yaddo. 1957.



Nell Blaine, *Studio Interior at Yaddo*. 1957.

In a lecture, Guest revealed a subtle but telling detail about the poem's composition. She stated: 'I have always believed it was the spirit of Nell Blaine that directed my poem, 'Parachutes', written when we were at Yaddo at the same time in the 1950s' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 14). Thus the 'suspension' addressed in the poem may be less abstract than first implied, as the anxiety, tension and instability of the poem may refer to Guest's precarious social position — a position that Blaine would have shared (*Collected* 14). Often described as a love poem, Guest's account affirms that 'Parachutes' is in fact a tribute to her budding friendship with Blaine. If we read the poem in terms of

female friendship, rather than romantic love, new interpretations can be discovered. The studio as site becomes an important framework to enable such a reading, as we can approach Guest's poetry by understanding how she read her female contemporaries.

The poem opens with an agitated response: 'I just said I didn't know' (*Collected* 14). This admission of ignorance is followed by ironic gratitude from the speaker, 'And now you are holding me/ In your arms,/ How kind' (14). The disjuncture around 'How kind' indicates the lack of freedom to make and correct the speaker's own mistakes. The poem presents the couple as complicit in their own situation as, 'Parachutes, my love, could carry us higher', yet neither individual is able to reach this elevation (14). It is the 'other' of the poem who declares that 'the suspension, you say,/ Is exquisite', suggesting she is comfortable in her current unstable position (14). The speaker, however, is less convinced, repeating: 'I don't know' (14). Whilst she may have successfully escaped the 'wide-net' of, perhaps, normative feminine behaviour, the speaker of the poem is 'treading water/ Near it', doing her best to survive, but slowly running out of energy (14). The enigmatic beauty of this poem emanates from the precarious 'suspension' that the poem enacts: as neither a lyrical confession nor an abstract exercise, the text realises a tentative equilibrium and in-between-ness (14). The speaker finds herself caught on this threshold, this 'mid-air in which we tremble', unable to achieve the required mobility to manoeuvre herself in any desired direction (14). Like the airlessness of the poem 'Roses', this immovable fixity is also creatively stifling. As such the speaker finds herself lost 'in a stranger ocean/ Than I wished' (14).

This poem is emblematic, I suggest, of Guest's own tentative positioning within the New York avant-garde, as she struggled to traverse the patriarchal experimental scene. This unstable and volatile position is shared with female artist Blaine, as the speaker posits: 'I am closer to you/ Than land' (14). As her career progressed, Guest would increasingly turn to the visual arts, rather than the literary world, for aesthetic stimulus and sustenance. For Blaine, liberation from the frustrations of the wider art scene could be found in the material space of art-making. Guest describes Blaine as going 'in and out of her studio with a sort of useful freedom, and often pure joy would emanate from her' (Guest

Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 14). To emulate this sense of ‘useful freedom’ — away from the politics of the avant-garde coterie — Guest likewise adopted the studio as her creative space.

In December 1952 Guest was invited to contribute reviews to the magazine ARTnews. An important commission for the poet, Africa Wayne asserts that her writing on art demonstrates Guest’s ability to navigate between the realms of both visual art and poetry, maintaining an active existence in both (*Dürer* 1). In her art reviews, Guest maximised the potential outreach, commenting on lesser-known women artists and making the case for the significance of their work.<sup>97</sup> The early poem, ‘Heroic Stages’ (1962), dedicated to Grace Hartigan, depicts the optimistic atmosphere shared by female artistic collectives of the period.<sup>98</sup> ‘The Quest’ of the female artist is set out in the poem, with evocative imagery of beginnings (‘sunlight’, ‘refresh your atlas’, ‘Spring air’), imbuing the stanzas with possibility and hope (*Collected* 27). The task of the female artist, the poem suggests, is indeed a ‘heroic’ charge (27). Guest exhibits faith in her colleagues by filling the ‘silent space’ of the poem with colour and light, reveling in the emergence of female artistic perception (27). This poem demonstrates that despite working within the medium of language, Guest felt a keen solidarity with her fellow women visual artists. Guest’s aesthetic has far more in common with the female New York School painters — particularly Grace Hartigan, Nell Blaine, Jane Freilicher, Mary Abbott and Helen Frankenthaler — than with the male New York School poets with whom she is most often associated. The identification of the studio as site of production was crucial, I argue, to this sense of commonality. Through her occupation of the studio, I argue, Guest materialised her connection and integration within a female experimental coterie.

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<sup>97</sup> This outreach is exemplified in the publication, *Dürer in the Window: Reflections on Art*, a collection of Guest’s art writing.

<sup>98</sup> In the early 1960s Guest and Hartigan were very close friends.



Grace Hartigan in her studio, 1957.

### **‘somehow it occurred/ living a public life’: The Studio as Stage**

Guest also began to make use of the career opportunities that emerged from her position in the studio. As she explains in her essay ‘The Shadow of Surrealism’, ‘we not only admired the work of the painters... we became envious of the activity of their personal lives’ (*Forces* 51). The distinction between the artist and the poet is clear; while painters were culturally recognised, and could afford ‘expensive cars, lofts and [a] chateaux’, their level of fame and income ‘stun[ed] the poet’ reports Guest (*Forces* 52). Sarah Burns notes that at the end of the nineteenth century, the American artist’s standing as a celebrity grew exponentially, with ‘the machinery of American publicity... in high gear’ and painters one of its favorite subjects (Ringelberg 14). This shift in public attention was from the artwork to the artist’s personality, as Burns notes: ‘Whether courting publicity or shunning it, the artist... had to confront an unavoidable fact of modern life: in addition to being a producer of aesthetic commodities, he (or she) had to become a commodity as well’ (Ringelberg 16). This commodification only inflated in the 20th century, as Picasso became infamous for his womanising and Pollock for his imperious masculinity. The route to fame for female artists was less straightforward. As Guest reveals in her notes on Marilyn Monroe,

'women must become legends' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 24). Guest conceded that negotiating the grounds of commodification would come part and parcel with her aesthetic achievements. But the poet was unwilling to sell *herself* into the market; her personality, her high profile friendships and particularly her tumultuous family history were off limits. Instead, the studio became the natural place for Guest to establish herself on the cultural marketplace.

Guest's studio became the place that she could command the attention of her contemporaries. In holding studio visits and apartment parties, Guest established herself as a superlative host of the avant-garde. Fraser remembers one such event in a letter from 1989, where she writes 'Thank you, again, for that very lovely party and the chance to meet some interesting new people. I loved seeing you in your studio, again; your innate grace is even more enhanced as you move among the pictures you've chosen over the years' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 271, Box 24). Sophisticated and graceful, Guest performed as the quintessential party operator, offering hospitality to a variety of audiences in her elegant apartments. Fraser qualifies her remarks in an extended recollection of Guest's home and hospitality:

There were pictures in her rooms and none of them were reproductions. The first time I visited, I noticed gritty trails of oil pastel, the wash of tempera and gouache, torn edges of paper, lumps of oil paint and glue... clues from the forming material world were everywhere evident and often framed. I wandered and looked while she made tea. Another time, at a large party in her uptown apartment, she was the beautiful blonde protagonist in the 'whodunnit' mystery, walking among her guests, offering little bunches of purple grapes and slices of green apple from a silver tray. There was a sense of occasion, but constructed always with a wry perspective... and some wisdom in reserve.

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Fraser's outlines the highly self-conscious, and even performative nature of Guest's hospitality and construction of a social persona. By the time of this encounter between the two poets, around 1964, Guest was living uptown in a large and expensive apartment at 1148 5<sup>th</sup> avenue.<sup>99</sup> In the extract Guest is masterful in her role. Described as the 'beautiful blonde protagonist', she moves between her visitors with ease and control. The description of her 'wry

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<sup>99</sup> As the younger and less experienced poet, Fraser's accounts of the period may appear tutelary, but she continually emphasises that '[Guest's] curiosity extended to the lives and works of persons younger and less sophisticated' (127).

perspective' and 'wisdom in reserve' gets to the heart of Guest's social persona: quietly present yet keenly observant.

As Fraser observes it, rather than defy the convention of a female hostess, and risk the invisibility of a woman poet without a network, Guest dons the appropriate mask to increase her social and aesthetic prominence. This cunning move allows Guest to play the role of studio hostess, embrace the aesthetic attention of her contemporaries, whilst simultaneously undermining such normative female behavior. Guest undercuts her role as the 'beautiful blonde protagonist' with this 'wry perspective'. As Ringelberg suggests: 'the artist [is] not a victim of social norms but a sometimes-resistant actor within them' (3). This notion of acting, as well as self-presentation, self-fashioning and self-invention, is a decisive factor in understanding Guest's constructed sociability. Guest noticed a similar performativity in the practice of her female artist colleagues. Describing Helen Frankenthaler, Guest writes, 'In that gallery [Tibor de Nagy] her position was separate from that of her colleagues... not that she wasn't absorbing the same atmosphere, going to the same parties, but her eye was focused differently' (*Dürer* 8). This same statement could be made of Guest's own shrewd social navigation; while she was also attending the parties, and forming a presence in the milieu, she, like Frankenthaler, was 'focused differently'. This difference can be refined in another description of Frankenthaler by Guest: 'Detachment — yes, in the middle of the struggle one is aware of detachment, a stepping back from the canvas, as a critical eye views it' (*Dürer* 8). This detachment is also a crucial part of Guest's aesthetic. The poet often records an involvement and participation in the moment, followed by a period of reflection and objectivity. Fraser labels this process '*distacco*', the Italian word, 'that refers to a little emotional distance that may be taken from a situation or conversation' (125). This moment of 'cool observation' or 'wry perspective' invites gestation, which can be seen in Guest's formerly examined poem 'The Rose Marble Table'.

This subtle distancing extended to the separations enforced between Guest's social and familial lives. While she utilised the daily imbrication between domestic and aesthetic existence in poems like 'Latitudes' and 'Escape' discussed previously, there was a conscious effort on the part of Guest not to allow the

politics of avant-garde sociability to infiltrate her family-life. As her daughter Hadley Haden-Guest makes clear:

I never felt that I was excluded... the paintings were on the walls, poets and painters were in the house, I was in the galleries...but Barbara did like to be on her own with her poetry and painting friends...but it is my belief that she was protecting me from all the politics, and all the personalities' and protecting a part of herself for her family, so the worlds didn't leak through or get all mixed up.

It is evident that Guest intended that her family were not subject to the turbulent scenes of avant-garde culture making. As she grew older, and found herself less prominent on the poetry circuit, she admits to Powell in 1988: 'I gave up an old life of entertainment and dinner parties — most of us now do and I want only to concentrate on my inner life which is creative and that means a certain dedication, a nun's life with exceptions' (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 402, Box 22). To proceed with this emphasis on her 'inner life', in 1993 Guest left New York and moved across the country, to California. Here, in her new residence, the studio was converted back into an entirely private space. As her daughter explains, they moved to Berkeley because Guest felt 'there was [too] much of the critical eye and too much judgment toward her and her poetry in New York... and she wanted the old freedom, the freedom she'd had initially, in the early days in New York... The light, the ocean, the poetry scene... she felt so much freer [in California]'.

### **'When two artists work together a *symbiosis* is established': Guest's Collaborations**

For the whole of her literary career, Guest was prolific at collaborating with her visual artist colleagues. She would either write poetry directly onto an artist's canvas, or conversely, image and poem were placed side-by-side. Both forms demanded that art-work and poem-composition occurred simultaneously. This collaboration would take place in the studio, as visual and linguistic expression were integrated and transfigured. *Symbiosis* (2000) appears on the page with artwork by Laurie Reid and unfolds as a meditation on the process of working collaboratively itself. It begins, 'A writer and an artist working together establish Symbiosis, as in nature, where dissimilar organisms productively live together' (*Collected* 451). Both artist and poet are dependent upon one another to achieve aesthetic productivity. The etymology of the word comes from the

Greek *symbiōsis*, 'a living together'. The joint venture of inhabiting the same space, both physically — working together in the studio — and metaphysically on the page/ canvas, is likened to a shared dwelling. The studio functions as the foundation of the creative practice; it is the space of coalescence, conjoining poetic utterance with visual expression in a collective site of mutual dependence.

*Symbiosis* questions how we read the space of collaboration. As Carla Hall comments, 'Entering *Symbiosis*, the reader is immediately aware that she is in a new space'. The first page charts the ebullient enthusiasm in beginning a collaborative project: 'The spirit/ sails along, amid live speech' (*Collected* 451). Animated conversation sets the 'symbiosis aflame', as the poet and artist discuss the future artistic journey (*Collected* 451). However, the second page discloses the possible conflicts associated with combining two distinct creative minds: 'Thinned down, staggering... Will it belong, or is symbiosis aflame each pine stroking' (452). Here the 'line' of the poet has become separated from the 'drawing', and so the poem questions: 'Will it belong[?]', i.e. how will the poem and image exist in a shared space? The plea, 'Needing, needing, needing' registers the intense emotional toil demanded by such a shared venture (452).



This moment ‘where the strophes meet’ embodies the genuine symbiosis of the written word and the painting — the poet and the artist — and ‘the weaving process that joins these two forms together’ (Hall). The ‘strophe’ refers to the classical Greek structure of an autonomous unit within the body of the poem. That, ‘the strophes meet’ here indicates that two independent entities have converged — language and image have successfully ‘interweave[d]’ (454). Both the verbal ‘speech’ and physical (‘bone’) are united; this union is bodily (‘metabolism’) as well as aesthetic (454). This convergence between disciplines is defined as ‘ancient’ accordance, which positions this effective symbiosis as part of an historical precedent (454). The work takes pleasure in its joint deliverance: ‘the gaze of symbiosis... pasting and painting in the same room — sharing’ (457). This activity is occurring ‘in the same room’, in the communal studio space, so the piece pays homage to the material site of its own creation. The collaboration encapsulates the delicacy of shared vision through the physical and imaginative layering of its own processual unfolding.

As the collaboration reaches its conclusion, a strange transference has taken place within the poetic voice. Through reaching out to her partner, Guest (as presiding lyrical presence) has become foreign to herself, ‘coming from outside/ studying to be someone else’ (458). Artistic ego is lost in the fluctuating momentum of the shared project: ‘She is more fluid,/ she is outside’ (459). Artist and poet have become interchangeable in the oscillating energy of the collaboration. This ‘rippling’ effect creates an inter-medial ‘overlapping’, as linguistic utterance and visual textures merge and mirror one another (460). The piece beckons the reader to inhabit this space too, through the communal act of meaning making. This mergence — between artistic modalities — although merely a fleeting embrace, transcends the normative experience of a ‘Poem-Painting’ (456). The materiality of the collaboration itself becomes the proof of the encounter.

As well as composing poetry in the studio, Guest also engaged in art practices, particularly early on in her career. She made collages in the 1950s and 1960s, like the cover to her *Collected Poems*, ‘Wheel’ — a collage made in 1951. The original edition of *Rocks on a Platter* also featured an early collage by Guest entitled ‘East Ninth Street’. Her collaboration with Fay Lansner in 1981, entitled ‘Tessera’, is a

pastel, watercolour, glitter, and paper collage with Guest's verse inscribed upon its surface. It was shown as part of the 'Poets and Artists' exhibition at the Guild Hall in East Hampton in 1982. While Guest did not work exclusively with female artists, the vast majority of her collaborators were women.



Mary Abbott in her studio in Southampton, Long Island, New York. c. 1967. Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 402, Box 16.

This photograph of Mary Abbott in her Southampton, Long Island, studio in around 1967, reveals the location where Guest and Abbott worked on their collaboration, 'Honey or Wine?' in 1965. In an extract collected in *Dürer in the Window*, Guest recalls that the experience of spending several weeks alongside Abbott in her studio was powerful. Guest had recently returned from a trip to Greece, and so the pair focused on Greek artefacts, using books belonging to Abbott. Particularly, Guest notes: 'one of vases, and the black surface of Greek mirrors' (*Dürer* 9). Like the books on Kandinsky previously discussed, what was residual in Abbott's studio were archaic images of Greek vases, ripe for artistic transmission. As Guest explains, for weeks, '[Abbott] drew and I wrote, and together we created our own artefacts' (*Dürer* 9). The final piece was a blend of

painting and poetry, with Guest's words attached directly to Abbott's gouache and collaged surface.



*Honey or Wine?*, Guest and Abbott 1965, *Dürer* 9

The collaboration renders the transmission from archaic inspiration to contemporary enactment. The vase itself, filling the canvas, is an unknown relic,

as the poem asks: 'To pour from this vase, Honey or Wine?' (*Dürer* 9). The object has been transported out of a distant period and into the present moment, and it is up to Guest and Abbott to handle the vase, and re-materialise its significance. This layering of remembrances, encapsulated in the vase itself ('What a bringer together of memories to come') is reflected in the layering of collage fragments upon the painting (*Dürer* 9). Lines and words are hidden beneath coatings of freshly pasted language: the work, like the vase, becomes a palimpsest of shifting identities. The physicality of this layering process is heightened, as the paint is heavily applied, leaving behind brush strokes and markings, while the final line of the poem, 'where the hand goes immediately' stresses the artistic labour behind the collaboration (*Dürer* 9).

Guest states of the experience: 'I preferred this invention [Guest's words pasted directly onto Abbott's canvas], rather than writing a lone poem "about" the vase. I wished the poem to look as if it were attached to the vase, as the studio had now become attached to a foreign surface' (*Dürer* 9). Guest equates the adhesion between word and image, to the adhesion between the studio and 'a foreign surface'. Exploring the artefacts, and refracting these through the imagination, has fused the studio with Greece. This fusion, of the studio to a foreign space, materialises another evolution of Guest's poetics of site. Here, Abbott's studio ceases to exist purely in its physical locale of Southampton, and is tangibly attached to a foreign site. Just as word is bound to image in the collaboration, the site of the studio becomes bound to wider geographical regions. Becoming mobile in this way, the studio opens out into the world, and allows the world to enter into it. Like her artistic identification with Cézanne and Kandinsky, the studio becomes the site that can usher in foreign aesthetic experiences.

### **Section Five: The Real and Imagined Space of Guest's Studio**

Rochelle Feinstein, painter and printer suggests that 'the studio is both gestalt and zeitgeist, place and non-place' (Jacob and Grabner 21). As a 'non-place', i.e. not a specific site but a metaphysical concept, Guest's idea of the studio was creatively empowering, but her work also addresses the physical reality of the spaces in which she wrote. While she never fully discloses, or renders, the

architectural material qualities of her studio in her poetry (a head-on description is never offered), she does take us to the fringes of that space, documenting what is found at the periphery: namely what *frames* her site.<sup>100</sup> This is most commonly explored through the window as a frame to the external. In 'The View from Kandinsky's Window', the lyric voice looks out onto a scene, but imaginatively transforms the exterior creating a new (aesthetic) reality. This approach is apparent in Guest's very early poetry right up until her last collection, *The Red Gaze*, published in 2005. Indeed the first poem in her *Collected* works, 'The Location of Things' (1960), opens with a description of the poet framed by her window: 'Why from this window am I watching leaves?' (*Collected* 3). The first stanza begins by inscribing the actual site from which the poem is being written: 'at this desk I am listening for the sound of the fall/ of color' (3). But in a typically Guestian manoeuvre, the domestic scene is soon interrupted by imaginative transformation, 'am I to find a lake under the table/ or a mountain beside my chair' (3). The external landscape intrudes upon Guest's familiar internal surroundings. The poem privileges this shift, this possibility for transmutation, as the lyric voice asks: 'Am I to understand change, whether remarkable or hidden' (3). The poem expresses an urge to be somewhere else, through looking out of the window of the home, or walking down 'Madison Avenue' (3). Despite the apparent located-ness of the environment, crystallised in the line, 'That head against the window', the imagination will not be stilled: the 'location of things' can never be fixed (3). This eternal and persistent 'change' will inevitably metamorphose the floor into a 'theatrical lake' and shed a 'forest[s]... leaves on my table' (3). While being positioned at her desk by the window, the poet is 'wandering... into clouds and air'; the boundaries of the lived space are only ever a threshold to cross into the realms of the imagination (3).

The late poem 'Imagined Room' (2005) demonstrates Guest's lifelong preoccupation with real and imagined forms of space. The poem urges that this imagined space is somehow 'made of glass', with 'no formal potions' (*Collected* 493). It is a place of reflection and transience, where thoughts can 'rest on the embankment' (493). But we are reminded that even an 'imagined' room is

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<sup>100</sup> This process, of going to the edges, or to the periphery, rather than tackling the subject head-on, is also demonstrated in Guest's ekphrastic method.

contingent upon an actual physical workspace — the singular zone in which the poet composes the poem. As an abstracted description of her crafted studio space, the poem discloses key elements to successful creativity. It even demarcates this space textually, leaving the whole left side of the page empty, and ready to be filled with this conceptual ‘room’. But there is a sense of passing away in this poem, of preparing to finish a journey, an acknowledgement of the immanence of death, perhaps, encapsulated in the lines ‘close the eyes’, ‘You have entered the narrow zone’, ‘Becoming less and less until the future faces you’ (492, 492, 493). It begins with a reminder that the writer’s life is earth-bound: ‘Do not forget the sky has other zones’ (492). In Guest’s final poem of interior space, even her impression of heaven comes in domestic form: it is an ‘imagined room’. But this space has yet *to be* imagined, as the blank space alongside the text confirms that it is presently uninhabited. For Guest, poetry *is* this imagined room, the space housing the absolute freedom of the imagination.

The poem emphasises the symbiosis between real and imagined spaces. As Gizzi proclaims of Guest’s work, ‘The relation between reality and imagination has become seamless’ (‘Introduction’, *Collected* xix). Guest summaries this duality perfectly in ‘A Reason for Poetics’:

A pull in both directions between the physical reality of a place and the metaphysics of space. This pull will build up a tension within the poem, giving a view of the poem from both the interior and the exterior.

*Forces* 20

Building upon the tension implicit in writing out of a physical site and an imagined space, Guest offers a simultaneity of perspectives — of inside and outside — distance and intensity — to render a room that is both real and imagined. As Guest wrote in a letter to Powell: ‘...having this studio has given me a “form” — my own place’ (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 402, Box 25). Guest’s studio was an en-forming space — a physical site where she could formulate her own imaginative poetics. This layering of inner and outer spaces is realised by Guest, as she explains: ‘There is always a physical place. Thoughts in a poem grow in physical spaces, if the method of the poem is to accent space’ (Guest Papers, Uncat MSS 402, Box 6). But this physical place *must be* supplemented by the expansive potential of the imagination, ‘I certainly wouldn’t want to write a

poem only about a real place, by itself, my imagination usually runs away from that' (Guest Papers, Uncat MSS 402, Box 6).

In the late poem 'No Longer Strangers' (2005), Guest evokes this 'integration' between real and imagined spaces (*Collected* 504). Here, she insists that distinct 'zones' are 'No longer strangers'; the separations between physical space (the studio) and textual space (the page) have dissipated (504). Both sites are now characterised as 'zones of departure', as spaces that lead away from reality and into regions of the imagination (504). Art and life have become irrevocably 'integrated' in the poem, as the lyrical voice urges, 'Put these two together! /you will notice it is all one speech,/ and jocular' (504). This poem comes from Guest's final collection, *The Red Gaze*, which embraces a metaphysical, ethereal aesthetic. Yet each poem also hinges on the real world that Guest inhabited. 'No Longer Strangers' is set 'in the looking glass room' — identifying the site of the poem's making (504). There is an effort to correctly 'distribute.... wings of artifice', to acknowledge the contingencies between 'artifice' and 'the real' and to read them as 'No longer strangers' (504). In her final collection, Guest's studio — her real-life spatial environment — becomes symbiotic with her metaphysical ideas of space.

As an unfolding psycho-spatial interior, the studio becomes the form by which Guest imagines, conjures and constructs a sovereign female poetic space. As Stephen Collis articulates, 'poetry may stand in a place we recognise, but it aims to enact a space that does not yet exist' (*To The Barricades* 21). To aim at or enact such space requires a capacious and elastic imaginary. Guest had such an elastic imagination, as she conjures the space, in the studio and in her poems, in which she seeks to exist. Summoning a poetic utterance that would come to inform and shape experimental women's poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Guest's studio interior demarcates a space for women to engage in the arts. As Woolf asserts, a room can exert more imaginative pressure than initially apparent: 'For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics' (83). Guest concurs with Woolf commenting, 'We tend to think of it [the imagination] as so lively it pierces walls' (*Forces* 32).

Breaking out of the walls of her static interior space, Guest's studio was the site in which the female imagination could extend itself. Such expansiveness proves that women's poetry can enter into territories in which it is usually uninvited. Remaining the uninvited "guest" for most of her career, on the periphery of a literary movement, she was not deterred by this position. Rather it inspired Guest to write into and over a history of poetry in which she was never fully welcomed. Thus Guest's studio and the poetry she wrote there is her political act — conjuring and enacting a substantial site for women's literary praxis.

To conclude, I will read Guest's poem, 'An Emphasis Falls on Reality' (1989), as a final example of how her studio conditions her aesthetic. 'I was envious of fair realism,' confesses the poetic voice, as we are presented with wonderfully abstract imagery, meticulously composed (*Collected* 221). The fairness of this realism, Guest has pointed out in interviews, relates to reality's innate beauty, rather than any sense of judgement (as being either fair or just) (Guest Papers. Uncat MSS 947, Box 10). So the speaker's envy is of the splendour of the natural world and her aim is to mediate that beauty through poetic language. 'I desired sunrise to revise itself/ as apparition, majestic in evocativeness': here 'sunrise' is urged to reconsider and recognise its own 'majestic evocativeness' (*Collected* 221). The poet cannot compete with nature's awesome transcendence. To capture the 'apparition' of sunrise, 'the words stretched severely': in order to contend with reality, the poet must expand language's potentiality (221). As the poem continues we move further from a sense of the external, towards a subjective and symbolic account, as we are told, 'willows are not real trees/ they entangle us in looseness' (221). This emphasis on the benevolent power of fictionalisation is strengthened in the lines:

This house was drawn for them  
it looks like a real house  
perhaps they will move in today

*Collected* 221

Guest sketches the outline of a child-like 'house', peopling it with unknown figures and suggesting that 'it looks... real'. But we are sharply aware that this house 'was *drawn* for them': it may appear real but it has in fact been constructed by the artistic mind. Yet this movement away from the real and into the imagination is encouraged, as the lyric voice assures us: 'The necessary

idealizing of your reality/ is part of the search, the journey/ where two figures embrace' (221). This 'search' for truth, and 'journey' towards understanding is contingent upon a subjective 'idealizing' of the real.

Guest affirms that the perception of reality is always inevitably a 'selective' experience, an oscillating synthesis between the outward and the imagined. This idea is crystalised in the poem's opening lines:

Cloud fields change into furniture  
furniture metamorphizes into fields  
an emphasis falls on reality

*Collected 221*

In these lines external and internal worlds fluctuate, as interior sites become transient and expansive. Guest's studio environment operated in a similar way; ushering in external experiences and enabling interior contemplation, her unique compositional space was equally transformative. As Guest wrote in an email to her friend Gloria in 2004: 'I Look forward to your visit here... perhaps, this living room will turn into a storybook castle' (Guest Papers, Uncat MSS 947, Box 12).

**Index of Collaborations**

*Honey or Wine*, with Mary Abbott, 1965.

*I Ching*, with Sheila Isham, 1969, Mourlot Art Editions, Paris, France, 1969.

*Musicality*, with June Felter, Kelsey St. Press, 1988.

*The Nude*, with Warren Brandt, Art Editions, New York, 1989.

*The Altos*, with artist Richard Tuttle, Hank Hine Publisher, San Francisco, 1993.

*Stripped Tales*, with Anne Dunn, Kelsey St. Berkeley, California, 1995.

*Strings*, with Ann Slacik, Paris, France, 1999.

*The Luminous*, with Jane Moorman, Palo Alto, California, 1999.

*Symbiosis*, with artist Laurie Reid, first exhibited at the Whitney Museum, New York City, in the Spring of 2000, and published by Kelsey St. Press, 2000.

**Index of Guest's Studios**

1946: Moved to NYC with first husband, artist John Dudley. Lived in Greenwich Village, 8th Street.

1948: Apartment on 102 Christopher street (Cold water flat).

1949: Daughter, Hadley Haden-Guest born.

1950: Apartment on East 9<sup>th</sup> Street.

1950s: Apartment on Grove Street.

1950s: Moved to 315 106th Street, first photograph of studio space taken here.

1955-1979: Large 8th floor, 10-room apartment at 1148 5th Avenue. Moved in with her third husband, Trumbull Higgins.

1959: Rented a house in Washington D.C.

1966: Trumbull Higgins bought a house at 198, Toylsome Lane, Southampton, Long Island. Sold the house in 1976.

1967: Lived in Paris, Rue de la Pomp.

1970s: Rented separate studio at Penthouse A, 152 East 94th Street, Lexington Avenue. Wrote much of her novel, *Seeking Air*, from here.

1975: Separate studio rental at 300 Canal Street, New York.

1975: Finished *Seeking Air* in Arden Road, Pasadena, California.

1980: Family rented house and Guest had her own back cottage at 116 Meeting House Lane, Southampton, Long Island. Wrote *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World* (biography of H.D.) from here.

1980s: Studio at 14th Street, around Union Square.

1981: Moved to 250 Mercer Street. Lived here until 1990.

1988 – 1993: Guest had a studio space in the apartment of Perdita Macpherson Schaffner (daughter of the poet H.D.) at 49W 16th Street.

1993-2006: Moved to 1301 Milvia Street, Berkeley, California.

**Home, Retreat, Archive: Sites of Refuge in the Poetry of Susan Howe**

Untraceable wandering  
the meaning of knowing

Poetical sea site state  
abstract alien point  
root casket tangled scrawl

—‘Articulation of Sound Forms in Time’, *Singularities* 25

Language is a wild interiority. I am lost in the refuge of its dark life  
—*The Difficulties Interview*, Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 69, Folder 7

There was the last refuge from search and death; so here  
— Emily Dickinson, quoted in *The Birth-mark* 47

In the Introduction to *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), Susan Howe articulates the magnitude of Dickinson’s significance to her poetic thinking. The passage in full reads:

When Thoreau wrote his Introduction to *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he ended up by remembering how he had often stood on the banks of the Musketaquid, or Grass-ground River English settlers had re-named Concord. The Concord’s current followed the same law in a system of time and all that is known. He liked to watch this current that was for him an emblem of all progress. Weeds under the surface bent gently downstream shaken by watery wind. Chips, sticks, logs, and even tree stems drifted past. There came a day at the end of the summer or the beginning of autumn, when he resolved to launch a boat from shore and let the river carry him.

Emily Dickinson is my emblematical Concord River

I am heading toward certain discoveries...

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This is a typical Howe invocation. Beginning with another writer (Thoreau), she gestures towards an extended American literary lineage, citing both the specificity of New England as a foundational poetic birthplace and a constructed literary conceit: ‘English settlers had re-named Concord’. Beyond this there is a post-human incantation to place, as the ‘current followed the same law in a system of time and all that is known’. Here ‘the current’ of Thoreau’s river is ‘an emblem of all progress’; the ‘logs and ‘sticks’ are moving downstream, flowing in the direction of advancement. It is only when Thoreau can bring himself ‘to launch a boat from shore’ that he can participate in such progress. Drawing upon the multiple embodied layers of Thoreau’s involvement with the Concord River,

Howe then performs a classically Dickinsonian linguistic twist with the statement: 'Emily Dickinson is *my* emblematical Concord River' (my emphasis). Here Dickinson performs as an emblem of an emblem; she has been distilled from Thoreau's river into a new refracted symbol. What this statement makes clear is that for Howe, Dickinson is more than an aesthetic innovator, more than a marker of literary accomplishment, and more than an influence or an idol: for Susan Howe Dickinson is a site that she can inhabit. The text of *My Emily Dickinson* therefore becomes Howe's version of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* as she dwells upon and in, the poetry of Dickinson as a journey into literary progress-making: 'I am heading toward certain discoveries...'

The process by which Howe can fully inhabit Dickinson evolves during the project. To begin with she dwells in the Dickinson archive, at other times she reads from the Dickinson library to revive her cultural influences, but most commonly Howe lives on the page with Dickinson, minutely and meticulously drawing out the exegesis of her manuscripts. As her first ground-breaking creative-critical text, *My Emily Dickinson* took Howe more than 10 years to write. While she had already published several poetry collections previously, Howe continually locates herself in and through Dickinson: Dickinson is Howe's primary site of engagement.<sup>101</sup> A new and significant question arises when we consider Howe's unique poetics of site: how can a person — a poet — function as an artistic site, a space to occupy, a zone to inhabit? The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that a site is either 'a place or position' or 'the ground or area upon which a building, town, etc., has been built' (*OED*). In the case of Dickinson, the poet functions as a place of solace that Howe can attend, a position by which she can orient herself, and substantially as the grounding, or foundation out of which Howe can compose her own works. Just as Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is entirely dependant upon the Concord River as stimulation and driving force, Howe's oeuvre is equally contingent upon the verse of Dickinson. In this way, Howe forces us to expand what we mean by a site — more than a location, a room, or a page — here a site is another poet. Dickinson's poetry is the most valuable site that Howe inhabits.

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<sup>101</sup> To find a route into the poetry of Howe then, we must necessarily approach and get a sense of the significance of Dickinson.

Howe, who was born into the crisis of the Second World War in 1937, began as a theatre intern in Dublin, studied art at the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts in 1961 and made some initial showings on the New York art scene, finally moved into the medium of poetry with her first collection, *Hinge Picture*, in 1974. Often associated with the Language School of Poets, Howe exhibits similar deconstructive attitudes towards language and literary orthodoxy, and yet her specific subjects — history, memory and its enactments through textual spatiality — mark her as one of the preeminent poets, not only of the Language School, but also of her entire poetic generation. Living the majority of her life in Guilford, Connecticut, Howe has shaped a 40-year literary career that tackles post-structuralist possibility through the haptics of sight, sound and the textures of language. Acknowledged as a poet of the archive, she has raised academic research to the level of aesthetic pleasure through her meticulous attention to historical documents and objects. Howe's inhabitation of the archive is key to her poetics of site, but I also suggest that in order to fully engage with her oeuvre, we must rethink what can be considered an archival source — including, but not limited to, Dickinson herself.

It is fair to say that Dickinson is Howe's originary home; a site that she revisits and resides in throughout her career. Dickinson is also the place where Howe's poetry makes the connection between sites and cites. Howe frequently quotes Dickinson, makes reference to her poems, and investigates Dickinson's own resonant citations. But Dickinson is also a site: 'the place or position occupied by some specified thing... implying original or fixed position' — i.e. the specific location that Howe occupies and builds her own aesthetic upon (*OED*). Consider Howe's life-long fascination with Dickinson's poem, 'My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –' (341). In *My Emily Dickinson* Howe dedicates (almost) the entire book to a devoted unveiling of its ceaseless implications. In a 'Poem Talk' episode at the Kelly Writers House Jessica Lowenthal says that Howe's take on the poem is 'so vast' and yet is still 'not done' (Lowenthal et al). Howe's later writings, including her preface to *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems* (2013) and *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives* (2014) demonstrate her life-long fascination with Dickinson's work. As Eliot Weinberger articulates in the preface to *My Emily Dickinson*, 'it is remarkable how many

passages in the book seem to be describing the poems that Susan Howe would write in the decades after' (xii). Signifying Dickinson's continued ability to be a site of rejuvenation for Howe, some of the central concerns that have evolved during her poetic career can be discerned embryonically in *My Emily Dickinson*. In public readings of the book, Howe frequently remixes the material, offering not a linear recital of the text, but an original rehash. This makes the text both appear fresh, self-fashioning, and simultaneously never complete, as there will always be new possible readings. Like Dickinson's poetry, which is so inexhaustible for Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* is able to reflect this boundlessness in its innovative form.

In her most ambitious critical-creative text, *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, Howe declares: 'Emily Dickinson's writing is my strength and shelter' (2). This term, 'shelter', is deeply meaningful to Howe. Through it she is able to shift the designation of Dickinson as the "sheltered" woman, using the term as a positive affirmation of Dickinson's nurturing home-like poetic quality. The lines between being sheltered (i.e. uneducated, inexperienced) and shelter (a place of safety and comfort) intersect and blur. Howe also firmly advocates that Dickinson's poetry is a shelter against conformity, but was never sheltered, or removed, from its contemporaneous cultural environment. It is Dickinson's peers, editors and critics that are ultimately proven "sheltered", as they were unable to encounter Dickinson on her own terms, and instead shut away her genius in ill-conceived publishing ventures. As Howe explicates further: 'Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence? What inner articulation releases the coils and complications of Saying's assertion?' (*My Emily Dickinson* 11-12). Here, as in much of Howe's writing, there is a clear distinction between being 'shut inside' and boasting an 'inner articulation'. While Dickinson may have remained physically enclosed by her domestic site, her language, grammar, form and poetic liberty-taking constructed an 'inner articulation' that was entirely emancipatory.

Ultimately, as with Thoreau's Concord River, an 'emblem' for 'progress' must remain fluid. While Dickinson is the undercurrent pulling her onwards, just as Thoreau had to return to the shore after his week on the Concord River, so Howe

had to depart from Dickinson in her movement towards aesthetic innovation. As the term 'shelter' makes clear, Dickinson's poetry could never provide a permanent dwelling-place for Howe, or a fixed home. She is a temporary *refuge*, a term more commonly used by Howe to express her own need for a physical retreat in which to write and think autonomously. As she quotes from Dickinson in *The Birth-mark*: 'There was the last refuge from search and death; so here'; for Howe, as for Dickinson, writing itself became a vital refuge (47). In an undated letter to friend and fellow poet Lyn Hejinian, Howe acknowledges her self-conscious position-taking: 'I am becoming more and more reclusive anyway. Backing away into a shell. I am just praying to get a little inspiration to be able to write something' (Hejinian Papers, MSS 74 Box 79, Folder 3). Howe often operates at the intersection between the private/reclusive, and the public/exterior. She is a poet and a teacher, an archivist and a performer, a historian and an artist. While the term refuge indicates interiority and seclusion, just as with her analysis of Dickinson, this temporary removal from exteriority is useful to create public documents. As the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* stipulates: 'Please, a definition: A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action' (5). However, a refuge is inevitably a temporary site intended for the avoidance of difficulty, escape and consolation (*OED*). Most significantly a refuge should never serve as a permanent home, so Dickinson becomes just one of many important sites of refuge for Howe. Since the publication of *My Emily Dickinson* in 1985, Howe has moved on to other sites of interest: Herman Melville, Henry James, Thoreau and Mary Rowlandson offer just a few examples.

Unlike the poets who have been previously discussed (Lorine Niedecker and Barbara Guest) it is unsurprising that Howe does not write from within a singular compositional site: each of her poetic inhabitations can only be compared through their relative temporariness. As Howe notes in a journal from 1987: 'Best work was when I was isolated here and had no other distractions... But I love working among people at the station. Who am I kidding? I'm never content anywhere just brief periods' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 12, Folder 2). Instead of a singular compositional space Howe occupies a series of poetic refuges. As such the first section of this chapter will consider, in detail, the historical, political and contextual reasons why, as a contemporary writer, Howe

cannot remain entrenched in stable singular location. The impermanence of her sites irrevocably complicates Howe's relationship with space, text and language. The second, third and fourth sections of this chapter outline, conceptualise and explore Howe's plurality of sites, considering physical working spaces, the text, the page and even the word as sites ripe for inhabitation. Beginning with the physical working spaces that Howe inhabited — her cabin at Lake George, her workroom at home in Guilford, Connecticut, and the numerous archives she uses — the argument will then consider the transition from Howe's theory of sites to her actual spatial inhabitations. The imbrication of Howe's sites represents another unique aspect to Howe's thinking and praxis. Sites can no longer be considered as discrete independent units here, but oftentimes inter-connect, overlap and converge. As Howe is arguably one of the most arresting and complex poets working today, writing on her is highly demanding. Her ideas and motifs are expansive: the argument below presents an interrelated collection of nodes, operating as a network. However, the linear academic form does not do justice to the multifarious intersections of Howe's ideas. This chapter forms a particular track through Howe's writings, then, as a route through the dense wilderness of her creativity and towards an appreciation of her varied poetic terrain.

### **Section One: Howe's 'homelessness at home'**

In an interview with Jon Thompson in 2005, Howe articulates the reasons behind her untiring fervor to haunt libraries and archives in search of poetic material. She explains that her quest to release the phantoms of history and culture is driven by those forgotten textual voices that are 'still wandering. It's homelessness at home'. In *The Liberties* Howe expresses a similar feeling, articulating the impossibility of the 'homeward rush of exile', connecting the poles of refuge and displacement (197). Adorno articulated a similar sentiment in his statement that, since the Second World War, it is 'part of morality not to be at home in one's home' (38). Thompson pushes this justification further by suggesting that 'homelessness at home' is the 'quintessential American condition'. For Howe this characterisation is truly apt. Despite growing up in New England, living most of her life there, and establishing a keen affinity and

attachment to place, Howe documents frequent feelings of instability and unsettlement. One poetic fragment from her 1978 journal reads:

HOME

ALL  
THE  
WAY

THIS  
LITTLE  
PIG  
HAD  
NONE

Howe Archives, MSS 201 Box 12, Book 3

If 'homelessness at home' is the 'quintessential American condition' as Thompson suggests, then, following this logic, the archetypal American manoeuvre that has produced this condition is the 'trespass' (*Birth-mark* 2). Howe documents in her creative-critical text, *The Birth-mark*, how historically, through colonialism, and aesthetically, through the drive for innovation, the American condition has been marked by this move of trespassing, 'When a group of English Puritans... left the European continent... they were trespassers' (*Birth-mark* 3). Howe outlines the history of this encroachment, while the trespass, as a literal border crossing of the English Puritans, is a repeated move made by her antinomian predecessors. She quotes from Emerson's 'Nature' essay, saying: '*Right* originally means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*... *transgression*, the crossing of a *line*' which Howe then equates to 'Trespassing' (Emerson 33, *Birth-mark* 15). While the trespass can be associated with the rebelliousness of the Puritans and the antinomians, and a seeking of space in which to exist without persecution, Russell West-Pavlov makes clear, 'the brutal character of the [American] colonisation process... was less a matter of "settlement" than of driving back the native inhabitant by means of armed violence. The land was less settled... than seized by bloody force, as befits an Empire' (195). Here the trespass takes on new and troublesome undertones: trespass = boundary crossing which can result in violence and a theft of homeland.

As such Howe renders a complex picture of the politics of victory; while America may have succeeded in seizing land from the Native Americans, and later gaining independence from Great Britain, what is at stake in such a victory?

How can we reconcile this sense of trespass, of unwelcome invasion upon the land, with a feeling of being intimately connected with that self-same landscape — with feeling at home there? Any pursuit of a veritable home, Howe concedes in her writing, is ultimately futile; secure emplacement in the United States is tantamount to a denial and erasure of the violent political forces that colonised the land and shaped it into a nation. Existing in this fragile condition, of being ‘homeless at home’, Howe operates through a differing set of criteria; she makes no claim to an ownership of place. She brings to the fore the issues of nation building, emplacement and particularly the troubling history that American poets have had with the American landscape. Howe does not shy away from rendering these problematic histories in all of their complexity, continually disrupting narratives of emplacement, she reads such accounts as modes of neo-colonialism. Instead Howe offers up her poetry as a *site* for the intimate scrutiny of such issues and, through her meticulous linguistic unfoldings, a space where the scraps of history can converge, converse, and begin to confront each other. A poet dedicated to the variable inflections of the historic juncture, Howe’s commitment to the archive, her ethical grounding and her self-consciousness around the artistic trespass, mark her as an important example of the poetics of site.

But for Howe, there is undeniable clout, and authority, in the maneuver of the trespass: to enter places where you do not belong, or are not permitted access. As she makes clear, there is a correlation between the political action of trespassing across land, and the American literary tradition of formal overstepping — of aesthetic radicalism. Howe spends time praising her literary ancestors who engaged in such aesthetic transgression: Dickinson, Herman Melville and Gertrude Stein are but a few of the long list of names that she singles out for their versions of formal innovation. Howe also acknowledges her own practice of complicity in such an overstep: ‘I have trespassed into the disciplines of American Studies’ (*Birth-mark* 2). As a writer who crosses genre boundaries, and sets out to challenge the perimeters of such boundaries by merging and blurring academic categories, Howe places herself within this tradition of the interloper. She cites an early experience with the politics of the trespass when she visited the Widener library at Harvard as a teenager. Here her father actively

halted her knowledge seeking, 'My father said I would be trespassing if I went to the stacks to find them [out-of-the-way volumes]' (*Birth-mark* 18). She continues, 'I could come with him only as far as the second-floor entrance. There I waited while he entered the guarded territory to hunt for books' (*Birth-mark* 18). This early encounter with the territorialism of libraries is shrouded with defeat: Howe was left to wait outside, physically 'at the margin' of the library, unable to enter herself (*Birth-mark* 18). As she describes, the space had already been colonised by the hegemony of male academic practice, as a 'guarded territory'. The experience is characterised by Howe's reluctance to disobey her father and commit the trespass, instead remaining on the threshold. Interestingly then, as her writing progresses, the library becomes a correlative to the pre-colonised wilderness: a space ripe for trespass. It is by eventually gaining access to such guarded territories that Howe was able to enact a formal rebellion in her poetry, as for her, to be in the library (or archive), is itself a great act of trespassing.

In 'Scare Quotes II' Howe provides a lengthy description of her trepidation when entering the Houghton Library at Harvard to view the Dickinson manuscripts some forty years later: 'Already just across the threshold... I am blushing, defensive, desperate' (*The Midnight* 122). As this passage makes clear, this trespass is always and inevitably within a space already cultivated, shaped and groomed by men (*Birth-mark* 18). This is a central tension for Howe: she desires to experience the wildness of the library unmediated (i.e. without the prior intervention of male forbears — to access forgotten or dismissed texts and recuperate them from erasure), but she is resolutely aware that 'history' is 'the record of the winners' (Keller and Howe); the libraries and archives that she frequents have been *constructed* and preserved by men and for men. Redell Olsen accurately terms Howe's libraries as 'Book-parks', suggesting both 'forays into the wilderness' and 'parklands of existing enclosure'; what is enclosed within a park may be wild, but it is contained by man-made boundaries. For Howe then, reading, or going to the library, is not an act of seeking security — of settling into — but instead a search for threat; a way to *unsettle* previous ideas. Howe trespasses into history and literally un-houses it, by taking it from the guarded archive (house) and bringing it into the open.

**Un'settle, v. 1. *trans.* To undo from a fixed position; to unfix, unfasten, loosen. 2. To force out of a settled condition; to deprive of fixity or quiet.**

If the characteristic American move is the trespass — and Howe can do nothing but repeat this action in her own artistic endeavors — then surely she is equally complicit, and culpable, in participating within a regime that she seeks to renounce? As much of Howe's poetry demonstrates, complicity in the historical fractures of the US is often inevitable and unavoidable. Whilst partaking in the trespass, Howe works to *unsettle* that which has already been established. First and foremost, to participate in the process of 'unsettling', as the title *The Birthmark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* makes evident, opposes the colonial impetus of settlement: of land appropriation (my emphasis). Settling an area means to conquer and claim it, so there is a resonance here with a number of earlier American poets who have written a determined poetics of place (William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson), and who are, therefore, implicitly entangled in this action of claiming land. Citing Increase Mather in 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time' the poem opens: '*Land! Land! Hath been the idol of many in New England!*' (*Singularities* 3). Indeed Olson's renowned first sentence of *Call me Ishmael*, 'I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America' also imbricates him directly in this colonial fervor (17). But Howe upholds a markedly different relation to the land — seeking to unsettle, to disturb, to de-house.

Working through America's vision of exceptionalism, Howe makes subtle and, at times, explicit overtures towards its incongruity. In 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time' Howe speaks directly to the 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of 'Manifest Destiny', a concept that justified American expansionism in the belief that the United States not only could, but was destined to stretch from coast to coast. This attitude helped fuel western settlement, Native American removal, and war with Mexico. The poem functions to entirely destabilise the ground from which such concepts emerge, and, as Nancy Gaffield asserts: 'to annul the sense of entitlement that Manifest Destiny has conferred' (271). This poem is also in conversation with later theories of place and nation. Taking issue with the Heideggerian demand for a sacrosanct national 'dwelling place', Howe treats this as synonymous with the German ideology of 'living space' or *Lebensraum*

(Heidegger and Krell).<sup>102</sup> Rather than supporting this dynamic of territorial expansionism, Howe seeks to provoke a theorisation of its reversal — of unsettlement.

There is a sense in the politics of this refusal that Howe is writing in conversation with the foremost space/place poet Charles Olson; rather than promoting an ‘open field’ for poetic work, and a demand for ‘expansiveness’, Howe advocates for the opposite — an existence within and against the remits of our own territory (*Olson Reader* 40). Howe was an avid reader of Olson and both appreciates and challenges his contradictory nature. Here she reads Olson’s project in Part 1 of ‘Projective Verse’ as conflated with America’s swollen aspirations of territorial expansion. As Howe gestures towards in *The Nonconformist’s Memorial*:

Who is not a wild Enthusiast  
in a green meadow  
furious and fell

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Energy for an expansive poetics is easy: the ‘green meadow’ here may be referring to Olson’s ‘open field’. Howe’s opposition is not only inferred through national politics, but also through gender, as she tells us: ‘Olson’s wonderful sentence “I take space to be the central fact to man born in America.” I am a woman born in America. I can’t take central facts for granted’ (*The Difficulties Interview*, Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 69, Folder 7). In the preface to ‘Articulation’ Howe tells us ‘In our culture Hope [Atherton] is a name we give women’ (*Singularities* 4). This female naming, then, provides an alternative relation to the American landscape, as Susan Schultz asserts, ‘[Howe] begins an American epic of reduction and reconstruction through a simple linguistic sex-change operation.... “Hope” for the American poet... becomes a feminine aspiration’. Here American (feminine) poetic ‘hope’, and the possibility for a new and ethical relation to the land, is connected to ‘reduction’ rather than

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<sup>102</sup> An ideology proposing the aggressive expansion of Germany. Developed under the German Empire, it became part of German goals during the First World War and was later adopted as an important component of Nazi ideology in Germany. The Nazis supported territorial expansionism to gain Lebensraum as being a law of nature for all healthy and vigorous peoples of superior races to displace people of inferior races.

expansion.<sup>103</sup> As Eliot Weinberger explains, citing the two poetic heavyweights of Olson and Dickinson: 'Olson's Figure of Outward against the Figure of Inward: the Amherst attic' ('Preface' *My Emily Dickinson* xi). Working within and against various poetic enclosures, Howe too operates through unsettling an expansive interiority — combining Olson and Dickinson's spatiality in her page space. The restricted territory is, for Howe, invariably the space of the page — a space that cannot physically be extended or expanded, but can be linguistically unsettled.

If Howe seeks to 'unsettle' America, retrieving its turbulent, and often erased, past memories, then libraries and archives become the means by which she can carry out this work. But not only do we get the sense that Howe is determined to unsettle the (colonised/exterior) world, but also her own writing practices. 'Poetry unsettles our scrawled defense', Howe writes in *The Birth-mark* (2). In order to counteract the impulse to settle, to dwell and feel comfortable, we must actively engage in unsettling processes. Poetry is automatically unsettling, Howe claims here, able to disturb and dislocate textual landscapes. Both Elisabeth Frost and Peter Nicholls describe Howe's poetic procedure as continually unsettling, forcing the reader onto uncertain paths, and allowing them to roam freely across her oftentimes non-linear linguistic panoramas. This willingness to exercise radical forms of disjunction is everywhere evident in her oeuvre; Howe even unsettles her own thoughts when they are verging on nostalgia or sympathy. As such Howe's poetry functions as a continuous process of revision — any statement is inexorably precarious, as reading and re-readings disturb any sense of a final or conclusive utterance. Howe is continually 'Singing into the draft'; the closing line of 'Scattering as Behavior Towards Risk' pronounces itself as 'THE REVISOR' (*Singularities* 24, 79).

This obsession with the unfinished (and unfinishable) — the practice of constantly revising and re-working the poem, means that no sense of true origin can be ascertained.<sup>104</sup> This statement is also true of Howe's use of the archive. While she takes on the role of 'THE REVISOR' of history, origins are invariably

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<sup>103</sup> See Introduction on the female poetics of site as operating against the male dominated poetics of place in US literary history.

<sup>104</sup> As Olson writes in 'Maximus, to himself': 'It is undone business/ I speak of, this morning,/ with the sea/ stretching out/ from my feet' (*Maximus* 103).

absent. Howe's theorisation of displaced origins runs parallel with the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. West-Pavlov theorises Deleuze's ideas from *Critique Et Clinique* in his study, *Space In Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze*:

[In Deleuze] we are faced not with a search for origins, but rather, with an evaluation of displacements. Each chart [or poem in Howe's case] is a redistribution of impasses and breakthroughs, of thresholds and closures, which necessarily runs from below to above.... it is not a subconscious of commemoration but of mobilisation, whose objects *shift their position* rather than remaining buried in the earth.

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This process of mobilisation, as outlined above, is vital not only because of the ability to move and manoeuvre, via 'breakthroughs', but also due to the obstructions that such processes make apparent. In the desire to mobilise, 'impasses', 'thresholds' and 'closures' are important structures to negotiate. So, like Howe's own personal barrier of waiting at the threshold of the Widener library, these constrictions, and enclosures can be used to illuminate the scope of the field.

### **Nomadic Encounters: Howe as 'the wanderer'**

Without a sense of secure origin, Howe operates as a poetic nomad, roaming through textual residues into undocumented linguistic zones. As Rosi Braidotti has proposed, nomadology has become a global political paradigm, well documented in the reports of refugees fleeing persecution, as well as through the neo-liberal impulse of the globalised workforce. But nomadology has also significantly inflected upon our ways of thinking. 'Thinking today is structurally nomadic', Braidotti argues, as critical philosophy has turned from the linear and hierarchical to a spatial and interwoven model of fluid movement, mobility and motion (1). While this is not a new approach to thinking per se, indeed Braidotti comments upon the 'privileged relation' between pre-Socratic thought and mobility, its wider theorisation is contemporary, particularly in relation to the rise of the Internet and networked structures of information technology (9). Nomadic theory is an important aspect of Howe's poetics of site.

On an individual level nomadology reveals a practice of refusal — the refusal to stay in one's proper place. This practice straightforwardly rejects the idea of a singular home. Such resistance informs and reshapes the remits of home-spaces and their boundaries. Nomadic critical philosophy also works to think global but

act local. This creates a nomadic modern subject — but one that is still grounded, and highly ethical. It is a ‘fluid and accountable’ theoretical approach, which ‘remains resolutely pragmatic throughout’ (Braidotti 6). As such, nomadic acts must occur in ‘highly specific geo-political and historical locations’ (Braidotti 10). For Howe this specific location is New England, her birthplace and residence, but also the misplaced memory of Ireland, her mother’s homeland. In ‘Scare Quotes II’ Howe outlines her mother’s crossing of the Atlantic, and the terminal restlessness this displacement invoked: ‘Even into her nineties she kept leaving in order to arrive one place or another as the first step in a never ending process somewhere else’ (*The Midnight* 119). Howe even describes herself as a nomadic subject, noting: ‘[I feel] an infinite nostalgia because I am and always seem to be an outsider — the looker — the wanderer’ (Howe Archives, 201 Box 37, Folder 5). Howe’s family heritage, and her own sense of identity, resists stability, seeking out expansive, distant experiences.

Howe’s poetry also invokes this sense of restlessness. Performing a literary retracing, or re-tracking across the settled histories of New England, Howe’s various textual passages lead us in several directions simultaneously, opening up previously closed pathways. One such example is the figure of Hope Atherton, himself lost on a military mission, forced to wander the wilderness in search of his home. As the poem ‘Articulation of Sound Forms in Time’ makes evident, through his experience of being captured by natives and witnessing the burning of his fellow soldiers, Atherton ‘became a stranger to his community and died soon after’ (*Singularities* 4). Howe discovers and upholds an early figure of nomadism, ‘The figure of a far-off Wanderer’ in Atherton, and the poem dissects (linguistically/ spatially) what happens when an American settler no longer feels at home (12). Howe’s procedure within the archive is also necessarily nomadic. Proliferating linkages, Howe’s archival labour is to infiltrate documented history, probe her way through it and ultimately to set it adrift. Howe describes her archival experiences as an: ‘Untraceable wandering’ (*Singularities* 25). Her rootless itinerancy through archival boxes and folders is untraceable, indiscernible. As readers we are unable to follow in her footsteps, being offered not the mimetic journey of her discoveries, but rather a sense of the wander itself. This is a process that, for Howe, is continually evolving and demanding

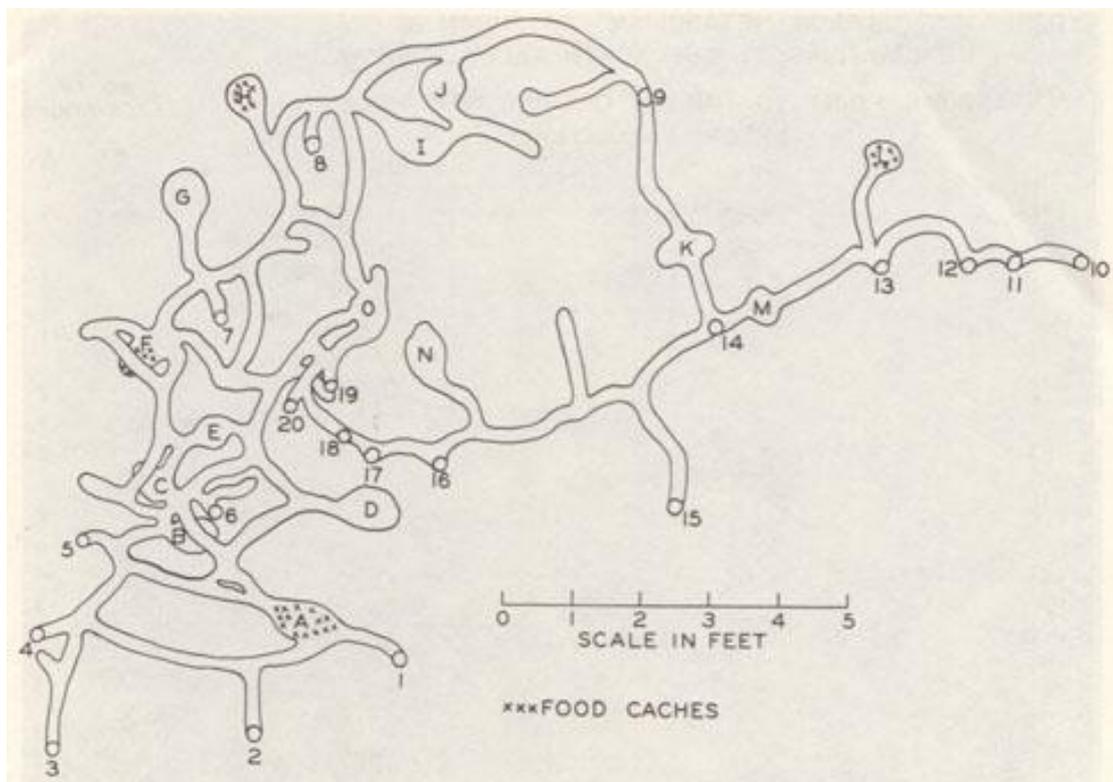
further energies, as she explains, 'Even so and by such tracing of far-fetched meandering I hope to stray' (*Birth-mark* 39). As with all of her endeavours, there is no sense of finished accomplishment in her ability to perform nomadically. Rather there is a determination to 'stray' even further afield next time.

The site where Howe can enact this nomadology is on the page. For Howe the page is a place filled with wonder and wilderness. History, geography, memory and hope are played out again and again on the textual geographies she constructs. Her linguistic markings not only operate symbolically, through linear meaning-making, but also semiotically, opening up new landscapes in every direction. Each specific dash or line, crossing out and margin leads to a divergent world ripe for exploration. This is particularly apparent in Howe's latest collections, as well as the 1970's work. For example, in 'Frolic Architecture' in *That This* (2010), each page is more reminiscent of a work of art than a poem. Here, linguistic operations reach a pivotal juncture with visual representation, as Howe demonstrates her deft merging of mediums to intensify artistic potentialities. The page is visually and linguistically nomadic, or restless.

In this way, the page operates not only in two dimensions (horizontally/vertically), but also with a depth that reaches into the unconscious workings of the semiotic. This depth echoes Deleuze notion of mobility cited previously, which 'necessarily runs from below to above... [as] it is not a subconscious of commemoration but of mobilisation, whose objects *shift their position* rather than remaining buried in the earth' (West-Pavlov 225). This form of mobilisation excavates what lies beneath — what lies hidden. It privileges an unconcealing, a bringing forth to the light. The activity is therefore one of mobilisation, of making connections apparent, rather than 'commemoration', of merely remembering. This approach entirely echoes Howe's praxis: in her poetry networks of memory must be recast and reworked in order to be recognised, as depth becomes spatialised. By digging down and bringing forgotten history back to the surface, Howe then works to re-integrate such neglected moments into our already established historical webs.

**To burrow: To make a burrow or small excavation, esp. as a hiding- or dwelling-place. A burrow: A hole or excavation made in the ground for a dwelling-place.**

A recurring emblem that Howe uses to encapsulate this process of digging for historical linkages is found in her use of the *burrow*. A term so far unexploited by Howe criticism, burrow is both a verb (to burrow: To make a burrow or small excavation, *esp.* as a hiding- or dwelling-place) and a noun (a burrow: A hole or excavation made in the ground for a dwelling-place) (*OED*). As such the burrow itself, a temporary dwelling-place, is compounded with the action implicit in labouring to make such a space — the action of excavation. The burrow is both deeply rooted, or grounded (a requisite for Braidotti's mode of nomadism) and entirely mobile and temporary (never functioning as a permanent dwelling-place but merely a passing one). In working through Howe's poetics of site, the burrow emerges as a more specific term than Braidotti's nomadism, to encapsulate both her position and labour in the archive. Howe's procedure is burrowing: she burrows into and through historical documents. But the archive itself is also a burrow-like space: it is a site of temporary security or refuge. In order to unpack how the burrow functions in Howe's thinking, I will first describe the features of a burrow.



Elaborate Norway rabbit burrow system. From Calhoun, 1963.

As this image shows, a burrow has multiple entry and exit points, as it usually functions as a network. It is a large complex of interconnecting tunnels, passages,

and cavities. Howe's thinking, practice and poetic outlays are also often burrow-like, inviting the reader into different sections of meaning, with multiple ways through the text and offering deviating outcomes. Both in terms of the depth of complexity that Howe creates in her poems, mining away at the interminable layers of language and history and in tunneling through distinct genre zones, Howe's poetic labour is burrow-like. While the specificity of the burrow has not been discussed by Howe criticism, this term clearly intersects with ideas of itinerancy put forth by Stephen Collis in, *Through the Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism*, and particularly with Mandy Broomfield's 2014 article 'Palimtextual Tracts: Susan Howe's Rearticulation of Place'. Here Broomfield draws on Michael Davidson's notion of the 'palimtext' (the multi-layered quality of the material) to characterise this dimension of Howe's landscape aesthetics (*Demarcations* 64).

While burrows grow outwards spatially, they create a restricted enclosed space to inhabit. If we consider Howe's work through the model of the burrow then, she instead digs down into the depths of the page space. Instead of producing an expansive, widening poetics, Howe digs through the space of the page, making passages and burrowing her way through it.<sup>105</sup> As such the poem is extended into a new dimension, reaching downwards and through the page to construct a three-dimensional poetic space. In her more recent collections Howe emphasises this shift into a layering of depths rather than reaching towards outward enlargement. *That This* (2011) operates primarily through the palimpsest, as the site of the page constructs deepness and depth. Howe's most recent collection is entitled *Debths* (2017) and as Collis tells us:

Howe's title is taken from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. 'Debths' is a suggestive neologism, and Howe wrings much meaning from it. It is an expression of the 'depths' of Howe's literary 'debts'; but it also invokes the watery 'depths' of mystery and death, the mystery of death, and perhaps even the poet's own approaching end.<sup>106</sup>

'Curating Resurrection'

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<sup>105</sup> This is one of the options Olson describes in *Call Me Ishmael*. As opposed to Melville, who inhabits space, Poe digs in.

<sup>106</sup> I mention Howe's latest collection *Debths* to point to continued themes of depth and excavation in her work. However, as it was only published in 2017, unfortunately there was not time to give space to it in this thesis.

The burrow, tunneling downwards towards hidden depths, also sets up new ranges of acoustics. Acting within the enclosed space of the burrow, the soundscapes of Howe's poetry begin to reverberate, and to echo. Howe's project, then, becomes to listen to how her constructed layers of linguistic temporality interact and intersect with one another, creating startling resonances and reiterations as they bounce around the page. Hence some of Howe's most experimental poetic constructions can be read as the linguistic reverberations rebounding off of each other from within a confined space, sometimes becoming jumbled, overlapping or merging into each other: 'I cannot tell/ Where you leave off and I begin... forfending/ Immeadeat Settlem/ but wandering' (*Singularities* 58). These words appear on the final pages of 'Thorow' and while they are presented in a linear fashion, it is clear that the liberating linguistic spatialisation of the previous two pages (where words are unanchored from formal and grammatical structures and float freely around the remits of the page) has impacted upon the subsequent poetic utterance. In this example, 'forfending/ Immeadeat Settlem', words are blurred and indistinct. It is as though during this (earlier) moment of free-forming expression the language that has resonated back has become jumbled together and muffled.

Howe's poetic model of the burrow is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic paradigm. It is what Deleuze calls an 'image of thought', which is based on the botanical rhizome, that sends out roots and apprehends multiplicities (Deleuze and Guattari 8).<sup>107</sup> Howe, who is well versed in post-structuralism, makes reference to Deleuze and Guattari in 'Thorow', and must be aware of the rhizomatic model as a series of endless networks that is self-reproducing and self-perpetuating, and, like the burrow, necessitates multiple entry and exit points. Howe's thinking and practice is continually rhizomatic —

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<sup>107</sup> As a model for culture, the rhizome resists the organisational structure of the traditional root-tree system which charts causality along chronological lines and looks for the original source, and seeks a pinnacle or conclusion. A rhizome, on the other hand, is characterized by 'ceaselessly established connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles' (Deleuze and Guattari 8). Rather than present history and culture as a linear narrative, the rhizome presents history and culture as a map or wide array of attractions and influences with no specific origin or genesis. A 'rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo' (Deleuze and Guattari 9). The planar movement of the rhizome resists chronology and organisation, instead favouring a nomadic system of growth and propagation.

not built like a tree with branches and connected via a central hierarchical trunk, but, instead, Howe's poetic thought moves through a series of inter-connected networks, spreading out tendril-like. Revealing various offshoots that will then go on to cross and re-cross one another, Howe forms a dense network in her poetry, forming a web of interconnected ideas and motifs. As such the entry route into Howe must always be sideways, and proceeding in several directions at once. Like the rhizome, reading Howe is continually generative, as her themes proliferate and bud outwards. Therefore our modes of reading Howe must also be innovative; her common tropes function as a network of associations, so the way that we read her language, moving between her words, must also take non-linear form.

Yet the rhizomatic mode does not produce or discover new meanings, as West-Pavlov comments: 'what is retained... is only that which increases the number of connections' (24). Similarly Howe makes no claims to originality or invention in her poetics. Instead she merely brings to light the intrinsic connectedness between her separate documents and artefacts. This links with Julia Kristeva's idea of the semiotic, and what radical latent meanings can exist outside of the patriarchal symbolic order. As she posits in *Revolution in Poetic Language*: language that existed before the spoken chain was 'not *linear*... but *spatial*... in which each mark gains its value by virtue of its position to the whole apparatus' (26). If semiotic language is not linear, then it can exist in a different type of space altogether. Kristeva usefully demonstrates the earliest form of language/meaning that has been discovered, 'from the caves of Lascaux onwards, it is possible to trace constant *topographical* relations between the animals presented' (32). By relating the appearance of semiotic language structures to depth and excavation, Howe's burrowing method arrives at a radical spatial poetics.

### **Metaphor as Non-Site**

The trespass, the nomad and the burrow — each of these terms functions in Howe metaphorically, or abstractly, as a hinge bending towards her central concerns. To get a handle on how the poet is using complex, intertwined but sometimes conflicting metaphors in her poetry, we must move away from Howe briefly, and go back to Dickinson's poetics. In the late Dickinsonian model,

metaphor is delivered — opaque but discernable — only to be immediately complicated or contradicted by a proceeding metaphor. Take for example Dickinson's wonderful poem, 'The Brain, within its Groove' as a prime example of the ways in which Dickinson conducts metaphor and utilises divergent conceits.<sup>108</sup>

The Brain, within its Groove  
Runs evenly – and true –  
But let a Splinter swerve –  
'Twere easier for You –

To put a Current back –  
When Floods have slit the Hills –  
And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves –  
And trodden out the Mills –

*Poems 254*

The poem, opening with the idea of the 'Brain' as an emblem for rational thinking and intellection, is presented as potentially 'Groove'-like in its ability to implement a line of reasoning 'evenly' and linearly. This idea of linear thought, as straightforward, direct and track-able also invokes how conventional binary metaphors work, i.e. the established metaphor here is of thought operating as a straight train-track. So thought is to train-track as a clear and linear metaphor. However, before we arrive at the complications of the next lines of the poem, Dickinson is already undercutting her own metaphor with the numerous connotations of whether such a 'Groove' (of thought, of metaphor) is positive. While a 'Groove' can suggest following a train of thought, it could also be viewed negatively, as being stuck in a rut, without the ability to maneuver thoughts freely and closing off other potentialities (like being stuck in the direct binarism of a simplistic metaphor). What follows in the poem are Dickinson's metaphoric examples of what happens when the brain operates differently — when the brain operates *unevenly* and *untruly* (or perhaps instead via a 'slant' truth — an uneven metaphor — as in 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant') (*Poems 432*). Uneven, or what Howe calls un-hermetic verse characterises Dickinson's language (*My Emily Dickinson 134*). Hence the 'Splinter' that can 'swerve' in the third line renders the original metaphor (the train of thought) utterly

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<sup>108</sup> While the following reading focuses on Dickinson, the thinking is also crucial to Howe, without which we are unable to grasp Howe's own complex use of metaphor.

inconsistent; a 'Splinter' could relate back to the 'Groove' as a fracture in wood, but while the 'swerve' recalls the train-track it also seems an inaccurate term for such a derailment. Here at least two metaphors are colliding with each other head-on (the brain as a piece of wood, the brain as a train-track) and there is no way for the reader to reconcile these diverging metaphors.

As the poem continues, Dickinson elects to complicate the metaphoric picture further, as the comparisons invoked become more cracked open and inconsistent. In the second stanza the central metaphor becomes that of water with the words 'Current' and 'Floods', as Dickinson instantiates another mode of thinking. Once linear thought has been disturbed (or 'Splintered') there is no going back — now ideas will crash and flood into the mind from several directions simultaneously. Here Dickinson is advocating that the mind needs to be free flowing, and cannot and should not be restrained by any linear track (or normative/ conventional way of thinking). This is a poem instantiating the free-flowing wonder and wander of the mind; like Howe, Dickinson proves herself intellectually nomadic. Hence the metaphors unleashed are also free flowing and double in complexity and irreconcilability. The words 'scooped' and 'trodden' are incompatible with the actions of water: water cannot scoop (like a hand) or tread (like a foot). The metaphors begin to operate like water — they are continually mobile as Dickinson relies on their malleability to unsettle any straightforward train of signification. It becomes almost impossible to conceive of the metaphors of this poem all taken together: train, track, splinter, swerve, flood, scooped. But it is not the reconcilability of these divergent metaphors that is important. Instead Dickinson, like Howe, privileges the *form of poetry* to encompass multiple inconsistent metaphors simultaneously.<sup>109</sup>

Returning to Howe's poetry, we can perceive the same mass of inter-tangled, inconsistent metaphors being formulated by Howe (the trespass, the wilderness, the nomad, the rhizome, the burrow). While there emerges a coherent lexicon of metaphors, some of which intersect with one another easily, there is an overall inconsistency owing to the sheer number of metaphors that Howe invokes. Metaphoric routes lead off in several directions simultaneously, branching off

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<sup>109</sup> Howe describes Dickinson's poems and letters, during and after her crisis years of 1858-60, as enacting an art of 'formlessness', which infers this sense of water-like instability (*Birth-mark* 1).

into ever more complex networks of ideas. Moreover, Howe's metaphors also function as "non-sites", as described by Redell Olsen in her explication of the work of Howe and Robert Smithson. In her article for *Jacket 2*, Olsen compares the work of Howe to the land-artist Smithson through his conceptualisation of sites (physical locations) and non-sites (abstract representations of those locations). Smithson usefully links the concepts of site and non-site to metaphor, a linguistic model of representation:

The non-site (an indoor earthwork) is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site in N.J. (The Pines Barrens Plains). It is by this three dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it — thus The Non-Site.

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This proposes an interesting counter-part to the sites that Howe physically inhabits. Each metaphoric non-site is therefore linked to a physical site i.e. the trespass is the abstracted metaphor for the pre-colonised American landscape, the burrow the metaphor for Howe's praxis of working in the archive. Metaphor in Howe's oeuvre then serves multiple functions, as a direct offspring from Dickinson's poetics and as a useful way to consider the link between the physical and the conceptual sites that Howe inhabits.

### **Howe's Plurality of Sites**

Working through her condition of being 'homeless at home', her nomadic wanderings and her poetic model of the burrow, we can begin to appreciate the theory behind Howe's plurality of sites. Such theorisations demonstrate why Howe cannot be read through a singular compositional site. The spaces she inhabits and the space-scapes she creates in her poetry are only ever temporary marginal residues: Howe's sense of site is reciprocal, uneven and continually evolving. Disrupting stable ideas of inhabitation and dwelling, each of Howe's poetic sites therefore functions as a refuge — a temporary space. A refuge should mean stability and safety, but Howe seeks out the opposite — the capacity to unsettle it, and, like a burrow, to construct new outward passages. In Howe's poetics then, the concept of the refuge takes on new potentialities. Moreover, like the burrow, Howe's numerous poetic inhabitations operate as a network — she often moves through several inter-connected sites to produce poems, as the coming sections will explore.

Such mobility echoes Deleuze's theory of becoming as spatial and temporal. He highlights that the flux of being not only changes in time but also in space, and that 'flux is reality itself'; fluidity is our basic reality (174). Howe recognises this inherent condition, and celebrates kinesis and instability. Even in moments of stasis — of movement held in tension in her poems — there is potential for transformation. Unable to permanently situate herself Howe operates in medias res; writing from numerous provisional sites her poems perform as provisional acts. This exercise in mobilisation was invariably a conscious decision. As such what can be considered a site for Howe never settles. Even the poem, the final and stationary site of her thinking, remains in flux due to her burgeoning evocations of meaning through new performances. Sites in Howe's work therefore provide manifold contingency. The next sections will consider three of Howe's most important sites — Lake George, her home, and the archive — as examples of her specific and localised poetics.

### **Section Two: Poetic Retreat: 'Thorow' & Lake George**

Despite its incongruous setting, the small town of Lake George, in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York, became an unlikely refuge for Howe while she wrote the poem 'Thorow' at the beginning of 1987. Howe records the significance of this site in the first lines of the poem's preface:

During the winter and spring of 1987 I had a writer-in-residency grant to teach a poetry workshop once a week at the Lake George Arts Project, in the town of Lake George, New York. I rented a cabin off the road to Bolton Landing, at the edge of the lake.

*Singularities* 40

This extract anchors the poem within a specific site: the poetic utterance that materialises from this experience is intrinsically linked to the space it was conceived. For Howe, living in Lake George was like going on location; her poetic universe was conditioned by being out of place, and living on-site. In an interview with Robert Creeley in 1994, Howe discusses the poem as a 'certificate of presence', likening it to a photograph or document (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 69, Folder 8). As such, in this section I argue that 'Thorow' should be read as a site-specific poem: it traces Howe's real presence in Lake George, inhabiting its textual histories and traversing its landscapes. A unique poetic output in her

oeuvre, the poem provides a great case study for thinking about the framework of the poetic residency. In ‘Thorow’ Howe registers the traditions of the writers’ retreat and complicates its relationship to space by unsettling those conventions. Using evidence gathered from her archive collection at the Mandeville Special Collections library at the University of California, San Diego, including her journals and notes from this period, I will put forward a new reading of this poem, which centres on its intrinsic site-specificity.

Howe chronicles the value of working on-site in an unpublished poetic extract, found in her journal from the period:

Not homesteads not abroad-steads  
bearing names on the road

Small hut in a retired place  
Guide and companions

Through distant and still uncut  
forests —  
Standing on an island  
Or headland  
Fragment torn from its content

Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 14, Book 9

The section opens with a reference to Dickinson’s entrenchment in the domestic, through the term ‘homesteads’. Dickinson’s homeliness is refuted by Howe, who also rejects foreign sites, ‘nor abroad-steads’. Instead, the poem suggests the benefits of peaceful retreat: ‘Small hut in a retired place’. This ‘hut’ may stand for Howe’s Lake George cabin; not a long-term home, this site was a short-lived, and transitory refuge. Away from the tempestuous artistic milieu of the New York poetry scene, Howe’s retreat to Lake George offered her the space for creative independence and reflection.<sup>110</sup> Spending six months living away from home, the final line may refer to Howe herself, as she becomes the ‘Fragment torn from its content’. Crucially, the poet was able to register the complexities of her new site through her position as an outsider.

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<sup>110</sup> After being overlooked for a poetry event, Howe remarks in her journal: ‘Another world. A world I would have loved to be asked into. But here I am still sitting in my little motel on the edge of Lake George. There are ironies in the situation. They are all men. Being the biggest irony... Oh well — to turn to Nature’ (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 37, Folder 6). Echoing statements made by Barbara Guest on the hegemonic masculinity of the avant-garde poetry scene, Howe turns away from the literary coterie and towards the natural environment instead.



The view from the shores of the Tea Island Resort (previously named the Tea Island Motel), Lake George, New York. Photo taken in August 2014.

Howe utilised her retreat at Lake George to recalibrate her relationship with nature. In 'Thorow', she complicates a straightforwardly Romantic appreciation, as she states in the preface, 'The Adirondacks *occupied me*' (*Singularities* 40). This is reminiscent of Emerson's 'transparent eyeball', as she is absorbent, rather than reflective, of her environment; Howe sets up a reciprocal, shared experience between herself and the wild ('Nature' 14). But she transgresses Emerson's Transcendentalist vision through her linguistic turn. Rather than claiming any ownership over the landscape, i.e. occupying it like the colonial forces, instead Howe states that the territory occupied her: nature is given access to dwell within her private body. The transcendent self is renounced in this move, emptying it out to make space for the wilderness of her surroundings. However, in an interview with Tom Beckett conducted in 1988 (just after her Lake George residency), Howe admits that this sense of reciprocity may have been fallacious. 'It's a first dream of wildness,' she says, 'that most of us need in order to breathe; and yet to inhabit a wilderness is to destroy it' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 69, Folder 7).

This recalls theorist Edward S. Casey, who argues that, 'A wild place is a second to culture — its very other — insofar as its very existence constitutes a challenge to cultural hegemony... it retains an instructive impenetrability, a permanent impassivity, an obdurate outsideness' (237). If we agree with Casey that the wild is always separate (outside of culture), and with Howe that anthropocentrism invariably destroys wildness, we reach an impasse. Lake George, as a tourist town and a site of natural wonder, sits in this liminal space — between culture and nature. In 'Thorow', Howe articulates this duality, stating, 'The town, or what is left of a town is a travesty... Everything graft, everything grafted' (*Singularities* 40). Lake George has been culturally 'grafted', Howe argues, indicating that it has been worked through, trudging down and covered over (*OED*).<sup>111</sup>

During my fieldtrip to Lake George in August 2014, I noticed little improvement from Howe's experiences in 1987. Now, as then, the streets are littered with gift shops selling slogan T-shirts and vulgar souvenirs. There are video arcades, two haunted houses, retailers peddling photo shoots of customers dressed in "traditional" clothing, karaoke nights and two shops called 'Purse Party'. Fortunately for the poet, her residency took place during the winter/spring period, when tourism was low, but even so she comments that she quickly 'learned to keep out of town' (*Singularities* 40). She concludes her description in 'Thorow' with the question: 'And what is left when spirits have fled from holy places?' (*Singularities* 40). No longer wild, nor a place of culture, Howe considers what can be rescued from such a site. Howe's project thus becomes one of redemption — to apprehend the historical forces that took shape there and to excavate the ruins.

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<sup>111</sup> To graft is also 'to dig', which has resonances with Howe's process of excavation, as well as links with the earlier idea of the burrow (*OED*).



Cats dressed in Native American costume. T-shirt on sale in Lake George, 2014.

'Thorow' opens with an extended prose section. Not a-typical of Howe's compositions, this combination of situational exposition ('There are two Laundromats; the inevitable McDonald's'), ruminations on the space ('Lake George was a blade of ice to write across') and author citation ('Thoreau once wrote to a friend...') introduces the poem with a weight on context (*Singularities* 40, 41). Before we are invited to enjoy the lyric unfolding on the fourth page, Howe sets the stage. She tells us, 'present is past now/ So many thread' (*Singularities*, 43). In order to appreciate the complexity of the relational threads tied up in the poem, historicisation is required. Howe's central argument is that 'present is past now': echoes and traces of the area's violent colonial past still preside over the contemporary moment. Howe conjures the complexity of place

by invoking numerous, and oftentimes-contradictory concepts of the area. Theorists Deleuze and Guattari are referenced, as are Sir Humfrey Gilbert and most frequently, Thoreau. Introducing us to this web of intricate interrelations functions to traverse 'multiplicities' (*Singularities* 41). By offering up several divergent accounts in the opening preface, Howe tells us that grasping the historical measure of Lake George is burdened with difficulty.

Here ideas of place and site come to their first juncture. While the notion of place is problematised (as will be explored further throughout this section), the site of the poem is far more straightforward. Site refers to an altogether more specific position, as Howe tells us, 'I rented a cabin off the road' (*Singularities* 40). Howe's site is her station on the lake, renting a cabin at the Tea Island Motel. This position "on-site", I argue, offered Howe an opening into the fraught territories of place. In her journal Howe discloses, 'I have noticed nature — loved the different views of the lake — feel close to some spirit of place' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 14, Book 9). This reflection implies that Howe's position gave her access to 'place', which gives her writing on the area legitimacy.

Following the example set by poets such as Olson, Will Montgomery argues that Howe was attracted to a similar 'voracious need to gather "facts", to find something, a quotation, a place name, a date, some documentary evidence in regard to... place' (98). In an interview with Merle Lynn Bachman, Howe brands herself a 'documentary' maker: 'my project as a poet has been documentary', she discloses (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 69, Folder 6). Yet this commitment to the historical specifics of place is challenged by Howe's personal interventions throughout 'Thorow'. Her poetic self-presence is indicated in the opening preface, as Howe uses the 'I' pronoun and explicitly emphasises her own position on site. Furthermore, in her notes and journals from the period, Howe reveals her motives behind writing the poem.



Journal entry by Howe, 1987. Howe Archives, MSS Box 37, Book 10.

She remarks just prior to leaving home: 'For Lake George. Keep a journal — show to me each two weeks — mix reading + life — read [in]to your reading' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 37, Book 1). Howe kept a small A6 sized notebook, which was primarily reserved for poetic expression. She also kept a large A4 sized journal, for logging quotations from her reading, observations of the lake, and personal insights. It was in this book that 'reading + life' were blended, as library reference numbers are jotted alongside intimate reflections. In a move to destabilise Olsonian authority, Howe recognises her own role as documentary maker, as the fallible human gatherer of facts, and draws attention

towards her own participation in the enterprise. She desires not a purely objective record of place, but a mixture of 'reading + life'.

Howe was keenly aware of her own role as modulator. The reiterated phrase, '*Revealing traces/ Regulating traces*', in 'Thorow' chronicles Howe's position in the project — she operates to reveal the past, but also, inevitably, to regulate that revelation (*Singularities* 46). She is attracted to this level of control, as a procedure of 'Measuring mastering' (*Singularities* 45). The lyric section of the poem opens with the line, 'Go on the Scout they say' (*Singularities* 46). Collis has praised Howe as a poetic itinerant, a 'scout' or 'way maker', whose example we would be advised to follow (*Anarcho-Scholasticism* 3). Yet Howe presents the 'scout' as a more problematic leading figure. Whilst one definition of scout is simply 'to travel about (in search of information)', another meaning has militaristic undertones, as 'An act of reconnoitring; a reconnaissance' (*OED*). This definition is significant given that Lake George was the site of colonial violence and war. The land was taken from the Native Americans, fought over by the French and British, and its key position on the Montreal-New York water route made it strategically crucial during the American Revolution. The poem wrenches out and re-encounters how settlers have abused the land for political gain: 'My ancestors tore off/ the first leaves/ picked out the best stars' writes Howe, acknowledging her own familial complicity (*Singularities* 52). Numerous military sites are referenced in the poem: 'Swegachey', 'Fort Stanwix', 'Armageddon at Fort William Henry/ Sunset at Independence Point' (*Singularities* 43, 46, 51). Like her ancestors, Howe too is scouting for land, she is performing an act of poetic 'reconnaissance': 'surveying a tract of country... discovering the nature of the terrain or resources of a district before making an advance' (*OED*). This idea is conveyed through Howe's poetic disjunction. Reference to the 'Armageddon at Fort William Henry' is followed by the lines, 'Author the real author/ acting the part of the scout' (*Singularities* 51). If Howe, as author, is truly 'acting' the 'scout', then she confirms her ambitions of mastery, just as the first Europeans did. Howe admits to 'taking notes like a spy' in the poem (*Singularities* 52). Such lines reveal a rigorous self-consciousness, conceding her own acts of potential complicity, described as 'Complicity battling redemption' (*Singularities* 55). By recuperating and reiterating the colonial

legacies of land domination, Howe is conscious that she is committing her own act of violence on the landscape.

**‘The walking trails are whispering routes’**

This act of violence occurs primarily through the system of naming. On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1987, Howe notes: ‘I’ve got to get a book so I can identify the different trees! Why this desire to name everything, but there it is. I want to have their names. It drives me wild when I don’t’ (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 14, Book 10). Echoing Wallace Stevens’ poem ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’, Howe’s ‘rage for order’ is a characteristic writerly response to the prodigious transcendence of nature (98). Howe acknowledges this in another unpublished poetic fragment.

Prerogative of naming  
discoverer’s prerogative of naming  
Uninhabited  
Unhandled globe

Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 14, Book 10

In this fragment the ‘discoverer’ may be an earlier formulation of Howe’s ‘scout’, driven to name the desolate ‘Unhandled’ world. This privilege of ‘naming’ the land is particularly relevant to Lake George, which was renamed multiple times. Originally known as the Andia-ta-roc-te by local Native Americans, in 1646 the French Canadians named it Lac du Saint-Sacrement. After being occupied by British colonial forces in 1755, it was re-named Lake George for King George II. The most recent designation veils the matrix of complex multi-layered perspectives, histories and accounts of the place. Howe illustrates this in the poem, citing from Deleuze and Guattari: ‘The proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of multiplicity’ (*Singularities* 41). This palimpsest of names covers over the contentious history of the lake, with each new label revealing the brutal reality of intensive land conflict.

Despite these links to colonial violence, Lisa Joyce claims that Howe ‘uses the naming power of language and subverts it’ in order to ‘return to names as they had been in the Adirondacks, to a time before names were at all’. This is demonstrated as Howe tracks backwards, towards ‘The origin of property/ that leads here Depth// Indian names lead here’ (*Singularities* 52). But even in getting the ‘Indian names straightened’, Howe’s poetic ‘word forest’ also commits violence *against* nature; the act of naming — of ordering nature through poetry

— functions as an enclosure upon the wild (*Singularities* 49). Howe rebukes the efficacy of naming, stating, ‘Every name driven will be as another rivet in the machine of universal flux’ (*Singularities* 41). Names serve to fasten a label onto a site, Howe claims, reducing its natural state of change. In an interview from *The Difficulties* Howe admits of her time on Lake George, ‘I think I was trying to paint a landscape... I thought I could feel it when it was pure, enchanted, *nameless*. There never was such a pure place. In all nature there is violence’ (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 69, Folder 7). Howe acknowledges her nostalgia towards the ideals of a Romanticised pre-colonised wilderness, but immediately corrects that nostalgia with inert factuality: ‘There never was such a pure place’. As Casey makes clear, ‘There is no abyss of wilderness not already papered over... with the text of culture’ (237). Thus there is no route into an unmediated wild source: an originary experience of the landscape is denied to Howe.<sup>112</sup>

Instead the poet is invested in unearthing this papering over of nature, as she performs an archaeological excavation into its layers of nomenclature. As Casey continues, this papering over occurs until ‘the wilderness itself... becomes a text’ (237). At Lake George nature is so saturated with language, that Howe reads it as a text. As Elisabeth Joyce argues, ‘language is her route into the wilderness... language becomes the track’ (45). Howe describes this linguistic pathway in an unpublished fragment: ‘Constant care of anxiety/ Places not to steep/ to find a foothold/ down into gloomy valleys/ strange and new/ wild space on flat rock’ (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 37, Book 7). In trying to ‘find a foothold’ in the landscape, Howe turns towards language — she goes back to what has been uttered, to what has been written down. This foothold can offer up ‘strange and new’ traction, to come to an understanding of place.

Howe’s entire experience of Lake George is mediated through language: ‘Primordial nature/ Etymologies outside one another’ (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 14, Book 14). Approaching ‘primordial nature’ will occur by calibrating

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<sup>112</sup> Things bring to mind the Wallace Stevens poem, ‘The Snowman’, where ‘the listener, who listens in the snow’ cannot have a veritable ‘mind of winter’, or be able to access the unmediated reality of the winter scene because of his own imaginative overlays: ‘misery in the sound of the wind’ (9). Similarly Howe cannot get to an unmediated experience of nature, she cannot have a ‘mind of winter’ but instead language and imagination overlay the scene.

various 'etymologies'. In her later publication, *Souls of Labadie Tract*, Howe clarifies this idea:

During the 1980's I wanted to transplant words onto paper with soil sticking to their roots — to go to meet a narrative's fate by immediate access to its concrete totality of singular interjections, crucified spellings, abbreviations, irrational apprehensions, collective identities, palavers, kicks, cordials, comforts. I wanted jerky and tedious details to oratorically bloom and bear fruit as if they had been set at liberty or ransomed by angels.

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In order to transcribe an authentic account of place, Howe seeks to transplant language 'with soil sticking to their roots'. This is realised in 'Thorow' through Howe's meticulous investment in the materiality of language itself — through the delicacies of etymologies, spelling, misspelling and linguistic shifts. The Indian names provide the first, primal linguistic expression, so there is attention paid to the sound-effects of such names: 'Assawampset, Acushnet, Pascaamanset' (*Singularities* 41). Not only does Howe follow in the tracks of language, but she also scouts for new paths, and invents innovative formulations. She is interested in mobilising language from its original site, transforming words through their work as poetic utterance. It is language itself, Howe reminds us, that is still wild.

In an extract from her Lake George journals, Howe describes the site where such wild language converged: 'The river beyond the openings/a wilderness of libraries' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 14, Book 9). The public library at Lake George operated as source material and sustenance for Howe during her residency. In discussion with Al Filreis at the Kelly Writers House, in March 2010, Howe articulates the value of this site to her poetic thinking. She discloses, 'I saw the worlds anew... [through] a tiny little local library' (Howe and Filreis). Despite Howe's retreat into the Adirondacks and into nature, she still inhabits the library as a key site for her poetic research. Howe goes on to describe how within the 'tiny little local library', which only encompassed 'one room', she was able to uncover the 'collection of the area' (Howe and Filreis). Here she read Thoreau, but also Sir William Johnson, an 'interpreter of the Indians', who reinscribed the original Native American spellings in his journals during the early colonial period (Howe and Filreis). Howe goes on to discuss how the 'violence in the landscape came alive in the tiny little library.... in this a local version with the old spelling' (Howe and Filreis). Through the library space,

Howe reads the landscape of Lake George as an archive: uncovering it through the traces of its written history. Reading drafts, fragments, narratives, poems and stories she investigates the vocabulary of place. More than a straightforward 'living on-location' then, the site-specificity of 'Thorow' emerges as a *situation in language*. The poem is conditioned by what Howe read; the books therefore define the limitations and possibilities of that site. In 'Thorow' these accounts appear haphazardly, as she works to break down hierarchies that privilege one voice over another. Through this democratic heteroglossia, we experience a communal vision of the site.

### **'Thorow — the scout — the echo of his name'**

A central figure in the poem is Henry David Thoreau. Close contact with Thoreau developed during Howe's residency, resonating throughout her reading. She closely studied Thoreau's *Walking*, a text where the human is considered, in Thoreau's terms, as 'an inhabitant, or part and parcel of nature' (1). Howe became invested in many aspects of Thoreau's life, including his household and the women he lived with. She notes that Ives, brother to Thoreau, comments, 'you may know all of this — all there is to know about Thoreau... but you know him not — unless you love him!' (Howe Archives, MS 201, Box 69, Folder 1). Howe goes on to write that this was 'Exactly how I felt about Thoreau when I was up in Lake George. He was my friend, he reassured me — he stood by me. I know him' (Howe Archives, MSS 201 Box 9, Folder 11). Studying Howe's archival materials, her notes, journals and poetic fragments, it is clear that Thoreau became another site that she inhabited.

Within the poem itself, the relationship that develops with Thoreau is complex. She comments in her journal, 'What am I doing here — Thorow — the scout — the echo of his name.... Ties it too much to him? Then this place as background where he never was but sense of nature he did have' (Howe Archives, MS 201 Box 37, Folder 5). Thoreau is explicitly the 'scout' here, not Howe, as she relinquishes autonomy over the project. Howe's own position in the text, as author and itinerant, works to complicate any clear demarcations of power. In her notes she records:

Fields and woods into the text  
Opening nature to culture re-ordering of space —  
space of sentence — presence of author.

Howe Archives, MSS 201 Box 37, Book 4

It is unclear whether the 'presence of author' refers to Thoreau, or to Howe. Elisabeth Joyce claims that Howe's project is to turn to the wilderness in order to re-create herself, to lose her identity in order to re-cast it (37). But in her notes, Howe contests this theory, writing: 'The author of the text, and the author in the text who bears his name', disclosing that she never loses herself as writer (Howe Archives, MSS 201 Box 37, Book 4). Furthermore, she adds, 'This Thoreau book is an epitaph/ origin and tendency are notions inseparably co-relative' (Howe Archives, MSS 201 Box 37, Book 4). The poem is an elegy for Thoreau, the figure who inspires the project. In her use of the term 'co-relative', Howe suggests that Thoreau was so close he was almost a family relation.

This collaboration with Thoreau is enacted through a blurring of poetic voices, integrating Howe's experiences with those of Thoreau. The relationship between the pair grows more intimate and less discrete as we move through the poem. We witness the struggle to keep hold of the personal poetic voice, as Howe writes, 'You are of me & I of you, I cannot tell/ Where you leave off and I begin' (*Singularities* 58). The final pages of the poem lose rigid stanza structuring, and utilise the entire space of the page to evoke a convergence of utterances. However the poetic form becomes almost incoherent, invoking the wilderness. Unsettling literary refinement, feral linguistic outgrowths overtake the textual space. The page is ravaged by shards of language; phrases overlap, reverse and become illegible. As the poem draws to a close, the multifarious competing voices of history engulf the text and become overwhelming.

Howe uses the page as a site to draw out the politics of enclosure. Rachel Tzvia Back claims that the mirroring of the final pages represents a 'liberation' of grammar and syntax (15). But Montgomery is keen to point out that *Singularities* is as much about breaking free of grammar and the strictures of writing, as it is about recognising those limitations and the spaces in which they exist (8). For Howe the page is always, invariably, a closed space. Montgomery argues that in 'Thorow' Howe can be seen to be engaging in various 'forms of constraint' (8). There is a delimited lexical field, with specifically chosen language to mark the boundary of the poem. Additionally on the final pages we have the jarring lines: 'The Frames should be exactly/ fitted to the paper, the Margins/ of which will

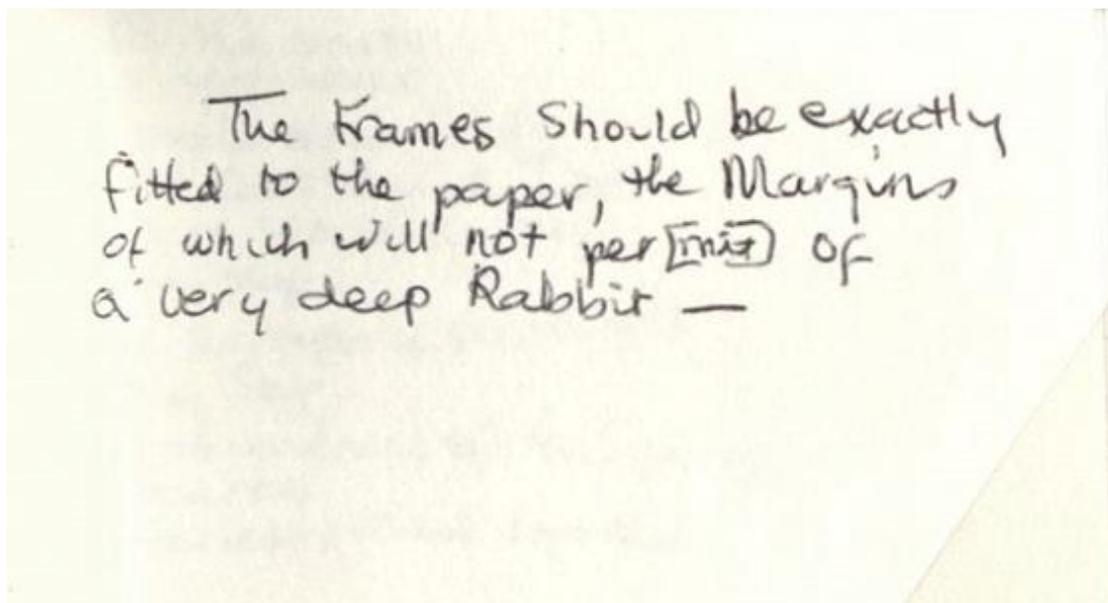
not per[mit] of/ a very deep Rabbit' (*Singularities* 56). Here the tracts of the 'Rabbit', and the passages created, are limited to being inside the margins of the page. These lines heighten the materiality of the page itself: as a constructed textual space.



*Singularities* 56

**'Burrowing' Home**

Howe's emblematic 'Rabbit' brings us back to her metaphor of burrowing, previously discussed in Section One. The rabbit is a well-known burrower.



Howe Archives, MSS Box 37, Book 10

In an earlier part of the poem Howe writes, 'Burrow and so burrow', reminding us that her method (whether in the archive, or at Lake George) is to burrow (*Singularities* 45). A poetic extract from her journal tells us that this idea of burrowing also extended to language:

Strangeness step to grasp  
by burrowing words

Howe Archives, MSS Box 37, Book 10

This poetic fragment, not used in the final version of 'Thorow', provides an insight into Howe's philosophy of language. That Howe uses the verb form of 'burrowing' reveals the active mobility of language. Such 'burrowing' indicates that words are continually tunnelling in several directions simultaneously, towards multiple definitions and meanings, just as a burrow contains multiple intersecting routes. This tells us that Howe's words are not fixed in a singular conduit system, but rather track towards multiple linguistic outcomes. A burrow is also a small space in which to live, defined as: 'a hole or tunnel excavated into the ground by an animal to create a space suitable for habitation, or temporary refuge' (*OED*). Dwelling in the burrows of language is therefore a transient experience for Howe, as words are a temporary refuge.

The second half of the poetic fragment evokes Howe's feelings about inhabiting the refuge of language. She writes:

we were  
we are born into meaning

Return to our true north  
and dismissal

Howe Archives, MSS Box 37, Book 10

Here the aforementioned ‘burrowing words’ become the means of tunnelling towards home — or true meaning. However challenging Heidegger’s assertion that language is our dwelling-place, Howe argues that if we were ever to reach this mystical ‘home’, we could only inhabit it fleetingly. To reach ‘our true north’ is to be terminally dismissed. In Howe there is no grand desire to dwell within a true origin or meaning. Instead of a secure sense of home then, Howe privileges the burrow, as a space of temporary refuge. This gesture, I argue, is cautious and arguably a retreat. To burrow is not a heroic act of bravery, but rather a protective act of survival. To burrow underground is to hide, and to create a small space within a fixed system. And yet the etymology of burrow comes from borough, meaning a stronghold.<sup>113</sup> As such, in Howe’s oeuvre, burrowing (through archives and through language) can be read both as a space of shelter and also as a poetic stronghold. Howe writes in *The Birth-mark*, ‘If history is a record of survivors, Poetry shelters other voices’ (47).

This sense of refuge is crystallised when we consider the compositional site of ‘Thorow’: situated away from home, in a temporary environment. As Howe admits in the preface: ‘I went there alone... [felt] the first panic of dislocation’ (*Singularities* 40). The poem records Howe’s disorientation, noting her feeling of ‘Apprehension as representation’ (*Singularities* 54). In her journal, Howe writes: ‘I long to go home, home to my house and Guilford... though what I am working on matters. I have been so cut — off I can’t go back unchanged’ (Howe Archives, 201 Box 37, Folder 5). Being cut off, she writes that the loneliness of the lake was profound, describing it as an ‘event of homelessness’ (Howe Archives, 201 Box 37, Folder 5). It is perhaps as a condition of her ‘homelessness’ that the poem evokes such textual instability: the site from which Howe was working was provisional and precarious, which is reflected in her volatile poetic utterance.

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<sup>113</sup> Etymology: Burrow: Of somewhat obscure origin. The forms are identical with those of BOROUGH *n.*, of which the word is commonly regarded as a variant; but the sense is not known to have belonged to Old English *burh*, Old Norse *borg*, or to the parallel form in any Germanic language. Possibly it may be a special use of BOROUGH *n.* 1, stronghold; or else a derivative (unrecorded in Old English and Old Norse) (*OED*).

In her journal Howe articulates this anxiety:

I think my poem ['Thorow'] will be alright though I'm not sure about the end. I could not have written it without coming here — but did I need to? I think so... But then again I need my room my own space to really see it right!

Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 37, Book 5

As this extract tell us, Howe composed the poetic fragments of the poem whilst in Lake George, but it wasn't until she returned home to Guilford, Connecticut that its structural form took shape. The sites of poesis were therefore multiple. This is demonstrated in her journal notes written on-site, and her drafts completed back home. While at Lake George there is a freer, more romantic and even elegiac appreciation of nature, with lines written such as: 'upstate watching the light/ over chaos winged sound' and 'so the snow/ is yet hear/ woods and fields/ all covered with ice/ Seem a world anew' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 37, Book 7). What is later revised at home in Guilford and published in 'Thorow' is far tighter and more considered. She removes the lyrical and expressive undertones, and opts for an unsentimental poetic voice. The line transforms to: 'The snow/ is still hear/ Wood and feld/ all covered with ise/ seem world anew/ Only step/ as surveyor of the Wood/ only step' (*Singularities* 48). The modifications most evident are phonetic, as Howe changes the spellings of 'field' and 'ice' into shorthand or verbal articulations ('feld', 'ise'). The 'hear' of the second line infiltrates the proceeding verse, as there is an attention afforded to the soundscapes of place; the visual scene 'all covered with ise' is treated with synaesthesia, as the optical perception is exchanged for emphasis on the auditory quality of 'ise'. In order to 'seem world anew', a transaction takes place between her original notes and her final poetic text. This transaction is also apparent in the title of the poem, changing 'Thoreau' to 'Thorow'. This change illustrates a 'thorough' phonetic shift and a tough journey 'through' Thoreau to write the final poem (*Singularities* 43). It is through this self-distancing — writing up the poem when she arrived home to Guilford, Connecticut, that Howe was able to detach herself from her immediate experiences of nature. In her movement away from her initial site, the cabin on the lake, to her 'room' at home, Howe was able to 'see' the poem 'right'.

This illustrates the importance of Howe's multiplicity of poetic sites. Lake George becomes just one in a series of refuges that Howe inhabits on her journey through writing 'Thorow'. This is articulated in the poem by the lines 'Home and I hope passage' (*Singularities* 47). This 'passage' may be understood as the possibility of artistic transference from Lake George into different sites. Howe describes this transference of sites further, in an interview with Keller in 1995.

When I wrote "thorow" I was staying for several months alone on a lake in the Adirondacks, and I surrounded myself with books by and about him [Thoreau], so I reached some kind of transference... [Later] I was reading the poem at a poetry festival in Tarascon in Southern France... [it was] out in the country on the steps of an exquisite, tiny, twelfth-century church... and I felt his urgency that I was bringing Thoreau, a quirky New Englander, to Provence, carrying him in my head to this little cathedral of ghosts... it was immediate and had to do with that particular spot and that one night

Keller and Howe

The first key point to address is Howe's claim that by surrounding herself with Thoreau she 'reached some kind of transference'. This is perhaps the first time Howe pronounces a form of telepathy between herself and another writer. Here there is a dualistic synergy occurring between her familiarity with Thoreau, and his affect on her public reading of the poem. Initially then, proximity appears to be key to this transference, as Howe is 'alone' on the lake and 'surrounded' by Thoreau's writings. However, it is at the poetry event in Tarascon when Thoreau's vestigial flicker is fully realised. This experience was again entirely site-specific, as Howe explains it 'had to do with that particular spot and that one night'. In France, among the presence of other 'twelfth-century' spectres, she was able to re-summon Thoreau as an urgent force. Thus, Howe was able to carry Thoreau with her to multiple new sites.

Another instance when the site of the poem was mobilised was during Howe's collaboration with the musician David Grubbs in 2005. Entitled *Thieft*, in the first part Grubbs cuts Howe's voice into phonetic chunks, overlays it with itself, so the poet is repeating, and recalibrating her own ghostly presences. Sometimes emphasising not the words themselves, but the phonic undertones to particular sounds, gasps and intakes of breath, the recording provides an imaginative reading of the poem, enhanced by the use of technology. Later on during the reading, once Howe's voice becomes more recognisable, she can again be heard

reading over herself, layering the poem into entirely new combinations. There is the sound of distant foot-steps, an unrelenting horn, and an awkward, uncomfortable feeling during the piece. The title *Thieft*, taken from the final word in the poem, indicates that Howe has somehow stolen the landscape of Lake George and re-positioned it here in sound. An incantation to place, Howe's spectral collaboration resurrects Lake George's presence. This sonic performance, as well as the reading of 'Thorow' at the Cathedral in France, offers Howe new sites in which to place the poem. Her continual poetic shifts, and Dickinson-like variants, provide an echolaic chamber of resonance. These new sites are redemptive for the poem, as it is set free to reverberate against new forms of enclosure. As a case study for site-specific poetry, Howe uses 'Thorow' to demonstrate the tension between aesthetic freedom, and material restriction. While the poem is conditioned by her physical emplacement, she mobilises its language to enter into new territories of experience.

### Section Three: The Poet's Residence

During an interview with Jon Thompson for *Free Verse* magazine, Howe speaks to the material intersections of place, space and home found in her poetry. She explains:

I don't think I found my voice as a poet until I moved here [Guilford, Connecticut] to this specific landscape with its rocky granite outcroppings, abandoned quarries, marshes, salt hay meadows, most of all Long Island Sound itself. Certain houses near the Guilford Green always remind me of Concord Massachusetts. Probably in 1947 I read Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and *Little Men*. Whenever I opened each treasured edition I saw the same sepia colored photo of the Alcott House spread across the inside cover and first page. Just the spreadsheet was enough for me to create in imagination an ideal originary home... According to Heraclitus: 'We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not.' In the case of Concord — just the name itself is enough. In 2005 Guilford is as close as I can get. Words I follow are like painted trail markers on trees in our West Woods.<sup>114</sup>

Here Howe is announcing, and simultaneously denouncing, herself as a poet of place. While she asserts the direct correlation between her poetic utterance and

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<sup>114</sup> The Westwoods trail system is the largest recreational area for hiking in Guilford. The Westwoods contain 39 miles of trails on 1,200 acres. Within it there are a wide diversity of natural formations such as cave structures, waterfalls, salt and fresh water marshes, an inland tidal lake, carved rock sculptures and rock formations.

the place she inhabits ('I don't think I found my voice as a poet until I moved here') she also complicates any idealistic image of the 'originary [New England] home' by quoting from Heraclitus that 'we are and are not' of that imaginary place. Within this paragraph there is an oscillating momentum that refuses to be restful, even while describing her sense of home her language and intonation are fluid, crystallised in the lines 'we step and do not step'. If, as Howe suggests, 'Guilford is as close as I can get' to any permanent home-like dwelling-place, it is worth unpacking the associations that Guilford has within her aesthetic. Following in Howe's own linguistic tracts, or the 'trail markers on trees in our West Woods' as she describes them, I will now manoeuvre around, in and through Howe's sense of home. Opening with Howe's broader attachment to New England, this section will move inwards, through her long-term residence at 115 New Quarry Road, Guilford, Connecticut, into the walls of her residential workroom/ study, and finally into the book as site. Each of these inhabitations, I argue, operates as a space of refuge through which Howe constructs her poetics of site.

### **'New England is the place I am'**

To speak first of Howe's place, rather than site, we can look to Robert Creeley's, 'A Note on the Local' as a useful poetic forebear. He writes:

THE LOCAL IS NOT a place but a place in a given man — what part of it has been compelled or else brought by love to give witness to it in his own mind. And that is THE FORM, that is the whole thing, as whole as it can get

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Repeatedly we find Howe speaking to the local, to its history, to its literature and to its landscape, and yet we are always made aware of Howe's personal mediation. Creeley's 'giv[ing] witness' is remarkably similar to Howe's mode of local observation. For Howe, bearing witness, enacted in her ability to summon forgotten regional voices, functions as a powerful intervention. By echoing out the particulars of time and place, Howe makes such neglected moments present and crucially newly en-formed. 'THE FORM', as Creeley tells us, 'is the whole thing.' There is an analogous avowal in Howe's poetry; *how* the local gets formed, historically but also poetically, is a vital process enacted in her work.

From the often quoted, 'I can't get away from New England. It's in my heart and practice' (*The Difficulties Interview*, Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 69, Folder

7) to her insistence that: ‘the tale and the place are tied in a mysterious and profound way... trust the place to form the voice’ (*Birth-mark* 156) and her assertion that ‘New England is the place I am’ (*Birth-mark* 47) Howe’s poetry often dedicates itself to the particularities of place and the minutiae of the local.<sup>115</sup> As she notes in a journal from 1989: ‘Life is local, local to a place, and particular persons. Life happens somewhere not everywhere’ (Howe’s emphasis, Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 37, Book 9). Howe’s critics have addressed the importance of place in her poetry. Thompson theorises Howe’s relation to place in his comments during their 2005 interview:

[Talking about] the importance of language and place in your poetry. That seems instructive and right; at the same time, though, when I read your poetry, place is, in the space of the poem, de-contextualized. Or is it that language, for you, is less about representing a particular place and more about revealing the way in which ‘placeness’ seeps into the materiality of language? Could you talk about that relationship? Are you interested in bringing the placeness of Connecticut, of New England into your own work?

Howe’s response to these probing questions was cited at the beginning of this section, where she describes New England as the place ‘we step and do not step’, which proves to be a tricky and fluctuating answer. Yet Thompson’s own remarks are perhaps even more instructive. Place is, as Thompson suggests, entirely de-contextualised in Howe’s work. The page itself, with its linguistic fragments, shards of semantics and broken off trails of thought attests to no singular demonstrable place. A sense of place is often inferred, but it is never certified in Howe’s verse: place-ness remains hesitant, anxious and ultimately unrepresentable.

Tzvia Back surmises that Howe does not ‘trespass in places where she can only be an observer’ (8). There is an active lyric presence and position taking in Howe’s poetry of place. ‘The mark on the landscape and the role of place’ as Back explains, functions through demarcations of territory, boundaries and positions taken within a framed space (3). Howe’s native New England has a particularly

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<sup>115</sup> Howe has also acknowledged the importance of other national dwelling places, most notably the Dublin of *The Liberties* published in 1980. This early poem has the grand ambition to construct a form of Dublin through the verse, but this was gradually exchanged for a more acute emphasis on the miniature, and the domestic, as found in the poems of *The Midnight* published in 2003.

difficult relation to such positions, as a contested space throughout its colonial history. Thus Howe feels intimately connected with her specific locale, but, due to its complex political landscape, she is also a foreigner, an outsider and an exile — unable to comfortably settle there. This idea is echoed in her journal, as she describes her Irish born mother Mary Manning's permanent sense of displacement: 'That's what mummy was what she did for me produced miracles and dreams and a sense of being always outside which she was — not being in Ireland and not being at home in America — but that has been a gift' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 37, Book 5). Howe's status as a terminal outsider is one of her most useful tools; she is able to exploit her position to proliferate historical linkages both from within and without, expounding an American-ness that is both authentic and accountable, and simultaneously distanced and objective. As she articulates in 'Scare Quotes I': 'I cling to you with all my divided attention. Itinerantly. It's the maternal Anglo-Irish disinheritance' (*The Midnight* 66). Disinherited from place, Howe confirms her intrinsic mobility, performing 'itinerantly' in her poems. Her sense of home-place is only ever a primary point of departure; she uses her complex feelings of dislocation to work through the difficult junctions of place, site and language.

The most apt characterisation of Howe's approach is as a desire for emplacement — to be located 'in place' (23). Casey theorises this type of 'implacement' in what he terms the 'place-world' (24). He argues that implacement is 'between orientation and inhabitation [where] we are neither disoriented or settled' (24). Casey's careful use of the double negative here, 'neither disoriented', implies that we are not oriented either; existing in this estranged convergence between orientation and disorientation, inhabitation and unsettlement, Howe's poetics operate through a terminally shifting set of bearings. Her account of place therefore occurs *in-situ* — she is in position responding to the particulars of place via her active and on-going emplacement within a specific zone. But this emplacement *in-situ* is contingent: her position is provisional as she is usually located somewhere temporarily.

### **'I feel deeply at home here'**

Turning to the specificity of Howe's residential site, her home in Guilford, Connecticut, this section will now consider how her domestic emplacement

operates in her poetry. In April 1984, Howe would make an important move, to her new home at 115 New Quarry Road, Guilford. In a letter to Lyn Hejinian she explains:

We are moving into the woods just near where we are now. Really less of a suburban road—only 3 houses though our number is 115. We have four and a half acres of woods and real privacy. The house is smaller and humbler and much nicer in a way—wood floors, a window seat in the kitchen—its cheaper which is why we did it—but then its nicer too.

Hejinian Papers, MSS 74, Box 4, Folder 18

At Howe's residence, economic necessity is combined with pleasant interiors and the demand for 'real privacy'. Her Guilford home is a centrifugal force in her poetry; it is the private site from which she can explore the contours of public history. There are numerous references to the importance of Howe's home throughout her diaries, journals and notes collected in her archive. She describes that '[for] so many many years I felt a stranger everywhere but I feel deeply at home here' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 37, Book 5). During the late 1980s and early 1990s Howe worked at the University of Buffalo in Upstate New York, eventually co-founding the poetics program with Charles Bernstein in 1991. However she felt displaced and disillusioned by the frequent need to travel in order to achieve an income. She describes to Hejinian in a letter from 1991 how: 'All my efforts are to hold onto this house where I feel my soul as a poet dwells' (Hejinian Papers, MSS 74, Box 22, Folder 13). Howe describes 115 New Quarry Road as a productive aesthetic space: a site where her poetic 'soul' could take refuge.

In her notebooks, Howe writes frequently of the house and its significance. One extract reads:

Sandhills dwindled away  
House alone in my head  
Go to mystic swallowing jokes, hinges, corner,  
attics, fingers, feathers

Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 12, Book 2

In a Dickinsonian refraction, Howe articulates the mind functioning as a type of domestic interior in the line: 'house alone in my head'. The thoughts expressed follow the model of the household, with 'jokes' working like hinges, and hidden 'corner[s]' and 'attics' as the forgotten recesses of the mind. This is reminiscent of the way Barbara Guest first approaches the aestheticisation of domestic space,

particularly in her early poems like 'Escape' (1945) and 'Belgravia' (1962). Guest and her husband, Trumbull Higgins, went for dinner at Howe's house in 1988. In a thank-you note posted afterwards, Guest writes to Howe: 'The memory of your delightful house still sallies in my mind' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 33, Book 7). While Howe never establishes a poetic homescape in the way that Guest does, she frequently references her home in letters and poetic drafts. It is clear that for Howe and Guest, as for Niedecker, maintaining a comfortable domestic space was prioritised.

Howe has detailed the benefits and drawbacks of living a fairly withdrawn lifestyle, in the secluded Westwoods of Connecticut. In 1978 she announces to the cosmopolitan West coast poet Hejinian: 'As to the "Poetry Scene" I am pathetically and wonderfully out of it. Mainly because I live out here' (Hejinian Papers, MSS 74 Box 4, Folder 18). Whilst avoiding the pitfalls and fallouts of the East coast poetry scene of nearby New York, Howe moans to friend George Butterick in 1981: '*This is the problem with being a self-educated recluse — I don't get information — [I] might have had it, had I been one of a company of like-minded poets*' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 33, Book 5). Howe describes herself as 'the ultra country mouse' and has indicated that 'my best work was when I was isolated here [in Guilford] and had no other distractions. Aloneness helped' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 37 Book 8).<sup>116</sup> For Howe separation was crucial, yet this had to be meticulously balanced with some integration into the contemporary poetry world, through publication, readings and performances. As she notes wryly in 'Scare Quotes II': 'It is fun to be hidden but horrible not to be found — the question is how to be isolated without being insulated' (*The Midnight* 27). Despite being friendly with a large number of poets and associated with the Language School, Howe's archival documents reveal her physical and aesthetic separation. Howe's physical seclusion, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, reveal that her poetry was forming autonomously.

### **'My room made a bid for me'**

To further scrutinise the specific nature of Howe's home-site, we must travel inwards — into her private workroom. While the archive, as a complex and

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<sup>116</sup> In her Lake George journal she also notes: 'I live so deeply in books and in just looking and feeling the landscape. You can't do this to this extent unless you are completely alone' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 37, Folder 5).

heavily theorised public space, is a readily acknowledged site for Howe's poetic labour, her domestic workroom is certainly of equal importance in her daily literary practice. As her sojourn at Lake George made clear, working on-site, whether that is in the archive or beyond, is only ever Howe's first step towards poetic composition. It is from within Howe's 'room of one's own' that she completes her aesthetic work (Woolf 6). This distinction marks a significant turn for Howe criticism; while her position-taking in the archive has been well documented, there has been no analysis to date that accounts for the importance of Howe's domestic site. This site, I argue, offers valuable new insights into her sustained engagement with domestic spaces and into her own compositional methods. In discussion with Al Filreis in March 2010, she reveals that poesis takes place within a single domestic room of her home:

I have done all my writing in one big room of my house, I must have tables, big tables, drawing tables, I can't have enough tables

Howe and Filreis

Howe's 'big drawing tables' invoke her time as a visual artist. Like Guest, Howe requires space to work, and crucially, large surfaces in which to construct her visual/ spatial poetry. Filreis goes on to ask: '[Is] the environment is very important to you?' (Howe and Filreis). Howe's reply is straightforward: 'yes which is why I don't leave this house, which I should leave, it's the one room I can't leave' (Howe and Filreis). This restricted sense of interior space, being only 'one room' that Howe requires aesthetically, recalls Dickinson's bedroom.

Later in the discussion, Howe states 'my room made a bid for me', suggesting that the specific domestic room had authority over the poet (Howe and Filreis). It is from within the confines of the domestic workroom that Howe locates creative labour, as one archival fragment reads: 'my room and generations of women/ Striving' (Howe archives, MSS 201, Box 14, Book 3). Howe's notebooks and journals reveal her fascination with domestic space. During the 1980s she made several word assemblages collected in her workbooks, which centre on rooms/ home/ walls. Moreover, there is a whole section of Howe's archive that is labelled 'Wall Materials'.<sup>117</sup> These folders preserve the wall coverings of Howe's workrooms during different artistic moments. Each folder contains a mixture of

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<sup>117</sup> Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 71, Folders 11-15 'Wall Materials'.

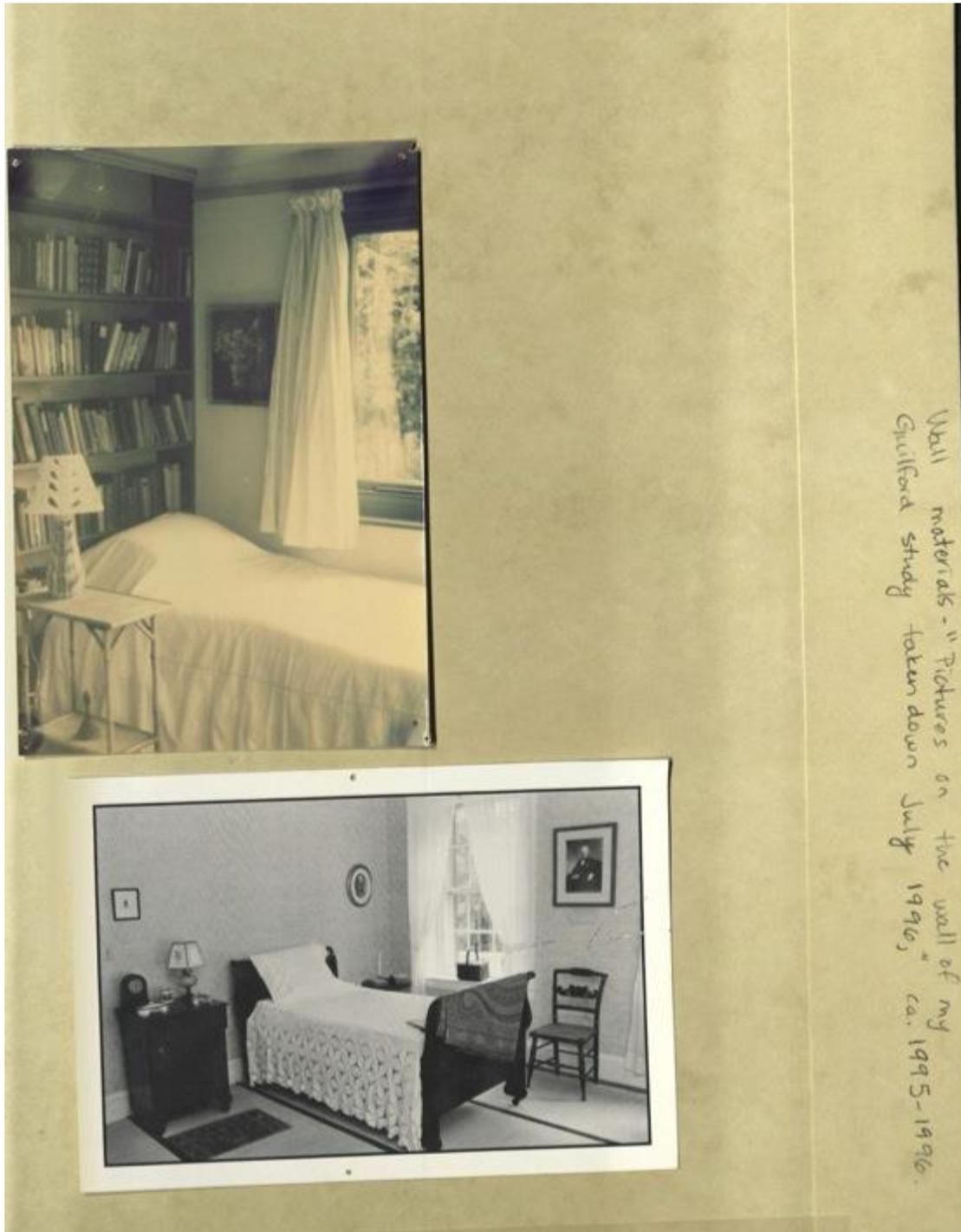
drawings, postcards and quotations, handwritten on scrap paper. These items would have been meticulously arranged and cellotaped to her workroom wall. This layering of inspiring fragments turned Howe's walls into a palimpsest.<sup>118</sup> Although she was no longer working as a visual artist, Howe meticulously constructed her visual environment<sup>119</sup>.

Listed below are a few examples of the kind of materials Howe pasted around her workroom: A postcard with a drawing of Keats, sketched on his death bed by friend Joseph Severn; *Rain, Steam and Speed — the Great Western Railway* by J.M.W. Turner; *Ariel* by Henry Fuseli; postcard of Austin Dickinson with the inscription on the back 'My Austin Dickinson'; 'Alone' poem by Edgar Allan Poe; two quotations from *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville, including: "There she breaches! There she breaches!" was the cry, as in his immeasurable bravados the White Whale tossed himself salmon-like to Heaven'; quotation from Howe's *The Europe of Trusts*: 'Slope the unmastered houses/ ghostly architecture/ fire forgotten' (123); family photographs; newspaper cuttings of a photo of her second husband, the sculptor David Von Schlegell (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 71, Folders 11-15).

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<sup>118</sup> The fact that Howe kept meticulous records of these wall coverings, and preserved them carefully, demonstrates their overall significance. The large amount of materials demonstrate that her workroom was large, and that most of the walls on every side, would have been covered over.

<sup>119</sup> It is worth noting here, without the space to fully tease out the similarities, that Howe's daughter, the visual artist R.H.Quaytman (Rebecca Quaytman) is a contemporary installation and site-specific artist living in New York. She is best known for painting on wood panels, using abstract and photographic elements in site-specific 'Chapters', now numbering twenty-five. Each Chapter is guided by architectural, historical and social characteristics of the original site. Quaytman works in archives, and she also makes architectural models of rooms, placing small paintings in them and photographing the arrangements. We can perceive a mutual reciprocity going on between mother and daughter, as site-specific art and poetry feed into one another.



Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 71, Folder 13

These two bedroom images, pinned up side-by-side on her wall, are particularly revealing. The second is a postcard of Dickinson's bedroom at the Dickinson homestead, in Amherst, Massachusetts, most likely printed by the Dickinson museum. The first is a photograph of another bedroom, presumably

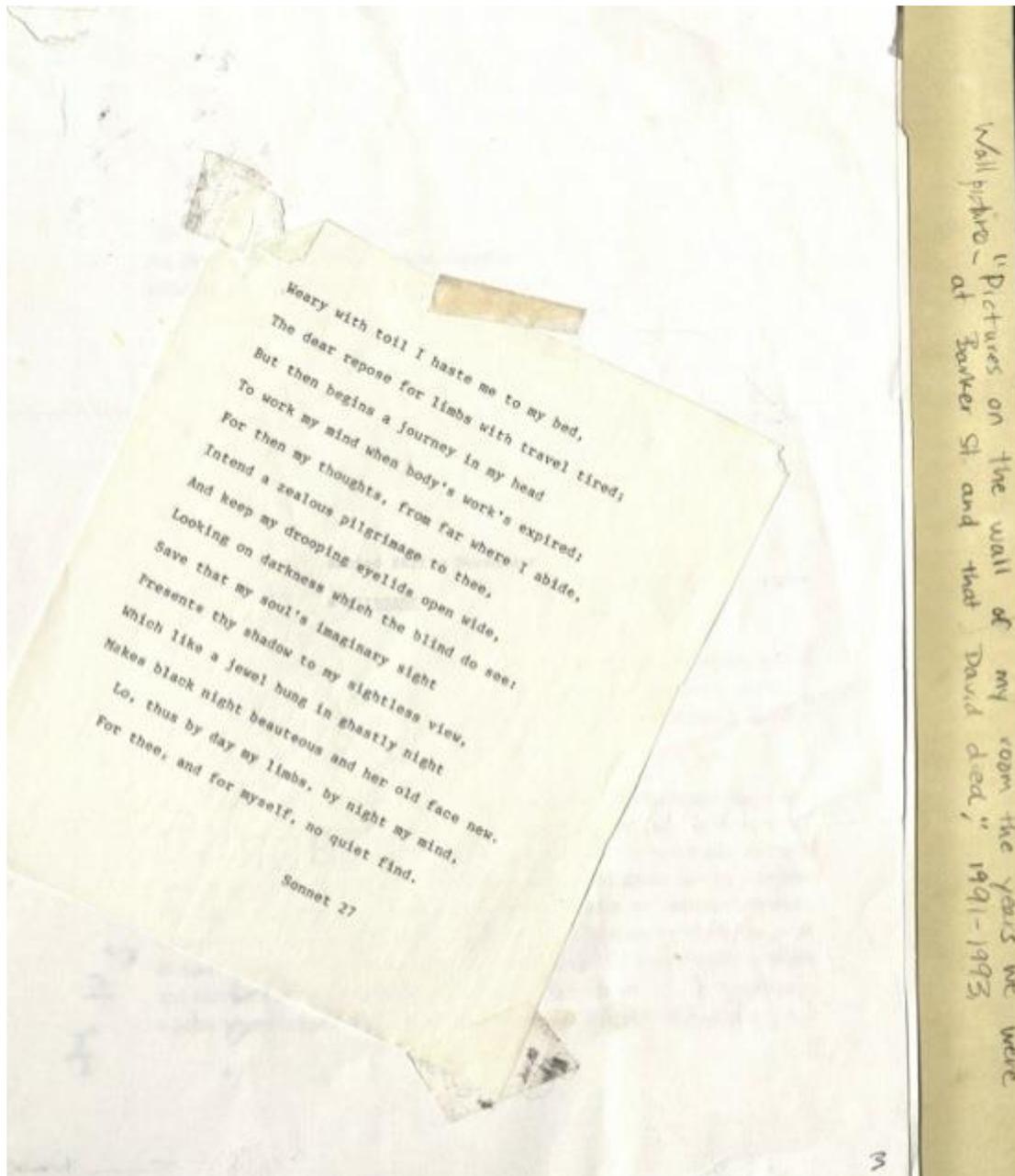
Howe's.<sup>120</sup> There is a wonderful synchronicity to the images, as the bed appears at the same angle, with the window on the right hand side and a lamp on the bedside table. Assuming that this first image is in fact Howe's bedroom, the intimacy of the photographic pair demonstrates her deep interest in personal and poetic inhabitations. Here Howe's own sleeping space is reminiscent of Dickinson's, an association that locates Howe through Dickinson in her most private space. The two images, pinned up together on Howe's wall, illustrate that the pair were bedfellows. Even if the photo is not of Howe's bedroom, the preservation of the two images indicates a fascination with mirroring spaces. Moreover, there is evidence from her correspondence with Hejinian, that Howe worked and slept in the same room, just as Dickinson did (Hejinian Papers, MSS 74, Box 4, Folder 18). As such, Howe reads their compositional sites as equivalent: she seeks *aesthetic* correspondence with Dickinson through a shared *physical* resting place. This fusion of artistic sites is reminiscent of Guest, who also sought aesthetic communion through layering her studio with that of Paul Cézanne and Wassily Kandinsky.

Howe provides some context to these pictures, disclosing that these were, 'Pictures on the wall of my Guilford study, taken down in July 1996' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 71, Folder 13). It was around this time that Howe began work on her collection *Pierce-Arrow*, which centres on Charles S. Peirce, the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher-scientist and founder of pragmatism, which may account for her desire to 'take down' the Dickinson influence. Such details reveal that Howe covered her walls with creative stimulus: she lived among her poetic subjects. Elsewhere in the 'Wall Materials' folder, Howe is equally exacting in her descriptions, giving us precise dates and explications of their significance. For example, 'Wall materials — "my loved ones, move" 1985-1996', and 'Pictures on the wall of my room the years we were at Barker St. and that David died, 1991-1993' (MSS 201, Box 71, Folders 11-15). Shakespeare's sonnet 27 makes an appearance in this collection, but the poem was stuck at an angle onto another sheet of paper, which is reminiscent of Howe's compositional techniques. Here,

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<sup>120</sup> There are no markings on this photograph, so it is impossible to state for certain whose bedroom it is, but common sense would suggest that Howe would be unlikely to have a photo of a stranger's bedroom alongside Dickinson's.

as with the citations which appear from her own poetry, Howe is literally writing her physical environment.



Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 71, Folder 14

In a letter to Hejinian from 1980, Howe explains the importance of these wall coverings:

In my room where I sleep and work [I] have a lovely large copy of the portrait of the 3 [Brontë] sisters (painted by Branwell with himself erased by himself in their midst). It is a talisman of sorts.

Hejinian Papers, MSS 74, Box 4, Folder 18

Howe labels her wall coverings as talismanic, which indicates that she is imbuing them with a mystical force. She implies that such objects enable aesthetic

transference. It is almost as if the walls themselves are summoning Howe's literary practice. She works through this idea in a later interview.

Years ago a friend gave me a postcard reproduction I've kept pinned on the wall to the left of the computer screen, so I am facing it while I write. It's a detail from J.M.W. Turner's "The Angel Standing in the Sun." Emily Dickinson read Ruskin's *Modern Painters*; she recycled a passage for use in one of her so-called "Master Letters." I am pretty sure that Ruskin's account of how Turner's myriad watercolor sketches gradually drop away from detail into an epiphany of undecidability, may have encouraged her own writing-drawing process in her very late work. In this color photo reproduction the Angel of Revelation is brandishing a sword in his right hand. His dazzled gaze is toward infinite light. He could be traveling.... 'out upon Circumference — Beyond the dip of Bell —'

An Open Field

Howe begins with the Turner postcard, gifted from a friend. From there she quickly turns to Turner's critic Ruskin, in order to establish another relation — to Dickinson. The image itself, pinned up next to Howe's computer 'while' she writes, is totemic: an object which traces back the lineage of Howe's writing to Ruskin's criticism of Turner, and then full circle back to Dickinson. This intricate linkage of seemingly disparate artistic moments is a typical Howe manoeuvre. She elects to work through these relations and actively draw out their interdependence. This inter-dependence begins with Dickinson's own mode of citation, as 'she recycled a passage for use in one of her so-called "Master Letters."' Howe makes a direct comparison between Dickinson's weaving citational technique and experiencing Turner's vision of 'undecidability'.



*The Angel Standing in the Sun* by J. W. Turner

Ruskin's interpretation of Turner's 'undecidability' is directly correlative to Dickinson's own creative process — her variant words, her constant redrafts and particularly the materiality of her handwritten manuscripts. Howe documents how aesthetic correspondence lays deep in the creative consciousness. Teasing out this correspondence, Howe conjures a new aesthetic tradition: a tradition that does not rely upon external factors like nationality or gender, but upon internal aesthetic correspondence. She positions Dickinson at the centre of this new tradition. The basis for Turner and Dickinson's similarity is drawn out through Dickinson's poem, 'I saw no Way - The Heavens were stitched' (*Poems* 286).<sup>121</sup> Through the verses there is a contracting and expanding poetic homescape, which invokes the potentiality of vast artistic worlds existing within

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<sup>121</sup>

I saw no Way - The Heavens were stitched -  
 I felt the Columns close -  
 The Earth reversed her Hemispheres -  
 I touched the Universe -

And back it slid - and I alone -  
 A Speck upon a Ball-  
 Went out upon Circumference-  
 Beyond the Dip of Bell-

*Poems* 286

confined space. Like the ‘Angel of Revelation’ Howe too is travelling ‘Beyond the Dip of Bell—’ in her poetic workroom. The Turner postcard ‘pinned on the wall’ reminds her that her physical emplacement should never constrain her expansive poetic imagination.

### **‘All roads lead to rooms’**

Within Howe’s domestic site, we run up against the productive tensions of enclosure and liberation. This is made explicit through her stability in her Guilford home, set against the political urgency enacted by mobility in her verse, as discussed in Section One. What emerges is a disjunction between Howe’s theory of literary nomadism and her physical entrenchment in her Guilford homestead. How we reconcile these differences, and whether they are in fact reconcilable, is at the centre of Howe’s poetics of site. Potential for reconciliation can be located in Howe’s announcement that:

I hope my sense of limit is never fixed. All roads lead to rooms is an old Irish saying. An aphorism and a pun... A poet is a foreigner in her own language. I don’t want to stay inside.

Howe Archives, MSS 201 Box 69, Folder 6

This extract demonstrates a master-class in dialetheism.<sup>122</sup> Howe both rejects and concedes to enclosed parameters in her statement, ‘I hope my sense of limit is never fixed’. This line enacts a subjective (‘sense’) and processual (‘never fixed’) account of boundaries. Even more instructive is her reference to the phrase, ‘All roads lead to rooms’. This expression could be inverted for Howe’s purposes, so instead, or as well, could read: ‘All rooms lead to roads’. Both versions work equally well to describe the intricacy of Howe’s poetics of site. If she begins on a nomadic path, wandering the archives of her New England ancestors, she must inevitably return home — to her domestic compositional site in Guilford. If she begins at home however, as in ‘all rooms lead to roads’, she unsettles her domesticity through artistic transference, as with the Turner postcard, which leads her towards new aesthetic crossroads. What is clear is that Howe’s physical entrenchment within her domestic site is entirely generative of

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<sup>122</sup> Dialetheism is the view that some statements can be both true and false simultaneously. More precisely, it is the belief that there can be a true statement whose negation is also true. Such statements are called true contradictions, dialetheia, or nondualisms. This is a term Howe uses in *The Midnight*.

her academic/ poetic itinerancy. Her seemingly irreconcilable positions, living at home, but being aesthetically nomadic — are mutually dependant.

However, it should be acknowledged that Howe's ability to occupy both of these positions — of domestic stability and academic itinerancy — is entirely privileged. Due to her white Anglophone identity, and particularly her scholarly upbringing, Howe has the ability to implant herself within and against the traditions of imperial home-making. Whilst Howe's oeuvre does much to disrupt the colonial project of expansionism through a sustained engagement with unsettling textual territories, the fact that Howe occupies private property in Guilford raises questions around her *license* to enact such literary nomadism. Returning to Howe's verse, we witness her negotiation of this privilege, as well as an interrogation of how such position-taking has functioned in American history. The circumferential wanderings of Hope Atherton provide one example. But instability comes in many forms, and in her journals Howe documents that financial precarity and domestic obligations were restrictive upon her creative sovereignty. As with Lorine Niedecker, who consistently suffered with economic uncertainty, there were periods when Howe too was financially unstable. In 1989, Fanny Howe, younger sister to Susan, was offered tenure at the University of California at San Diego, for a salary of \$46,00 a year. Howe notes wryly of the news: 'The same day I worked at Breakwater Books all day and earned \$5.50 an hour. The only job I can get' (Howe Archives, MSS 201 Box 37, Book 5). Howe often found herself in a position of economic dependency, and it is unclear whether she owned property before the 1990s.

In 1984, in another letter to Hejinian, Howe offers a rare glimpse into the domestic dynamics of her second marriage. She reveals:

David does nothing but retire to his studio suddenly he has many projects — ahem. They are all in his head but the male head being more important than the female because in this family sculpture earns money — not poetry — my head must go on hold.

Hejinian Papers, MSS 74, Box 4, Folder 18

Throughout their 40-year correspondence, Howe and Hejinian discuss the roles and responsibilities of motherhood and childrearing frequently. 'It is a conflict', Howe writes, 'Does it mean a man can bring more time, energy, unspoilt intensity to his art? I wonder?' (Hejinian Papers, MSS 74, Box 4, Folder 18). Despite

coming from the next literary generation, Howe — like Guest before her — still suffered gender discrimination and did not have ‘unspoilt’ time for poetry writing.

Dickinson emerges as a central figure in reconciling this tension between domestic entrapment and artistic liberation. Howe describes her workroom as ‘womb and tomb alike and I do fine’ and she articulates how she needs the quiet to sleep: ‘I am simply insane on the subject of noise at night. I almost have to be in a coffin to be happy’ (Hejinian Papers, MSS 74, Box 4, Folder 13). This tomb-like sense of confinement is vividly conceptualised by Dickinson’s verse, as she imagines the interstices between autonomous space and physical restriction. The poem, ‘This Chasm, Sweet, upon my life’ invokes Dickinson’s chosen enclosed site, remaining in the homestead, described as ‘close[d]’ like a ‘tomb’ (*Poems*, 431-432).<sup>123</sup> Howe too selects tomb-like confinement, which illustrates her desire not to perform a projective, outward poetics, but an interior, restrained verse form.

Howe’s 2003 collection *The Midnight* is imbued with this deep sense of interiority. It reads bed-hangings and closets as spaces of intimate privacy: the

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This Chasm, Sweet, upon my life  
I mention it to you,  
When Sunrise through a fissure drop  
The Day must follow too.

If we demur, its gaping sides  
Disclose as 'twere a Tomb  
Ourself am lying straight wherein  
The Favourite of Doom.

When it has just contained a Life  
Then, Darling, it will close  
And yet so bolder every Day  
So turbulent it grows

I'm tempted half to stitch it up  
With a remaining Breath  
I should not miss in yielding, though  
To Him, it would be Death -

And so I bear it big about  
My Burial - before  
A Life quite ready to depart  
Can harass me no more-

*Poems 431-432*

bed hangings act as a border between shared domestic space and private individual withdrawal. Furthermore, in the poem Howe discloses, 'I am an insomniac who goes to bed in a closet' (*The Midnight* 43). Closet here, indicating 'A room for privacy or retirement; a private room; an inner chamber', may refer to Howe's bedroom — her private compositional site (*OED*). But the 'closet' could also infer the interiority of Howe's mind; as an insomniac she spends the night thinking, rather than sleeping.<sup>124</sup> Like Dickinson, Howe merges her enclosed domestic space with the autonomy of her mind: they become a single poetic refuge.<sup>125</sup>

### **Howe's Interior: Tracing the 'echo-fragments'**

This sense of interiority is played out in many of Howe's poems; she frequently appropriates her own autobiography and personal life into her work. As Tzvia Back explicates, 'the historical terrain Howe's poetry traverses is at all times informed and propelled by the personal' (2). While her poems are historically orientated, they are also the story of family and home. Poems chart her childhood and ancestry, working to expand and re-conceptualise her own Puritan genealogy. This familial angle has been undervalued by some Howe criticism, which tends to focus on her wider political historicity. However, Montgomery outlines Howe's investment in both an individual and a collective history, tracing the linguistic expressions of both lines of descent. This is where Howe places herself, argues Montgomery, as '[t]he poetic voice engaged in this lexical drift [that] is felt to be private but knows itself to be public' (xvi). Howe may retreat into the 'closet', but such private withdrawal enables her to carry out her public work. While she takes refuge in the interior of her home, such interiors eventually make their way into the public space of poetry.

This idea is taken up in 'The Disappearance Approach', the opening prose poem in Howe's 2010 collection *That This*. Written as an elegy for her third husband, the distinguished Professor Peter. H Hare, the poem enacts the

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<sup>124</sup> See for example, Shakespeare's Sonnet XXVII, which Howe had up on her writing room wall. It begins:

Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,  
The dear repose for limbs with travel tired;  
But then begins a journey in my head  
To work my mind, when body's work's expired.

<sup>125</sup> This sense of enclosed work-space is also found in Howe's conception of the 'burrow'.

taxonomy of absence felt after the death of her companion. The poem is bold and veil-less; there is a bare and raw brutality to Howe's loss, the second death of a husband in less than fifteen years, which marks this as a pronounced example of interior life in Howe's praxis. While we are offered archival fragments from the family of Jonathan Edwards, Milton, W.H. Auden, Nicolas Poussin and Ovid, the dispersal of these sections does little to disguise the visceral lack that Howe documents. The choreography of this dispersal, with short paragraphs of descriptive narrative, self-reflexive interventions and citations, creates an irregular weaving pattern that lulls the reader into a dream-like state of suspension. Howe acknowledges this affect and her own purpose in its construction: 'Everything appears in a deliberately constructed manner as if the setting of our story was always architectural' (*That This* 15). In fact, the setting of Howe's story *is* architectural. Peter's house in Buffalo plays a vital role in disclosing this poetics of absence. In the opening section of the poem we are told, 'The house was so still. I called his name. No answer', as if the house recognised Peter's death before she did (*That This* 11). Later, Howe describes: 'I want to fill this room between our workspaces with flowers because light flows through them — the scent is breath or spirit of life against my dread of being alone' (*That This* 19). It is the house that contains the enormity of Howe's emptiness; she articulates her hollowed out interiority through the 'silence' of the domestic sphere.

There is a concerted effort to 'return to people we have loved and lost' in this poem, carved out by attending to the sites that they inhabited (*That This* 19). First, Howe attempts this through a re-examination of Peter's language, 'I was impatient with your verbal tics. "All squared away." Now I would turn to listen with elation' (16). Here Peter's linguistic distinctiveness is re-mobilised in an attempt to diminish the distance between them. Later, Howe finds objects of remembrance, the 'treasures of knowledge we cluster around', most notably Peter's 'old photograph albums' which contain residues of 'pre-communicable penumbral associations' (17, 18). Such objects can illuminate pre-linguistic connectives to those who have died, Howe suggests. Music is another mode of latent reincarnation. Mid-way through Howe describes how the music of Jean Redpath 'brings my mother back into the room' (29). The house is slowly

becoming re-peopled with the singing of ‘The Raggle Taggle Gypsies’ on her ipod (27). Finally Howe ‘restores order’ with ‘covering rituals’; she enters Peter’s room in the hope of locating him: “‘I’ll go to him—I’ll find him’” she insists (17, 18).

What Howe clings to most explicitly is Peter’s study, ‘the room I loved most... A large dilapidated desk his father, a modernist architect, designed and constructed during the 1930s, was littered with old syllabi, letters and journals’ (*That This* 18). Throughout the poem there is a meticulous attention paid to the spaces shared by the couple. Howe theorises this effort at re-locating him in an earlier section:

Somewhere I read that relations between sounds and objects, feelings and thoughts, develop by association; language attaches to and envelopes its referent without destroying or changing it—the way a cobweb catches a fly.

13

Howe articulates the associations of Peter’s life, his study, his books, and his belongings, in the hope that somehow, through this enunciation, Peter’s essence will be enveloped within it. Through the descriptive quality of the language attached to its subject, Howe hopes to catch a glimpse of Peter, ‘the way a cobweb catches a fly’. This utopian aspiration is coupled with the acknowledgement that the language of this enunciation can only ever be a mirror image, or ‘negative double’, of reality (13).

At moments this double-ness is characterised as ‘unpresentable violence’ (*That This* 13); Peter’s mirror image, or linguistic double, is a violent act on his essence. His body, like his language is now a shadow, crystalised in the phrase ‘you shadow mouth’ (14). Howe’s poetic form is but a shadow too, an utterance that cannot do justice to the embodiment of the man himself. Yet Howe clings to the possibility of artistic redemption, asking: ‘Can a trace become the thing it traces, secure as ever, real as ever — a chosen set of echo-fragments?’ (29). While poetic language is but a spectral ‘trace’, in assembling such ‘fragments’ then together they can echo forth a vital new presence. As with Peter’s belongings, Howe finds a refuge in the *attempt*; she can detect a vestige of her husband through her attempt to reassemble him linguistically. In his 2011 collection, *Threshold Songs*, Peter Gizzi (a former student of Howe’s at Buffalo) describes the grieving process as ‘being in loss’ (33). Howe too materialises the

tangible presence of grief, as ‘the sense of being present at a point of absence where crossing centuries may prove to be like crossing languages’ (*That This* 31). Through her emplacement ‘at a point of absence’ in their home, Howe is afforded access to the junctures of lost family voices and histories.

Howe captures this idea of presence in absence in the poem, in her description of the ‘Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library’ (*That This* 30). She documents its sheer physicality, ‘constructed from Vermont marble and granite, bronze and glass’, and she also describes the materiality of her archival processes, using ‘One or two stuffed oblong cloth containers, known in the trade as snakes, [to] hold the volume open’ (30). This emphasis on tangible presence functions to heighten Peter’s bodily absence. Howe also captures the significance of the haptic in these sections. Howe documents the tactility of the page as a form of touch; she tells us anecdotally about ‘reading Xerox copies’, or ‘the “invisible” scotch tape’ she uses in an effort to heighten the haecceity of particular haptic forms (30). There is an emphasis upon the textures of the page that correlates directly to the proceeding poem in the collection, entitled ‘That This’, which centres on Jonathan Edwards’ family. Recounting the writing practices of the family, we are told:

The folio-size double leaves Jonathan, Sarah, and his ten tall sisters wrote on were often homemade: hand-stitched from linen rags salvaged by women from worn out clothing. Grassroots out-of-tune steps and branches, quotations of psalms, dissonant scripture clusters, are pressed between coarse cardboard covers with frayed edges.

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By handling the homemade manuscripts, Howe achieves a valuable closeness to the Edwards family, not proffered by language alone. Finding a method of reading the fabric of objects, and particularly reading the ‘relations between sounds and objects’, becomes Howe’s wider project in *That This*.

This is also true of her latest publication, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*, where Howe announces that her artistic vision has been formulated through the haptic. She synthesises sight and touch in the line, ‘Place one in my looking-glass hands’ (*Spontaneous* 41). In her latest collections, Howe demonstrates the vital correlation between past and present material embodiments. Howe validates the importance of the non-linguistic in reading and feeling, the textures of textuality. Touching, or reaching out, become for

Howe a more legitimate process of reincarnation, able to reanimate the lost voices of history through a transmission of material forms. In the middle of *That This* Howe invokes W.H. Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*. But she chooses not to quote it directly, and instead paraphrases it for us, as: 'One beautiful sentence about the way we all reach and reach but never touch' (*That This* 18). The line exists as an enactment of absence: we are not privy to touching, or closing in on Auden's actual lines. Instead we get Howe's translation — a shadow of the former articulation — which, as Auden describes, is the best we can hope to achieve through language. As Howe speculates later on:

Do we communicate in mirror languages, through some  
inherent sense of form, in every respect but touch? Do we ever  
know each other; know who we really are? Midas, King Midas  
— is the secret we take away with us — touch

*That This* 34

This extract reasons that language alone is inadequate for human contact. Instead, as with the Turner/ Dickinson aesthetic equivalence which occurred through their formal correspondence, here our 'sense of form' operates as another 'mirror language'. But this 'form', reasons Howe, rarely approaches the haptic. It is only a 'mirror', a shadowy untouchable trace. Referencing the Greek myth of King Midas, who turned everything he touched into gold, Howe suggests that 'touch' may in fact be our most important sensory affect. This thesis is expanded in *Spontaneous Particulars*, as Howe reflects: 'To reach is to touch' (60). Again it is the attempt that is most valuable; in trying to reach out, in trying to connect, we are denied and simultaneously permitted, the pleasure of contact.

### **'The study was its heart'**

Before Howe was able to cross into the wilderness of libraries and archives, she was first permitted into the secretive space of the residential study. As outlined above, Peter's study becomes the key to unlocking his history, memory and his corporeality. In an interview with the Paris review, Howe discloses the childhood significance of the study to her household:

By the time I was thirteen, we had moved several times, but finally we bought a house in Cambridge... the room we called the study was its heart. My father came home from work regularly every day around six o'clock. Then my parents had cocktails in the study and we gathered with them there before supper. That's where all the books were. Two of the walls were completely lined with bookcases. On one were classics and

sets, histories, and reference books—sets of histories by Parkman, and British classics like Dickens—they both loved Dickens— Trollope, George Eliot, that sort of thing. Nothing was ever alphabetically arranged. It was helter-skelter. On the other wall were my mother's books. They were almost all Irish. Poetry and plays. Yeats of course, Elizabeth Bowen, Austin Clarke, Joyce, Synge, Shaw, Ernie O'Malley, biographies of Jonathan Swift, narratives of the Easter Rebellion and the Irish Civil War—some very tattered, which gave them an air of having been carried through danger. In my imagination the divided bookshelves were separate worlds. I used to just love looking at the spines and their varieties. Wandering and looking.

Howe and McLane

It is not unusual that, for Howe, the study — the room filled with books and 'worlds' — was a special site, ripe for 'wandering and looking'. It was in her childhood home that Howe gains her first access to imaginative escapism. Or as Dickinson puts it, 'It is still as distinct as paradise, the opening of your first book. It is mansions, nations, kinsmen, too, to me' (*Letters* 303). The study becomes a site of refuge in Howe's conceptualisation, as a place where books have found a home, as 'some [were] very tattered' as if they had been 'carried through danger'. Further on in the same interview Howe reiterates this claim, stating 'If I can get into a library—public libraries or even a bookstore—I feel safe, and that probably goes back to our library at home' (Howe and McLane). Howe's use of the word 'safe' reminds us that, for writers like Howe and Dickinson, the public world was often perilous.

What is most conspicuous about Howe's description is the unusually social atmosphere of the Howe family study, as the place in which 'my parents had cocktails... and we gathered with them there before supper'. In this way the study, as Howe outlines it, really is at the 'heart' of the household; it is the space in which literary and inter-personal exchange occurs; a space for the gathering of the whole family. This is a rather unusual formulation. The traditional definition of a study (noun), refers to: 'A room in a house or other building, intended to be used for private study, reading, writing, etc., esp. by one particular person' (*OED*). Even the verb, to study, implies singular meditation, deliberation or individual pondering. That Howe reads the space socially, as a place of vibrant familial exchange, does much to expand and transform her poetics of site. As an embryonic form of an archive, the study shares the mode of telepathy — between people, between texts — that Howe values. It is this conflation, between

the academic, the imaginative and the familial, which Howe finds so enduringly appealing: the spaces of books, and even those around books (the study/ the archive) can give rise to intimacy.

Howe often invokes the innate spirituality of books in her poetic utterances. Examples from two unpublished fragments read:

god of nooks of all dark corners and places  
underworld kingdom

Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 12, Book 1

Imperfections and omissions  
space allotted to the subject —  
shuddering books on the shelves

Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 12, Book 1

The first, announcing the ‘nooks of all dark corners’, conjures the ghostly presence of volumes which appear as ‘god’ in the forgotten recesses of the study. The second invokes a similar lacuna, as the ‘omissions’ and ‘space’ that can be felt is found in the ‘shuddering books’ that remain unread upon the bookshelf. Without being read, being handled, picked up and shared amongst the family, these ‘shuddering’ books remain in an ‘underworld kingdom’ of neglect.

In order to rejuvenate the vitality of books, Howe describes how volumes were passed between close friends and family. This practice of familial book exchange is explicitly detailed in the two prose sections, ‘Scare Quotes I’ and ‘Scare Quotes II’, of Howe’s collection, *The Midnight*. Books as material objects become an important site for Howe: she dwells in her mother’s books to regain physical contact. Fulfilling the Socratic imperative of self-examination, the poetic/prose utterances of ‘Scare Quotes I’ and ‘Scare Quotes II’, body forth an absorbing elegy for the poet’s mother, Mary Manning. At the centre of the collection are numerous pictorial and photographic interjections. The notes on these ‘illustrations’ at the end of the collection specify an array of interleaves, photographs, pasted materials, homemade bookmarks and sketches, all found within the personal books of Howe’s family and re-arranged by the poet, together with citations and personal recollections (*The Midnight* 43). Howe articulates the prominence of such books in ‘Scare Quotes I’.

My mother’s close relations treated their books as transitional objects (judging by a few survivors remaining in my possession) to be held, loved, carried around, meddled with, abandoned, sometimes mutilated. They

contain dedications, private messages, marginal annotations, hints, snapshots, press cuttings, warnings — scissor work.

*The Midnight* 60

Again Howe is being attentive to what is beyond language, considering the whole textual object as readable. Beyond the literary print, Howe dedicates herself to the personal extra-textual touches that enliven the books. It is these specific markings, ‘dedications, private messages, marginal annotations’, which revive the Manning family for Howe. They are signs of life, signs of vitality, signs of relationality. It is through studying these ‘transitional objects’, as Howe describes them, that we can experience a greater intimacy, and even proximity, to the unfolding drama of her relations.

It is re-admission into familial sociability that Howe longs for in this collection. As she has described in an interview, ‘As for my mother, she and I read with and to each other, aloud. Shakespeare, the Brontës, Keats, Matthew Arnold, Yeats, Synge, Joyce, Tolstoy, Ibsen—reading was our vital bond’ (Howe and McLane). Through rereading of her mother’s personal archive, Howe re-materialises the study space where her family used to gather; a space of assemblage, exchange, and most acutely a site of intimacy. As Howe reveals, ‘[t]his was how it was to grow up with my mother as sanctuary and choir... I aligned myself with half of her history as if it were a lifebelt’ (*The Midnight* 80, 141). In order to stay afloat upon the tumultuous seas of history, Howe finds refuge in their shared domestic objects.

In re-handling such objects, Howe engages in colloquy with her relatives; she witnesses their innermost deliberations and inserts herself into their debates. At times, however, the books shrink from public view. We are told:

My great-aunt Louie Bennett has written the following admonition on the flyleaf of her copy of *The Irish Song Books with Original Irish Airs...* This book has a value for Louie Bennett that it cannot have for any other human being. Therefore let no other human being keep it in his possession

*The Midnight* 59

This reproach is not framed, as we might expect, in terms of permission, or lack thereof.<sup>126</sup> Rather Howe acknowledges ‘Aunt Louie’s predatory withdrawal, or

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<sup>126</sup> Although, on the following page we/Howe are reprimanded severely for such intrusion: ‘Go away and do something else, grave robber’ (*The Midnight* 60).

preservative denial' and recounts how she 'secured the spine... with duct tape' (*The Midnight* 59). Here again, it is the *materiality* of the object, rather than any symbolic meaning evoked, which is given priority. Howe privileges the experience of the haptic, of touching and experiencing these objects, oftentimes in various degrees of decay. 'Often you must turn Uncle John's books around and upside down to read the clippings and other insertions pasted and carefully folded inside', Howe tells us (*The Midnight* 143). The hand of her relative is at work here, making notes, turning the texts around and inserting various fragments.<sup>127</sup> Through Uncle John's books we witness the labour of thinking, enacted physically upon the page by the hand cutting, pasting and folding.

The emergent relationship between each specific inscription stands out in this mode of work, or this labour of thinking. It is this relationality, the way these disparate strands hold together, that Howe seeks to unpick in *The Midnight*. The following section from 'Scare Quotes II', illustrates her undertaking:

When something in the world is cross-identified, it just is. *They* have made this relation by gathering — airs, reveries, threads, mythologies, nets, oilskins, briars and branches, wishes and needs, intact — into a sort of tent. This is a space children used to play in.

*The Midnight* 60

Howe attempts to unpick this process of cross-identification by untangling the threads of identity and relation that her ancestors have weaved together. In tracing this web of meanings and associations, Howe seeks to understand her own relationship to her family. In this case, it is her relatives, '*they*', who have done the 'gathering' for her. This exchange of agency is intriguing. Howe materialises her position as poetic assembler throughout the text. But here writerly control is abandoned: this elevates her relatives to co-contributors. This it is this *shared* space that Howe situates the poem, describing it as forming 'into a sort of tent'. It is this word, 'tent', which draws us again towards the concept of the refuge. Defined as 'a portable shelter or dwelling of canvas (formerly of skins or cloth)' the tent encompasses both the sense of woven family histories and a

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<sup>127</sup> Howe neatly surmises the relationship between the hand, and direct proximity, in this statement: 'I always have my mother's copy of *Finnegans Wake* near at hand' (Howe and McLane).

temporary zone for inhabitation.<sup>128</sup> That the familial text of *The Midnight* is tent-like, indicates that it is both a site of refuge, but also vulnerable to the elements. The images of the materials themselves reveal this exposure; they are tattered, worn and at times resist full legibility. Yet the resounding quality of this assembled ‘tent’ is its textual playfulness. ‘This is a space children used to play in’ the poet tells us. Inverting the emotion of the elegy to her mother from sadness to joy, Howe summons a new sense of the word refuge — bringing to bear a positive emotional relation.

#### Section Four: The Archive

It is well documented that Howe calls herself a voracious ‘library cormorant’ (Keller and Howe). Following the Olsonian precedent, she has utilised a wide variety of libraries and archives from across the US, but mostly in New England, as a foundation to her poetic practice. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the influence of her archival procedures can be felt ubiquitously; from Bhanu Kapil’s *Humanimal*, to M. NourbeSe Phillip’s *Zong!*, contemporary artists and poets have replicated and expanded upon Howe’s aesthetic approach to archival source material. Her project may appear straightforward — to recover and recuperate the forgotten voices of history — yet her means of enacting this project takes myriad forms. At the centre of her historical transactions is the conflict of memorialisation and erasure, which is demonstrated most explicitly in the form of the archive itself. Many of Howe’s critics have devoted time to probing at the complexities of her archival inhabitations. As Norman Finkelstein surmises:

Under the conditions of postmodernity, Howe’s particular struggle manifests itself in her obsession with history or, specifically, with the writing of history. Thus, the usual site of the struggle is the archive, where conflicting ideologies are expressed both in texts, often antique and obscure, and as texts, born again into new poems from the suppressions and detritus of the past.

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As Finkelstein proposes, the ‘usual site’ of Howe’s struggle with and against history is the archive. The poems that emerge from an archival occupation are necessarily specific to the archival environment and what it conditions. Yet the parameters of the archival experience shifts and mutates in Howe’s work, as

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<sup>128</sup> Textile fabric, and narrative fabrication are other common tropes of *The Midnight*.

does the wider conceptualisation of what the archive is and does. Her critics have discussed expansive theorisations of the archive in Howe's poetry. In Peter Nicholls' account, he understands the archive as a form of wilderness: 'Howe's wilderness is a text composed of gaps and traces. It is also like the archive, from which knowledge of a historical wilderness can now be drawn' (589). Collis has written convincingly about Howe's position-taking within the archive, taking into account the spatial, relational and political motivations behind her dwelling there. As a poet-critic deeply influenced by Howe, he argues that 'Complicit poet-critics — arguing *with* the archive — *within* the archive — is where Howe's example leads' (*Anarcho-Scholasticism* 5). Collis makes clear that proximity to physical archival spaces is key. In order to legitimately argue about, with and through the archive, Howe places herself *within* the archival site.

#### **'Excavate an imprint': Howe in the Archive**

This final section will consider Howe's position in the archive through an analysis of her own archive at the Mandeville Special Collections Library at UC San Diego. This refraction, of reading Howe's conception of the archive through her own archived materials, makes for a valuable chiasmus. This approach marks a new turn for Howe criticism, illuminating a synchronicity between her archival inhabitations and my archive-based research methodology. In journals and correspondence, Howe documents that library and archival visits were a weekly, if not a daily, occurrence. Everywhere in Howe's notes are library reference numbers, book titles, and manuscript jottings. Throughout her academic notes on archival subjects, such as Thoreau, Melville, Dickinson and H.D., Howe provides marginal personal reflection. Howe engages with the principal theorist of the archive, Jacques Derrida, in her notes on 'Archive Fever'. She responds to Derrida's theorisation that:

The concept of the archive shelters in itself, of course, this memory of the name arkhe... the arkhe in the physical, historical, or ontological sense, which is to say to the originary, the first, the principal, the primitive, in short to the commencement... the meaning of "archive," its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek arkheion: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law. On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that place which is their house (private house, family house, or employee's

house), that official documents are filed. The archons are first of all the documents' guardians

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In Derrida's thinking, the archive is just another enclosure: a private house of documents. He argues that it is in a 'state of house arrest, that archives take place' as documents are locked away, static and contained, kept hidden from the public, and protected by the archons who guard the documents. Yet it is in the transition and transmission of such documents, 'this institutional passage from the private to the public', which most fascinates Howe, and which occupies her aesthetic reasoning (10). As she records in her journal notes on 'Archive Fever': '[the] archive always contains the problem of translation' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 39, Folder 3). This statement indicates the central difference between the library and the archive — namely that libraries circulate books and materials externally, whereas archives house documents that are never removed. The junction at which information gets passed from the (sheltered/ enclosed) archive to the (exposed/ open) public space is where Howe positions herself: as an intermediary vehicle between these two states. As she proposes in *The Non-Conformist Memorial*: 'Must lie outside the house/ Side of space I must cross/ To write against the ghost' (61). Howe must mobilise documents 'outside' of the authority of the archive in order to 'write against' the phantoms of the past.

In her marginalia on Derrida's text Howe elaborates on his thinking, and provides some insight into her own archival practices. She writes: 'excavate an imprint pressure of the footsteps leave their mark as place of / at moment when imprint is yet to be left abandoned by the press of an impression/ confuse with archaic origin/ master the art of deciphery' (Howe's emphasis, Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 39, Folder 3). This intricate poetic/ prose statement brings further archival considerations to the fore. If we trace the terms being offered, we can get at Howe's implied meaning. The 'excavation' that Howe sanctions, must refer to her archival procedure of excavating, that is, 'To uncover or lay bare by digging; to unearth' (*OED*). It is understood that the purpose of the archive dweller is to lay bare clandestine history, yet a further definition of excavation is to 'To form or make (a hole, channel, etc.) by hollowing out' (*OED*). This definition brings us back to the term *burrow*, as a more specific mode of tunneling through. Relating this definition, with prior examples I have laid out in

this chapter, burrowing, I argue, is Howe's archival process. As Howe notes in another journal entry: 'Burrow into past into distance separated by archaeological digs' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 39, Folder 3).<sup>129</sup>

Returning to Howe's journal entry, she notes that one must 'excavate an imprint.... the footsteps leave their mark as place of origin' (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 39, Folder 3). This truncated sentence signals that historical origins are fallacious and that only the footsteps left behind can be examined. It is these footprints, rather than any true 'origin' which is all that remains, an an 'imprint', or 'mark'. This 'imprint' is merely a residue, or left-over — rather than the actual origin itself. This concept is echoed in archival materials, as a veritable 'place of origin' is unattainable, instead such materials are recognised as merely offering the textual mark of history. This, Howe continues, functions as the 'press[ure] of an impression', i.e. the impression created by these residues, creates a pressure of knowing what cannot truly be known (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 39, Folder 3). Hence the final sentence, 'confuse with archaic origin/ master the art of deciphery', gives voice to this potential for origin misplacement, as one must 'master' the ability to decipher what can and cannot be read accurately from within the archive (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 39, Folder 3).

Howe's theory of the archive acknowledges the impossibility of representing historical accuracy, regardless of documentary evidence. Her imperative to 'master the art of deciphery' becomes a central concern, just as, in Derrida's theory of the archive, two paradoxical drives emerge: desire and fever (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 39, Folder 3). Archive desire favors preservation. It is archontic and conservative, as it is a desire for 'remembrance, origin, source' (Derrida 19). Conversely, archive fever is destructive and revolutionary (Derrida 18). Collis reminds us that in revolutions archives are destroyed, for they are 'records of the state, marking the privilege of property and law' (*Anarcho-Scholasticism* 5). This destructive 'archive fever' is likened to Freud's death drive, which seeks erasure, repression and ignorance (*Anarcho-Scholasticism* 5).

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<sup>129</sup> Olson, too, acknowledges the significance of excavation, most explicitly in his words: 'Best thing is to dig one thing o place or man until you yourself know more abt that than is possible to any other man. It doesn't matter if it's Barbed Wire or Pemmican or Paterson or Iowa. But exhaust it. saturate it. Beat it. And then U KNOW everything else very fast: one saturation job (it might take 14 years). And you're in, forever' (*Collected* 306-07).

Derrida claims that this paradox, this simultaneous desire and fever, is 'to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away' (19). Hence Collis posits that an archive is often defined by what it omits, excludes or restricts (*Anarcho-Scholasticism* 19).

This is Howe's quest: to seek the limits of the archive and search for that which is undocumented. Tzvia Back claims that Howe tries to document the undocumented, or give voice to that which is absent (11). But Collis claims that Howe embodies archive fever as she seeks to understand the structures of history: the archive's 'entrance' and its 'nameless escape' towards unutterability (*Anarcho-Scholasticism* 19). 'Howe gives voice to this paradox', posits Collis, as she exists on the threshold of the archive, trespassing into zones in which articulations of particular experiences have been erased, or are unuttered, or unthought (*Anarcho-Scholasticism* 17). This gives Howe a distinctive position, particularly in relation to unveiling women's histories. As she tells us, 'If you are a woman, archives hold perpetual ironies. Because the gaps and silences are where you find yourself' (*Birth-mark* 158).

### **'She is the blank page': Woman in the Archive**

In her early notes and journals, Howe spends time thinking through the gender dynamics of archival occupation. In Howe's mind, she has infiltrated a traditionally masculine arena by working in archives. In one instance, she considers Nietzsche's infamous lines:

I walk among men as fragments of the future: of that future which I scan.  
And it is all art and aim, to compose into one and bring together what is  
fragment and riddle and dreadful chance. And how could I endure to be a  
man, if man were not also poet and reader of riddles and the redeemer of  
chance! To redeem the past and to transform every 'It was' into an "I  
wanted it thus!" that alone I would call redemption

Nietzsche 110

After typing the whole of this passage into her workbook, Howe is self-reflective, writing: 'of course Nietzsche says this in *Ecce Homo* one of my favourite books. And if Nietzsche is one of my favourite authors and if he has defined my art and aim as a poet and I am a woman — Can the pasts we are trying to redeem be the same?' (Howe's emphasis, Howe Archives, MSS 201 Box 37, Book 1). This is a central question for Howe: is the task of the *female* archival dweller the same, or different, and in what ways? As Howe points out, historically women have been

the silenced victims of the violence of the American archive. In an explicit statement of intent, Howe exclaims:

What women have done, what they have [felt?] of joy, of grief anger —  
how they have revealed their individuality — — that history passed over  
in silence — this is the domain of poetry

Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 37, Book 1

There is a fundamental absence of themselves that history has recorded, as Howe notes: 'Women spoken for. Women set up as what is not. What is not there. What you have not got. Difference comes to rest on this' (Howe Archives, MSS 201 Box 37 Book 2).<sup>130</sup> This problem of negation, of how to account for the absence of women in literature and history, is taken up by Howe. Through her poetry she addresses the question: how can we read women in absence?

It is the work of the woman archivist to carve out the shape of what is missing from the archive, and begin to re-inscribe new pathways of female historical possibility, as Howe writes: 'Historical imagination gathers in the missing' (*Frame Structures* 10). To re-trace a concealed, counter-history of female experience requires female precedents, and as Tzvia Back contends, Howe attempts to locate the voice of the other, as she 'sees herself in them' (13). From within the gaps of history Howe executes her poetic labour, using her imagination to reinscribe women's experiences. Montgomery designates this process as 'generative absence': from the lacunae of women's articulation Howe performs redemptive intervention (45). In her early work then, Howe seeks to give voice to her female forbears, in an attempt to construct a *female* American lineage. Howe dramatises the negotiation between the material form of the archive, and the immateriality of lost female experience. From the third person Howe announces: 'She is the blank page/ writing ghost writing' (*The Non-Conformist Memorial* 68). Elisabeth Joyce argues that Howe seeks to 'avoid the self', perhaps because her female self has been so thoroughly excluded (31). Women's writing is presented as ethereal, incorporeal ('ghost writing'), as an outside space where fragmentary traces drift illegibly on the horizon of meaning. Existing within this othered space, Howe implies that women are still illegible.

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<sup>130</sup> Howe quotes from Gertrude Stein in *The Birth-mark*: Stein says in 'Patriarchal Poetry': 'They said they said./ They said they said when they said men./ Men many men many how many many many many many many men men men said many here' (46).

She writes, 'A return is necessary, a way for women to go. Because we are in the stutter... We have come onto the stage stammering' (*Birth-mark* 181).

Operating from within the stutter of female experience, Howe works to capture this illegibility, enacting a poetics of estrangement rather than familiarity. She does this principally through poetic form. Challenging the frameworks of legibility, such as normative syntax, linear poetic forms and conduit systems of meaning-making, Howe reproduces the conditions of the archive in presenting the actualities of the illegible as they exist. This practice is most apparent in Howe's later collections *The Midnight* and *That This*, in which illegibility is unfettered without recourse to authorial explanation or intervention. Taking issue with premature legibility, Howe problematises how we read the archive, and how bodies of meaning are shaped and constructed out into the public sphere. Legibility infers a text that is 'easily made out or deciphered', so instead she articulates a theory of the illegible, insisting that some sites cannot be read (*OED*). Going back to Howe's earlier effort to 'master the art of deciphering', there is a conscious negotiation here of what archival labour can and cannot accomplish. Through Howe's poetry we witness both the recoverable and the in-extractable linguistic expressions of history (Howe Archives, MSS 201, Box 39, Folder 3).

Collis terms Howe's placement in the archive 'Anarcho-scholasticism' coming from the two poles of anarchy and scholar (*Anarcho-Scholasticism* 11). These two motivations converge in Howe's work, Collis argues, which can also account for her dual engagement with the legible and the illegible: to be a scholar is to make yourself intelligible, but to be an anarchist is to defy conventional order (*Anarcho-Scholasticism* 11). 'Anarcho-scholasticism is the poet's anti-authoritarian challenge to the archive's sovereignty', Collis argues. 'It takes up the archive and the scholarly task only to challenge the very institutions and processes which manage and maintain the documents in question' (11). This is a highly political charge to place upon Howe's work, particularly as she is, at times, not so explicitly politically aligned in interviews and accounts of her poetics. Typified by 'formal waywardness and structural plurality', Collis argues that Howe builds conflict and ruptures 'from within the American archive' (11). Howe's subjects, Mary Rowlandson, Anne Hutchinson and even Dickinson, all

derive from this tradition of rupture, signifying an American breakage from the root. Hence Collis claims that Howe is able to 'peer into the archive from a place outside authority' (12). This position of outsidedness challenges the autonomy of the archive as an enclosed space, as Howe performs as an historical interloper.

Collis's overt politicisation of Howe's oeuvre is interesting, particularly when we consider not only her formative poetry collections (*Frame Structures*, *The Europe of Trusts*, *Singularities*) but also her later, alternative, archival investments (*That This* and most clearly, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*). Here Howe's political position-taking is far more tangential; there is a clear trajectory from her earlier, and more explicit political concerns, to her later work which privileges the materiality of the archival experience. *Spontaneous Particulars* can therefore be misread as apolitical; much of the book is caught-up with the specific immediacy of the haptics of hand-writing, of its 'Sheer verbal artistry' (*Spontaneous* 51). Yet this devoted attention to detail is just another tour-de-force of Howe's feminist politics. As an antidote to the horrors of political violence and omission, Howe resorts to a new mode of resilience — love. Rather than continue to retrace the impossible histories of oppression suffered by American women, in her most recent collections Howe deliberately decides to record her *love* of the archive. With a refracted feminist lens, she records her passion for documents and her commitment to recognising the intimate valences of the archival experience. This attention to materiality enunciates her solidarity and devotion to particular female predecessors. Love is a word commonly used by Howe and even more regularly evoked in her later writing. As she announces in *Spontaneous Particulars*, 'Hit or miss — an arrow into the eye of loving' (51). Howe's labour in the archive, whether successful or not, attempts to penetrate into the core of textual affect.

### ***Spontaneous Particulars: Materialising Inter-Woven Histories***

Looking at Howe's recent publication, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*, we can witness how this loving plays out through its pages. The first, and most obvious thing to note is the beauty and charm of the book itself. Published by New Directions, the hardback cover, a textured blue, is imprinted with the title and author, and stuck onto the front cover is a photographic image of a card catalogue by Thomas Smillie from 1890. Through its striking

materiality the book is home and shelter to Howe's collection of archival reflections. It provides an instructive example of Howe's materialist poetics. In analysing the text, the archive as site and the book as site are folded into one cohesive whole. Images, resources, copies, ephemera, observations, and poetic impressions appear paratactically, with few introductions or explications. This is Howe's 'collaged swan song to the old ways': it is poem and criticism, image and object, totem and telepathy, a perfect culmination of a life dedicated to unveiling the intimacies of the archive (*Spontaneous* 9).

'[A] deposit from a future yet to come, is gathered and guarded in the domain of research libraries and special collections', Howe tells us (*Spontaneous* 8). Telepathy is invoked as a by-product of archival loyalty, as the 'communication of impressions of any kind from one mind to another, independently of the recognised channels of sense' (*OED*). Howe describes how temporality is eschewed in the labyrinth network of the archive, as 'Often by chance, via out-of-the-way card catalogues, or through previous web surfing, a particular "deep" text... reveals itself *here* at the surface of the visible, by mystic documentary telepathy... If you are lucky, you may experience a moment *before*' (*Spontaneous* 18). Tied to this telepathic communication is the ability to 'experience' history in actuality. Through the materiality of the document or object, we can access a moment of exacting historical clarity. Howe elaborates on this sense of clarity. 'In research libraries and collections, we may capture the portrait of history in so-called insignificant visual and verbal textualities and textiles. In material details' (*Spontaneous* 21). Howe suggests an innovative way to get at the reality of historical fact. Rather than reading, or decoding history by utilising language as a vehicle for thought, Howe emphasises the pre-linguistic 'material details' of the text. It is these 'material details', as Howe describes them, which can provide the only true measure of historical reality, as they require no interpretative distortions. Such details appear in the archive *as it is*, and 'reveal itself *here* at the surface of the visible' (*Spontaneous* 18). It is in 'twill fabrics, bead-work pieces, pricked patterns, four-ringed knots...' that such history can be located (21). This is emphatically a feminine record. In *Spontaneous Particulars*, Howe does not focus on the exterior world of public documents but the interior, private world of domestic objects and labours.

There is a concentration put upon the action of sewing through the book, as, Howe reminds us, “The English word “text” comes from the Medieval Latin *textus* “style or texture of a work,” literally “thing woven”” (*Spontaneous* 19). We have a 19<sup>th</sup> century British pricked pattern for lace copied on page 23, then later the definitions from Dickinson’s Webster’s Dictionary of ‘skein’ as, ‘A knot or number of knots of thread, silk, or yarn’ and, ‘Something suggesting the twistings and contradictions of a skein’ (26). Here the domestic, and traditionally feminine action of sewing is entangled into the complicated knots of literary meaning. Howe proclaims, ‘Words are skeins—meteors, mimetic spirit-sparks’ (26). In her comparative reflections, ‘Quotations are skeins or collected knots’, she utilises the textile as a metaphor for the quality of language. Howe reveals a textile language, both in how language is woven into entwined meanings, and how texts themselves are woven: as a textured material form. Howe takes from the small, quotidian practice of pattern making in its most basic form, a “STITCH” she reminds us is a “n[oun]. A single pass of a needle in sewing” (31). But she propels such stitch-work to high status. This reversal in scale is crucial; Howe takes the seemingly diminutive work of the textile weaver and raises it into a state of high value. Textile and text are afforded equal significance.

This is by no means the first time that Howe has turned materially to manuscripts and their ephemera to make an argument about gender. In *The Birth-mark* Howe claims decisively that Dickinson’s ‘Letters are scrawls, turnabouts, astonishments, strokes, cuts, masks... These manuscripts should be understood as visual productions’ (139). It is in Dickinson’s non-conformity of scripture, in her unique equivocations of calligraphy, that Howe reads dissent. Yet there is a shift in thought, and particularly in practice, that happens between *My Emily Dickinson*, and her most recent work. In the case of *Spontaneous Particulars*, and in the precursors of *The Midnight* and *That This*, Howe makes a turn away from the literary, and towards the non-literary as archival source material. While still invested in language’s multifarious potentialities (‘Words are skeins’ we must remember) we can note a radical shift in attention, in what she is drawn towards in her archival occupations. In *Spontaneous Particulars* the visual representations of textiles stand alone, untempered by linguistic overlay, and directly expose a material immediacy not afforded to linguistic expression.

Revisiting the archive of Jonathan Edwards and his family, Howe makes plain the necessity of this turn: 'But almost all that remains from this 18<sup>th</sup>-century family's impressive tradition of female learning are a bedsheet probably woven by Jonathan's mother, a tiny blue fragment of his wife Sarah Pierrepont Edwards' wedding dress.... and several raggedy scraps from his younger sister Hannah's private writings—' (*Spontaneous* 45). It is the remnants of the Edwards' cloth, rather than the writing, that Howe most values. Howe's task in the archive has always been to locate the female perspective ('the gaps are where you find yourself') and through this attention to textile materiality, she is able to read women through their textiles. From within the lacuna of female experience she has found women's lives woven in history: their material embodiment.

This material embodiment marks a dramatic achievement for Howe, who previously inscribed the intangibility of the female experience historically, as 'writing ghost writing' (*Birth-mark* 42). In *Spontaneous Particulars*, Howe begins to imaginatively load the space of women's history through the haecceity of the textile fabric as text. As she continues in her project, even language begins to resemble thread: 'If you open these small volumes and just *look*—without trying to decipher the minister's spidery script, pen strokes begin to resemble textile thread-text' (*Spontaneous* 46). Much of the handwriting reproduced in the book resembles needlework, which serves to remind the reader that language itself is merely a complex form of pattern making. Handwriting too is material embodiment, a weaving on the page, a consciousness in action. It is the action of weaving, of sewing together, of stitching in its myriad forms that becomes a metaphor for the event of telepathy. In this inter-weaving, this ability to interconnect disparate elements of experience, Howe comments: 'The closer I look—the farther away your interlaced co-conscious pattern' (*Spontaneous* 60). Every pattern, contends Howe, is 'co-conscious', has the ability to extend beyond single creative autonomy and extend into the sentient reachings of another individual. In an ode to the rare book collections of the Beinecke, Howe recalls: 'Scholars could be copying out a manuscript or deciphering a pattern... In this room I experience enduring relations and connections between what was and what is' (*Spontaneous* 43).

The ‘enduring relations and connections’ that Howe experiences from within the site resemble the fabrics interwoven relationality. In her research Howe can pick up strands of meaning and weave them into patterns of connectivity. This textual tracing of the past, enacted through the delicate stitching of disparate ‘Spontaneous Particulars’, occurs through a variety of passageways (*Spontaneous* 9). For example, Howe cites Minny Temple’s letters, and claims they ‘serve as images or shadows’ (*Spontaneous* 56). This remark is followed by a line of Walt Whitman: ‘Up from the mystic play of shadows’, which seems to bare no relation to the previous observation, except for the repetition of the ‘shadow’. Here then, Howe is playing the active agent in materialising such connections. She has drawn the parallel between Temple’s ‘shadows’ and Whitman’s ‘shadows’, and through her collaged process of interlacing the two examples, she illuminates a form of linguistic telepathy between them. Howe explores this further in another, more personal illustration:

Most of my life has been spent in Connecticut not far from where Hannah Edwards Whetmore lived and wrote. Reading her “private writings” I experience, through an occult invocation of verbal links and forces, the qualities peculiar to our seasonal changing light and color. It’s a second kind of knowledge—tender, tangled, violent, august, and infinitely various  
*Spontaneous* 59

The relationship that Howe sets up with Hannah Edwards Whetmore is based primarily through their physical proximity, living in the same area, which gives Howe a privileged access to Whetmore’s writings. It is characterised by ‘an occult invocation’, or form of telepathy, as we might paraphrase it, that not only affects the linguistic utterance, but affects the exterior vestiges which Howe inhabits ‘our seasonal changing light and color’. This ‘second kind of knowledge’ (we may wonder what the “first” is — perhaps direct perception) is complex, ‘tangled’ and ‘infinitely various’, which relates back to the woven trope. What is most important in working through this form of networked relationality, is to recognise Howe’s aim in achieving an interconnectivity and community with those forgotten women of the past. Howe’s efforts facilitate a proliferation of linkages, a convergence of seemingly disparate entities in order to manifest a lost kinship, a hidden relationship existing between.

**‘[T]he relation between’: Archival Interactions**

Howe works through the infinite 'relations between' in 'Scare Quotes II' (*The Midnight* 115). Despite its seemingly unrelated location, on the street, this section outlines the fundamental problems of laboring within archives. To conclude, I will read it as a wider allegory for Howe's process of historicism.

During the 1960s I was living on Christopher Street, a block from the Hudson river in Manhattan. Often a well dressed stranger with obsessive compulsive disorder *par excellence* used to pace the sidewalk... He appeared to be proceeding in the direction of the water, but at each line of transition between pavement slabs, he halted in a frenzy of anxiety. There followed an explosive colloquy between himself and the concrete. Where philosophy stops, poetry is impelled to begin... Pavement to the west which must be crossed, pavement to the east which must not be left. Forward the minutely particular thin line. "Jump at it!" With the stride of a giant, or like any artist attempting to leap in a single direction, he propelled himself forward; but some rigidly elaborate rule having nothing to do with realism drove him (praying, counting, gesticulating) back. A ghostly skeptic. Overcompliant. In a chiasmus the second half of a sentence repeats the first; but with the order of the two main elements inverted so that the meaning of the second half returns to its source in the first half, hovering between identities. 'We'll hang together—or together we'll hang.' The direction is always towards the middle. There are people who can challenge transition on its own terms and those who cannot. He was one who could not. As I watched his inertial journey, the murderous aphorism 'Step on a crack—break your mother's back' continually inserted itself into my thoughts. I wondered about the relation between one concrete slab and another concrete slab

*The Midnight* 115

This section is concerned with many things, but the primary interest is arrived at in the final line: 'I wondered about the relation between'. Whilst trying not to over-determine this passage, it may well be read in relation to Howe's own activity in the archive. If Howe is the well dressed stranger with OCD, then the pavement is the archive. This conceit is imperfect, but to simplify Howe's complex picture, let's follow it to begin with. The first thing to note is that this stranger is attempting to move, to maneuver himself, 'in the direction of the water'. Going right back to the beginning of this chapter, in a chiasmic move not disavowed by Howe, we may remember that for Thoreau, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, the river was an 'emblem of all progress'. '[L]aunch[ing] a boat from shore' provided Thoreau with aesthetic inspiration. Thus like Thoreau and Dickinson, who favour water as a fluid metaphor for progress, this stranger's attempt to reach the river is an indicator of his attempt

to achieve a level of serious (literary) advancement. This is reinforced by Howe's chosen terminology, to "'Jump at it!'" and 'leap in a single direction', which describes such an act of advancement, closely echoing the dramatic 'leap' into Passaic falls that takes place in William Carlos Williams' *Patterson*. If such literary achievement is the goal and the stranger is unable to 'challenge transition on its own terms' – actualising a Williams-esque leap forward – then is 'inertial' movement merely a paralysing 'chiasmus'?

Howe interrogates the possibility of such immediate advancement by prioritising the 'relations between', rather than the actual stepping forward. The stranger in this passage is able to somehow propel 'himself forward' 'like any artist', Howe tells us, yet he is immediately forced backward in a moment of 'Overcompliance'. The man seems unable to carry himself forward due to 'some rigidly elaborate rule.' However, there is also sympathy and perhaps redemption for the figure, who illuminates a new truth via his difficult excursion. This is also Howe's manner of walking, her particular gait, which recalls her way of exploring the archive and its poetic valences. Her manoeuvring through history is not always easy — it is often hesitant, backtracking or meandering. Howe explores these strategies of failure as opportunities for re-thinking and re-making. Mid-way through the passage, the streets of New York transform into the frame of the page, as an authorial voice provides us with the definition of 'chiasmus'. The stranger, it seems, executes this chiasmus — unable to move forward purposefully. Instead he is consigned to direct himself 'toward the middle', repeating and inverting the act. At the level of metaphor then, Howe is complicit in this action, or rather inaction of the chiasmus — of reading and re-reading history with a slant perspective rather than seeing the world afresh. Yet what this stranger is afforded, and what Howe is able to perform during this 'inertial journey', is an 'explosive colloquy...[with] the concrete'. Focusing not on the 'giant' stride forward, but instead on the status of the ground, leads Howe to her final observation: 'I wondered about the relation between one concrete slab and another concrete slab'. This 'relation between' is what Howe's archival work figures, not as a momentous leap of artistry, but a measured and lengthy re-investigation of the relations of the past.

Such devoted attention to the 'relations between', accurately demonstrates the ethics of care that Howe enacts during her archival work. As an agent acting within the traditionally male infrastructure of the archive, Howe's unpicking of textual threads is dedicated. This is a gendered labour of care, as Howe is bringing to light the invisible work that women have undertaken throughout history. Howe does this through spending time with materials and ephemera, caring for the scraps of history that otherwise go unnoticed. There is continuity here between spatial relations and social relations, as Howe produces modes of intimacy that connect formal interactions with familial relationality. In this way both the archive itself, and Howe's poetic utterances, provide refuge for women's experience, in constituent and aesthetic terms. As Howe describes the Beinecke 'radiates a sense of peace... Here is deep memory's lure, and sheltering' (*Spontaneous* 43).

Howe is performing an interesting reversal, or chiasmus, of what Derrida presents in 'Archive Fever' through her archival occupations. She demonstrates that as Derrida explains, the archive is a house (documents are under 'house arrest' and kept enclosed), but also that the house is an archive; the material fragments of the home should be read, explored and interpreted as the core material of female experience (9). This reversal is revolutionary in changing the terms by which we think about the woman being at home, affording the domestic space equal and urgent political attention and ultimately democratising what can be considered as readable archival evidence. In privileging the embodied labours of sewing, to her own intimate self-archiving, Howe works to enlarge what we consider as recognisable history, and what we consider as useful sources for historical content.<sup>131</sup> This activity exposes the fragility, and permeability of the archive, as a space not only for housing documents, but also now extending out into the far reaches of the domestic sphere, and on into the imaginary. In her poetry the woman's archival trace is not supplementary, but constitutive. In this way, Howe's earlier 'chiasmus' becomes a potent symbol for revolutionary re-examination; the going backwards is a key moment of political intervention, whereby female historical experience is afforded legitimacy. By trespassing into

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<sup>131</sup> See Antoinette Burton's *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* for her detailed reasoning behind the urgent need to reconsider what can be considered archival material, including memory, fiction, memoirs and aural family histories.

the male domain of the archive, then exploding what we consider to be legible historical sources, Howe has transformed its potentialities to reclaim this space as a refuge for women's inhabitation and contemplation.

### Conclusion: Mobilising Sites in the 21<sup>th</sup> Century

Nature is a Haunted House — but Art — a House that tries to be haunted  
— *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* 536

I come home and find that I have lost my sense of home. I come home to  
find that I have left my home. No rest, no refuge.  
— Caroline Bergvall, *Drift* 136

In reading the poetic sites of Lorine Niedecker, Barbara Guest and Susan Howe, I argue that each writer confirms the indispensability of a sovereign compositional space for the female poet in the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore Virginia Woolf's assertion that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write' has not changed: even in the contemporary period, maintaining an autonomous writing space is crucial for the woman poet (6). Each chapter has mapped the terrain of particular poetic spaces, charting the distinctiveness of female site-based poetics over the last century. In attending to the detailed, specific and localised poetics of site, larger questions about the broader gendering of space have also been addressed. All three poets consider the role of the residential dwelling in their emergent poetics, interrogating how the site of the domestic has been shaped through the poetic act over the last century. As a place for the labour of poesis, each poet also challenges the public/private binary in their literary work on-site. Through sustained attention to these sites of writerly composition, the intersections between lived, imagined and textual spaces have been examined to generate a richer sense of what it means to inhabit poetic space.

Over the course of the previous three chapters, this thesis has established how Woolf's 'room of one's own' has been adapted and transformed over the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century (6). Typifying Woolf's example of an autonomous writing space, Niedecker's cabin was a literary sanctuary as well as being grounded in the everyday realities of Blackhawk Island in Wisconsin. Fixed in geographical specificity, this reading of site necessitated that her position within her local community also be scrutinised. Guest, on the other hand, was unrestricted by physical geography; instead it was the model of the studio that she transported to her different locations, taking with her the methods of visual artistry that she translated into the space of her poetry. Finally, occupying a range of public and

private spaces, Howe mobilises the poetic site in her contemporary poetry — disrupting historic, colonial US ideas of settlement in her dislocating, radical poetics. The relative mobility of each poet and each site is therefore an important lens through which to consider how poetic space has transformed over time. Niedecker’s rootedness can be registered against Guest’s relative itinerancy, while Howe figures nomadism through her itinerant textual inhabitations. Such comparisons demonstrate the trajectory of poetic sites throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century — from fixed location, to mobile site, to textual restlessness. Such readings establish a new poetic tradition, one that begins with Emily Dickinson, as a valuable forebear for the inauguration of poetic subject-production at home, and leads us to the contemporary moment with the terminally unsettling work of Howe.

This trajectory of poetic sites leads us towards Rosi Braidotti’s concept of nomadology, which I explore alongside Howe’s poetry in Chapter Three. Existing in a period of great global instability and insecurity, who can live where and for how long becomes an ever more pressing question. Over the last decade the refugee crisis, the Occupy Movement and debates around immigration are just a few examples of how the fraught territories of space are being shaped by contemporary politics. In our highly mobilised present moment, where living in a singular fixed location is more and more uncommon, it now seems critical to reconceptualise how we understand our relationship with space. As Jennifer Johung argues in *Replacing Home: From Primordial Hut to Digital Network in Contemporary Art*:

Many of us are rarely in one place for very long these days, much less in place at all. We are able to move great distances over actual land and through virtual space.... Yet we cannot deny that we still care about being in place, that we need to be housed, and that we want to belong somewhere.

x

As Lytle Shaw outlines in *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics*, while the idea of “place” may no longer be sustainable category in poetics, site-based approaches offer up new avenues to explore (62). This thesis presents new ways of engaging with space, by negotiating spatial boundaries and recognising the constructions of literary place-making through the significance of the compositional site. In a world of fast-moving, non-static and heavily mobilised

workforces, the poetics of site registers the deep necessity of understanding our placement in the world.

In this thesis I present evidence that the poetics of site can provide a new framework for reading poetry and space in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Site-based poetics offer up a situated mode of interpretation, intrinsically located within a particular frame of reference. Equally, specifying a zoomed in focus, a microscopic understanding of space can lead to wider macroscopic resonances. Niedecker's poetics of site exemplify how small scale poetic acts can capture the broader political implications of a class, race and gender. As Shaw argues, framing poetic readings through site becomes a pinhead reverberating out into the world (*Fieldworks* 259). In a political landscape rife with contentions around national borders and national identity, finding a situated mode of reading that does not resort to reinforcing the problematic frames of place or nation is critical. The sites under investigation in this thesis are de-territorialised spaces, not explicitly defined by nation-state, area or place. In attending to such small-scale individual sites, there is a new value put upon of the politics of the domestic, which functions to diminish the significance of national borders. As Antoinette Burton argues in *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, 'imagining home is as political an act as imagining the nation' (30). Over the previous three chapters it becomes clear that the site-specific interpretative frame requires an entirely different mode of inquiry.

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Operating as a feminist counterpart to Shaw's *Fieldworks*, my thesis reconceptualises what can be understood as a poetic site. Robert Smithson and Shaw characterise the site as a delimited frame for conditioning the experience of the external; in their theorisation the site — in its static position — is geographically fixed. In redefining the parameters of the poetic site, my thesis unbinds site-based poetic work from geo-physical locatedness. Guest's studio is unfixed geographically; it is a mobile artistic model that is constructed and reconstructed by the poet in her different residences. My conceptualisation of poetic sites repudiates the physical restrictions of geography, instead opening up the possibilities of site-based poetic research. I consider textual artefacts and

literary figures as poetic sites, alongside domestic rooms, writer's residencies and public spaces. I present evidence that Howe inhabits Thoreau as a site and that she lives on the page with Dickinson who functions as her foundational poetic refuge.

To crystallise this new conceptualisation of the poetic site we can turn briefly to Dickinson, whose model of circumference gives us a useful foothold. In 'I saw no Way – The Heavens were stitched –' Dickinson plays with expanding and contracting imagery to heighten the position of the speaker (*Poems* 284). A mere 'Speck upon a Ball –' the presiding voice of the poem 'Went out upon Circumference –' to touch 'the Universe –' (*Poems* 284). The site of the speaker is not fixed geographically, but the outward 'Circumference' functions to mark the boundary where the subject cannot penetrate. As Laura Gribbon argues:

This border is a highly charged point of convergence where oppositions are collapsed, boundaries are explored, and meaning originates. Circumference is also the space within a circle where life is lived, pain is felt, and death is observed. It is not, as Thomas Johnson argues, the means by which Dickinson elicits 'awe from the object or idea by which she is inspired' (134); it is not the means to a sublime end but is at once the source and terminus of poetic discourse, marking the perimeter beyond which language, thought, and 'awe' cannot penetrate.

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For Dickinson, the circumference is both 'source and terminus' — it marks the beginning and the end of the poetic act (3). Through the idea of circumference, Dickinson questions what lies inside or outside a poem. What is at the centre, and conversely what is at the periphery? If the idea of circumference points towards a limit, then what is at the central point of the circle? If we take the site to be the centre-point of the poetic space — then all poetic outlays go out 'upon' circumference from this centre-point. Unanchored from specific geography, the site is thus the position, or orientation, from which the world can be circumferentially glimpsed in poetry.

In unbinding the site from its located fixity, the boundaries between site and poem also become more fluid. The site, in its static and delimited spatialised form, usually functions in opposition to, or in tension with the unbounded imaginary of the poem. However in my readings, as the site becomes unfixed so does the poem. By paying close attention to the literary forms generated from within a particular site, including drafts, variants and crucially the materiality of

the textual artifact itself, contingencies of poetic form are acknowledged and validated. Howe's 'Thorow', Guest's collaborations with visual artists and Niedecker's *Homemade/Handmade* books offer up examples of what I term each poet's distinctive *site-production*. By attending to what is generated whilst on-site, rather than simply what is published, modes of poetic utterance are read in site-specific context — as highly provisional and mutable. Thus in my readings of site-production enabled through the archive, the poem is not limited to the finalised published version. Instead methods of site-production collected in the archive challenge the enclosure of the finished poem, recognising that poesis is a contingent, fluctuating process.

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Alongside this sense of formal openness and fluidity, is the fundamental need in each of my poets to locate and inhabit a poetic home. But Woolf's feminist 'room of one's own' can be registered against German-Jewish philosopher and critic Theodor Adorno's claim in 1951 that: 'it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home' (38). Speaking of the state of exile after the Second World War, Adorno argues, 'Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible' (38). He continues:

The house is past. The bombings of European cities, as well as the labour and concentration camps, merely proceed as executors, with what the immanent development of technology had long decided was to be the fate of houses. These are now good only to be thrown away like old food cans.

39

Adorno renounces bourgeois desire for private property, as exemplified by Woolf, claiming that homelessness is the only possible refuge post-war. It is, perhaps, the trauma of the Second World War that most deeply connects Niedecker, Guest and Howe, as each lived through it. Thus, each poet explores this intrinsic contradictory state of dwelling — both physically and poetically. As Burton argues, images of 'house and home' can form 'the basis for writing histories about the impossibility of dwelling comfortably "at home"' (5). Guest maintains Adorno's critical distance from the domestic, treating it with a detached perspective. Niedecker interrogates the political tensions of owning private property, considering indigeneity and race alongside capitalist forms of dispossession. The paradox of home is most keenly worked through in Howe's verse, as she enacts restless opposition to colonial land violence and bourgeois

dwelling. As Jon Thompson describes, Howe's poetics enact 'homelessness at home'.

Two Dickinson poems, which appear in the same fascicle, illustrate this inherent contradiction of the urge to be at home with the politics of never at home.

804  
Ample make this Bed –  
Make this Bed with Awe –  
In it wait until Judgement break  
Excellent and Fair

Be it's Mattrass straight –  
Be it's pillow round –  
Let no Sunrise' yellow noise  
Interrupt this Ground -

807  
Away from Home are some and I -  
An Emigrant to be  
In a metropolis of Homes  
Is easy possibly -

The Habit of a Foreign Sky  
We - difficult acquire  
As Children, who remain in Face  
The more their Feet retire

*Poems 357*

The first poem (804) embodies the well-established Dickinsonian trope of entrenchment within the home, presenting the image of staying tucked-up safe in bed. However, poem 807 troubles this idea and instead conjures contestatory modes of dwelling and living-in-the-world. Both poems were composed in 1865, during the American Civil War, and 'Away from Home are some and I -' records the political context through solidarity with those displaced. Directly opposing the sentiment of 'Ample make this Bed -', in the second poem Dickinson's speaker wants to 'dwell in [the] possibility' of leaving home: she is 'An Emigrant to be'. This line 'An Emigrant to be', also encapsulates the ideas that every poet is an emigrant — as poems will be taken from their home and carried out into the world of readers, or a 'metropolis of Homes'. As Dickinson observes, the poem itself thereby becomes a vehicle to reconcile this being-at-home with homelessness. Written from a place of relative security, the poem must travel outside of its site to be appreciated.<sup>132</sup>

However, the central issue here is not actually leaving home (Dickinson never did) but instead escaping the 'Habit' of home. In writing experimental poetry, Dickinson continually defied convention — or the 'habit' of literary tradition —

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<sup>132</sup> Niedecker explores similar themes in her *Homemade/ Handmade* collections, via the alternative systems of distribution she creates.

in her formal aesthetic transgressions. In discussing the writing of German-born American poet Rosmarie Waldrop and the Norwegian-born English and/or American poet Caroline Bergvall, Vincent Broqua characterises their verse as enacting this mode of ‘Never-at-home’.

In [Gilles] Deleuze and [Marc] Crépon’s perspective, to have no assigned nor assignable linguistic identity or, that is, to be under the pressure of ‘never-at-home’ is an otherness necessary for writing: if, as do [Gertrude] Stein and [Francis] Ponge, one sees the poem as an act of writing, or as a text constantly displacing itself onto other linguistic territories – and thereby annihilating the notion of a fixed territory – Waldrop’s and Bergvall’s positions between languages as well as their methods of composition constitute a poetics of deterritorialisation or a poetics of ‘never-at-home’.

‘Never-at-home’

Waldrop and Bergvall serve as important examples for Broqua due to their hybrid national identities and their subsequent multilingualism.<sup>133</sup> However, I would contend that the very essence of experimental poetry is that it is ‘never-at-home’. Innovative poetic practices defy normative grammatical structures, syntax and semantics; experimental poetry is unfamiliar, wandering, homeless. Dickinson may have written her poetry from within the safe confines of the Homestead, but her verse resists comfort, stability or settlement: Dickinson teaches us that it is the space of poetry that can wrench language from its dwelling.

In another article, Broqua argues that the female experimental poetic tradition has suffered under this condition of homelessness. Writing in 2008, his attention is focused on the ‘minimal place experimental poetry produced by women occupies in the UK’ designating it as a ‘non-place’ that still needs a ‘map’ (‘Non-place’). He asserts: “The question of the “place” or “space” of “the experimental feminine” is a paradoxical one.... experimental poetry is being written by women in the UK [but] it remains virtually non-existent in print and its place seems to be a “non-place” (‘Non-place’). We might assume, therefore, that the female experimental poet in the US fares better — as Niedecker, Guest and Howe do maintain some visibility in the academy. But outside of the dominant US literary movements of Objectivism, the New York School and

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<sup>133</sup> Indeed, Broqua argues that more than just ‘not having a home,’ Bergvall’s language resists a home. As Bergvall tells us, her work and that of Waldrop’s ‘critique and respond to [...] the myth of Home(coming)’ (‘Never-at-home’).

Language Writing, what place is each female poet afforded in literary history? This thesis grew out of a frustration with the narratives of marginality and exclusion that usually frame (to a greater or lesser degree) critical perspectives on Niedecker, Guest and Howe.

Thus, in exploring the poetics of site my research contributes towards generating new forms of female poetic community. Broqua claims: 'If such a thing exists, the constructed community of women writing experimental poetry lies precisely elsewhere than in a binding sense of national community' ('Non-place'). Instead of drawing on the fictional unity of national identity, reading experimental women poets through site opens up new forms of correspondence and interconnection. The physical writing site, as foundational to the compositional practice of poetry, is both highly specific to each poet and reveals broader collective investments in inhabiting space. In mapping these sites, it is possible to formulate new versions of what Julia Kristeva calls 'l'écriture féminine': the poetics of site works to articulate the singularities of individual authors whilst simultaneously formulating a new community of female poets (130).

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If this thesis represents a site — a position from which to orient oneself in the world of experimental female poetry — then it inevitably overlooks other important territories, or fields of poetic production. My research has taken gender to be one of its central tenets, but it has not had the space to fully explore other political intersections. On the question of class, relative to Niedecker, Guest and Howe occupy positions of comparative privilege. Yet there has not been room to fully investigate how Niedecker's working-class position excluded her from literary culture more widely. Furthermore, in reading particular compositional sites, my research fails to ask questions around material embodiment, such as: what does it mean to be a body in space? How do different kinds of bodies — conditioned through gender, race or sexuality — operate in distinctive ways on-site? Finally, I wish to acknowledge the problematic whiteness of this thesis. While I do tackle race in Niedecker's poetics, and indigeneity as it is addressed by Howe, in researching three white women poets

from the US my work fails to deconstruct, or decolonise, the white supremacy of the western avant-garde poetic tradition.<sup>134</sup>

Nevertheless, I argue that the framework of site-based research can be extended and usefully applied to a wide-range of poetic productions. Moreover, site-based interpretations may prove an instructive way to consider new literary-spatial configurations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The poetry of Caroline Bergvall is testament to the contemporary innovation occurring in site-specific aesthetics. As Broqua explains:

Bergvall's poems confront textuality and situation: she specifically adjusts her text and her performances to their site. In her collaboration with Ciaran Maher, as well as in *Éclat*, her texts were produced by the investigation of the site where the piece was supposed to be inscribed. These works arise from the pressure of what Bergvall calls the 'else-here'<sup>135</sup>

'Never-at-home'

In Bergvall's work, attending to particularised sites becomes a form of political intervention and a mode of embodiment: poetry is inscribed within the body-voice of the poet through a ritualised experience of space and a linguistic incarnation of site. Bergvall's poetics open up new avenues of site-specific attentiveness through their unique experiential performances. Her example shows us that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the possibilities for site-specific poetry have only just begun to emerge.

As a feminist framework, the poetics of site works to locate the experimental woman poet by studying her inhabitations of real and poetic space. My site-based research responds to the lacunae of women's literary tradition by rematerialising the quotidian site of female poetic experience. In crafting her own unique space in which to write, the female poet validates her position in literary history. As Dickinson reminds us:

Eden is that old - fashioned House  
We dwell in every day  
Without suspecting our abode  
Until we drive away

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<sup>134</sup> As Cathy Park Hong forcefully argues in 'Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde': 'To encounter the history of avant-garde poetry is to encounter a racist tradition'.

<sup>135</sup> Bergvall describes the 'else-here' as 'the fact of inhabiting the world in the here and now and of displacing the sites of production of text, meaning, and territory' (*Drift* 221).

How fair on looking back the Day  
We sauntered from the Door  
Unconscious our returning  
But discover it no more

*Poems 620-621*

In Dickinson's poem, 'Eden' is the 'House' that 'We dwell in every day'; the quotidian experience of domestic space is aesthetically transcendent. To 'discover' the site of female poetic production has been the undertaking of this thesis. To challenge the hegemony of male-dominated poetic research cultures, we must find new ways to read women against the American grain. *The Poetics of Site* offers up one such feminist methodology, building a refuge for exploring the experimental female poet on her own terms.

**Annex 1: Notes on Fieldwork and Research Sites**

July 2013: Fieldwork visit to the Niedecker Cabin, Blackhawk Island and Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin.

July 2013: Archival research of the Niedecker Collection at the Fort Atkinson Library & Hoard Museum, Wisconsin.

August 2013: Archival research of the Guest Papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale.

October 2013: Further consultation of the Guest Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale.

July 2014: Research at the Howe Archives, Mandeville Special Collections Library UC San Diego.

August 2014: Fieldwork visit to Lake George, New York. Stayed in the Tea Island Resort.

August 2014: Fieldwork visit to the Dickinson Homestead, now Dickinson museum in Amherst, Massachusetts.

April 2015: Graduate Research Fellowship at the Harry Ransom Centre, Austin, Texas. Zukofsky and Niedecker Papers consulted.

May 2015: Fieldwork visit to the Zukofsky house, 30 Willows Street, Brooklyn, New York.

August 2015: Visiting Student Researcher at UC Berkeley. Mentored by Lyn Hejinian.

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