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For Susan and Enno

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation elucidates the neglected yet intimate history of literature and sociology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. "Sociopoetics" is the term I use to distinguish texts marked by a self-conscious, reciprocal cross-pollination between literary and sociological vocabularies, forms, and methods of inquiry. My approach to such objects involves a combination of historical and formal analysis that accomplishes two major aims. First, in order to illustrate the widespread presence of sociopoetics, I assemble a diverse archive of works that places social and literary theorists, researchers and literary authors in conversation for the first time. Second, drawing on thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, I. A. Richards, C. Wright Mills, and Kenneth Burke, I argue that sociopoetics is most productively construed as a *strategy.* More specific than forms or genres, strategies name and navigate typical, recurrent situations in the world that correspond to the particularities of social structures. Conceived of as a strategy, on my definition sociopoetics adopts an interactive, problem-solving attitude to social issues like racial and economic inequalities as well as to more abstract questions around disciplinary modes of inquiry, authority, and representation.

In bridging aesthetic and social structures, sociopoetics animates meaningful yet underexplored connections between literary and sociological ways of apprehending human actions, interactions, and cultural products. My archive demonstrates that the tensions between "the evident rhythm of human action" and "the evident incalculability in human action," as Du Bois put it in 1902, has implications for debates about the distinctiveness of aesthetic objects, the association of literature with the "incalculable" aspects of experience, and our contested practices of close reading. I build upon "sociological turns" in literary criticism—such as digital humanities, surface and flat reading, thick description, and actor-network-theory—that have

applied interpretative methods with roots in social science, but have yet to notice and assess the substantial range of interdisciplinary experiments on which I elaborate.

Through four conceptual chapters, I examine how writers and sociologists negotiated emergent paradigms for thinking about human beings both empirically and imaginatively, as a matter of collective fact and individual feeling. In Chapter one, I track emergent sociopoetic practices through the 1930s, when sociological studies of "typical" people and communities as well as documentary-literary works were proliferating. Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown* studies, James Agee and Walker Evans' documentary photo-book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and Muriel Rukeyser's poem sequence *The Book of the Dead* each challenge a newly visible conflation of social type and subjective self. I show that their accounts of a typical Midwestern city, an average family of tenant farmers, and a representative incident of industrial atrocity deploy objective, empirical approaches infused with humanizing, individuating poetic tropes and devices.

Chapter two shifts away from the issue of totalizing types and towards a series of post-WWII experiments concerned with the statistical enumeration and fragmentation of individuals as well as with literature's capacity to express social facts at scale. Delving into the technical procedures of quantitative methodologies, I use the attitude studies of social psychologist L. L. Thurstone to reveal the relational, provisional character of probabilistic inference and highlight the statistical "rotation" of patterns and correlations in literary form. Attending to a broader cross-section works by mid-twentieth and early twenty-first century poets, from W. H. Auden and Langston Hughes to Evie Shockley and C. D. Wright, I draw connections between statistical vocabularies and literary devices like enjambment, anaphora and parataxis as they function to divine knowledge about radically indeterminate subjects.

My third chapter arranges the growing archive of sociopoetics around the themes of self-reflection, self-fashioning, and self-expression in response to the specific forms of address constituted by the inquiries of survey analysis. I read works, like John Ashbery's "Proust Questionnaire," that engage with surveys as ubiquitous cultural sites at which negotiations between the coded worldviews of individuals, collectives, and institutions take place. While Ashbery's poem performs an act of answering, Charles Bernstein's "Questionnaire" and Ron Silliman's *Sunset Debris* are composed solely of questions; stylistically varied, these works disturb the unequal power hierarchies of interrogation and forge new encounters between official and personal registers of language. I also turn to projects by poet Bhanu Kapil and sociologists such as Laurel Richardson that remediate actual responses to surveys and interviews, recovering the voices of respondents otherwise rendered into trends in quantitative studies.

The final chapter develops its inquiry along the lines of the recalcitrant social and conceptual problem of singularity through a case study on Richard Wright. I reframe his well-known engagement with sociology in terms of the tension between "personality" and "environment" rehearsed throughout his oeuvre on the shifting stage of global race politics. Focusing on *12 Million Black Voices* and *The Color Curtain*, I explore narrative shifts between abstracted social forces and mass agency to the particularized emotions and experiences of people of color. I conclude by offering a meditation on the haiku Wright composed serially in his final months, which supply an analogue for this dissertation as well as the works it assembles. Much like Wright reconciles singular and multiple through a lived practice of accumulation, sociopoetics reckons ongoingly with our ways of understanding the strange relations between self and world, fragment and whole, particular and general.

INTRODUCTION

CALCULABLE/INCALCULABLE

> "[These] classifications, groupings, [are] made on the basis of some strategic element common to the items grouped. They are neither more nor less 'intuitive' than *any* grouping or classification of social events. Apples can be grouped with bananas as fruits, and they can be grouped with tennis balls as round. I am simply proposing, in the social sphere, a method of classification with reference to *strategies*...The classifications I am proposing would be *active*. I think that what we need is active categories. These categories will lie on the bias across the categories of modern specialization."
>
> — Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 1941

Carol Milford, the protagonist of Sinclair Lewis' 1920 bestselling novel *Main Street*, is portrayed as a "rebellious girl," an embodiment of "the spirit of that bewildered empire called the Middlewest."[1] The book opens with a portrait of Carol on a windswept hilltop, an eager, restless, naïve college student searching for her life's elusive purpose:

> Her versatility ensnared her. By turns she hoped to discover that she had an unusual voice, a talent for the piano, the ability to act, to write, to manage organizations. Always she was disappointed, but always she effervesced anew—over the Student Volunteers, who intended to become missionaries, over painting scenery for the dramatic club, over soliciting advertisements for the college magazine.[2]

Carol's rapid movement between desires, activities, communities, and organizations is very much in the "spirit" of a modernizing Midwest and an entire nation facing the changes and challenges of urban growth, industrialization, globalization, mass immigration, mass production,

[1] Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street: The Story of Carol Kennicott* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1920), 1.
[2] Lewis, *Main Street*, 2-3.

and other significant shifts in the early decades of the twentieth century.[3] *Main Street* might be called a satire of adaptation; over the course of the story, the pattern of enthusiasm, experimentation, and dissatisfaction repeats, most impressively in Carol's efforts to transform the small Minnesota village of Gopher Prairie into a more progressive, cosmopolitan, and aesthetically pleasing community. Although her husband Doctor Kennicott comes to channel her ambition to this particular locale, Carol's reformist energies—and the drama of the novel—are awakened in *Main Street*'s first pages, when she is still a student sifting through role after role, career after career: "studying law, writing motion-picture scenarios, professional nursing, and marrying an unidentified hero. Then she found a hobby in sociology."[4] It is the sociology professor from Boston that introduces Carol to the idea of "village-improvement—tree-planting, town pageants, girls' clubs."[5] And while only mentioned once, it is the "supplementary reading in sociology" that inspires her seemingly endless attempts and failures to beautify Gopher Prairie's Main Street, update its institutions, and inspire liberal ideals within its population. In short, Carol becomes a "sociological messiah" on a mission "to conquer the world—almost entirely for the world's good."[6]

Where Carol failed, *Main Street* did seem to conquer the world, bringing in an astounding 295,000 sales within its first year and reaching readerships far beyond the usual audience of New York's publishing houses.[7] It was a victory for honest, yet cynical realism documenting the

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[3] See Liesl Olson, *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017) for a history of the ways in which the urban Midwest developed modernist practices that responded to such shifts and challenges.
[4] Lewis, 3.
[5] Lewis, 5.
[6] Lewis, 254.
[7] According to Malcolm Cowley, the regular purchasing community then consisted of around 200-300 thousand people. Including cheaper paperback printings, *Main Street* sold more than two million copies in 1921. By 1925, *Publisher's Weekly* had named *Main Street* the best-selling

experience of rapid social change and delayed adjustment; Alfred Harcourt, Lewis' publisher, called it "the truest book [he had] ever read."[8] The brief appearance of the sociologist in the novel is, at one level, part and parcel of its commitment to capturing the truths of its day. At the time, the scientific study of human behaviors was still a relatively small affair practiced professionally by a few hundred people belonging to handfuls of academic departments. [9] From the outside, sociology seemed "little more than an umbrella term for the ideas of social reformers, meliorators, and visionaries" as well as the subject of "occasional undergraduate courses."[10] Carol's serial visions of improvement reflect this popular association between sociology and reform as well as the gendered history in which women sociologists like Jane Addams or Charlotte Perkins Gilman, also a literary author, were known more for their activism than their publications in the *American Journal of Sociology.*

Yet the figure of the sociologist registers a truth beyond and behind the novel's realist conventions, entrenched in its very compositional methods. Lewis would have gained a more nuanced understanding of the burgeoning social sciences than most during his time as an undergraduate at Yale, one of the few institutions with a robust sociology program in the first decade of the 1900s.[11] In diaries from university years, he recounts "sociological expeditions" to the slums of New Haven and asserts that "studying men, first hand" was part of "a poet's

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American novel of the 20th century thus far. Richard Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2002), 157-9.

[8] Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 146.

[9] Martin Bulmer, "Support for Sociology in the 1920s: The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial and the Beginnings of Modern, Large-Scale, Sociological Research in the University," *The American Sociologist* 17, no. 4 (1982): 185–92.

[10] Charles Camic, "On Edge: Sociology during the Great Depression and the New Deal," in *Sociology in America: A History*, ed. Craig J Calhoun (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 229.

[11] It also claims the first sociology class taught in the United States, which was offered in 1875 by William Graham Sumner.

training."[12] Such expeditions were also a resource for the composition of *Main Street,* which drew not only on his childhood memories of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, but also on detailed research and fieldwork Lewis undertook during extensive travels across the country—he once described fiction writing as scratching a "sociological itch."[13] Moreover, his protagonist's enduring struggle against a lagging but stable social climate resonates with concerns that were already central to sociology in its early phases: the dynamics of social control, the processes of social stability and change, and the relation of the individual to the collective and of individual behaviors to collective norms and values. And so, finally, the sociologist of *Main Street*—both character and author—points to a meaningful yet underexplored fluidity between literary and sociological ways of apprehending human life in the face of a "bewildered" and complex world.

This fluidity is more explicitly evinced in sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois' *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, published by the newly minted Harcourt and Brace the same year as *Main Street.* In contrast to the empirical, scientific studies of Du Bois' early career such as *The Philadelphia Negro*, *Darkwater*'s collection of polemic writings traverses literary, analytic, and autobiographical conventions, interspersing verse poems between essays, allegories, and short stories. [14] He describes the book's structure as follows:

> Between the sterner flights of logic, I have sought to set some little alightings of what may be poetry. They are tributes to Beauty, unworthy to stand alone; yet perversely, in my mind, not at the end, I know not whether I mean the Thought for the Fancy—or the Fancy for the Thought, or why the book trails off to

[12] Cited in Lingeman, *Sinclair* Lewis, 23.
[13] Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst, eds., *Sinclair Lewis Remembered* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2012), 5, 4.
[14] Du Bois composed literary works increasingly throughout his career. His novels include *The Quest of the Silver Fleece: A Novel* (1911), *Dark Princess: A Romance* (1928), and *The Black Flame Trilogy* (1957-1961). For a collection of poetry and other literary works see W. E. B. Du Bois, *Creative Writings by W.E.B. Du Bois: A Pageant, Poems, Short Stories, and Playlets*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (White Plains: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1985).

> playing, rather than standing strong on unanswering fact. But this is always—is it not?—the Riddle of Life.[15]

Interpenetrating poetry and logic, Fancy and Thought, play and stoic empiricism, Du Bois remains "perversely" ambivalent about defining the relationship between aesthetic and scientific modes of writing and of knowing. Rather than dictate whether one is "for" the other—perhaps as complement, supplement, or lens—he figures logic as "flight" and poetry as "alighting." And yet this analogy with mobility and stasis, with journey and respite, is soon complicated, as poetry becomes that which moves away or "trails off" and logic that which "[stands] strong." Coming from a discipline focused on isolating influences, interdependencies, and correspondences, his equivocation is notable. What is clear, at least, is the need for something more than "unanswering fact." Marginalized by the white sociological community on the basis of his race, Du Bois struggled to reconcile the potential of empirical positivism—and its claims that positive or certain knowledge of the world is derived from a combination of direct sensory experience and logic rather than metaphysical contemplation—to understand the causes of and suggest remedies to economic and racial inequalities within the limits of its objective perspective. The inclusion of "Fancy" calls to mind the demand for subjective considerations at the beginning of his 1902 *The Souls of Black Folk*, a work also noted for literary aspects like narrative prose and the analysis of slave folk songs. "Between me and the other world," Du Bois writes, "there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it…How does it feel to be a problem?"[16] In both of these instances, Du Bois wants a sociological inquiry that incorporates feeling, not just logic or "Thought." Here

[15] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (Mineola: Dover, 1999), ix.
[16] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 363.

the "other world"—the white world, which wields the power to decide who is a problem and under what conditions—has developed behavioral conventions and vocabularies that block the articulation of the "strange experience" of black subjectivity. The "difficulty of rightly framing" the unasked question of exclusion thus poses the additional problem of form and mediation, of how to approach, understand, and express something that has not yet properly entered a shared social vernacular.

The "Riddle of Life" would attract others. As sociology and the literary establishment continued to expand and specialize—commercially as well as academically—we can see such patterns of overlap proliferate. In 1929, literary critic and rhetorician I.A. Richards publishes *Practical Criticism,* the synthesis of his "experiments" to objectively study literary characteristics that would lead to the rise of New Criticism and effectively establish literary studies as a discipline. In 1937 Richard Wright, preparing to produce the manuscript of *Native Son*, visits sociologist Louis Wirth for a reading list in sociology.[17] W.H. Auden goes to Occupied Germany in 1945 to take part in the Strategic Bombing Survey to measure the effect of bombing on public morale in the wake of World War Two.[18] Erving Goffman uses drama as an analogy for the social "roles" he observes his research subjects performing in 1956.[19] Amiri Baraka dedicates a poem to E. Franklin Frazier, one of the key contributors to the sociology of race, on the occasion of his death in 1969.[20] Arlie Russel Hochschild, who coined the term

[17] For more on this encounter, see Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 68, 81.
[18] For an account of Auden's involvement and its effect on his writing, see Claire Seiler, "Auden and the Work of *The Age of Anxiety*," in *Auden at Work*, ed. Bonnie Costello and Rachel Galvin (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 250-274.
[19] As outlined in the "dramaturgical analysis" of Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).
[20] See "Letter to E. Franklin Frazier" in Amiri Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000), 212.

"emotional labor," writes in her 1983 study *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* that "we need feeling in order to reflect on the external or 'objective' world."[21] At the turn of the twenty-first century, poet Jenna Osman makes a list of "docupoetry" that sparks critical discussions of "a poetry of externals, of historical fact, of groups rather than individuals."[22] At the Modern Language Association annual meeting in 2019, scholar Rita Felski talks about her "sociology envy."[23] Such episodes of contact between literary and sociological production begin to show the imbricated history of disciplines that, subject to the pressures of specialization, tend to be thought of as siloed in the contemporary. They point to the development of a particular brand of inquiry into and representation of a spectrum of human actions, motivations, institutions, and interactions that this dissertation brings into focus.

In "Socio/Poetics," I provide an account of the historical relationship between literary and sociological practices and texts that redefines the orientation of literature to the social sphere and reveals the aesthetic affinities of sociology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My overarching purposes, which I expand upon later, are two-fold. First, the project offers a record of works, like those already presented, that self-consciously cross generic and disciplinary boundaries, absorbing forms, vocabularies, ideas, and methods of inquiry from each other. While not exhaustive, this collection of texts is more extensive—wider in chronological range and more formally diverse—than any existing study I have encountered. In our specialized and even insulated academic landscape, tackling such a scope both demonstrates the substantial existence

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[21] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Third edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 31.
[22] Mark Harrington, "Docupoetry and Archive Desire," *Jacket2*, October 27, 2011, http://jacket2.org/article/docupoetry-and-archive-desire.
[23] Rita Felski, "My Sociology Envy," (paper presented at the Modern Language Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, 2019).

of literary and sociological overlaps and allows me to extract shared traits which I define as "sociopoetics." Second, I excavate and present this archive to articulate new possibilities for understanding the relations between literary works and their contexts—and to envision literary and sociological objects and forms of knowledge as contexts for one another—in a world irrevocably changed by the application of the scientific method to the study of individual actions and collective human organizations. By this I do not only mean the extent to which, from birth, we are now counted, measured, polled, compared, surveyed, assessed and addressed by methods developed in the course of the history of sociology. I refer also to the impact of cultural and material phenomena produced or enhanced by sociology at different times and scales: the ideology of progressivism and social change parodied in *Main Street* and the continued diagnostic search for the causes and remedies of social ills; the paradigms of self versus society and rugged individualism versus social determinism; the expectation of predictive polling in politics and markets; the circulation of statistics in the mass media; the naturalization of psychological, physiological, and behavioral measurement and assessment, both by institutions and processes of "self-rating" that manifest in sites as varied as private thoughts, state testing, and playful quizzes in books, magazines, or online; and a vision of a differentiated, diverse, and relational social sphere. Literature, to generalize, has played its own role in cultivating the values of Western humanism until and beyond the twentieth century. Poems, novels, and plays can both evidence and furnish individual agency and self-expression, the mysteries of subjectivity, the fertility of the imagination, or the irreducibility of experience. After the rise of sociology, aesthetic texts entertained new versions of longstanding questions. To what extent are we influenced by social forces of which we may or may not be aware, and what is a "social force" to begin with? What is normal or an aberration in a situation of competing values, acts, and

judgments? How does the individual establish, maintain, and present a personality? "How does it feel to be a [social] problem?"

My contention is that we have much to learn about literary responses to and interactions with such circumstances, including from within the sphere of sociological inquiry, and that the best way to do this is by observing textual acts that do things like combine poetry and "sterner flights of logic" in motion. The claim I adduce from this contention is that "sociopoetics," distinguished by its interdisciplinary attributes, is best understood not as merely a mode, form, or genre, but as something more specific: a "strategy." I take this word from the rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke, a protean, influential twentieth-century intellectual whose works span criticism, fiction, and poetry. For Burke, a strategy is a way of naming—in order to navigate—typical, recurrent situations in the world that correspond to the particularities of social structures. Over the course of this dissertation, I elaborate on just what kinds of situations and social structures sociopoetics names and how this naming happens. The readings already presented begin to suggest some shared characteristic of these situations: rapid historical change and uneven responses from competing social landscapes; an individual at odds with the norms of a group; the inadequacy of a single research paradigm to explain the relationships between various phenomena; and the failure of a dominant shared vocabulary, specialized or quotidian, to express a minority experience. They all, I am claiming, name the existence of a "social problem." Du Bois provides a helpful definition in his 1898 paper "The Study of Negro Problems," originally published in the *Annals of American Political and Social Science*. "A social problem," he writes "is ever a relation between condition and action, and as conditions and actions vary and change from group to group from time to time and from place to place, so social problems change,

develop, and grow."[24] According to a more recent reference text, a social problem indexes "an alleged situation that is incompatible with the values of a significant number of people who agree that action is needed to alter the situation."[25] While the definition has changed insofar as the amount of people needed to define a social problem has grown, the incompatibility between condition and action remains the key indicator.[26] Sociopoetics, then, is a rhetorical strategy bridging condition and action that names and navigates social problems germane to the same developing West to which sociology first turned its gaze.

§

I began with a reference to bewilderment, a term that weaves its way through the intellectual and disciplinary histories out of which sociopoetics arises. To be bewildered is "to lose one's way," to be pathless and perplexed, in conditions of anomie—but the bewildered state is also one in which unanticipated routes can materialize and be pursued. In this section, I will give an account of generic and paradigmatic borrowings in the thought of four figures, canonized in their various fields, that articulate the search for a way forward at an uncertain crossroads. My

[24] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Study of the Negro Problems," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 11, no. 1 (January 1898): 3.
[25] Bryan S. Turner, "Social Problems," in *Cambridge Dictionary Of Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 581. Turner is quoting from Earl Rubington and Martin S. Weinberg, eds., *The Study of Social Problems*, Sixth edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[26] In the same paper, Du Bois defines a social problem at both group and individual registers. With regard to the former, a social problem is caused by "the failure of an organized social group to realize its group ideals, through the inability to adapt a certain desired line of action to given conditions of life." As he elaborates, Du Bois then reframes the social problem as experienced by the individual: "He finds himself, therefore, peculiarly weak in that nice adaptation of individual life to the life of the group which is the essence of civilization." Du Bois, "The Study of Negro Problems," 2, 8.

emphasis here is that, although the objects in this dissertation range from canonical to unorthodox, it is striking that the kind of inquiry that now signals "interdisciplinarity" was at once a simpler matter of organic imbrication *and* immanent to works that we now consider pillars of our disciplines. First, I turn to two examples that show foundational figures in sociology and literary criticism—W. E. B. Du Bois and I.A. Richards—working through quandaries about the aims, methods, objects and subjects of knowledge in their respective emerging fields. Each of these thinkers speculates on the possibility of making conclusive claims about human actions and judgments in the face of inevitable but unexpected irruptions into regular trends and objective observations. Their meditations on the borders between law and anomaly, group and individual, reveal a set of shared impulses and impasses that animate the hybrid texts this dissertation addresses. I then outline Kenneth Burke's formulation of rhetorical strategies more extensively, proposing it as a productive explanatory framework—a heuristic—for understanding the situated, active orientation of sociopoetics. Finally, I look to C. Wright Mills' largely forgotten meditation on what he calls "sociological poetry," the term from which I draw the title of this dissertation, as a means of sharpening my account of sociopoetics as not just a form but a strategy.

In a 1905 manuscript called "Sociology Hesitant," lost to the archives until nearly a century later, Du Bois redefines the borders of social scientific inquiry, isolating one of the intellectual problems important to my sense of sociopoetics. [27] Addressing the limits of the positivist methods in the lineage of Auguste Comte, he begins by observing "a fundamental

[27] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant," *Boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (2000): 37-44. Ronald A. T. Judy dates its composition to 1905 based on a reference to a meeting of the "Congress of Arts and Sciences at St. Louis last summer," held in conjunction with the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. Ronald A. T. Judy, "Introduction: On W. E. B. Du Bois and Hyperbolic Thinking," *Boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (September, 2000): 7.

confusion of thought at the very foundations of our science" that involves the reification of "Society" into an abstract entity as well as the valorization of method over attention to the minutia of data.[28] Comte's initial project, Du Bois recalls, attempted to turn the tools of science to study "the vast and bewildering activities of men and the lines of rhythm that coordinate certain of these actions."[29] In order to take on such vastness, however, the "prophet" and "his followers" reified a series of abstractions; having "noted the grouping of men, the changing of government, the agreement in thought…instead of a minute study of men grouping, changing, and thinking, [they] proposed to study the Group, the Change, and the Thought and call this new created Thing Society."[30] In other words, sociology was neglecting "the real elements of Society"—the "bewildering" deeds of people actively "grouping" rather than being grouped—in order to stay within the limits of positivist doctrine.[31] Here, Du Bois implies that this conceptual problem is also social, since the current paradigm then governing sociological research was confounded by the scope of human acts being carried out on the ground.

At the heart of his critique is a paradox between two conflicting premises to which nascent sociological discourses had yet to properly respond: "1) The evident rhythm of human action; [and] 2) The evident incalculability in human action."[32] The language with which Du

[28] Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant," 38.
[29] Du Bois, 38.
[30] Du Bois, 39.
[31] Robert Park and Ernest Burgess make a similar critique of Comte in *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. "It was Comte's notion that with the arrival of sociology the distinction which had so long existed, and still exists, between philosophy, in which men define their wishes, and natural science, in which they describe the existing order of nature, would disappear. In that case ideals would be defined in terms of reality, and the tragic difference between what men want and what is possible would be effaced. Comte's error was to mistake a theory of progress for progress itself." Robert Ezra Park and E. W Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1921), 4.
[32] Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant," 41.

Bois describes the source of the second premise—the "Great Assumption" of Western humanist thought that attributes an unpredictable component to human action—is a useful guide to the kinds of phenomena that, historically and in the contemporary, have posed challenges to sociological comprehension:

> This assumption […] prefaces all our thinking, all our science, all our literature […] and language has crystallized the thought and belief in Ought and May and Choice. Now, in the face of this, to propose calmly the launching of a science which would discover and formulate the exact laws of human action and parallel "Heat as a mode of motion" with a mathematical formula of "Shakespeare as pure Energy," or "Edison as electrical force"—simply to propose such a thing seemed to be and was preposterous.[33]

In this passage, Du Bois associates the "incalculable" with genius, creativity, invention, and specific individuals famous for possessing these qualities and who, moreover, changed the world in ways that could not be plausibly forecast or explained by the identification of social law or rhythm. We might include in the incalculable sphere the individual as such, subjectivity in general, the agentive human will that enables "Choice," the ethical sensibilities that tell us what we "Ought" to do, and the sense of possibility that opens the horizons of what we "May" do. Given the reference to Shakespeare, we should also register the link between literature, subjectivity, and incalculability that sociopoetics both picks up on and interrogates. Du Bois is doing just this with his concluding remarks in "Sociology Hesitant," in which he admits the incalculable into the sphere of sociological analysis as a kind of limit case or "secondary rhythm" that shows "the scientific side of inexplicable Will."[34] In a sense, Du Bois' solution invites the individual into the realm of sociological study as the creative, transformative side of

[33] Du Bois, 40-1.
[34] Du Bois, 44.

history, accepting the "Assumption of Chance" as a given and treating Law as a "Hypothesis" rather than a conclusion. Chance, the "secondary rhythm" differs from the "primary rhythm" that dictates as law, in that its regularity may be disrupted by a "more or less sudden rise at a given tune, in accordance with prearranged plan and prediction and in being liable to stoppage and change according to similar plan."[35] As we will discover shortly when Kenneth Burke joins the conversation, these rule-governed but flexible patterns of "stoppage and change" are accommodated by an understanding of literary form as "strategic."

Managing a sense of bewilderment ascribed to linguistic ambiguity was also part of a project at the foundations of literary criticism. I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (1929), which informed the work of Kenneth Burke as well as of William Empson, John Crowe Ransom, and other New Critics, took on the task of cataloging and classifying poetry based on the reactions of an educated sample population. The data or "protocols" that Richards meticulously taxonomizes and annotates are responses of undergraduate and graduate students, gathered over the course of several years, to unattributed poems varying in quality and renown. In the introduction to *Practical Criticism*, he outlines his aim to explore as objectively as possible "the vast *corpus* of problems, assumptions, adumbrations, fictions, prejudices, tenets; the sphere of random beliefs and hopeful guesses; the whole world, in brief, of abstract opinion and disputation about matters of feeling."[36] Focusing on subjective phenomena like beliefs, opinions, and feelings, Richards seems to be precisely in the sphere of incalculability. Affirming that poetry "is a central and typical denizen of this world [of ambiguity] both by its own nature and by the type of discussion with which it is traditionally

[35] Du Bois, 44.
[36] Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 3-6.

associated," he recapitulates the "Great Assumption" that troubled Du Bois. Yet Richards is also interested in understanding "matters of feeling" by probing "the scientific side of inexplicable Will." Steeped in a culture of scientism within and beyond the University of Cambridge, he draws both on the value-free ideals of the natural sciences and on social scientific methods of data collection and analysis throughout his study. Relying substantially on insights from the field of psychology, he refers to his work as an "experiment" with "precise conditions," a "record of field-work," and a "survey."[37] Moreover, he also demonstrates the urge to examine the play *between* the two strands of the paradox above, looking to understand material that can neither "be discussed in terms of verifiable facts and precise hypotheses" (primary rhythms) nor those that "can be handled by rules of thumb and generally accepted conventions" (secondary rhythms).[38]

In wedding scientific approaches and literary objects, Richards' goals are both humble, grandiose, and not quite fulfilled. On the one hand, he admits early on that "no attempt will be made…to do more than shake out and air these variegated opinions."[39] On the other hand, his traversal of the "bewildering" "labyrinth" of protocols leads him to declare the need for a much more significant project: a study of "Total Meaning" and the development of a "Theory of Interpretation" that should "be recognized as a vital branch of research."[40] As is well-established, the commitment to "Total Meaning" influenced literary critical understandings of poetry as a

[37] I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*, Revised edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930), 10. The fact that Harcourt and Brace published the revised addition for an American audience is another link to *Darkwater* and *Main Street*.
[38] Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 5.
[39] Richards, 18.
[40] Richards, 179, 337.

"thing-in-itself."[41] While today such pure formalism is critiqued for ignoring the meaning incurred by contexts of various kinds, for Richards it was an antidote to the "Dread of the bewilderment" that ambiguity in value, opinion, and expression through language *as communication* induced in readers.[42] What *Practical Criticism* illustrates, beyond its objective and systematic approach, is that before the poem came to be viewed as "a pattern of resolved stresses" the meaning of poetry was already profoundly unresolved and socially situated.[43] For although Richards is credited with the inauguration of "close reading," he devotes one-hundred and fifty pages of *Practical Criticism* attending closely to the responses of his students caught, confused, and confounded; his evidence is also the evidence of the sociologist interpreting, for instance, informant narratives, attitudes, and judgments. And while part of the bewildering nature of communication is the existence of ambiguity writ large, in part Richards blames social factors, like the "expansion and dissolution of small communities" brought about by modernization, urbanization, and globalization, and with them the diminishment of common vocabularies.[44] In order to systematically approach the ambiguous world of poetry, Richards needs to theorize a new "mind of the future": "The mind that can shift its view-point and still keep its orientation, that can carry over into quite a new set of definitions the results gained through past experience in other frameworks."[45]

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[41] For an overview of different interpretations of the origins and lineages of New Criticism, see the introduction to Donald J. Childs, *The Birth of New Criticism: Conflict and Conciliation in the Early Work of William Empson, I.A. Richards, Robert Graves, and Laura Riding*, eBook (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).
[42] Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 341.
[43] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1947; repr. New York: Harvest Books, 1975), 203.
[44] Richards, 339. Richards' work promoting and teaching Basic English in collaboration with C. K. Ogden is an extension of a kind of linguistic imperialism that is implicit here.
[45] Richards, 343.

A white Oxbridge intellectual and a black American scholar during Jim Crow, both Du Bois and Richards were perplexed but not deterred by the bewildering qualities of their objects of knowledge—though the real strangeness of the language that they use to describe their respective inquiries has become arguably overshadowed by their persistence in cutting a new path through the vastness of deeds, feeling, and meaning. To call for a scientific study of "inexplicable Will" and envision a "mind of the future" able to identify, catalog, and overcome types of ambiguity are ambitious goals. Rather than simply seeking access to the unknown, each of these thinkers are interested in understanding how things work at its border: how we are oriented towards and how our viewpoints shift with respect to the materials of knowledge. "Sociology Hesitant," and *Practical Criticism* set the stage for my presentation of sociopoetics as a strategy not only because they mark paradoxes and labyrinths in their disciplinary enterprises, but also because their authors forged ahead by making recourse to methods and vocabularies that would become absorbed by specialized, separate fields. As John Crowe Ransom recorded in his 1938 "Criticism, Inc.," arguing for the installment of literature professors in a "proper seat...in the universities," literary criticism "will never be a very exact science, or even a nearly exact one. But neither will psychology...nor will sociology...It does not matter whether we call them sciences or just systematic studies; the total effort of each to be effective must be consolidated and kept going."[46]

Even as the fields of literary criticism and sociology were solidifying their borders in the wake of these moments of gestation, Kenneth Burke maintained an interstitial presence. For Burke, traversing the bounds of empirical and imaginative, objective and subjective, symbolic

[46] John Crowe Ransom, "Criticism, Inc.," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 1109.

and analogic frameworks for apprehending literature, language, and human behavior was both a natural proclivity and an indispensable approach. According to Frank Lentricchia, Burke's work "is marked by contradictory impulses" to preserve singularities and discern overarching structures and to analyze language synchronously and diachronically; he "never bought the separatism that isolated action from contemplation, willing from imagining, or poetry from power."[47] Indeed, Burke's corpus includes works in rhetorical, literary, and social theory, sociology, cultural criticism, fiction and poetry. In the 1930s, a highly polarized period marked by debates about the value of art as autonomous and disengaged, on the one hand, or political and even revolutionary on the other, Burke held the position that all language—from everyday utterances to propaganda to romantic lyric poetry—derives meaning from social context.[48]

I draw here mainly on his continued pursuit of classificatory systems for literary form as "symbolic action," and more specifically on his proposition of an interpretive approach he calls "*sociological* literary criticism."[49] In his essay "Literature as Equipment for Living," first published in 1938 and later included in his book *Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (1941), he explores the correlation of ordinary language with the particularities of a given set of social conditions or structures. Using the basic example of the proverb, Burke observes that these commonplace sayings are generally used to designate common experiences or "situations" that pertain to a given social world.[50] Some proverbs, he tells us, have to do with "consolation," others with "vengeance," "foretelling," "wise living," "instruction" "admonition";

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[47] Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 56, 87.
[48] See Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, New Edition (London: Verso, 2011).
[49] Kenneth Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 293.
[50] Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 293.

what they share is a purpose, an "active nature" and a "direct bearing…upon matters of welfare."[51] In other words, proverbs are instruments or "equipment" for negotiating social life; "they are *strategies* for dealing with *situations*. Insofar as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them."[52] And, Burke asserts, these strategies can be organized under a scheme of classification based not just on the characteristics of linguistic form, but also on the lived situations that such forms name and, in doing so, actively negotiate. At a moment when, Burke says elsewhere, "a citizen has one foot on the relatively solid ground of established institutional habits and the other fast to an escalator erratically moving in several directions at a bewildering variety of speeds," we can imagine the urgent nature of his treatise.[53]

Burke's important and contestable move in this essay—prefigured, echoed, and rehearsed throughout his oeuvre—is to extend this framework to the interpretation of literary works. In doing so, he proposes that we have to dispense with existing categories by which literary critics describe and evaluate texts, to put aside distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow or autonomous and political art. This is not to say that literature should be undifferentiated; rather, Burke wants to build a new system of differentiation that "would derive its relevance from the fact that it should apply both to works of art and to social situations outside of art."[54] His "sociological criticism," then, is a way of reading that makes art and life coterminous, that always contextualizes art with regard to "the social sphere."[55] As I discuss over the course of my

[51] Burke, 295-6.
[52] Burke, 296-7
[53] Burke, 408. Burke is here describing the strategies in Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown* studies, which feature in my first chapter.
[54] Burke, 303.
[55] Burke, 303.

argument, these claims have implications for our understanding of what Richards called "the sphere of random beliefs and hopeful guesses; the whole world, in brief, of abstract opinion and disputation about matters of feeling" to which poetry is ascribed pre-eminent access in *Practical Criticism*. Suspicious of Freudian approaches to the human psyche and their application to artistic objects, Burke figured interiority as indistinguishable from its interaction, moment by moment, with the external world. "A motive is not some fixed thing," he wrote in his 1935 *Permanence and Change*, "like a table, which one can go and look at. It is a term of interpretation."[56] And interpretation—of motives as of poems—should always proceed with an eye to *function*, "purpose, strategy, the symbolic act."[57] As I will remark upon soon, thinking of literature as a strategy demarcates a third space in debates about the privileged status of art with relation to subjectivity. Although I am not, to be clear, arguing that we treat all literature under Burke's theory, I am arguing that sociopoetics, active and oriented towards problems, is a productive archive through which to explore this alternative prospect.

While Burke supplies me with a language for talking about what distinguishes sociopoetics—beyond its formal disciplinary hybridity—I borrow the title and central term of this dissertation from C. Wright Mills. Specifically, I adopt a moniker that Mills, in a 1948 retrospective review, suggested for James Agee's and Walker Evans's 1941 *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: sociological poetry.[58] Like many critics, Mills struggled to fit a name to *Famous Men*, a text whose admixture of journalism, travelogue, monologue, thick description, and prose

[56] Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (New York: New Republic, 1935), 38.
[57] Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 100.
[58] C. Wright Mills, "Sociological Poetry," in *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*, ed. John H. Summers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 34.

poetry has made it notoriously difficult to categorize.[59] In the preface, Agee himself calls it a "book only by necessity";[60] more than half a century later, Rancière called it "an impossible poem."[61] Mills' broad definition of sociological poetry, "a style of experience and expression that reports social facts and at the same time reveals their human meanings," likewise conveys a sense of friction between different registers.[62] Drilling down into the enigmas of sociological poetry, he notes it is at once characterized by reception or "reading experience" and "formal rules…that have to do with the ratio of meaning to fact."[63] Through a combination of "imagination and painstaking reporting" as well as "sharp sight and controlled reactivity," it produces not only experience but "visions."[64] As an object of evaluation, its "success" might be determined by its ability to "[contain] full human meaning in statements of apparent fact."[65] Like Burke's strategies, it treads the boundaries between art and life.

A closer looker at this neologism will help sharpen the qualities of sociopoetics that I have been describing and clarify my reasons for approaching it through the lens of "strategy." Like his famous book *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills' sociological poetry is connected to dissatisfactions with the state of his discipline. He first frames Agee's non-book as providing

[59] The review takes the form of a letter to Dwight MacDonald, who then published it in his magazine *politics*. Although *Famous Men* had fallen flat on the market, MacDonald, a great admirer of Agee, was belatedly distributing unsold remainder copies to *politics* subscribers and friends, including Mills. For a more detailed history, see John H. Summers, "James Agee and C. Wright Mills: Sociological Poetry," in *Agee Agonistes: Essays on the Life, Legend, and Works of James Agee*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 199–216.
[60] James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001), xi.
[61] Jacques Ranciere, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Paul Zakir (New York: Verso, 2013), 259.
[62] Mills, "Sociological Poetry," 34.
[63] Mills, 34.
[64] Mills, 34.
[65] Mills, 34.

"some answers to a problem" confronting both social scientists in particular as well as "any writer on social and human topics."[66]

> How can a writer report fully the 'data' that social science enables him to turn up and at the same time include in his account the personal meanings that the subject often comes to have for him? Or: How can the writer master the detaching techniques necessary to modern understanding in such a way as to use them to feel again the material and to express that feeling to the readers?[67]

Mills' language here resonates with the tensions between objectivity and subjectivity, fact and feeling, articulated by Du Bois and Richards at earlier points in the century. His first question communicates an anxiety about the erasure of the researcher's subjectivity as a means of securing scientific conclusions. The second then extends the loss of "personal meaning" in "detached" analysis to implicate the reader who, alongside the expert, may otherwise "feel again the material" disclosed in a given report. As Mills goes on to make clear, it is not only the methodologies through which social science achieves a sense of "modern understanding" that are to blame for such a loss, but a common orientation to the broader circumstances of contemporary Western life.

> This is not merely a technical problem of analysis or of exposition, [but one of] the *bewildering* quality and pace of our epoch and the unsureness of the modern intellectual's reaction to its human and inhuman features. We are reaching a point where we cannot even 'handle' any considerable part of our experience, much less search for more with special techniques, much less write it within the inherited styles of reflection and communication.[68]

[66] Mills, 33.
[67] Mills, 33.
[68] Mills, 34, emphasis added.

This problem is familiar to any scholar of the post-World War II period and the twentieth century as a whole, and it is linked to familiar literary histories. The overwhelming character of this period, for instance, is also a catalyst for rejections of "inherited styles of reflection and communication" perceptible in the formal experiments of modernist art. And its "inhuman features," from the Holocaust and Hiroshima to economic and other forms of deprivation—inhuman as in dehumanizing—to automation, consumer culture, and mass media—inhuman in the sense of a mechanized and virtual object world—shape the contexts for human rights literature, poetries of witness, and postmodern novels, among many other lineages of cultural production. Mills is also describing, as I take it, the very general conditions of the situation that has provoked the response of not just sociological *poetry* but socio*poetics*. I use "poetics" in place of "poetry" to zoom out rather than in, since the phenomenon I identify is not endemic only to poetry or even only to literature; "poetics" signals both objects and their theories of making across media and genres, suggesting the sense of craft imparted by Mills' use of the word "handle" above. The problem of "handling...experience" also calls to mind Burke's claim that strategies "deal in manners of welfare." In describing sociopoetics as a particular kind of form called a strategy, then, I echo Mills in understanding it as an "answer to a problem" or problems whose dimensions are shaped by historically specific circumstances or situations on which I will elaborate in each of my chapters to come.

While my conception of sociological poetics is a variation on a forgotten term, my method is also strongly informed by certain insights in one of Mills' most famous texts. *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), as mentioned above, offers solutions to the dissipated attention to "social problems" caused by the joint fragmentations and specializations of his discipline—the divisions that obscure, though do not inhibit, the continued forms of border-crossing that I track

and reanimate in this dissertation. For Mills, the most nefarious breach is between the schools of "Grand theorists," who seek totalizing accounts of social relations through "arid game[s] of Concepts," and "Abstract Empiricists," who, data-obsessed, calculate human action at the level of the sample size and at the behest of government and corporate interests.[69] Each camp fails to integrate "biography" and "history," to understand "the higher generalities [with regard to particular] problems in their historical and structural contexts," and to isolate the "significant problems of [its] period."[70] In contrast, Mills' sociological imagination, akin to Richards' "mind of the future," embraces thinking simultaneously at different registers and scales about a variegated set of objects: it is defined by "the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self…to shift from one perspective to another –from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry."[71] This project is similarly interested not only in identifying "significant problems" that appear in the situations articulated by objects in my archive, but also in speaking to the problem of sequestered discourse built into our current academic structures. Thus my own writing, too, moves between perspectives, across time periods, writers, themes, and vocabularies in order to create an archive of texts that denominates something both recurrent and unnamed.

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[69] Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 33, 55.
[70] Mills, 33.
[71] Mills, 7.

The story I tell in "Socio/Poetics" is aimed primarily at an audience of literary scholars, although it also holds significance for the sociology of knowledge and the history of sociology. For those who may have scant exposure to such a history, I will briefly outline a few major characteristics of sociology, past and present, that motivate my invocation of sociopoetic form as "strategy." First, to restate and extend my earlier comments, sociological thought is bound up with the practical implementation of knowledge towards remedying social problems in the modern Western world. Auguste Comte begins his cornerstone text *A General View of Positivism* by distinguishing sociology from other sciences in just this regard.[72] "At the very time when the theory of society is being laid down," he writes, "an immense sphere is opened for the application of that theory; the direction, namely, of the social regeneration of Western Europe.[73] Originally published in 1848, the same year as *The Communist Manifesto* and the failed revolutions across Europe's "Great Western Republic," Comte's positivism responds concretely to a "great crisis of modern history" in an attempt to "lay down a definite basis for the reorganization of society."[74] Second, then, sociology—while it once posited an entity called "society"—has come to develop around the study of aggregates, groups, and organizations. As the discipline took root in the Unites States, the so-called Chicago School of Sociology, which I will touch on throughout, came to prominence in the 1920s and 1930s. With figures such as Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, W. I. Thomas at the helm, sociology both coalesced as a discipline

[72] Comte's first treatise on the positivist study of human political and social life was *The Course in Positive Philosophy,* or *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, a five-volume collection of works published between 1830 and 1842. He begins using the term "social physics" to outline his program; the word sociological does not appear until volume four. (Park and Burgess, *Science of Society*, 3). This was originally a very predictive science.
[73] Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, trans. J. H. Bridges, 2nd ed. (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880), 1-2.
[74] Comte, 1.

and diversified its objects and its aims, edging out of the confines of positivist models that, as Carlo Ginzberg put it from a historian's view, have "the tendency to simplify the relationship between evidence and reality."[75] The sociologist, engaged in abstract theory or practical research, emerged as the expert on how things hang together, on the complex of relations which carry on within a set or subset of phenomena: causation, interdependence, correspondence and interaction. As Park and Burgess wrote in the textbook nicknamed the "Green Bible," "it is the very essence of the sociological method to be comparative."[76] Since this period, sociology has splintered and grew through various chapters and channels, from the province of measurement by statistical sampling to qualitative models of inquiry, many of which have been thoroughly absorbed by and adjusted to a huge variety of academic cultural, governmental, and corporate implementations.[77] Whether pursued through quantitative or qualitive approaches, these basic investments in reorganizing the world, attending to aggregates at scale, and understanding the dynamics of interrelationships all underlie my conviction that a refined awareness of literature's intersections with sociology will benefit literary studies.

This project emerged in response to recent conversations in literary studies about the efficacies of interpretive methods that borrow from the social sciences—the digital humanities, distant, surface and flat reading, thick description, and actor-network-theory, among others—as a way to consider meaning at different scales and in relation to a highly differentiated social and

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[75] Carlo Ginzburg, "Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1991): 83.
[76] Park and Burgess, *Science of Sociology*, 23. I take the nickname from Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies In The Sociology Of Deviance*, New edition (New York: Free Press, 1997), 203.
[77] See Andrew Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) for a history of the social science disciplines as well as a description of cultural structures more broadly in terms of self-similarity and "fractal distinctions."

material world of agents, objects, ideas, and phenomena. According to critics like Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, these moves are a reaction against "symptomatic," "suspicious," or "paranoid" styles of reading that, following a Marxist model popularized by Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, excavate historical and political "latent meanings" from literary forms.[78] At the same time, as James English observes in his introduction to the 2010 special issue on "New Sociologies of Literature" published in *New Literary History*, the adoption of Marxist close reading practices, with their emphasis on "History and Power," has also meant that most literary scholars are trained to be "sociologists of literature" as well as formalists to some degree.[79] Together, English notes, the legacies of book history, British cultural studies, and other sociologically-minded trends focused on institutional histories, canon-formation, and readerships have produced a widespread attention to literature in the social field or as a social form.[80] More focused interdisciplinary work engaging with sociology and social theory has tended to make productive use of a particular thinker or a particular method of inquiry, from C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination, to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical outlook and emphasis on social role-playing, to Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory, to the uptake of quantitative instruments in the digital humanities and more general appeals to empirical practices of observation and

[78] See Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21.
[79] James F. English, "Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature After 'the Sociology of Literature,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): viii.
[80] English, "Everywhere and Nowhere," v–xii. Some examples of works that attend to literature in relation to social and institutional life include: Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Daniel Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics Riddles, Nightlife, Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Michael C. Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

description as opposed to "symptomatic" analysis.[81] Books like Evan Kindley's *Questionnaire*, Lori Cole's *Surveying the Avant-Garde*, or Merve Emre's *The Personality Brokers* have recently provided us with histories that reveal the ways in which sociological tools of collective and individual assessment have saturated our culture.[82] Yet even these detailed accounts remain selective in their choice of entry into the sociological terrain. The range of sociological methods and schools of thought, including self-reflexive debates about the virtues and weaknesses of a huge spectrum of approaches, or more technical details of procedures like writing and analyzing surveys, have seldom been examined with an eye to their literary affinities.

What this dissertation contributes—and what has not been sufficiently undertaken—is a cultural history of the relationship between sociological and literary practices of knowledge-making as manifested in the formal and methodological characteristics of specific texts. As I mentioned more briefly at the start of this introduction, my aim is for a combination of range and focused attention, of historical and formal interpretation. I trace real confluences and influences between writers in conversation with each other or responding to a shared social and intellectual climate. For example, chapter four reconsiders several works by Richard Wright, who actively sought the company of sociologists, read sociological texts, wrote about reading sociological texts, and self-consciously applied sociological research methods in his fiction, essays,

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[81] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, 1st edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Franco Moretti and Alberto Piazza, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London; New York: Verso, 2007). For a defense of description as a literary-critical practice, see Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best, "Building a Better Description," *Representations* 135, no. 1 (2016): 1–21.

[82] See Evan Kindley, *Questionnaire*, Object Lessons (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Merve Emre, *The Personality Brokers: The Strange History of Myers-Briggs and the Birth of Personality Testing* (New York: Doubleday, 2018); and Lori Cole, *Surveying the Avant-Garde: Questions on Modernism, Art, and the Americas in Transatlantic Magazines* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2018).

travelogues, speeches, and poems. In other instances, I am interested in the impact of the cultural absorption and circulation of the vocabularies, forms, and methods of sociology into literary works and vice versa in a given historical milieu. At all points, I examine the ways in which formal experimentation is associated with documented historical overlaps of various kinds. The benefit of using examples that *formally* exhibit methodological borrowings—for instance, a poem that is also a questionnaire—that readers may be able to glimpse, through more familiar literary analogues, mechanisms of sociological inquiry that can dispel some of our assumptions about both disciplines. For instance, as I discuss in chapter two, the association of statistics with numbers and counting obscures its interest in relationships *among* phenomena. While doubtless reductive in many ways, the dynamics of statistical probabilities are also remarkably flexible and relativistic. Likewise, as I show in chapter three, survey methods involve a keen sensitivity to linguistic form, the ambiguities of meaning, and the subjectivity of respondents that is likely to surprise literary scholars; examples like the objects of "poetic inquiry," verse produced out of interpreted or "coded" survey and interview data, can reframe our own close reading practices.

It is exactly such sociological adoptions of literary modes that leads me to my second major point about what this dissertation offers: a reassessment of debates about not just how aesthetic texts should be read, but also about the specificity of art as opposed to other kinds of artifacts. For the reasoning behind "sociological turns" in interpretive practices listed above is closely linked to, indeed part of, the longer politicized history involving the status of art, capitalism and commercialization, resistance and revolution, and identification and sympathy. In particular, I refer to enduring debates about aesthetic autonomy and political commitment that were of concern to many of the writers in this dissertation—such as Langston Hughes, Muriel Rukeyser, W. H. Auden, Richard Wright, Charles Bernstein, C. D. Wright, among others—and

subtend the ways scholars today approach their work. To risk a generalization, at one pole we can observe connections between the value of aesthetic autonomy and lyrical self-expression, the inheritances of New Critical formalism, and conservativism. At the other, we can note a link between more radical, leftist politics, the conviction that art is always historically and politically situated, and a suspicion of the view that literary studies should direct its energies at, to quote Richards again, "the whole world of...abstract opinion and disputation about matters of feeling." As Heather Love has put it in her defense of "flat reading," the association of literary forms and critical methods like close reading with the "sacred human qualities of warmth, intention, depth, and authenticity" is historically contingent and, moreover, holds up a fantasy of stable subject that is not available to everyone.[83]

In poetry scholarship in particular, the aforementioned binary has appeared in a split between avant-garde and "official verse culture" as well as debates about the conservative politics of what Virginia Jackson and others have called "lyric reading."[84] By the 1990s, Christopher Beach could note a schism between "sociological" and "aesthetic" schools of reading, the former which takes poetry as a "socially contingent practice" whose meaning is entangled with its contexts, and the latter which sees poetry as a "universally relevant and respected art" whose aesthetic machinery gets unpacked by the critic.[85] This divide has since deepened in the poetry world in debates that pit lyric self-expression against anti-lyrical forms

[83] Heather Love, "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 381.
[84] Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005);Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); cf. John Michael, "Lyric History: Temporality, Rhetoric, and the Ethics of Poetry," *New Literary History* 48, no. 2 (2017): 265–84.
[85] Christopher Beach, *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry between Community and Institution* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 1.

that mark, in Johanna Drucker's words, "the end of the era of the individual voice."[86] We might locate the beginning of this end in the 1960s and 1970s, when civil rights and cultural revolutions that prompted and were energized by poetry movements—the Black Arts Movement, feminist poetries, and Language poetry, to name a few—brought into view the fact that the lyric persona or "speaker" imagined by much scholarship occupies a privileged space that is inadequate to represent marginalized, non-white or non-western experience. [87] If "lyric reading" is taken as "the de-historicizing and de-socializing process of reading everything as if it were a lyric," and if it has made poetry look "more and more abstract and ineffable," these frictions are further complicated by the materiality and polyvocality of other forms of poetry that document, cite, and speak in collective voices.[88] The framework of form as *strategy* I put forward here takes a step outside the discourses of poetics and the history of poetry towards other ways of imagining how literature "makes something happen."[89] The logic of sociopoetics detaches "self-expression" from a sanctified origin point somewhere "inside" the self, emphasizing the social function of poetic language; it treats language at once in its particular form—poetic, literary, sociological, scientific—and in general. Because it invokes a multiplicity of registers and speaks directly to the contexts from which its problems and questions derive, examining it need not be limited to

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[86] Johanna Drucker, "Beyond Conceptualisms: Poetics after Critique and the End of the Individual Voice," *The Poetry Project Newsletter* 231 (2012), 9.
[87] Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* dislocates "the romantic/expressive model of lyric" and "lyric as a drama of the attitudes of a character," instead considering lyric poems as events that use performative and ritualistic elements to "illuminate and interpret the world for us." However, Culler's archive is largely ahistorical and restricted to Western traditions. Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 5-8.
[88] Jennifer Ashton, "Labor and the Lyric: The Politics of Self-Expression in Contemporary American Poetry," *American Literary History* 25, no. 1 (2013): 218; Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 2.
[89] Frank Lentricchia suggests "Literature makes something happen" as a slogan for Kenneth Burke's work on the whole. Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change*, 105.

close or distant, formal or historical reading. And if we notice that the association between poetry, warmth, and intimacy gets activated as a strategy in the sociological field, we can see that it often names a situation in which "colder" objective registers of attention have reached an impasse.

Thinking about literature as a strategy, then, joins a host of interpretive methods that run against the New Critical conception of art as a "thing-in-itself," as a timeless, closed, and stable set of formal parts. As Rita Felski has put it, for the majority of literary scholars today "context is not optional."[90] And yet, as she also points out, what counts as the right context or the right amount of context can be highly contestable; interpreting texts in relation to context "inveigles us into endless reiterations of the same dichotomies: [not only] text versus context [but also] word versus world, literature versus society and history, internalist versus externalist explanations of works of art."[91] Reading in context, that is, makes it difficult to track the life of an object through time, across social and geographic space, or in relation to changing readerships and receptions. Felski offers one solution by borrowing an approach from science studies. Using Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory, she advocates for the view of a text as an actor that "summons up actions and orchestrates events…that modifies a state of affairs by making a difference."[92] Caroline Levine's 2015 *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* shares a general dissatisfaction with the binaries Felski lists above. However, rather than importing a model from another discipline, Levine develops a new theory of formalism that also bears some similarities with Burke's approach. She argues for the extension of the concept of aesthetic forms into the social, material world, modeling a criticism that understands "all shapes and configurations, all ordering

[90] Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!," *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011): 573.
[91] Felski, "Context Stinks!," 576.
[92] Felski, 583.

principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" as forms.[93] The upshot of Levine's approach is that we can read social and literary shapes, principles, patterns, and so on without hierarchizing, nesting, or putting boundaries up between literature and social life; we can understand "literary forms not as epiphenomenal responses to social realities but as forms encountering other forms."[94] Burke says something quite similar in his book *Counter-Statement:* "There are formal patterns which distinguish our experience. They apply in art, since they apply outside of art."[95] Burke's strategies are, like Levine's forms, both "situated" and "portable."[96] Levine's use of the design-terminology "affordance" for thinking about the potential function of a form—something one *could* use it to do—is something akin to the way Burke thinks about strategies.[97]

The difference is that strategies, in the manner of "text-as-actor," are always actively engaging with and modifying the situations in which it arises. My uptake of Burke, then, allows us to combine some of Felski's and Levine's insights above with regard to the tensions between text and context, form and history. For the situations that strategies name can be both timeless, or at least consistent over broad arcs of history, and new linguistic strategies can be created in correspondence with new social structures. One more look at Burke's "Literature as Equipment for Living" will demonstrate the utility of treating sociopoetics as strategic. Providing an account of H.L. Mencken's *The American Language*, Burke asserts the book was in fact written by

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[93] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3.
[94] Levine, *Forms*, 14.
[95] Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 143.
[96] Levine, *Forms*, 1-23.
[97] Levine, 1-23.

"many millions of people" figuring out how survive and socialize in the new world.[98] "As you read that book," he says, "you see a people who were up against a new set of typical recurrent situations, situations typical of their business, their politics, their criminal organizations, their sports. Either there were no words for these in standard English, or people didn't know them, or they didn't 'sound right.'"[99] This also describes the situation to which I am responding, one in which terms and categories like "lyric" seem inadequate, stale, or inapplicable as our fields of poetry and literary studies become global, hemispheric, and at once more diverse and diffuse. As I take it, discipline-specific vocabularies that sociologists use to describe their objects and tools, and that I apply to literary texts throughout the dissertation—"coding," "self-rating," "factor analysis," statistical "rotation," and "communality," to name a handful—can open our own modes of analysis to new dimensions and forms of attention.

§

The four chapters that follow are variegated, taking structural cues and emphases from the objects they place in conversation. Each chapter title hinges two terms that, like "calculable" and "incalculable," imply a tension between disciplines and discourses that sparks sociopoetic responses I go on to examine: single poems and books of poetry, prose forms like travelogues, essays, reports, and sociological studies, and works of social and literary theory. The majority of the objects are hybrid, marked by some combination of features usually attributed to verse or prose, literature or sociology; in some cases, where genre appears straightforward, the influence

[98] Kenneth Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 300.
[99] Burke, 300.

of a thought paradigm or device from one discipline or the other remains visible. Novels will be noticeably absent, largely because most scholarship on the convergence of literature and sociology has tended to focus on fiction; moreover, these studies exhibit a further tendency to view the novel as a coherent reflection or record of social realities from which sociological knowledge can then be gleaned. In contrast, as previously stated, my account focuses on textual objects that do less to *reflect* and more to *engage* with the external, historical world.

While chapters are organized thematically, the progression moves somewhat chronologically, addressing the evolution of particular sociological and literary approaches and schools of thought, such as the concretization of quantitative methods by mid-twentieth century and experiments with computational modes of writing poetry. The general period of focus ranges from the 1920s into the contemporary; no single chapter is limited to a discrete time period within that span. I begin in the 1920s because it was arguably then that sociology, while still in formative years, was more concretely institutionalized and naturalized in the public mindset. Robert Park and Ernest Burgess' *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, a book geared to the student, suggests just this in the authors' delineation of three phases of the sociological enterprise:

1. The period of Comte and Spencer; sociology, conceived in the grand style, is a philosophy of history, a 'science' of progress (evolution).
2. The period of the 'schools'' sociological thought, dispersed among the various schools, is absorbed in an effort to define its point of view and to describe the kinds of facts that sociology must look for to answer the questions that sociology asks.
3. The period of investigation and research, the period into which sociology is just now entering.[100]

[100] Park and Burgess, *Science of Sociology*, 44.

By "now" Park and Burgess mean 1921, the same year that *Main Street* had record-breaking sales, disseminating an image of a sociology professor to unprecedented numbers of American readers. The "investigation and research" phase marks new, expansive contact between the world of academic sociology and the world on which it turned its inquiring gaze. Interviewers would be increasingly scattering across the city of Chicago, Park's "urban laboratory," and the knowledge they derived would be used in policy, shared in the news, its image circulating as part of public, cultural life. In other words, sociology was becoming a part of society.

Chapter one, "Type/Self," considers sociopoetic works that name recurrent but unruly situations in a modernizing 1930s America, contemporaneous with upheaval in social and economic structures as well as with the thoroughgoing institutionalization of social science. In particular, I locate the emergence of widespread sociopoetic practices in the context of a culture of national self-seeing—prefigured in *Main Street*—that was encouraged by publicly circulating sociological studies of "typical" people and communities as well as the proliferation of documentary literary works in the Depression era. Faced with comprehending rapid and bewildering changes in scale, infrastructure, and inequality, the writers and researchers I examine in this chapter deployed objective, empirical approaches to the typical—a typical Midwestern city, an average family of tenant farmers, and a representative incident of industrial atrocity—and infused them with humanizing and individuating poetic tropes and devices. Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown* studies (1929-1937), James Agee and Walker Evans' documentary photo-book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), and Muriel Rukeyser's poem sequence *The Book of the Dead* (1936) all index and seek to intervene in conditions of cultural lag, economic deprivation, and corporate exploitation that cannot be adequately expressed by scientific facts or lyricism alone. First, "The Middletown Spirit," a section of *Middletown in*

Transition that assembles "typical" statements of belief and conviction from residents in Muncie, Indiana in verse stanzas, performs a ventriloquizing act of critique to reveal incongruities in the façade of conformity. Agee's work, to which I then turn, both parrots the idiom of sociological studies like *Middletown* and destabilizes any sense of objective conclusiveness. Seeking to portray "human divinity" and radical selfhood rather than typicality, Agee's sociopoetics creates a sense of excess, failure, and ongoingness at the limits of aesthetic representation. Rukeyser's poem, in contrast, draws on a combination of lyric models, documentary forms, and scientistic unifying theories to create a holistic but differentiated text that calls for social change in a charged political climate. Taken as a whole, "Type/Self" is rooted in a discrete period of time in order to showcase the methodological and formal variety through which sociopoetics takes shape—in this case, around the problem of recognizing the thin border between conceptions of an objectified type and a subjective self.

In my second chapter, "Statistic/Relation" I substantially widen the historical scope of chapter one to explore sociopoetic experiments thematically grouped by a concern with the enumeration, fragmentation, and probabilistic assessment of individuals and groups. I also delve more deeply into the technical procedures and vocabularies of quantitative methodologies, which I then use to produce novel readings of the function of familiar literary devices like enjambment, anaphora and parataxis. The chapter is organized around major tensions in the logics of statistics—which by midcentury were being rapidly applied across spheres of research, policy, and mass culture—with regard to the definitiveness of quantification and the indeterminacies of statistical inference. First, I address sociopoetic efforts marked by numbers, percentages, tallies, and other acts of counting that push back against the norms set by quantitative measurement and the analysis of people as sets of attributes and variables. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, I

discuss President Hoover's Committee on Social Trends and its organization of American life in tables and totals, as well as Langston Hughes' speculations about the capacity of poetry to express social facts at scale. I then introduce poems by Kenneth Burke and W. H. Auden from the 1940s and 1950s that take up and ironize the rhythms of social laws and norms determined by computation and bureaucratization. Turning to the attitude studies and "common factor analysis" of social psychologist L. L. Thurstone, I identify features of statistical inference like seriality, relationality, and provisionality to highlight the ways that sociopoetics "rotates" our perception of patterns and correlations in literary form. Attending to writers such as Jackson Mac Low, George Oppen, and Evie Shockley, I tease out the implications of mapping statistical vocabularies onto poetic divinations of knowledge about radically indeterminate subjects. The chapter closes with a discussion of the role of judgment in manufactured statistical categories like deviance, which I show to be figured as collective and tentative in C. D. Wright's twenty-first century poem sequence, *One Big Self*.

"Survey/Voice," my third chapter, arranges the growing archive of sociopoetics around the themes of self-reflection, self-fashioning, and self-expression in response to the specific form of address constituted by the inquiries of survey analysis. Unlike the totalizing forces of types and the iterative, indeterminate processes of statistics, surveys are linguistic sites at which complex negotiations between the worldviews of individuals and institutions take place. As James Agee sensed when solicited by *The Partisan Review* to participate in an author questionnaire, and as sociological researchers are well aware, surveys procure expressions of personal facts, thoughts, and feelings while simultaneously constraining them. Surveys orchestrate, that is, encounters between "vocabularies of motive"—another term I take from C. Wright Mills—that, while conventionalized from one point of view, may be illegible from

another. I carry the tensions implicit in surveys through sociopoetic texts, published primarily after the Second World War, that stage such encounters in myriad ways: as antagonistic clash, comfortable conversation, anxious partnership, wry battle of wit, or as transformative alignment. The objects I include likewise engage with various phases and aspects of survey analysis. While Charles Bernstein's "Questionnaire" mimics the survey format but uses diction that undermines its coherence, John Ashbery's "Proust's Questionnaire" speculates on the limits of self-determination in answering. Ron Silliman's *Sunset Debris*, a poem composed entirely of questions, emphasizes the unequal power hierarchies of interrogation by eliding the possibility of response. The remaining texts in this chapter deal in assembling and remediating the language of actual responses to surveys and interviews with an aim quite the opposite of Silliman's: to recover the voices of respondents in the process of interpretation or "coding" that are otherwise rendered mute. My readings of works of "Poetic Inquiry" by sociologist Laurel Richardson and others in tandem with poet Bhanu Kapil's *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* illuminate strategies for weaving a collective voice, neither lyric nor anti-lyric, that speaks as a means of, as Burke had it, "matters of welfare."

In my fourth chapter and epilogue, "Case/Problem" I conduct a case study on Richard Wright, an author thoroughly immersed in the sociological discourses of his day. In focusing on a single figure, I also develop my inquiry along the lines of one of the most obstinate, recalcitrant problems shared across the spheres of humanistic and social scientific knowledge: singularity. While models for literary studies tend to uphold exemplarity and falter at scale, accounting for the individual's "incalculable" status has presented enduring puzzles, solved only to reoccur, for sociological methods, laws, and trends. Briefly tracing Wright's intimacy with social science, I isolate the process of "too and fro" motion between the particular and the general, which he self-

avowedly used to compose *Native Son*, as an analogy for his sociopoetic practices. I then concentrate the bulk of the chapter on examining tensions between "personality" and "environment," an incompatible binary to which Wright referred throughout his oeuvre, as it plays out in two of his works. First, I address the prophetic, collective voice of *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), which configures a world of deterministic social forces and mass agency. Second, I explore the more nuanced, entangled representation of the relation between individual and group articulated in *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1955). Implementing a questionnaire to help him comprehend this momentous meeting of post-colonial states in the politically charged atmosphere of the Cold War, Wright anchors the report in his own emotions and experiences as a person of color. However, as I argue, he refracts his subjective views through an extensive remediation of his informants' questionnaire replies in a sociopoetic—and pedagogical—gesture of testimonial parataxis. Lastly, I offer a short coda on the many haiku Wright composed at the end of his life, which betray an impulse to dissolve the binary of "personality" and "environment" into a natural, egoless, and unsocialized space. Serial and consistent in their themes and numbering in the hundreds, the haiku enact a reconciliation of singular and multiple through a lived practice of accumulation.

I close this introduction with a few final notes on method. My project develops a way of reading that takes cues from the archive it assembles, and I am committed to thinking with my archive as it conceives of its own terms. Sociopoetics, a strategy for dealing with a specific set of situated but recurrent problems, is largely self-reflexive and puts its reflexes on display. To see how purposive action is woven into form, I consider each text's discursive understanding of its project as I proceed. The same goes for the frequently and loosely deployed abstractions like "type," "average," "knowledge," "self" or "voice" that often populate my objects; as my

dissertation accumulates examples of sociopoetics at work, these terms will attain specificity in their interdisciplinary contexts. In the case of "knowledge," for instance, I am hesitant to align myself with existing critical models for stamping a particular time and place with an epistemological tradition or vice versa, in part because I am trying to draw out what "knowledge" meant for texts that variously shy around, de-familiarize, and transmute its meaning. On a related note, I have intentionally kept my engagements with existing readings of the objects treated within the dissertation to a minimum. I see "Socio/Poetics" as an archival project, and while the archive includes famous as well as lesser-known works, it gathers force and definition from the conversations I animate within it. Even as it does inform my own understandings of various figures and works, then, secondary criticism does not dictate the central basis of my arguments. Finally, since my aims are to make visible the sociopoetics of works acting in different ways to various degrees, my own mediations and analyses will vary in detail; while I dwell with some objects at length, others, like the poems in Du Bois' *Darkwater*, are "little alightings."

CHAPTER ONE

TYPE/SELF

> "One's self I sing, a simple separate person,
> Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse […]
> The Modern Man I sing."
>
> — Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1855

> "Thence comes the well-known fact that the really valuable part of practical wisdom acquired by the individual during his life is incommunicable—cannot be stated in general terms; everyone must acquire it afresh by a kind of apprenticeship to life—that is, by learning…to construct for his own use particular schemes of the concrete situations which he encounters."
>
> — W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki,
> *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 1918-21

The 1947 romantic comedy *Magic Town* features a struggling opinion pollster named Rip Smith who lights upon a "mathematical miracle" that will save his career: a small town called "Grandview" that is statistically identical to the country as a whole.[1] Smith, played by James Stewart, devises a plan to poll this perfect sample population about "progressive education in public schools," bidding against competitors who have been working on the question for months. There is, of course, a catch. The survey must be kept a secret, for if Grandview realizes how special its ratios actually are, the responses of inhabitants will be slanted in future polls—and so Smith and his associates set off under the guise of selling insurance. The plan goes awry when subjectivity interferes with objective, quantitative research and Rip falls for a local journalist,

[1] Robert Riskin, *Magic Town*, directed by William A. Wellman (RKO Radio Pictures, 1947), 103 minutes.

Mary (Jane Wyman), who discovers his deceit and exposes the real reason for his presence in town. Suddenly Grandview is making national headlines, becoming flooded with pollsters, reporters, advertising agents, and real estate developers looking to purchase opinions. Meanwhile, residents are happy to capitalize on their newfound status. In a montage sequence that captures Grandview's accelerating modernization, once-quiet streets appear transformed, littered with signs like "The Average Man Shines his Shoes Here" and packed with buses running "The Typical Tour of the Typical Town."[2] In full entrepreneurial spirit, Grandview's population begins polling *itself* on questions of interest and distributing numbers to eager national news outlets—until they indicate an atypical perspective. Asked "Would you vote for a Woman for President of the U.S.?", the town replies 79% in favor, a result deemed "ridiculous" by experts.[3] Confronted with an inflated housing market and a City Council of deflated egos, Rip and Mary team up and rekindle their relationship as they set the town on a path of slow expansion and progress inaugurated by the construction of a new civic center.

The film figures the "Average Man" and the "Typical Town" as fantasies of consumer culture, "miracles" generated by calculations, and sight-seeing spectacles appropriated by advertising schemes. The fact that the plot of a mainstream comedy could prey upon the attempt to put the "U.S. in a capsule" indexes both the voracious media appetite for assessments of public sentiment as well as a sense of self-awareness with regard to the limited explanatory power of the "typical."[4] Released at the outset of the post-WW2 period to the populace of a newly global power, its satire also seems nostalgic, pointing backward towards earlier decades of isolationism in which America could still be imaginably encapsulated. Like the subject of *Main*

[2] Riskin, *Magic Town,* 70:00-73:00.
[3] Riskin, 88:00.
[4] Riskin, 67:00.

Street's satire, the laugh-track of *Magic Town* is animated by a tension between small-town cultural lag and urban progressivism. But while the "typical center of a typical Main Street block" in the former reflected a realist portrait for readers in search of an American self-image, the "typical town" in the latter was legible to audiences as a creation of "magic," an outcome generated from polling instruments that had become prominent across the fields of academic sociology, public policy, and market research. The real-life joke on Gallup in 1948, when the organization failed to predict the victory of Harry Truman in the presidential election, further speaks to the limits of measuring public opinion, especially in periods of rapidly expanding and diversifying economic, political, and cultural climates. Underlying *Magic Town's* caricature, then, were persistent practical and methodological problems to do with the production and consumption of knowledge about American society. How could the diverse characteristics of a group, including subjective matters like opinions, be properly generalized, and at what scale?

The question of collective introspection and representation is also evident throughout poet William Carlos Williams' first book of *Paterson*, published the year before *Magic Town's* release. Bearing out Williams' axiom "no ideas but in things," the poem constitutes its figurative Paterson from the material one—images, locations, objects, individuals, historical documents, folklore—and meditates on its attempt to distill universals through the assemblage of granular facts. Its "Preface" begins:

> "Rigor of beauty is the quest. But how will you find beauty when it is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?"
>
> To make a start,
> Out of particulars
> And make them general, rolling

Up the sum, by defective means—[5]

Williams is after something quite different than Rip Smith, as he dismisses the method of "rolling / Up the sum" as a "defective means" of figuring something singular yet composed of a diverse assortment of things. Yet the poem continues to meditate on the idea of "rolling up," both as a potential poetic means to the end of achieving "rigor of beauty" and of fulfilling his aim to examine "the resemblance between the mind of modern man and the city."[6]

> no return; rolling up out of chaos,
> a nine months' wonder, the city
> the man, an identity—it can't be
> otherwise—an
> interpenetration, both ways. Rolling
> up! obverse, reverse;
> the drunk the sober; the illustrious
> the gross; one. In ignorance
> a certain knowledge and knowledge,
> undispersed, its own undoing.[7]

This is the first of many encounters between person and site of social organization that run through the poem. "Rolling up" now takes on the additional connotation of arriving by car, perhaps putting it in "reverse" when faced with the challenges of the "quest." For "The city / the man" are placed in an impossible relation—"it can't be"—and an impossibly co-dependent one—"it can't be / otherwise—an / interpenetration." Are man and city then affiliated like "the drunk the sober; the illustrious / the gross," opposites or counterparts named by social types? Probably not quite, since enjambment makes "the gross" simultaneously vulgar and numerous as

[5] William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, ed. Christopher MacGowan, first ed. repr. (New York: New Directions, 1995), 3.
[6] Cited in Christopher Beach, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 110.
[7] Williams, *Paterson*, 4.

it pairs lopsidedly with "the illustrious" and "one." The proposed correlation of "man" and "city" is mercurial, at once ignorant and certain, loose and exact, and an important feature of the poem's "undoing" of one-to-one correspondences.

Paterson, with its many narrative threads, found documents, and journalistic style, also recognizes the limits of lyrical forms to represent at scale. We might say that the lyric "I," because it produces a sense of the universal self out of the articulation of private experience, has something in common with the "typical man." For sociologist and cultural theorist Theodor Adorno, the lyric poem purveys a social whole from an external, withdrawn standpoint. As he puts it in "Lyric Poetry and Society," the voice of the lyric "I" obtains universality by encapsulating "the historical relationship…of the individual to society…in the medium of a subjective spirit thrown back unto itself."[8] This is a Whitmanesque model, on which the "I" can both "hear America singing" and "sing the body electric," on which the "People I meet" and "the effect upon me of…the ward and city I live in, or the nation…come to me days and nights and go from me again / But they are not the Me myself."[9] Williams, for whom Whitman is an important influence, sensed that this scale was unavailable to his more documentary, thing-based approach. Paterson was chosen as the place to reconcile man and city because "it was a place not too big to be understood in its totality yet varied and distinguished enough to provide thematic interest."[10]

Magic Town and *Paterson* each register the fact that by the time of their release it was implausible to squeeze the variegated character of American experience into the canister of an

[8] Theodor W. Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," in Theodor W. Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, *Notes to Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 42.
[9] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Signet Classics Edition (New York: New American Library, 2005), 9, 80, 25-6.
[10] Beach, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Literature*, 110.

imagined, single figure or "type." The assignation of "typical," as I will treat it in this chapter, is a way of organizing the diversity of experience, Du Bois' "bewildering deeds of men," into a picture at once representative and holistic. Put broadly, on my definition to typify a person or a community is not only to associate individuals with traits held by a group, but also to generate a categorical shorthand to refer to any number of members. Types reduce the difference or cross the distance between the part and the whole, so that the "typical man" refers to both an individual and an abstract concept circumscribing all other typical individuals; it is at once singular and multitudinous. In the early decades of the twentieth century, when sociology was developing into a public arbiter of social knowledge, the problem of abstracting empirical data into types—extending the site of the self—is consonant with the emergence of sociopoetic practices.

This chapter examines a set of sociopoetic works with a historical focus on the 1930s, a decade marked by economic upheaval, political isolationism, and the expansion of state power. It is also much-discussed as a documentary age, one in which journalists, photographers, pollsters, literary writers, sociologists, and many other kinds of intellectual and cultural workers conducted projects of national self-seeing that frequently and seriously engaged with the language of types.[11] As I will show, sociopoetics gets animated at the intersection of intertwined histories in this period: the accelerated institutionalization and public visibility of sociology as a discipline; the uncertain value of aesthetic production amidst the economic and political crises that define the Depression Era; and the widespread documentary urge to capture American realities. All of the objects that I consider exhibit concern about the authority of typicality over individuals and

[11] For a commentary on the documentary culture of the decade, including its impact on and by sociology, see William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, New edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). John Grierson, the film producer and writer who coined the term documentary, was trained as a sociologist. Stott, 9.

experiment, through recourse to a combination of literary and sociological methods and values, with ways to untangle the conflation of the individual self with the collective type orchestrated by typicality. Like *Magic Town* and *Paterson*, each of the following works are purposefully situated in a locale being surveyed, and each is self-conscious about the act of researching and writing about its subjects as representatives of their environment or situation. This particular brand of sociopoetics refuses lyrical and typical forms of representation to draw attention to instabilities within types and discursive norms, creating new arrangements between totality and singularity. It inserts incongruous or unabsorbable elements to create snarls in otherwise normative structures of the typical, rewriting "the gross; one" relation to make visible the blips, the margins, and the multiplicities.

In the first section, I elaborate on sociological modes of typification in the 1930s and unpack public discourses around the institutionalization of sociology as a tool for national introspection by way of Robert and Helen Lynd's 1929 bestseller *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*. In approaching *Middletown* and its sequel, *Middletown in Transition*, I highlight their public role—how they imagined ordinary America and how readers imagined sociology as a tool to describe the typical—as well as their more complicated trajectory as experimental texts with sociopoetic qualities. In particular, I read "The Middletown Spirit," a section of the 1937 *Middletown in Transition*, as testament to the fallacies of typical thinking, one that remediates and defamiliarizes a litany of social norms in the lines and stanzas of a poem. In part two, I examine James Agee and Walker Evans' 1941 *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the hybrid project that C. Wright Mills called "sociological poetry," against the backdrop of widespread projects of national self-seeing. Agee both invokes and dismantles the epistemological authority of grammars that reduce human subjects through generalization,

exploding the container of the "typical" and exposing the representational limits of writing. Finally, I come to Muriel Rukeyser, a poet committed to summoning up a voice that might articulate the raw facts of marginalized experience while conveying a sense of solidarity. Situating her 1936 poem sequence *The Book of the Dead* in a literary climate troubled by political upheaval and aesthetic withdrawal, I show how Rukeyser interposes lyrical, documentary, juridical, and social scientific registers to derive new relations between individuals and collectivities she figures as "alloys."

It is worth briefly noting the structural differences between this chapter and those that follow. For one thing, I have chosen to center my analysis around typicality in a quite broad sense as a means of setting up later treatments of sociopoetic works that deal more explicitly with the technical aspects of sociological forms and subfields: statistics and survey analysis. For another, I focus on a discrete time period and draw more heavily on the backdrop of mass culture in order to show how sociopoetics as a strategy oriented towards particular, frequently occurring conditions must be understood as situated within a historical and cultural milieu. I also take this opportunity to note some of the qualities of sociopoetics that persist throughout this archive: repetition and recombination, ironizing and ventriloquism, and self-reflexive commentary on method, among others. In other words, the function of this chapter is to begin to provide a sense of what reading sociopoetics as a strategy looks like, which our archive will expand upon and complicate as we go on.

PART ONE: *MIDDLETOWN*'S "TOTAL SITUATION"

As a scientific research device, the "typical man" has precursors in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century natural sciences, whose "typical" specimens were at once descriptive and, in

so far as their circulation in books and pictures established the common ground for "collective empiricism," were prescriptive, asking practitioners to see this or that in the world.[12] In the field of statistics, the typical must also be traced back to the "Social Physics" of Adolphe Quételet, whose definition of the *homme moyen,* or average man, was a nineteenth-century solution to the realization that "individual humans are too complex and diverse to serve as the basis of science."[13] Quételet went as far as to extend this usefully abstract "fictitious average" to signify "the 'type' of a [given] nation."[14] Although the major sociological monographs published during the 1920s and 1930s, especially in the Chicago School, focused less on numerical averaging than on the details of differentiation—within their pages one finds case-studies, interviews and first-hand observations, personal documents, biography, historical records, and other diverse materials—their titles speak the language of type and associate people with the sites that organize or disorganize them: *The Polish Peasant* (1918-21)*, The Negro in Chicago* (1922)*, The Hobo* (1923), *The Child in America* (1928)*, The Taxi-Dance Hall* (1932) and so on. Looking into the pages of Paul Cressey's *Taxi-Dance Hall,* to take one example, we can see the utility of designating types as a way to make such data legible to the reader. Cressey introduces his subject as a "type" of dance hall, with a particular "type of ownership or management," a "type of physical equipment," and a "typical location."[15] The people who attend have a recognizable

[12] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, "Epistemologies of the Eye," in *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 17-54. Their account of the development of "objectivity" as an "epistemological virtue" in the history of science links the codes and values of a given scientific paradigm with suggestive ideals about the kinds of self it imagines its experts having.
[13] Gerd Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance: How Probability Changed Science and Everyday Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 42.
[14] Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance*, 43.
[15] Paul Goalby Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall : A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life*, Paperback Edition, The University of Chicago Sociological Series (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008), 18-19.

"distinct type of personal behavior," and the "seasoned taxi-dancer" has a "distinct personality type."[16] The evidence provided, though assembled from sundry sources, is likewise described as being "typical."[17] Ernest Burgess' introduction to Cressey's work forges a link between the utility of the type and the book's mission to expose a reality "almost unknown to the general public" characteristic of not only sociology but literature and reportage of the 1930s.[18] As Burgess puts it, "The reader is given an entrée into the social world of the taxi-dance hall such as the casual visitor never gains. Vicariously, he may imagine himself in the place of the taxi-dancer or her patron, participating, as it were, in their experiences, and getting some appreciation of their outlooks and philosophy of life."[19]

The role of sociology in the promulgation of American self-study at a national level is embodied by the probable real-life referent of *Magic Town,* Robert and Helen Lynd's 1929 *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*. The first best-selling sociological monograph in the U.S., *Middletown* has been considered by social historians to be "the most influential work of its kind in the history of American social science."[20] The book brings to life a picture of a "typical" small, Midwestern city over the course of more than 400 pages of aggregated data gathered over a two-year period. The circulation of *Middletown* outpaced that of other products

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[16] Cressey, *Taxi-Dance Hall*, 36, 40.

[17] For example, "a regular sequence of typical experiences" and "life-history excerpts," (Cressey, 94), individual cases (Cressey, 163, 172) newspaper accounts (Cressey, 237), and processes of social interaction (Cressey, 243), among other uses.

[18] Ernest Burgess, introduction to Cressey, xiii.

[19] Burgess, xiv.

[20] Christopher Shannon, *Conspicuous Criticism: Tradition, the Individual, and Culture in Modern American Social Thought*, Rev. ed. (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2006), 27. Shannon's book registers the ground-breaking nature of the Lynd's study, and is representative of the interest that social historians have taken in the Middletown works. The link between *Magic Town* and *Middletown* I take from Sarah Elizabeth Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), x.

of the Social Survey Movement published in the first decades of the twentieth century—154 general surveys and 2,621 specialized surveys by 1928.[21] The book went through six printings in the space of the year, filled the windows of New York's Fifth Avenue bookstores, was added to syllabi at dozens of universities, produced long waiting lists at libraries, spawned community discussion groups in all kinds of locales, and was reviewed by the most humble to the most prestigious newspapers.[22] Between the printing of the first study and the second, *Middletown in Transition*, it sold around 32,000 copies at five dollars apiece—a fair expense during the Depression that hit shortly after its release.[23] Readers were able to range over a field of non-fictional material more idiosyncratic than one would expect of a sociological survey: not just numerical figures and questionnaire replies but extensive quotations and anecdotes supplied by inhabitants in casual conversation; newspaper and comic clippings; observations taken during town assemblies and church meetings; historical public records since 1895; and lengthy narrative descriptions of the everyday routines, clothing, and living spaces of everyone from high school students to grandparents.[24] Muncie, Indiana, later revealed as the site of the survey, was selected from criteria that included a population of 25-50,000, relative "[self-containment] in this era of rapid and pervasive inter-communication," and only a "small Negro and foreign-born

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[21] Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, Diversity, and the Rise of Sociological Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 67. For a more detailed account of the Survey Movement see Martin Bulmer et al., *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
[22] Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 122.
[23] Fox and Lears, *The Culture of Consumption*, 122.
[24] The legacy of *Middletown* has been sustained well into the present. Follow-up projects range from: the 1937 *Middletown in Transition*; a 1982 PBS mini-series directed by Academy Award winner documentarian Peter Davis; the creation of the Center for Middletown Studies at Ball State University, whose archives include oral histories of black and immigrant communities that were excluded from the original reports; and a ten part *Guardian* series by journalist Gary Younge covering the final months of the 2016 Presidential Election.

population."[25] These requirements meant that the "typical community," as it was introduced to readers, had a population of 88% white "constant native American stock," making it unusually homogeneous for a US city and completely racialized.[26] "The very middle-of-the-road quality about Middletown" was not immanent to Muncie, awaiting discovery. Rather, it was generated by a combination of methodological choices, the authority ascribed to objectivity, and the wealth of accumulative detail in the Lynds' report.[27]

Historian Sarah Igo, drawing on an exhaustive archive of *Middletown's* reception and dissemination, attributes the book's popular appeal to two substantial factors: its objective, "dispassionate" approach and its patently ordinary object. For instance, H.L. Mencken wrote that *Middletown* "reveals, in cold-blooded, scientific terms, the sort of lives millions of Americans are leading," while Stuart Chase remarked in *The Nation*, "Who touches the book touches the heart of America."[28] Years later a feature in *LIFE* reflected of *Middletown* that "Sociologists use it as a specimen, advertisers as a test tube" and that it "made Americans gasp with wonder, recognition and surprise."[29] Together, these quotations reveal the newly attained status of the "typical" as a figure that both accommodates and invigorates national self-understanding. The fact that *Middletown* portrays the "heart of America" even in "cold-blooded, scientific terms" reflects a faith in objective sociological fact that, we will see, becomes increasingly fraught for the public in the Depression era. [30] The additional reference of "heart" to core or essence, to the

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[25] Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 8.
[26] Lynd and Lynd, 8; Igo, *Averaged American*, 56.
[27] Lynd and Lynd*, Middletown*, 9.
[28] Igo, *Averaged American*, 24.
[29] "Muncie, Ind. Is the Great U.S. 'Middletown': And This Is the First Picture Essay of What It Looks Like," *LIFE* 2, no. 19 (May 10, 1937): 15.
[30] The popular usage of "scientific" here obscures the contested meaning and value of "scientific" and quantitative approaches in academic sociology that is immediately evident on a perusal of the American Journal of Sociology, arguably the most influential periodical of the

act of collapsing "millions" into a single organ, suggests a tacit acceptance that the type—not a national symbol or archetype but a figure born of sociological research—adequately expresses common experience otherwise too vast to be measured. As noted in my introduction, the public view of sociology in previous decades was strongly associated with social reform and, by extension, the study of types like the unemployed, the sick, the sexually depraved, and so on.[31] Unlike Cressey's types, which concentrated on microcosmic situations outside the bounds of dominant, stable social mores to reveal changing habits in urban recreation, the Lynds attempted a "total-situation study of a contemporary civilization."[32] Rather than focus on symptoms of more rapid urbanization, industrialization, and globalization that occupied the attention of the Social Survey Movement, the Lynds turned their gaze toward a longer historical view that examined the slower impact of these conditions on white American middle-class life.

The initial aims of the "Small City Study," which was funded by the Rockefeller Institute for Social and Religious Research, had been far narrower, and its methods more conventional. The Lynds, neither of them trained sociologists and rather inexplicably hired to head the project

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period. Sites of anxiety include accuracy, as in Read Bain, "Stability in Questionnaire Response," *American Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 3 (1931): 445–53; Mapheus Smith, "A Note on Stability in Questionnaire Response," *American Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 5 (1933): 713–20; Ruth Shonle Cavan, "The Questionnaire in a Sociological Research Project," *American Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 5 (1933): 721–27. More pressingly, some practitioners register the risks of reducing social life to quantitative forms of analysis and expression as well as the problem of measuring data in non-quantitative categories. See for example Floyd N. House, "Measurement in Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 40, no. 1 (1934): 1–11; William F. Ogburn, "Limitations of Statistics," *American Journal of Sociology* 40, no. 1 (1934): 12–20.

[31] Igo, 25-7. Igo in particular refers to Paul Kellogg's long-running Philadelphia project and publication *The Survey*. For a detailed history of *The Survey* and Kellogg see Clarke A. Chambers, *Paul U. Kellogg and the Survey; Voices for Social Welfare and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971).

[32] Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1959), 3. For more information on the Lynd's and the gestation of their project see Igo, 30-35.

after a series of organizational obstacles, began their work using anthropological models that they soon modified and complemented with methods improvised along the way. In her autobiography *Possibilities*, Helen Lynd recalls how their use of a "combination of formal and informal techniques" was misunderstood and denigrated by the study's funders.[33] As she put it, "what we were doing didn't fit into any category."[34] Found "positively bewildering" in its range and scope by the Institute, the manuscript was picked up two years after completion by Harcourt and Brace—the same commercial press that had published Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* in 1920.[35] Indeed, decades later, sociologist Maurice Stein would note that among its "literary technique[s]" was a "dead-pan irony" comparable to that of Lewis.[36] When *Middletown in Transition* was published in 1937, it was clear that the Lynds had taken even more liberties with their material. As Ernest Burgess noted, the second *Middletown* book leaned on "extraneous" material that supplanted "desirable" questionnaire or "other sampling methods" that might have "supplied a solid foundation of objective fact for the analysis of the cultural superstructure of community life."[37]

This departure from convention reaches its height in "The Middletown Spirit," the penultimate chapter of *Middletown in Transition*, in which we find the text strategically disorganizing and critiquing Middletown's adherence to typical outlooks. Here, Lynd collates his findings to describe the "large elements of repetition and coherence in [Middletown] culture…points of view so familiar and so commonly taken for granted" that they would be met

[33] Cited in Dwight W. Hoover, *Middletown Revisited* (Muncie: Ball State University, 1990), 6.
[34] Hoover, *Middletown Revisited*, 6.
[35] Hoover, 6.
[36] Cited in Hoover, 7.
[37] Ernest W. Burgess, "Review of *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts*, by Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd," *American Journal of Sociology* 43. 3 (1937): 487.

with an "of course."[38] Helen considered the "The Middletown Spirit" to be "one of the best things Bob wrote" in either book; it is also one of the most literary.[39] The assembled statements are knit together in an anaphoric lineated structure that resembles a credo, manifesto, or a poem. In a very general way, the intimacy of shared understanding indicated by "of course" in the pronouncements of "The Middletown Spirit" universalize an encounter between speakers and listeners much like a lyric poem can do. More precisely, poetry dilates an encounter with the "of course" to hold us in a moment of reflection about the nuances it conceals even as it generates the possibility of identification. Robert Lynd accomplishes this feat without recourse to any particular "I" as he probes the sanctioned status of Middletown's idiom, ironizing, self-interrupting, exaggerating, and creating juxtapositions that reveal internal contradictions in its governing logics.[40] In order to provide a sense of the poem, I include the entirety of the first stanza below.

> By and large Middletown believes:
>
> In being honest.
> In being kind.[2]
> In being friendly,[3] a "good neighbor," and a "good fellow."[4]
> In being loyal, and a "booster, not a knocker."
> In being successful.
> In being an average man. "Practically all of us realize that we are common men, and we are prone to distrust and hate those whose we regard as uncommon."[5]

[38] Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937), 402.
[39] Quoted in Charles E. Harvey, "Robert S. Lynd, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Middletown," *Indiana Magazine of History* 79, no. 4 (1983): 353.
[40] I will refer to Robert Lynd singularly because he is reported to have written this chapter without Helen's assistance. See Fox and Lears, *The Culture of Consumption*, 130. Although Helen was not part of the team sent to Muncie in 1935, she was instrumental in writing the book. In a letter to her mother in March of 1936, for instance, she notes that she had spent a "good part of the vacation putting a shoulder under Bob's new Middletown ms." Box 2 Folder 15, Robert and Helen Lynd papers, Kent State University Special Collections and Archives.

In having character as more important than "having brains."
In being simple and unpretentious and never "putting on airs" or being a snob.[6]
In prizing all things that are common and "real" and "wholesome."
"There are beauties at your own doorstep comparable to those you find on long journeys."
In having "common sense."
In being "sound" and "steady."
In being a good sport and making friends with one's opponents. "It doesn't help to harbor grudges."[7]
In being courageous and good-natured in the face of trouble and "making friends with one's luck."[8]
In being, when in doubt, like other people.
In adhering, when problems arise, to tried practices that have "worked" in the past.[41]

Written in the passive voice and purportedly applicable to any given Middletown inhabitant, these statements of belief and value forge a link between type and self only to destabilize it, particularly through the use of anaphora and citation. The minor variations in line openings, for example, belie the false consistency of the repeated word "in," instead illustrating a gradual progression away from an imagined yet elided speaker. "In being" statements seem to identify firm beliefs about the self at a fundamental level, while "In having" and "In prizing" draw the language of consumerism into the categories of morality and personhood. The sense of accumulation surrounding these words is future-oriented and increasingly prescriptive—Lynd's choice to cinch the stanza with a switch to "adhering" to "tried practices" in response to problems invokes the power of social norms to manage and adjust our behaviors. Taken together, the substitutions of one anaphoric phrase for another create an arc that first asserts, then denaturalizes, an ontological claim about human value—they disclose a revelation that what

[41] Lynd and Lynd, 403-5.

defines one's "being" might just be second-order traits of "having" and "adhering" to pre-existing standards. To further complicate an otherwise wholistic picture, the supplemental quotations and footnotes that become increasingly present imply specific, but unnamed, individual sources that put forth subtly alternative phrasings. For instance, the belief "In being an average man" is rearticulated in more negative terms: "Practically all of us realize that we are common men, and we are prone to distrust and hate those whose we regard as uncommon." At a basic level, this addended testimony admits that only "practically all" men—and here the male type is presumed to organize everyone—hold this view. The revision of "average" to "common" suggests a slightly different form of collective identification, one based moreover on its active opposition to those who are "uncommon," emphasizing not the existence but the *lack* of heterogeneity in Middletown. Finally, the substitution of "being" with "realize that we are" and "those [who] we regard" not only indicates the possibility of false-consciousness embedded in "of course," but also attaches acts of judgment and antagonism to the seemingly neutral idea of "being average."

Quotation marks around single words and short phrases have a slightly different effect in the process of shattering the illusion of typicality. Though I have printed these lines without interruption above, they actually span the top of two pages, the bottom halves of which are filled with extensive footnotes. In footnote four, following the first implementation of quotation marks, Lynd explains his citation method.

> The quoted words and phrases scattered through this list of things Middletown believes are from local editorials, club programs, civic-club and other presses and papers, and from conversations. All are included because, in the experience of the writers, they represent widely-held Middletown attitudes. For the sake of brevity, the many

sources are not always identified in this long listing.[42]

This is as much a disclaimer as it is an explanation, one that gives Lynd the freedom to quote without reference to a source and, as I take it, for rhetorical effect. Echoing the shifts in line openings, the quotation marks generate an increasing amount of distance from or defamiliarization of the terms and concepts they bracket. While perhaps the quotation marks around "good fellow" and "booster, not a knocker" are justifiable insofar as the words issue from a specific lexicon, and while it is easy to accept the sentence-length quotations, footnoted or not, as locally-sourced information that should be distinguished from Lynd's own script, the use of punctuation to set off words like "real" or "steady" seems less warranted. Here, the device raises tensions between the meaning of words in the poem and in possible original contexts. What does it mean, for instance, for tried practices to "work"? In a text that has already devoted hundreds of pages to the state of labor in American capitalism, does the suspicion around "work" force us to alter our understanding of the project as a whole?

Lynd's sociopoetics, then, is at once ventriloquizing Middletown's "of course" and interrogating it, establishing from the outset a pattern of incongruities nestled within Muncie's views. Kenneth Burke put this a different way in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, when he remarked that the Lynds' second study was important precisely because it exhibits "a strategy of stooping to conquer" that "begins by *listening* rather than by *asserting*. It is postponed assertion."[43] The poem is indeed patient and subtle in its presentation of mushrooming self-contradictions, slowly piling additional indeterminacies upon terms—like "work"—and themes—like the distrust of difference—across fourteen pages. The following excerpt, for

[42] Lynd and Lynd, 404. Two of these footnotes cite poems. In fact, poetry is featured throughout the book as a form of data.
[43] Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 407.

instance, continues to play on the fluctuating meaning of "work" that can be mapped back onto other beliefs like being "successful," "a good fellow" and "an average man."

> That leisure is a fine thing, but work comes first.
> That "all of us hope we'll get to the place sometime where we can work less and have more time to play."
> But that it is wrong for a man to retire when he is still able to work. "What will he do with all his time?"
> That having a hobby is "all very well if a person has time for that sort of thing and it doesn't interfere with his job."[44]

Again, Lynd employs distancing techniques such as the disruption of "But that" in the anaphora "That" and the introduction of small qualifications and inexactitudes: "if," "when" "sometime," "sort of thing." In a way these reconfigurations of the relation between work and leisure are amusing; perhaps we could chuckle along with a man of Muncie at his devotional disposition toward work. Other contradictions drawn out by the poem, however, feel more nefarious, even dangerous for the marginalized people subjected to the accepted local codes.

> That charity will always be necessary. "For you wouldn't let a dog starve."
> That in a real emergency anyone with any human feeling will "share his shirt with an unfortunate who needs it."[13]
> But that a "government dole" on a large scale is an entirely different thing from charity to an individual…
> That idleness and thriftlessness are only encouraged by making charity too easy.
> That is "undermines a man's character" for him to get what he doesn't earn.[45]

[44] Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, 412.
[45] Lynd and Lynd, 415.

These avowed principles of charity come into overt conflict when applied in different contexts: "it will always be necessary" but only "in a real emergency," and it is valuable on the individual but not institutional scale. While being necessary, it cannot be made "too easy," and even in necessary situations, it damages the "character" of the recipient. Read in tandem with other moments in the long poem, the lines also reveal a kind of process by which the language of Middletown's givens can smooth over or accommodate an incongruous set of actions they might produce in practice. For instance, an earlier statement "That nobody is really starving in the depression" relieves the strain of reality on the compatibility of the first two "of course" statements above: if no one is "really starving," there is no "real emergency" in which one would be compelled to act.[46] Remember also that Lynd used quotation marks in his first stanza around "real," setting a precedent for reading future instantiations of reality as perspectival and inconsistent. Just as previously proved scientific laws begin to fail in the contexts of new discoveries at the brink of a paradigmatic shift, Middletown's ideals in the context of modernity, particularly in the depression, no longer create a sensible whole.

Or rather their unification, revealed to be artificial, occurs in the space of the poem rather than the world—and once realized, the gap between representation and reality ripples outward to de-authenticate the report's delineation of the typical in the first place. For "The Middletown Spirit," even as it destabilizes the architecture of its core values, is built on the scaffolding of a sociological organizing schema that structures the book as a whole; its twelve thematic stanzas mirror the categorical groupings of the tables of contents of both Middletown studies. Just a few instances will serve to illustrate this pattern: the excerpt above concerning charity reflects back on an earlier chapter entitled "Caring for the Unable During the Depression"; a stanza beginning

[46] Lynd and Lynd, 409.

"That the family is a sacred institution and the fundamental institution of our society" can be linked to the chapter "Making a Home;" and the section announcing "That schools should teach the facts of past experience about which 'sound, intelligent people agree,' whose every line references education, crystallizes findings already disclosed in "Training the Young."[47] Such alignments enable readers to transpose the poem onto the book but, in the wake of Lynd's defamiliarizing strategies, onto Muncie only with reservation. In summary, then, the sociopoetics activated here borrows formal features and devices of literature in the context of a sociological text to convey a critique with multiple prongs. Besides the charge that, in response to economic crisis, "Middletown tries to forget and to disregard the growing disparities in the midst of which it lives,"[48] Lynd self-reflexively throws suspicion on his own methods. The coherence of the "total-situation-study" as well as the figure of a "typical" American small city, his poem conveys, arises less from organic communal structures or deep social laws than their methodological blueprints.

The growing challenge to the value of such methods was pressurized by the proliferation of New Deal research committees whose relief measures were failing to alleviate widespread suffering as well as by documentary projects that pitted their approaches against sociology's more scientific protocols. As one article in *Harper's Magazine* put it, organizations were caught up in a self-justifying "Fact-Finding Farce."[49] "Since we became 'sold' on what we believe to be the scientific method," the essay explains, "the accumulation of facts as a substitute, rather than as a basis for collective action has become a national gospel."[50] Or as journalist Maxine Davis

[47] Lynd and Lynd, 410, 411.
[48] Lynd and Lynd, 491.
[49] Lillian Symes, "The Great Fact-Finding Farce," *Harper's Magazine* (February 1932): 354.
[50] Symes, 355.

asserted in the introduction to her documentary book *The Lost Generation,* "We will make no sociological survey…we want to explore the lives of the boys and girls we meet, and there is no tabulating and card-indexing of the hearts and souls of human beings. We cannot weigh statistics of hope deferred, or figure rations in blighted ambitions."[51] Lynd echoes these charges in his 1939 book *Knowledge for What?: The Place of Social Science in American Culture*, observing that sociologists, the newfound arbiters of American self-knowledge "in the most disparate and confusing cultural environment faced by any generation," have stopped caring about those suffering the conditions of actual social problems: "they have lost 'the person' below their horizon, as they move along busily ploughing their respective research furrows."[52] Meanwhile, facts depicted in or alongside visual and literary registers were taking on more significance. For example, reformist photodocumentary projects like Roy Stryker's FSA archive, a monolithic undertaking sponsored by government funding that sent dozens of photographers to capture tens of thousands of images made available to the press, was instrumental in turning the gaze of America inward. The rise of mass picture magazines capitalized on the country's desire for self-knowledge in more digestible and even sensationalized forms; in the words of media magnate and *Life* founder Henry Luce, its audiences were invited "to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed."[53] William Stott asserts that documentary, a "genre of actuality," was the "primary expression of thirties America" precisely because of its admixture of fact and feeling; it is a

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[51] Maxine Davis, *The Lost Generation: A Portrait of American Youth Today* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 8.
[52] Robert Staughton Lynd, *Knowledge for What?: The Place of Social Science in American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), 11.
[53] Blake Wilson, "'The Show-Book of the World': Henry Luce's Life Magazine Prospectus," *Artsbeat, The New York Times* (blog), March 2010, http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/04/23/the-show-book-of-the-world-henry-luces-life-magazine-prospectus/.

"method of presentation or representation of actual fact in a way that makes it credible and vivid to people at the time," a way to "increase our knowledge of public facts, but sharpen it with feeling."[54] In the next section, I read James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in the context of these overlapping efforts and critiques of representation circumscribed by the tenets of objective empiricism. While Lynd's text reveals the incoherencies that arise from a "total situation" if one listens long enough, Agee's sociopoetics approaches the type—at once abstract and discrete—through what exceeds its bounds, opening it to the complexities of lived experience and immediate human encounter.

PART TWO: AGEE AND THE "NORMAN PREDICAMENTS OF HUMAN DIVINITY"

As I stated in my introduction, sociopoetics is a particular kind of poetic form, a strategy, that names a problematic situation in order to negotiate it. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* speaks at the limits of this naming in the face of the destitute conditions of the Depression in the rural American South and the faces of its individual inhabitants. Agee and Evans' 1936 journey away from industrial centers and into the farms of Alabama was occasioned by commission from *Fortune* magazine—part of the Luce empire—and thus also by the public fascination with self-seeing that *Middletown* helped bring into the mainstream. Alfred Kazin retrospectively isolated *Famous Men* as the most salient example of the cultural boom in "formal social exploration," the "documentary book to end all documentary books."[55] Like the Lynds, however, this pair of youths chose not to satisfy the initial terms of their assignment, producing a notoriously uncategorizable work whose scope exploded the conventions of the long-form photo-essay.

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[54] Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 14, 18.
[55] Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds, an Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), 490.

Evans' prints, captionless and decontextualized, preface hundreds of pages of dizzyingly complex, often ungrammatical text that Agee insists has nothing to do with the photographs.[56] A composite of narrative and poetry, dense passages of close description, meditations on the act of representing human experience, abstract theorizations about the limits of the written word and the nature of aesthetics, excerpts from magazines and textbooks, and its author's lengthy interior monologues, *Famous Men* balks at delimitation. Its radical experimentation has drawn a great deal of critical interest in how to read this attempt to describe "human actuality."[57] Due to Agee's aspiration "to tell everything as accurately as possible: and to invent nothing," he explains, the project requires "as total a suspension of 'creative' and 'artistic' as of 'reportorial' attitudes and methods, and…is likely therefore to involve the development of some more or less new form of writing and of observation."[58]

Where "The Middletown Spirit" defamiliarized its categories, *Famous Men* disposes of them, lingering in taxonomic interstices. It is described by its author as "a book only by necessity," one that combines "some generalizing, some art, and science," and the "hearing and seeing of a complex music" while remaining irreducible to any single genre or medium.[59] Although Agee does not explicitly cite sociology alongside generalizing, art, and science, he performs a sophisticated engagement with sociological vocabularies and social types that, as aforementioned, led C. Wright Mills to conceive the term "sociological poetry." In this context, I

[56] James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), xi.
[57] As Jeff Allred puts it, *Famous Men* works towards the "political ends of fostering new collective subjects." Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.
[58] Agee, quoted in John D'Agata, *The Making of the American Essay* (New York: Macmillan, 2016), 429.
[59] Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, xi, 199, 204.

read the project's excessive descriptions, revisions, and speculations, as well as its failure to achieve full or total knowledge, with respect to sociological conceptions of typicality. Though it is difficult to track this theme—or any single thread—through *Famous Men*'s many digressions, Agee does at points directly address both the subjects of his study and his readers in just these terms.

> How, looking thus into your eyes and seeing thus, how each of you is a creature which has never in all time existed before and which shall never in all time exist again and which is not quite like any other…how am I to speak of you as 'tenant' 'farmers,' as 'representatives' of your 'class,' as social integers in a criminal economy, or as individuals, fathers, wives, sons, daughters, and as my friends and as I 'know' you?[60]

The challenges of Agee's "attempt" flow out simultaneously from the limits of perception, of textual representation, and finally from the false capaciousness of speaking about "representatives" in the first place. This last problem speaks to Agee's frequent and estranging invocation of demographic coinages—farmers, classes, social integers. He makes recourse to many of the conventions of community studies like *Middletown,* including: extensive notes on methodology; assemblages of quotations from interviews with local residents; exhaustive descriptions of the homes, yards and labor routines of sharecroppers; catalogues of their clothing, shoes and belongings; and excerpts from news headlines hung on their walls and from the textbooks of their children. For Agee, however, these data are never adequate to produce a representative persona. *Famous Men* constantly gestures towards what it has excluded in its own pages, referring for instance to a "chapter too long for inclusion" on "business arrangements, and working histories, and [money]."[61] As I will demonstrate, Agee's sociopoetics inserts

[60] Agee and Evans*,* 88.
[61] Agee and Evans, 101.

incongruous elements into a seemingly standard investigative procedure to emphasize the unknowability and inarticulability of a full experience of human encounter. In particular, I want to emphasize that Agee's sociopoetics mark a discrepancy between conditions and actions—the basis of a social problem—at once in the impoverished circumstances of his research subjects and the limits of available literary and sociological methods to accomplish his aims. In this sense, *Famous Men* takes a step further than "The Middletown Spirit" in binding material and formal inadequacies.

Given the fact that the work is unfinished and ongoing, I will focus the majority of my attention on the preface, whose reiterative statements of purpose somersault through the text. Agee opens with discursive language that calls to mind the sociological studies of his day. "The nominal subject," he begins, "is North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three average white tenant families."[62] Discontent, he quickly revises this statement. "Actually," Agee tells us, "the effort is to recognize the state of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense. More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity."[63] Before we address the oddities of this mission statement, it is important to note that it echoes the rhythms, propositions, and qualifications that resemble the first page of the original *Middletown*:

> The aim of the field investigation recorded in the following pages was to study synchronously the interwoven trends that are the life of a small American city. A typical city, strictly speaking, does not exist, but the city studied was selected as having many features common to a wide group of communities…the aim has been…to record observed phenomena, thereby raising questions and suggesting

[62] Agee and Evans, x.
[63] Agee and Evans, x.

possible fresh points of departure in the study of group behavior.[64]

The interest in "recording" "interwoven trends" (Lynd) or "certain normal predicaments" (Agee), the refinement of the purpose of the "investigation" (Lynd) or "inquiry" (Agee) in successive phrases, and the reservation that typicality "strictly speaking" is an analytical tool rather than an extant reality are mutually resonant. Like the Lynd of "The Middletown Spirit," Agee is invested in both invoking and disrupting the smooth sociological idiom. The aim to "Recognize the stature of a portion of," for instance, signals an act of measurement, the use of a sample size to demonstrate a broader trend. Yet the "portion" being generalized is not, as we might expect part-way along the winding sentence, the population of a small city, a sector of labor, or a family budget. Agee's substitution of these legible fragments of daily life with "a portion of unimagined existence" lifts us into the territory of the radically unmeasurable, unsettling an otherwise recognizable proposal.

As the preface goes on, it continues to invoke and interrogate social scientific idioms. If we are lulled back into the secure register of the "independent [read: value-free] inquiry," we are immediately baffled by another aberration. To undertake a study of "normal predicaments," we might say, is to demarcate the borders of what the typical signifies under the conditions of a social problem. But Agee is out to get at the "normal predicaments of human divinity," an abstraction that far exceeds the scope of sociological findings and even aesthetic imaginings. In the next lines, the reliability of the tools to be used for the "recording" and "communication" of research is also undermined. We learn that *Famous Men*'s "immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera, and the printed word."[65] This method seems all of a piece with sociological

[64] Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 3.
[65] Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, x.

reports or documentary photo-books, until Agee clarifies that these devices are actually secondary: "The governing instrument—which is also one of the centers of the subject—is individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness."[66] The revised intention is to record something "unimagined" or "[divine]," and the instrument—here we should also bear in mind Agee's many comparisons of the text to a musical score—is singular, mysterious, and uncontainable. We are on page two, and already the study has become impossibly wide. The formal consequences of such an endeavor erupt as another superficially ordinary remark develops an inconceivable relation between part and whole. Agee presents the text as the first volume of a longer study to be called *Three Tenant Families*, "as the beginning of a larger piece of work; and to stand of itself, independent of any such further work as may be done."[67] This assumption that the part can stand in for the whole is the scaffolding on which the logic of the typical is built, a logic presently abandoned by Agee.

> Ultimately, it is intended that this record and analysis be exhaustive, with no detail, however trivial it may seem, left untouched, no relevancy avoided, which lies within the power of remembrance to maintain, of the intelligence to perceive, and of the spirit to persist in. Of this ultimate intention the present volume is merely portent and fragment, experiment, dissonant prologue…a swindle, an insult, and a corrective.[68]

As the "ultimate" end of the project approaches the infinity or fantasy of a completely exhaustive study, one that leaves nothing out, the "portent and fragment" is figured as coercive, bizarre, and indeterminate; we find ourselves at the limits of reckoning the "normal predicaments of human divinity."

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[66] Agee and Evans, x.
[67] Agee and Evans, x.
[68] Agee and Evans, xi.

A final example from a later moment in *Famous Men* will show how deeply these recapitulations and substitutions complicate the structure of the sociological community study—its taxonomies, its charts, its terms—as well as of the "individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness." In the section called "Colon," Agee tries to capture a single self, an "individual among most of the two billion now alive" and "generations upon generations" of past souls.[69] Most of "Colon" is devoted to narrating this individual's birth, growth, and suffering through an extended metaphor with a "heart, nerve, center," "seed" or "flower" traveling in a "globular structure" that accrues "damagements"—"holes," "cuts," and "wounds—from the "brutal infuriate structures" that restrict its potential.[70] This story, however, has no "ultimate" end either, and relapses back into methodological speculations.

> We undertake not much yet some, to say: to say, what is his house: for whom does he work; under what arrangements and in what results; what is this work: who is he and where from, that he is now here; what is it his life has been and has done to him: what of his wife and of their children, each, for all these each is a life, a full universe: what are their clothes: what food is theirs to eat: what is it which is in their senses and their minds: what is the living and manner of their day, of a season, of a year: what, inward and outward, is their manner of living; of their spending and usage of these few years' openness out of the black vast and senseless death; what is their manner of life: [71]

Many of the questions between these colons and semi-colons align with the organization of *Middletown* and the norms that are eventually dismantled by Lynd's poem about its "spirit": "what is this work" with "Getting a Living"; "what is his house" with "Making a Home"; "what of his wife and their children" with "Training the Young," and so on. More to the point of my argument, Agee's sociopoetics radically undermines the prospect of "undertak[ing] to say"

[69] Agee and Evans, 88.
[70] Agee and Evans, 89-96.
[71] Agee and Evans, 97.

anything about a "life, a full universe" by studying partitioned, incommensurate components like "work" "house" or "food." This unwieldy list of abstractions and concrete details, held together by rhythmic repetitions, colons and semi-colons, highlights the reliance of a grandiose "total-situation study" on the coherence of its own protocols, which break down radically here. For the colon, the primary pivot and binding agent between phrases and categories, also represents a self-defeating gesture, "a sharp end and clean silence: a steep and most serious withdrawal: a new and more succinct beginning: "[72] Used recursively, it suggests a provisional sense of ending, of exhaustion, followed by renewal. The colon is a blink rather than a foreclosure, a sense echoed elsewhere in Agee's use of open parenthesis and his continued writing after "the last words of [the] book have been spoken."[73] If the relationship between the parts in the catalog above, set slightly out of pitch to the tune of inquiries into the social and the sublime, relies on signifiers caught in an endless loop of beginning again, we are in a strikingly inconclusive space. For Agee, then, the type and the individual appear equally resistant to representation.

Since I have read *Famous Men* in conversation with the *Middletown* studies, I will close this section with a brief gesture to the unpublished poetry of Helen Lynd, which bears affinity with Agee's speculations on "anti-authoritative human consciousness." If the *Middletown* studies, as Kenneth Burke put it, are "survey[s] of the country's mental contours," inquiries into "typical" aspects of a "total-society," then Helen Lynd's ventures into poetry survey the mental contours of the subjective individual.[74] The typewritten manuscripts of more than sixty poems collectively titled "The Freud Sonnets" meditate upon the relationship between self and world, the curious borders between objective and subjective perceptions or truths. The poems are left

[72] Agee and Evans, 87.
[73] Agee and Evans, 389.
[74] Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 407.

undated, but we may presume that they were written sometime after Freud's death in 1939, given that several describe his move from Nazi-occupied Vienna to England and his final burial. However chronologically distant from *Middletown*, they occasion another confluence of social science—both sociology and psychology—and literature that bears out a situation of irrational conflict and applies a methodology to arrive at some form of self-knowledge or self-awareness "beyond the positive sun": a "self-finding law / Born of self-searching pain…In the serviceable silence of the mind."[75] Like *Middletown*, the poems evoke a generalized specificity. Their many abstractions, for instance "the human constant," "the sameness of that self," "the self-ceding truth," "the total word," or "the edgeless word" are nevertheless almost always anchored with a definite article that ground them in particularity.[76]

The sonnet "In Terms of Myself" is among many that narrate or record a psychoanalytic project of introspection, of listening, of self-seeing at the personal rather than the social or national level. Although its narrative is plainly psychoanalytic, it describes more than a session on Freud's couch. If the "goal" of inquiry into the drives of the unconscious below is held "within" a single speaker, it nevertheless plays with the tensions between wholeness and incongruity, imagining an individual consciousness that is simultaneously whole, situated, and relational.

> I bear the goal within me and bequeath it
> Mind to mind; let the self round and contain it;
> The goal is innermost
> Of pain and of desire,
>
> Untouched, untroubled; you whose scattered selves

[75] Helen Lynd, undated typewritten manuscript entitled "The Freud Sonnets: Releasing Thought," box 3, folder 9, Robert and Helen Lynd Family Papers, Kent State University Special Collections and Archives.
[76] Lynd, undated typewritten manuscripts in the series "The Freud Sonnets," box 3, folder 9.

Break from the branch, fly from the crumbled core,
Bring back the homeless words
The paths of broken air

Arrest from memory; bring back the beat of the heart
That shut them upon night.

The self is one in all the universe,
The multiple center; take
Space at the eye, and see

The many-floweredness of the single point
Of the star-pulse of law;
Sink mind in mind, and come

By the inexhaustible reference of the soul
Into the quiet truth.[77]

This exploration of the "innermost" is also a meeting conducted "mind to mind" that is further projected outward as it is "bequeath[ed] to" an audience. Yet it is also accomplished by a layering of "mind *in* mind," as if situated in some universal consciousness. Other spatial and grammatical constructs throughout these lines make the relationship between "I" and "you" as well as interior and exterior extraordinarily obscure. "The multiple center" that Lynd unveils seems to apply both to "the self" and "the universe" in which "the self is all one." And the command to "take / Space at the eye" ambiguously invokes both sight and the center or "eye" of a storm or solar system—outer space. What we encounter from this perspective, "The many-floweredness of the single point / Of the star-pulse of law," produces further multiplications within a "single point" along a spectrum as long as, we could imagine, the distance light travels from stars to the earth. In summary, such perturbations attempt to reconcile variety and sameness in a unity that may be understood as an individual consciousness or a self containing

[77] Lynd, undated typewritten manuscript entitled "The Freud Sonnets: In Terms of Myself," box 3, folder 9.

multitudes—a type refigured as a self. So while we could see a narrative of Freud's psychoanalytic process—of identifying drives to pleasure or pain, of drawing "homeless words" or dream contents into associations that restore "paths of broken air" and a "crumbled core"—the poem's story can also be compared to the story of *Middletown*, of a community fraught by the "crumbling core" of its norms. As Muriel Rukeyser wrote of Helen, to whom she dedicates her poem "The Seeming" in 1964, "In terms of Myself" "show[s] us / fear, and form...the dailiness of our being and doing / morning and every time the way to naming."[78] Indeed, abstract as it is, Lynd's sonnet does seem to embody an act of "naming" a new situation, "mind to mind," in a social sphere. Nearly three decades earlier, Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, which I explore in the next section, had done so through an approach thoroughly rooted on the concrete, bringing dissonant voices and regimes of meaning into proximity to create a whole with indeterminate borders.

PART THREE: RUKRYSER'S "ROOM OF EYES"

Early twentieth-century literature has its own fluctuating, ambivalent relation to the constitution of "types," the revelation of the general through the lens of the particular, and the enterprise of national self-study. The host of literary and documentary photo-essays, such as Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), Archibald MacLeish's long poem *Land of the Free* (1938), and Richard Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941), the latter of which I discuss in chapter four, testify to the public appetite for textual as well as visual images of types. We can see a similar manifestation in works of fiction that, following on the late-nineteenth century Local Color movement, sought to touch "the heart

[78] Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 451.

of America" in an urbanizing, industrializing nation whose traditional human taxonomies were becoming obsolete. For instance, a work like Edgar Lee Masters 1916 *Spoon River Anthology,* which recorded fictional obituaries of small town dwellers in pithy verse epitaphs, projected images of ordinary rural folk back to metropolitan centers.[79] Sherwood Anderson's 1919 popular short-story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio* makes a similar gesture to purvey the rich complexities of a Midwestern community, organizing the account of its anonymous "writer" around social types: chapter titles include "Mother," "The Philosopher," "A Man of Ideas, "The Thinker," and "The Teacher."[80] Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-1936), a hefty course in American self-study, exhibits the strain of individual experience against the narrative appeal of representative figures at the formal level, as the book switches between prose-poem biographies of historical heroes, pastiches of news headlines, and realist depictions of characters with clear affiliations to particular classes and value sets.[81]

The consolidation of a social domain and its multitudinous members within a literary text has also been explored from a vast terrain of twentieth-century theoretical perspectives. Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, famously distinguished the epic from the novel with regard to the former's valorization of "archetypes" and the latter's manifestation of an "unrealized surplus of humanness"; while the epic delivers a total, closed-off encounter with the past, the novel is committed to making "contact with the present in all its openendedness" so that "an individual

[79] Edgar Lee Masters, *Spoon River Anthology*, (New York: The Macmillan company, 1915).
[80] Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995). Anderson's 1935 book *Puzzled America* shed the fictionalized approach of *Winesburg, Ohio* to take on a more documentary style. Its collection of "sketches, attempts at pictures of America now" also bespeaks the influence of scientistic culture, taking and objective and "impersonal tone" that, for Anderson, he "cannot take." A distanced approach, he writes, is inadequate to record the stories of suffering that "on every side…look at [him] out of the eyes of men and women." Sherwood Anderson, *Puzzled America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), ix, x, 5.
[81] John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* (New York: Modern Library, 1937).

cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh of existing sociohistorical categories." [82] Alternatively, as referenced in this chapter's opening, Theodor Adorno saw the reflection of an entire social reality in the romantic lyric poem that is simultaneously made other from that which it reflects. As he puts it in *Aesthetic Theory*, traditionally "Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity."[83] Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School, of course, raised concerns about the status of aesthetic autonomy and the definition of the art object, which derives from the world but "say[s] what is more than the existing," in a technological, secularized, commercial twentieth-century context.[84]

In this section, I examine sociopoetics as it names both oppressive conditions in the material world and the tensions of urgent debates in literary and intellectual circles of the 1930s about the relationship between aesthetics and society. [85] The rise of proletarian literature or "proletcult," the founding in 1935 of the League of American Writers by the Communist Party in America, and the scores of writers who supported—in text or in the field—the Republican cause of the Spanish Civil War all exemplify a wave of literary commitment to social change. Conservatives and aesthetes of many shades, on the other hand, were concerned about the dissolution of literature into propaganda, arguing that the canonized, autonomous spaces of art needed to be maintained; for proponents of this view, a poem should be interpreted as a thing-in-itself. Muriel Rukeyser, like Kenneth Burke, held a nuanced position amidst these polarizing

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[82] "Epic and Novel," in M. M. Bakhtin and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 19, 37.
[83] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1.
[84] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 133.
[85] For an extensively researched and acclaimed account of this climate, see Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*.

debates. A left-wing activist and an amateur historian of science, she responded to ferment in literary circles by calling for a poetry that not only engages with exterior realities, but actively changes the orientation of the reader to the world in which she acts. Rukeyser framed her poetry as a resource that, in resonance with Burke's description of the "strategy," "prepares us" for the world, borrowing heavily from the spheres of applied knowledge that, on some points of view, endangered aesthetic autonomy. In order to contextualize my reading of her long poem *The Book of the Dead*, the sociopoetics of which re-imagines models of human collectivity while bearing fidelity to the real world, I will briefly outline some major points of her own literary theory. [86]

First, Rukeyser was committed to experiment and invention in poetry over and above tradition. In "Poem out of Childhood," which opens her first book *Theory of Flight* (1931), Rukeyser describes a process of disillusionment with classical and romantic forms of poetry that, read autobiographically, matches the trajectory of her own upper-class education. In lines that recall teachers "smearing those centuries upon our hands, trapping us in a welter of dead names, / snuffing and shaking heads at patent truth," her diction associates the western canon with suffocation, filth and rot, and an anachronistic denial of contemporary vitality.[87] The cloistered nature of literary studies becomes anathema to Rukeyser's "we" in the face of the charged political environment she encounters outside the ivory tower.

> We were ready to go the long descent with Virgil
> The bough's gold shade advancing forever with us,
> Entering the populated cold of drawing-rooms;
> Sappho, with her drowned hair trailing along Greek waters,
> Weed binding it, a fillet of kelp enclosing
> The temples' ardent fruit :
>
> Not Sappho, Sacco.

[86] Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, repr. (New York: Morrow, 1974), 24.
[87] Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 3.

> Rebellion pioneered among our lives,
> viewing from far-off many-prancing deltas,
> innumerable seas.[88]

Emphasized by the transitional colon and spacing of the page, "Not Sappho, Sacco" is a key moment in which the verse touches its outsides and redefines the borders of the "typical" beyond *Middletown*'s "American-born stock." The reference to Nicola Sacco, an immigrant who along with Bartolomeo Vanzetti was famously and contentiously sentenced to capital punishment, triggers several transformations: the ancient becomes contemporary; the artist becomes the worker; poetry's subject of love mutates into the subject of labor; and the soft middle consonants of "Sappho" harden as if mimicking the clanking noises of industrial urban spaces. Suspicious of the institutional control of culture's production, dissemination, and reception, Rukeyser pulls the potential of literature away from its conventions—archetypes like Virgil, images of ancient temples and gardens, atmospheres of upper-class drawing-rooms and "Greek waters"—toward the urgent realities it has ignored. The line "Not Sappho, Sacco" literally demonstrates this by drawing our gaze away toward the margins of the page.

As much as Rukeyser critiqued the bastions of high art and culture for patrolling their borders and taking solace in tradition, she also posited that the institutionalization of typifying studies like *Middletown* and many others had a role in pushing the arts into obscurity. As she reflects in her 1949 essay collection *The Life of Poetry*, the first half of the twentieth century saw the normalization of a "fear of poetry" rooted in a cultural "hunger for uniformity [and] the shared norm of ambition and habit and living standard," an oppressive "code [that] strikes deep at our emotional life."[89] In order to make ourselves socially and professionally legible, "we make

[88] Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 3.
[89] Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 15.

a criterion of adjustment, which glorifies the status quo, and denies the dynamic character of our lives, denies time, possibility, and the human spirit." [90] Rukeyser's references to "norms" and "[criteria] of adjustment"—which prefigure discussions in my next two chapters—forge a causal link between the "socially unacceptable" state of poetry and sociological forms of inquiry that elicit visions of American life from, for example, "of courses."[91] As she noted,

> If you ask your friends about it, you will find that are a few answers, repeated by everyone. One is that the friend has not the *time* for poetry…or your friends may speak of their boredom with poetry…one person will confess that he has been frightened off forever by the dry dissection of lines in school…one will confess that, try as he will, he cannot understand poetry, and more particularly, modern writing…one will say it is willfully obscure. One that it is inapplicable to the situation in which he finds himself.[92]

The sense here is that the popular understanding of the existences of averages and social trends has become prescriptive, reproducing "a few answers, repeated by everyone" that, in this case, dismiss poetry as a purposive site of self-conception. Together, the canonization of "fossil poetry" and the rise of competing mass cultural forms, Rukeyser complains, have encouraged poets to embrace "dogma and shrinking from the external world"; that is, they deploy holistic structures that are determined in advance and sustained by the authority of the grammars and methods of the traditions in which they write. [93]

Even under these circumstances, Rukeyser is attracted both to formal totality and collectivity at a massive scale. Her disciplinary model for eliciting a whole from particulars, although it is interpreted and re-deployed differently, is the same model around which sociology

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[90] Rukeyser, 44.
[91] Rukeyser, 45.
[92] Rukeyser, 7.
[93] Rukeyser, 172.

developed. She sees an analog for poetry in the scientific method, whose experiments discern a "gathering-together of elements so that they move together according to a newly visible system…[they give] us a clue that may lead to a way to deal with any unity which depends on many elements, all inter-dependent."[94] Rather than provide a totalizing or typifying *account* of the social world, poetry can invite a "total" or "full *response* to the earth, to each other, and to ourselves" by taking a scientific approach to the discovery of patterns emerging, shifting, and re-converging. [95] Like the sociopoetics that draw on survey methods that I explore in chapter three, Rukeyser's solicitation of "responses" occasions an opportunity for a subject's knowing, thinking, and feeling. In *The Book of the Dead*, her compositional methods frequently includes fieldwork and the collection of data. Yet while the poem is systematic, her mediation of voices and data creates collectivities at different, less absolute scales.

The sociological poetics of *The Book of the Dead* excavates its "newly visible system"—one that redirects the gaze of national introspection—from the documentation of a narrative, broadcast widely across US media channels, of the 1931 Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster. Given the significance of historical reality for the poem, the details around which it revolves deserve recounting here. In order to construct a nine-million-dollar hydroelectric plant in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, the Union Carbide Company hired local workers and imported non-unionized migrants, most of them black, to dig a tunnel through which water could be diverted and converted into power. Blasting through Gauley mountain, the company discovered a high silica content in the rock and, although silica dust was known to cause the fatal lung disease silicosis, failed to dispense protective masks to workers or to resort to the slower, safer, digging technique

[94] Rukeyser, 18.
[95] Rukeyser, 8.

of wet drilling. As little as two months of breathing air thick with grains of glass left workers ailing or dead in barracks—by 1932, after the completion of the tunnel and dispersal of the labor force, workers and their families began filing lawsuits against Union Carbide. In the mid-1930s the case was regularly making national news, partaking of the prevalent compulsion to fact-finding. The available facts were, however, very limited and by degrees farcical; due to the intentional disposal of documents and bodies in unmarked graves, and because many migrant workers had become untraceable, it was impossible to determine the extent of the damage wrought by silicosis. A response to a story written on the terms of an exploitative corporate-legal complex, *The Book of the Dead* retrieves effaced testimonies and exposes hidden relations to construct an aesthetically unified community of workers and even readers.

Like Agee and Lynd, Rukeyser begins with an imperative to explore the American landscape and to reevaluate the dominant forms of representation through which readers encountered it.

> These are the roads to take when you think of your country
> and interested bring down the maps again,
> phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,
>
> reading the papers with morning inquiry.
> Or when you sit at the wheel and your small light
> chooses gas gauge and clock; and the headlights
>
> indicate future of road, your wish pursuing
> past the junction, the fork, the suburban station,
> well-travelled six-lane highway planned for safety.[96]

This opening poem, "The Road," fuels an inquiry into the relation between individual and social world on the basis of the subjective "interest" and the "wish" of the second-person addressee

[96] Rukeyser, *Collected Poems,* 71.

comfortable in her desire for a grand view of her country. Yet we cannot consume this view as a spectacle from home—we leave behind the safe grids of modern, urban spaces to perceive what we can through the halo of the miner's "small light." While this may seem like a rejection of sociological surveying, Rukeyser includes it among a series of activities: "Phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend, / reading the papers with morning inquiry." The poet or speaker here is also a researcher, or is asking the reader to be one, inciting her not to just read the "morning papers" but to read the papers with "morning inquiry," that is, with an attitude of critical distance and sociological curiosity. Imagining myself in such a role, I turn to two poems in *The Book of the Dead*—"Statement: Philippa Allen" and "Praise of the Committee"—in which the arrangement of particulars play on questions of multiplicity and centralization, representation and representativeness, and the possible emergence of textual and social unity.

The first of many remediated courtroom transcriptions in the sequence, "Statement: Philippa Allen" focalizes around the testimony of a social worker, an early compatriot of the sociologist. During Allen's interrogation, Rukeyser juxtaposes competing institutional and individual registers of meaning embodied respectively in the legalese of the courtroom and the personal observations of Allen herself. The line of questioning, clearly spliced and modified, calls on the witness to alternatively express her subjective opinions about the incident and to disclose objective facts backed by her professional authority and knowledge of the case. A lawyer, we surmise, initiates the session on an affective note: "—You like the state of West Virginia very much, do you not?" And Allen replies "— I do very much, in the summertime."[97] A few lines later, after inquiring about the salaries of the Gauley tunnel workers, the court proceeds to ask:

[97] Rukeyser, 73.

—You have met these people personally?
—I have talked to people; yes.
According to estimates of contractors
2,000 men were
employed there
period, about 2 years
drilling, 3.75 miles of tunnel.[98]

The testimony slides from the casual register of "talking to people" to the tabulation of bodies, time, and space, all of which counts as evidence under the court's jurisdiction. Having just withdrawn into an idiom that seems to purify the chaos caused by silicosis into its scientific number, "SiO2," the line of questioning reverts back to a subjective lens.

—Where did you stay?
—I stayed at Cedar Grove. Some days I would have to hitch
into Charleston, other days to Gauley Bridge.
—You found the people of West Virginia very happy to pick
you up on the highway, did you not?
—Yes; they are delightfully obliging.[99]

This darting in and out of registers, which variably grounds the legitimacy of the testimony in the locus of an "I" intimate with the Hawk's nest victims and in the dominion of law, combined with the lack of attribution of most questions and answers, distributes the authority of judgment across characters, forms of knowing, and social bodies. The statement of Philippa Allen does not stand on its own, but rather exists alongside concrete "estimates of contractors" and the comportment and behaviors of "the people of West Virginia." Moreover, the individuals and collectivities described are neither average, as in *Middletown*, nor radically singular, as in *Famous Men*, nor spectacularized, as in media portrayals of the Hawk's Nest incident. Instead, they are set up in

[98] Rukeyser, 73.
[99] Rukeyser 74.

relation to each other without being conflated or exaggerated. We are held in suspension in the medium of the emerging pattern of the poem as it draws the tenor of everyday life in Gauley Bridge—characterized by a generous attitude towards people like us, traveling researchers from the city—in proximity with the official accounts of Union Carbide. To this point, the poem ends on an aspirational but uncertain note.

> I feel that this investigation may help in some manner.
> I do hope it may.
> I am now making a very general statement as a beginning.
> There are many points that I should like to develop
> later, but I shall try to give you a general history of
> this condition first…[100]

The "I" of the last few lines cannot be easily associated with witness, interrogator, or judge; unanchored, it feels like the return of the voice calling us down "The Road." The emphasis on interiority produced by "I feel, I do hope, I would like, I shall try" interrupts the courtroom's cool tones with a dose of uncertainty that trails off into an elliptical space of deliberation, not an arrival but a new "beginning." Interestingly, unlike the habitual re-starts of *Famous Men*, the account renews itself at the level of the "general," gesturing toward the promise of a whole divulged through some accumulation of "points."

The ongoing construction of a unity that incites individual voices to erupt within flattening legal, medical, and corporate discourses is performed in "Praise of the Committee." Opening with the declarative "*These are the lines on which a committee is formed,*" Rukeyser immediately links the writing of verse to the formation of an institutionally-constructed group, for "These…lines" are simultaneously a set of real terms and conditions in the world and the

[100] Rukeyser, 75.

inscription of the poem, figured as a both a representative and representing body.[101] Here social organization is on display not as a set of stable laws but as an active performance that begins with ceremonious language, introducing abstract ideologies and functional methodologies: "*The Committee meets regularly, wherever it can*"; "*The Committee is a true reflection of the will of the people*"; "*This is the procedure of such a committee."*[102] And yet the enactment of collectively held principles becomes complicated by additional lines that situate them in a broader system of variously divergent events, actors, and observations. Italicized and set-off from the rest of the poem, the committee's lines start to feel at odds with the subjects they are presumably designed to represent.

These are the lines on which a committee is formed
Almost as soon as work was begun in the tunnel
men began to die among dry drills. No masks.
Most of them were not from this valley.
The freights brought men every day from States
all up and down the Atlantic seaboard
[…]

The Committee is a true reflection of the will of the people.
Every man is ill. The women are not affected,
This is not a contagious disease. A medical commission,
Dr. Hughes, Dr. Hayhurst examined the chest
of Raymond Johnson […]

The Committee meets regularly, wherever it can.
Here are Mrs. Jones, three lost sons, husband sick,
Mrs. Leek, cook for the bus cafeteria,
the men : George Robinson, leader and voice,
four other Negroes (three drills, one camp-boy)
Blankenship, the thin friendly man, Peyton the engineer,
Juanita absent, the one outsider member.[103]

[101] Rukeyser, 77.
[102] Rukeyser, 77-8.
[103] Rukeyser, 78.

Rukeyser makes space for singular, named individuals alongside typical or descriptive subject positions such as "cook," "leader and voice," "thin friendly man," and "outsider member." She also populates her lines with an array of alternative forms of collectivity besides the committee, suggesting its centralized authority is potentially erroneous: "men" that assemble for purposes of employment in freight trains, bus cafeterias, or share the condition of illness; a healthy but suffering community of "women"; a "medical commission"; a family including "three lost sons"; and a racialized group of "George Robinson [and] four other Negroes." While members converge "wherever [they] can," "around the stove beneath the one bulb hanging," their meeting spills out into the shadows as "Many come with them / who pack the hall, wait in the thorough dark."[104] Later, a reference to a "defense committee"—it is not clear whether this is an opposition group or a titular revision—uses a series of enjambed collective pronouns to make it increasingly difficult to distinguish one mouthpiece or another as representing the "will of the people."[105] Prospective members only continue to multiply as spies, crooked lawyers, Pliny the Elder, the Bureau of Mines, Senator Holt, the *People's Press,* Company, The Racket, and many quoted but unattributed voices.[106] The "lines on which a committee is formed," then, permit such a number of permutations that the logics of trickle-down social control—logics that render typification legible and the representation of "anti-authoritarian human consciousness" impossible—begin to dissipate.

The subjects populating Rukeyser's poem are never fully constituted by their replies in courtroom cross-examinations, recognized by their insurance claims, or represented by their

[104] Rukeyser, 78.
[105] Rukeyser, 78.
[106] Rukeyser, 78.

committees. How, then, are the diversified forms of collectivity unified into the system of the poem? One answer is that the many repeated tropes and recurring imagery—glass, for instance, manifesting as silica dust, reflective waters, the lens of a camera—create a coherent aesthetic atmosphere. Another is the underlying compositional model of natural science, a "paradigm deriving from a fundamental law of nature."[107] On my reading, a more compelling account is related to an inversion of collective self-seeing that animates the sociopoetics discussed in this chapter. In the following passage, as Rukeyser dramatizes and resolves the peak of the indeterminacies I have been describing, the reader is addressed as the subject of the poem's gaze alongside a multiplicity of "eyes" or "I"s.

> here is a room of eyes
> a single force looks out, reading our
> Life.
>
> Who stands over the river?
> Whose feet go running in these rigid
> hills?
> Who comes, warning the night,
> shouting and young to waken our
> eyes?
>
> Who runs through electric wires?
> Who speaks down every road?
> Their hands touched mastery; now
> they
> demand an answer.[108]

We are no longer provided with some authoritative resource—a map, a set of statistics, a court, a committee—on what counts as a representative person, belief, or trend. The pronouns in this

[107] Bryan Duncan, "'All Power Is Saved': The Physics of Protest in Muriel Rukeyser's The Book of the Dead," *Contemporary Literature* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 573.
[108] Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 79.

passage, which exemplifies the larger claims and aims of *The Book of the Dead*, blur our role as researcher or reader as we are subject to "a single force…reading our / Life." The "room of eyes," concretely situated "here," appears at first as our juror and judge, until we too seem included in its call to "waken our / eyes." Rukeyser's "who," the orchestrator of this potential vision of belonging indicated by "our," is grammatically anonymous, collective, and singular. Unlike poetry's lyrical "I," this "who" is generalizable without being standardized. Used in an anaphoric sequence tinged with urgency, "Who" also functions differently from Lynd's "That" or Agee's colon, which, as we saw, both invoked and subsequently discredited pre-defined orders. "Who speaks down every road" starts as if from scratch, inaugurating a search for "shouting," self-aware individuals who might make "demands" on official forms of speech, sight, and social organization.

This imagined aggregate "they" is conglomerate, as yet indefinite, and continually emerging. Like *The Book of the Dead* itself, composed of heterogeneous voices, found texts, and otherwise disparate vernaculars, it is suggestive of an "alloy." Indeed, at the close of the entire sequence, Rukeyser links the creation of such a substance newly melded and minted with the imperatives to re-see and re-map the country that drove each object in this chapter:

> Defense is sight; widen the lens and see
> Standing over the land myths of identity,
> New signals, processes:
>
> Alloys begin : certain dominant metals.
> Deliberate combines add new qualities,
> Sums of new uses […]
>
> New processes, new signals, new possession.[109]

[109] Rukeyser, 105.

In a moment of technological, economic, and social transition, these lines look away from known landscapes and debunk "myths of identity" to arrive at "new uses," "new signals, new processes" and "new [self] possession." Naming such possibilities is the active work of a sociopoetic strategy.

In this chapter, the first major dive into an archive of sociopoetics, I have understood types as unities that represent a countless number of instances of individuals, cities, statements of opinion, and so on, which may nevertheless stray in equally countless ways from the types that index them. As we have seen with "The Middletown Spirit," sociopoetics is a strategy to disrupt typically held values and opinions by revealing their internal contradictions. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, in contrast, refuses to enclose or circumscribe singular selves within sociological or even poetic idioms, spilling out in excess and reveling in failure and ongoingness. Helen Lynd's poetry takes a different direction, moving away from the "type" and examining the excess of consciousness. Rukeyser toes the line somewhere between, creating a totality in the form of a text while giving voice to individual selves and narrating acts of collective binding at different scales. All of these projects share the endeavor to comprehend the differentiated social sphere of the 1930s, to "widen the lens and see" new arrangements of particulars.

Yet, to cycle back to *Magic Town*, by the post-WW2 period new problems of global scale and abstraction would see the typical outgrow itself, replaced with new inferential techniques that used samples to correlate fragments and estimate wholes. The theme of my next chapter is elucidated by a scene of national re-discovery that occurs early in the film, as Rip Smith and his assistant Ike disembark from the train at Grandview. Stepping onto the terrain of an idealized American microcosm, Rip pauses to marvel: "The moment Columbus first caught sight of land must have been just like this." Explorers of the average, he and Ike amble around town; in one

notable shot, the two pollsters stand side by side, not quite in dialogue, focused on a research subject at a distance, a man leaving his picket-fenced home, briefcase in hand. "Look at that fellow over there," Rip says, turning away from Ike to look across the street, "I know all about him. He's married, he has 1.7 children, out of his income he spends 11.2 for rent, 23.5 for food, 17.2 for clothing…" As he trails off, Ike remarks in monotone, an ever-present cigar dangling from his lips, "Poor guy, he's just a series of fractions. He oughta stop acting like a human being."[110] The joke plays on the rendering of individuals not only into numbers and fractions, but on the idea that the probabilistic sampling occasioned by developments in statistics could allow us to "know all about" a person. "Statistic/Relation," my next chapter, tracks sociopoetics as it evolves around specific sociological technologies and literary concerns around scale, enumeration, and uncertainty.

[110] Riskin, *Magic Town*, 7:45-9:10.

CHAPTER TWO
STATISTIC/RELATION

"Obsessed, bewildered
By the shipwreck
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous."

— George Oppen, *Of Being Numerous* (1968)

"Block what you can; randomize what you cannot."

— A statistical aphorism

In late 1929, shortly after the publication of the first *Middletown* study and just weeks before Black Friday, President Hoover issued a "summons unique in [American] history."[1] He called for the formation of a new state-sponsored sociological research group, the Committee on Social Trends, to isolate "elements of instability [in the] social structure."[2] As Hoover wrote in the preface to the two-volume *Recent Social Trends* finally released in 1933, the Committee would reveal "where social stresses are occurring and where major efforts should be undertaken to deal with them constructively."[3] Teams of leading sociologists—Robert Lynd among them—were recruited to study twenty-nine topics ranging from "Trends in Economic Organization,"

[1] President's Committee on Recent Social Trends, *Recent Social Trends in the United States; Report of the President's Research Committee on Social Trends* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1933), xi.
[2] Herbert Hoover, foreword to *Recent Social Trends in the United States; Report of the President's Research Committee on Social Trends* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1933), xi.
[3] Hoover, *Recent Social Trends*, vi.

"The Growth of Governmental Functions," "Labor Groups in the Social Structure," to the more elusive "Changing Social Attitudes and Interests," "The Influence of Invention and Discovery," and "The Arts in Social Life." Though its scope would be much wider than that of *Middletown*, Hoover's initiative also sought a totalizing account in its "effort to interrelate the disjointed factors and elements in the social life of America [and] attempt to view the situation as a whole rather than as a cluster of parts."[4] The Committee's methods, however, were quite distinct from the improvisational and often qualitative approach of the Lynds. *Social Research Trends* set out to construct an integrated, holistic vision of national institutions and interest groups under the rubric of statistics.[5]

The quantitative, positivist orientation of the study was assured by the appointment of William F. Ogburn to lead the Committee's group of "eminent scientists."[6] [7] A forerunner in statistical research who had been recently hired by the University of Chicago for his "plans to develop the statistical approach in a way not hitherto done," Ogburn instructed his team to rely strictly on "proofs, records, and measurements" and "safeguard against prejudice, bias, values, and opinion, the great dangers this report must avoid."[8] This demand for rigorous objectivity and numerical evidence did not go uncontested and produced friction within the committee during the research process. Lynd's study of "The People as Consumers," for example, in which he theorized the existence of a new American "consumptive personality," was considered by several

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[4] Hoover, xii.
[5] In his essay, "Studying Society: The Making of 'Recent Social Trends in the United States, 1929-1933,'" *Theory and Society* 24, no. 4 (1995): 537–65, William A. Tobin argues that *Recent Social Trends* marks a pivotal moment in US history, one that established the "faith that social phenomena could be rationally analyzed" in public discourse. (Tobin, 540)
[6] Hoover, *Recent Social Trends*, vi.
[7] Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, Diversity, and the Rise of Sociological Research* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 171.
[8] William Ogburn during a staff meeting in June 1930, quoted in Tobin, "Studying Society," 546.

colleagues to be overly evaluative and opinionated rather than objective in tone.[9] Additionally, the dearth of available numerical data on certain subjects, like religion and art, brought chapters under editorial fire that occasionally sparked resistance among researchers.[10] According to committee member Alice Hamilton, known for her reformism in occupational health and women's rights, the chapter on "Changing Social Attitudes and Opinions" was "more interesting before Mr. Ogburn made it scientific."[11] "So many things [that are] spoken of here," she remarked, "are dropped because you can't put them in percentages."[12] Russian-American sociologist and activist Pitirim Sorokin said of the final publication that the reliance on "statistical tables" as the "main truth" of the study gave it little traction on the "real cultural and mental currents which have gestated, have been lived and believed in."[13] Sorokin's words touch on major questions arising in tandem with the centrality of statistical measurement to social science in the Depression era: what are the proper methods and objects of quantification, as opposed to participant-observer or case-study approaches? How far would enumeration go to help solve social problems, given the limits of its explanatory power upon religion, art, opinion, and "cultural and mental currents" of life?

Sociology would find the tools to refine answers to such questions with the institutionalization of probability-based, inferential statistics as a field of its own. The statistics of *Social Research Trends* was descriptive; that is, the purpose of its tables was to summarize and organize numerical facts and identify basic frequencies like means, medians, and modes. Yet, as the Committee admitted, "the severity of the current depression has been due in large

[9] Tobin, 549.
[10] Tobin, 548-549.
[11] Tobin, 549.
[12] Tobin, 550.
[13] Tobin, 555-6.

measure to non-cyclical factors" that could not have been not anticipated by previous numerical findings.[14] Inferential statistics, which has an overlapping though distinct history from its descriptive counterpart, has the capacity to infer, predict, and generalize the likelihood of outcomes by mathematically designing and repeating its own experiments. While many nineteenth-century statisticians saw numerical trends as evidence of a deep social order and stable social laws, forerunners in inferential statistics realized that "evidence should be accompanied by an assessment of its own reliability."[15] Indeed, as I will discuss later on, probability-based statistical models developed out of an interest in the role of error, variability, and uncertainty in the discovery of scientific knowledge.[16] It was only in the 1920s and 1930s that figures like R. A. Fisher, Karl Pearson, and Jerzy Neyman formulated principles, including statistical "tests of significance," that allowed for an understanding of whether the effects produced by new circumstances—for instance, a fertilizer introduced into soil—was attributable to a particular variable, in what ways, and in what likelihood.[17] While *Recent Social Trends* could "identify social stresses" and then create policy in an attempt to remedy them, inferential statistics was learning to use data to create hypotheses about causes and effects which it could then test and assess in a variety of scenarios.

In 1928 Langston Hughes published a short verse called "The Johannesburg Mines" that posed a "test of significance" with regard to his own treatment of a numerical fact. The poem was written in response to a request for revision from the NAACP's *Crisis* concerning another

[14] President's Committee, *Recent Social Trends*, xxix.
[15] Stephen M. Stigler, *Statistics on the Table: The History of Statistical Concepts and Methods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1.
[16] Gerd Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance: How Probability Changed Science and Everyday Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 26-70.
[17] Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance,* 70-79.

poem, also featuring South African miners, which editor Jessi Fauset found too formally "crude."[18] Placed in *The Messenger*, another magazine known for its role in the Harlem Renaissance, "Johannesburg Mines" raises the question of the correspondence of form to subject matter.[19] At once a pithy, factual report and a meditation on aesthetics and politics, it problematizes the representation of the realities of colonial, white supremacist exploitation abroad that nevertheless had parallels at home.

> In the Johannesburg mines
> There are 240,000
> Native Africans working.
> What kind of poem
> Would you
> Make out of that?
> 240,000 natives
> Working in the
> Johannesburg mines.[20]

The poem entertains several quandaries that appear to revolve around scale and the meaning of numerical data: how to make sense of a huge number of suffering workers, how to touch down on the other side of the globe, how to shrink down a collective experience into a handful of words. Is it, can it, or should it be the job of poetry to help us do these things? On the one hand, the re-worded repetition of the language bracketing "What kind of poem / Would you / Make out of that?" might seem like a gesture of defeat that reframes its principal question as rhetorical or throws its hands up in "a tragic recapitulation."[21] On the other hand, there is more to be said

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[18] Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, V.1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 88.
[19] Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, V.1*, 88.
[20] Langston Hughes, "Johannesburg Mines," *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Random House, 1994) 43.
[21] Joshua Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (University of Alabama Press, 2015), 17.

about Hughes's insistence on the numerical fact, a splice or sample size of an "epic underground empire of exploited labor," in light of Hoover's project to identify "where social stresses are occurring and where major efforts should be undertaken to deal with them constructively."[22]

As I take it, these stresses are occurring not only in social life but also in the structure of the poem, and Hughes deals with them at the level of textual patterning, changing the relationships among words and what they represent from one iteration to the next. His second-person address, for instance, draws the distant scene of manual labor in proximity to the scene of the poem's writing and reading. The absence of the words "African" and "there are" in the last third of the poem likewise abstract the calculation from its remote context. He also dispenses with the enjambment that gave us pause before applying 240,000 to the object of its tally, "natives," bundling them together on their own line. Given that Hughes is well-known for portraying common experiences of black life in America through everyday speech and dialect and the rhythms of blues and jazz, the strategies of rearrangement in "Johannesburg Mines" suggest that the poem's content did call for adjustments in method. The "kind of poem" he makes here generates meaning out of small shifts in linguistic relationships, altering our understanding of a social problem distinctly remote and difficult to imagine, in fact literally underground. Not only does his citation of "240,000" describe the circumstances of living in a statistical world, his recursive treatment of his evidence suggests the experience of writing in one.

The sociopoetics I will examine in this chapter is co-constituted by aesthetic and sociological engagements with, investments in, and challenges to the tools, concepts, and

[22] Schuster, *Ecology of Modernism*, 17.

conditions of "the empire of chance."[23] Each of these opening examples illustrates a shift away from imagining the social world in terms of abstract, totalizing "types" and towards another means of managing unwieldy and impossibly large problems and interrelationships. After the relative isolationist decade of the 1930s, it was increasingly difficult to envision a "whole" global or even American social landscape, and both researchers and artists seeking the "meaning / of being numerous," to quote my epigraph, turned their investigations towards instabilities, uncertainties, and the ways that parts or "variables" correspond with and influence one another. Although we tend to think colloquially of statistics as being a matter of counting and calculating, descriptive statistics is as much a matter of relationships as of numbers. The language with which statistical knowledge is communicated—"11.7 percent of [American] adults read poetry in the past year"—highlights its figuration as a fraction, a proportion, something *per* or *of* something else.[24] The relational character of statistics is heightened and abstracted in probability-based models, which shares more with Hughes' exploratory dynamics than Hoover's objective tabulations and comparisons. Like all examinations of relationships, statistical conclusions shift depending on how they are being looked at—and such methods of shifting and looking, of binding the parts together, are those upon which a statistical sociopoetics operates.

This chapter offers readings of works that engage the tensions between law and chance and the situations these terms name and make manifest in the social world, with special attention to two relevant statistical categories: normal and deviant. It moves from discussions of tightly structured texts that invoke and interrogate the dynamics of rule-following, to those whose

[23] I refer to the title of Gerd Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance: How Probability Changed Science and Everyday Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
[24] "Taking Note: Poetry Reading Is Up—Federal Survey Results," NEA, June 7, 2018, https://www.arts.gov/art-works/2018/taking-note-poetry-reading-%E2%80%94federal-survey-results.

strategies deploy and denaturalize the processes by which chance becomes transmuted into law and law dissolves into chance, and finally to those that reconcile statistical enumeration and abstraction with specificity and immediacy. All the objects I address complicate the traction of categories like normal and deviant—or conventional and experimental—on questions of social knowledge and aesthetic value. They are generically heterogenous, combining literary and sociological "forms of new uses," as Rukeyser put it, such as repetition and statistical replicability, the recombination of variables, and paratactic relations. How do both statistical and poetic methods sense and enact upon multiple possibilities of correlation between units of various scales? How might we look at the arrangements of language in a text the way statisticians look at the arrangements between variables?

In part one, I begin with midcentury poems by W.H. Auden and Kenneth Burke that critique the bureaucratization of statistics, reflecting a cultural absorption of its figuration of people as sets of variables and the normal as an arrangement of observable attributes. Part two explores the more technical aspects of probability through the work of social psychologist L.L. Thurstone, who produced inferential tools for determining correlations among subjective, invisible "factors" underlying empirical correspondences by mathematically "rotating" data into new possible patterns. To conclude this section, I tie such statistical tools to analogous, hybrid compositional modes in poems by Evie Shockley, Jackson Mac Low, and George Oppen that confront conditions of indeterminacy by recursively "rotating" the relationships among their formal elements and material referents. Finally, in part three I examine C.D. Wright's twenty-first century portrait of incarceration, *One Big Self: An Investigation*, a study into the "interrelation of poverty, illiteracy, substance and physical abuse, mental illness, race, and

gender…blaring to the naked eye and borne out in the statistics."[25] Disordering correlations that might mark someone as "deviant," or indeed that might crystallize into any formation ruled by law, Wright's sociological poetics forestalls judgment, cycling through its data not to conclude but to linger in relation.

PART ONE: NORMS, COMPUTATIONS, VARIABLES

Recent Social Trends is indicative of a movement in American sociology away from the reigning Chicago School paradigm of empirical data-gathering and generalization through case-studies, biography, and participant-observation approaches, and toward more rigidly quantitative methods—both descriptive and inferential—that would become near-doctrine by the post-WW2 period. As Ogburn predicted in his 1929 presidential address to the American Sociological Society, "Statistics will disappear as a distinct field of knowledge because it will be almost universal" in the variety of its applications.[26] Indeed, it was to quantitative, "big project" sociology that the US government machine turned during wartime. The number of sociologists and social psychologists involved in state administrations soared, expanding from domestic branches like the United States Department of Agriculture to the Research Branch of War Department, the Office of War Information, the OSS, the Office of Price Administration, and the National Resources Planning Board. As the GI Bill brought waves of new students into universities, there were unanticipated positions for graduate students, many of which had been employed in wartime "big projects," and the majority of which were being trained under the

[25] C. D. Wright, *One Big Self: An Investigation* (Port Townshend: Copper Canyon Press, 2007), xiv.
[26] Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology*, 182.

banner of empirical positivism.[27] By 1955, while the membership of the ASA had swollen to five times its size in 1940, the methodological diversity of the field had, by many accounts, narrowed significantly.[28] The domain of "the social" was increasingly treated as a closed system, as synchronic and ahistorical, and the studies of "mainstream sociology"—as Mills notes in *The Sociological Imagination*, were increasingly driven by funders' desires for concrete results rather than the development of new, different strains of methodology to confront unique social problems.[29]

This apparent homogeneity in the field is complicated by the legacies of other prominent figures or schools. The creation of the Society for the Study for Social Problems in 1951, for example, marked tensions between sociologists like Ernest Burgess and ASA leadership; an essay in one its journal's early issues identifies a disease called "projectitis" that limits the capacity for "freely roaming inquiry."[30] C. Wright Mills, too, would famously lament the professionalization of "the intellectual administrator and the research technician" busy piling up data that "do not convince us of anything worth having convictions about."[31] On the back-end of the institutional consolidation around big-projects and number-crunching, the International

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[27] James T. Sparrow and Andrew Abbott, "Hot War, Cold War: Structures of Sociological Action, 1940-1955," in *Sociology in America: A History*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 284.
[28] Sparrow and Abbott, "Hot War, Cold War," 284.
[29] For a more detailed account of the relative homogenizing of sociology around empirical positivism follow the Second World War, see George Steinmetz, "American Sociology before and after World War II: The (Temporary) Settling of a Disciplinary Field," in *Sociology in America: A History*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007), 314-366. For a narrative that shows how the landscape quickly became more complicated, see the next essay in the same edited volume, Craig Calhoun and Jonathon Van Antwerpen, "Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and Hierarchy: 'Mainstream' Sociology and Its Challengers," in *Sociology in America: A History*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007), 367–410.
[30] Harold W. Dodds, "The Dangers of Project Research," *Social Problems* 1, no. 3 (1954): 90–93.
[31] Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 55.

Statistics Institute had actually become separated from official government organizations.[32] Yet as statisticians had space to evolve their mathematics in relative independence, their approaches were being applied in rapidly growing public contexts and imported into national curricula. By the early 1970s, statistics had been absorbed by a generation of laypeople as a way to make all the "uncertainties and complexities of life and society" comprehensible. As one popular textbook put it, "we *can* study [even] the meaning of words by the orderly methods of statistics."[33]

These are some of the conditions that, stemming from a series of nineteenth-century cultural and political transitions, constitute what philosopher Ian Hacking has called a "statistical" society. For Hacking, this society was the result of a series of interrelated shifts, in particular: the increasing "enumeration of people and their habits," which revealed statistical laws and a stable social order with the "average man" as its ideal;[34] the "avalanche of printed numbers" that facilitated the assemblage and circulation of this data;[35] and an "erosion of determinism" that left an epistemological absence for statistical laws to fill.[36] In practice, this means that individuals in a statistical public are "relentlessly tabulated," constantly confronted with statistically-generated categories across media forms, and subject to forces of social control that encourage people to adhere to norms. [37] *Recent Social Trends* seems to bear out the point that "by covering opinion with a veneer of objectivity, we replace judgment by computation."[38]

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[32] Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance*, 115-120.
[33] Joseph B. Kruskal, "The Meaning of Words," in *Statistics: A Guide to the Unknown*, ed. Judith M. Tanur (San Francisco: Holden-Day, Inc., 1972), 185.
[34] Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4.
[35] Hacking, *Taming of Chance*, 3.
[36] Hacking, 3.
[37] Hacking, 4.
[38] Hacking, 4.

Kenneth Burke ironizes this faith in computation and its ties to normative social and professional life in his poem "Rhymes Done with the Aid of a Computer," published in "Introduction to What: Poems 1955-1967." His commentary can be read in the contexts of post-war cultural conformity, discourses around cybernetics and automation, and the statistical paradigm described by Hacking above.[39] Chance holds little sway in the world of this poem's couplets, each of which elaborates on a claim that bookends the text: "Tell me what to do, and I'll do it if I can, / I'm a truly independent modern man."[40] To be "modern and independent" is, according to the speaker, to be completely rule-abiding: "Put me in traffic, I'll keep to the right / Give me a radio, I'll turn it down at night // Supply me with a questionnaire, and I'll fill out the form / Tell me what's abnormal and I'll try to be the norm."[41] This computer is an expert both at following directions and predicting laws—of high-way lanes, of noise violations—in advance. He is in the habit of properly reacting to nearly everything in his social landscape—shown a slot machine, he'll "drop in a coin," invited to a club, he'll "pay [his] dues and join."[42] He understands that figures are for making sums, stairs for walking up and down, and by-passes for avoiding town. The rudimentary rhymes like "form"/"norm," "sum"/"thumb" and "line"/"fine" contribute to the general sense of mundanity and repetition in an administrative computing, and

[39] For an overview of consumer capitalism and conformity, see Randall Bennett Woods, *Quest for Identity : America Since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), particularly the chapter on "Capitalism and Conformity," 121-154. For midcentury discussions about the rise of computing and automation see, for instance, Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1961) and John Diebold, *Automation: The Advent of the Automatic Factory* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1952).
[40] Kenneth Burke, *Collected Poems, 1915-1967* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 166.
[41] Burke, *Collected Poems*, 166.
[42] Burke, 166.

commuting, routine.[43] On the whole, the incongruity between "independence" and conventionality is stark; by the time we reach the repeat of the opening couplet at the close, we might accuse the speaker of an acute case of false consciousness.

Simple as the poem's barbed portrait may be, the tensions between performances of conformity and purported independence also play with the role of independent variables—variables whose influence is being tested in statistical experiments—and the indeterminate causalities that statistics investigates. Although the self-regulating character of the speaker's obedience in the poem as a whole ironizes the authority of scientific rigor and social law in the sociology of the period, chance nevertheless appears subtly in the refrain as a sort of "test of significance" that appears to be verified by the close. If this speaker's consciousness runs on a formula that goes something like tell, show, or otherwise direct me and "I'll do [what's expected of me] *if I can,*" the line "Tell me what's abnormal and I'll try to be the norm" demonstrates both the highest degree of formal compliance and introduces a negative vector into the exercise in rule-following. For one thing, it is the only statement that captures the uncertainty conveyed by "if I can"—in "trying" rather than doing, it most closely mirrors the structure of the refrain and acknowledges the possible presence of error. For another, however, it is unique in that it follows directions by moving in the opposite direction; in order to be normal, the computer needs only know what is abnormal, what to avoid rather than what to adopt. Burke is sensing something about the relation between the normal and abnormal, dependency and independency: these categories are not only co-constitutive but gain stability through repeated instantiations.

A similar parody shows up in a different way in W.H. Auden's 1940 poem "The Unknown Citizen," which profiles an anonymous, "normal" man as a series of defined attributes

[43] Burke, 166.

or, from a sociological perspective, a collection of variables. Its distant or birds-eye view, its diagnosis of social ills, its schematic lifting and recasting of idioms are all typical of Auden. And its wry humor provides an answer to a question haunting what Samuel Hynes called "The Auden Generation": "Is the traditionally private content of lyric poetry, for example, appropriate to a time of public distress?"[44] Entangled as it is with its historical and political moment, the refracted persona and imbalanced power hierarchies it constructs also specifically engage with the institutions of statistics. As Auden perceives, forces such as "History the operator, the / Organizer," to which he appeals for anti-fascist action in his poem "Spain," have ceded to the organizing schemes of "Bureau[s] of Statistics."[45]

The title of "The Unknown Citizen," paired with an epigraph commemorating a fallen soldier identified only by "JS/07 M378" links wartime, civic duty, bureaucratization, and quantitative sociology. To be a citizen is to be a soldier or dog-tag, a survey-respondent or rather, as we will see, an array of facts and findings, reports, memberships, and purchases. The poem begins with a sort of birth; as if discovered or named by the jurisdiction of a sociological study, "He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be / One against whom there was no official complaint."[46] His assigned, abstracted state—"to be / One"—is homogenous, passive, a type. Yet the "One" is not a seamless whole nor a specific "I," as it spirals out into a collection of observable traits and behaviors on the records of various "official" bodies:

> And all the reports on his conduct agree
> That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint
> For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
> Except for the War till the day he retired

[44] Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 67.
[45] W.H. Auden, *Spain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 9.
[46] W. H Auden, *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945), 142.

He worked in a factory and never got fired,
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.
Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his dues,
(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)
And our Social Psychology workers found
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day
And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.[47]

While there are no numbers in these lines, they are full of the stuff of statistics, of variables like work record, opinion, union membership, popularity, and the consumption of alcohol and news; moreover, they frame individual attributes in relation to, and from the perspective of, various groups or conglomerates. His "normalcy," echoing the negative definition of Burke's "normal" above, is defined by reactions rather than actions. Almost everything we learn about the "unknown citizen" is second-hand, mediated information; the citizen is re-animated by a language of assessment, as with "His Union reports," "our report…shows," "Our Social Psychology workers found," and "The Press was convinced." As the profile proceeds, Policies and Health-cards, fictitious magazines like Producers Research and High-Grade Living, researchers into Public Opinion, a Eugenicist, and his children's teachers prove, show, declare, say, and report data on his "conduct [that] all agrees," at least according to the poem, a report on a collection of reports.

From the perspective of Auden's Bureau of Statistics, being "normal in every way" seems to be a matter of having the right correspondence or "agreement" of behavioral qualities. The citizen has the "right number of children," "held the proper opinions for the time of year," and owned "everything necessary to the Modern Man." In a statistical framework, we might

[47] Auden, *The Collected Poetry*, 142-3.

think technically about the text as correlating a set of "variables," each of which has one or more "attributes."[48] Variables are classified by a variety of metrics—the data they hold can consist of numbers or words, might be counted, ranked or measured on a sliding scale, or might have a single value like "yes" or "no." They may be dependent or independent in relation to each other, they may be controlled or confounding, observable or latent, hidden. Based on the poem, we might imagine that someone working at the Bureau could find on his desk a list of variables like this:

> Number of Complaints Lodged Against: 0
> Community Service (Null-Saint): Saint
> Employment Record: Perfect
> Marital Status: Married
> Insured: Fully
> Union Membership: Dues Paid
> Frequency of newspaper reading: Daily
> Number of Children: 5

When correlated along with a sample of such scorecards, the data yields a conclusion: he was "normal in every way." It is not until the end of the poem/report that Auden bursts into the office and spins a new angle of inquiry:

> Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
> Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.[49]

"We"—which perhaps refers both to the "Bureau of Statistics" and the "Greater Community"—will never hear from the citizen directly, and not just because he is physically dead. The problem,

[48] See the entry on "Variables" in *Applying Social Statistics: An Introduction to Quantitative Reasoning in Sociology,* ed. Jay A. Weinstein (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).
[49] Auden, *The Collected Poetry*, 143.

the thing that's gone wrong, is that "certainty" about the quality of a human life, its truth or measure, is derived from an incomplete, fractured portrait that moreover circulates more like rumor than a dictum of law. We do hear an oppositional voice in the poem's satirical tone, which arises from disagreement, incongruity, or error. It comes across in the dissonance of the sing-song rhyme scheme with administrative-speak, the proliferation of extremes in the description of normalcy— "fully," "everything necessary," "never," "anything"—combined with line openings like "But," "Yet," and "Except," the portrayal of a Eugenicist as an authority figure during a war with Nazi Germany, and the rhetorical questions at the close. Beyond Auden's critique of the organization of people into the categories and variables that feed statistical inquiry—descriptions as well as inferential experiments—there is an implied link to the longer history of probability. Francis Galton's contributions to mathematical statistics in the late-nineteenth century, for example, were motivated by his eugenicist aim to understand the exceptional rather than the average, leading him to the revelation that variation within a data set was itself distributed on a "normal" curve he called "the supreme law of Unreason."[50]

In spite of the distance created by the satire, the "we" implicates the speaker and the reader in the "state" mentioned in the epigraph, attesting to the saturation of statistical thinking in the "Greater Community" as well as to the rule of calculated—as in both scheming and numerically recorded—"Unreason" being meted out by the Nazi regime. Auden himself would join in the United States' large-scale quantitative projects in 1945, when he joined the Morale Division of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) directed by social psychologist Rensis Likert, known for his development of a self-rating scale to measure the intensity of the attitudes of research subjects. Auden was deeply troubled by the devastation he

[50] Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance,* 55.

saw in Germany and especially by the methods of the survey, which was used to determine the extent of "the hidden damage," or psychological devastation, Germans suffered during the war.[51] Auden's antagonism towards the social sciences was heightened by his service in the USSBS. In his poem "Under Which Lyre," given at Harvard's first post-war commencement ceremony, Auden frames the future of his audience in terms of their allegiance with competing "lyres" (or "liars"): the "common-sense" and ultimately conformist "Commercial Thought" and "Official art" of Apollo, and the "Underground" resistance of the "Precocious" "god of dreams," Hermes.[52] The role of statistical sociology in constructing Apollo's realm is overt, as Auden mocks "Our intellectual marines," who "Landing in little magazines / Capture a trend" and entreats the new students, many of them fresh from the battlefield of Ares, to fight on the side of Hermes:[53]

> Thou shalt not answer questionnaires
> Or quizzes upon World-Affairs,
> Nor with compliance
> Take any test. Thou shalt not sit
> With statisticians nor commit
> A social science.[54]

Auden's antipathy towards numbers and measurements, then, is part and partial of a response to their broader application in the "statistical society" and a pre-occupation about the risks of numerical approaches to human bodies, the organization of difference within pre-established grids, and the totalizing machineries of the capitalist state apparatus. In this well-known battle

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[51] *The Hidden Damage* is the title of a parodic narrative written by Auden's friend James Stern, who also joined the USSBS effort. See James Stern, *The Hidden Damage* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947).
[52] W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage International, 2007), 182-187.
[53] Auden, *Selected Poems*, 186.
[54] Auden, 187.

between Hermes and Apollo, the humanities and sciences, aesthetic harmony and law-like order, social science is placed on the side of the latter. According to some scholars within the discipline of sociology itself, methods that "[sought] to reduce human group life to variables and their relations," as Herbert Blumer put it in his 1956 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Society, were "becoming the model[s] of correct research procedure" to the detriment of research.[55] Blumer, like Auden, had long been suspicious of "variable analysis" because "variables may be selected on the basis of a specious impression of what is important," including "the basis of what can be secured through a given instrument or technique…or on the basis of an imaginative ingenuity in devising a new term."[56] As I have already gestured to, the establishment of statistical laws in an indeterminate world could define its variables in just this manner, through a complex process of discovery involving experiment, repetition, and tests of significance until the most likely relationships in a data set are revealed. In the next section, I turn towards a more specialized example of statistical inference that displays the imaginative ventures into realms of uncertainty—including domains like "happiness"—that social scientists and poets "commit." As I will show, while statistics may not always—or not often—choose its variables with the right social problems in mind, sociopoetic writing can pick up on its "imaginative ingenuity" in transformative ways.

PART TWO: FACTORS, ROTATIONS, ADJUSTMENTS

The role of "Social Psychologists" referenced in "The Unknown Citizen" in the comprehensive system of human measurement was more complicated than it appears in either of

[55] Herbert Blumer, "Sociological Analysis and the 'Variable,'" *American Sociological Review* 21, no. 6 (December 1956): 683.
[56] Blumer, "Sociological Analysis and the 'Variable,'" 683.

the above poems. For many working in this field, ascertaining internal, subjective states like happiness was not at all absurd; rather, it was a fruitful enterprise that was reshaping the organization of management, bureaucracy, government, and public life. "Opinion," which Ogburn and others in his team sought to eradicate from *Recent Social Trends*, was just the subject of burgeoning fields like psychometrics, personality and intelligence testing, and attitude studies. Of the all the indeterminate relationships that statistics investigates, the correlations between human interiority, action, and external conditions, between "motive" and behavior, are perhaps the most obviously difficult to pinpoint. More difficult still was the relationship between different abstract, unobservable phenomena *within* a personality, mind, or consciousness. As I have briefly noted, inferential statistics in particular is not only designed to deal with indeterminacies but developed in the face of them. Some of the earliest statistical leaps in the eighteenth century, in fact, occurred in the study of the great unknown: celestial bodies. Astronomers seeking to apply the novel principles of Newtonian physics to the observable movements of planets and moons found themselves hard-pressed to check the formulae of physics against error-free observable evidence.[57] The complexities of collecting data on the position of objects in the heavens over time were manifold, ranging from atmospheric effects, to misunderstood orbits, to the position of the observer and a lack of knowledge about the shape of the earth. Rather than trying to gather observations at the same time, from the same place, and take an inevitably imperfect average, figures like Laplace, Legendre, and Gauss developed equations that, when applied to a "combination of observations" under a variety of conditions, could minimize error by distributing it evenly across all data. These advancements in the natural

[57] Stephen M Stigler, *The History of Statistics: The Measurement of Uncertainty before 1900* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990), 16. The entire chapter "The Combination of Observations" (pp. 11-61) tracks this early history.

sciences dovetailed with nineteenth-century efforts to understand the bewildering nature of "Society," both to gather numerical data and "to characterize the probability schemes that underlay society," though it was not until the twentieth century that probability was properly theorized and applied towards sample populations, and many important inventions occurred outside sociology, for instance in agriculture and psychology.[58]

In the latter vein, social psychologist Louis Leon (L. L.) Thurstone devised a theory called "common factor analysis," designed to identify "unobservable constructs presumed to account for the structure of correlations among measures."[59] Thurstone's work will help convey the strategies that sociopoetics uses to illuminate not only what is "normal"—properly distributed—but what is held communally among the numerical and linguistic, material and abstract variables it ties together. The play of chance here is acute, since—as is the case with gravitational forces or divinities—the "unobservable" is difficult to prove. As I will show, Thurstone's methods of rendering the unseen or disorganized into a legible structure of influences and relationships provide a productive lens for exploring sociopoetic forms of juxtaposition, parataxis, and programmatic writing that turn on analogous ways of constructing meaning.

The attitude studies of Thurstone, a long-time faculty member at the University of Chicago and colleague of William Ogburn, are a useful example of how statistics designs experiments to test its findings—its aims are also rather literary.[60] His 1928 paper, "Attitudes

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[58] Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance,* 52, 110, 116. Psychology was employing inferential statistics as early as 1860, decades before the application of probability-based models in fields such as sociology and economics.

[59] Leandre R. Fabrigar and Duane Theodore Wegener, *Exploratory Factor Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3-4.

[60] W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki contributed significantly to the understanding of "attitudes" as a combination of beliefs and dispositions based on past experience that arise in

Can Be Measured," outlines a means of discovering patterns to describe "the sum total of a man's inclinations and feelings, prejudice or bias, preconceived notions, ideas, fears, threats, and convictions about any specified topic."[61] Thurstone's insight was that although such "subjective and personal affair[s]" were unlocatable, they were comparable and, as such, the difference *between* them could be measured.[62] And as elusive or immaterial as attitudes seemed, he argued, one could track their manifestation in concrete, "verbal expression[s]" or "symbol[s]" that he called "opinions."[63] If one could record and distribute opinions on a continuum of lower to higher intensity, one could presumably measure the attributes they designate. The statistical task at hand, then, was to build and test a ruler. Well-aware that there was no obvious "zero" point at which to begin and that attitudes on particular topics might vary in the difference between their extremes, Thurstone first standardized a series of steps to build a unique measuring device for any "attitude variable" out of a large sample of written opinions. Using attitudes ranging between pacifism and militarism as an example, he assembles the open-responses of several hundred people on various political issues—say, the American entry into World War I. He then asks a different group to create clusters of responses that seem to occupy similar positions, arrange these positions from less-to-more militaristic, and write statements to represent each one. At this point, to continue the analogy, our ruler has two opposing ends but no marks for feet and inches,

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response to a particular external situation. However, in W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1918-1920), they drew on extensive case studies, biographical material, and first-hand observations. See also W. I. Thomas, "The Behavior Pattern and the Situation," Presidential Address (American Sociological Society Annual Meeting, The New School of Social Research, New York, 1927) for Thomas' evolving thinking on the relationship between wishes, values, and situations in the analysis of behavior.

[61] L. L. Thurstone, "Attitudes Can Be Measured," *American Journal of Sociology* 33, no. 4 (1928), 531.

[62] Thurstone, "Attitudes," 531.

[63] Thurstone, 531

no regular intervals between attitudes; that is, the attitudes are distributed but do not follow a normal frequency distribution. The next phase was to revise the wording of statements to alter their intensities and reiteratively poll further groups to endorse positions that expressed their attitudes about peace and war. When poll data expressed a proper distribution curve along the ruler, it was a complete "scale of evenly graduated opinions so arranged that equal steps or intervals on the scale…*seem* to most people to represent equally noticeable shifts in attitude."[64] In other words, meaning could now be attached to expressive statements about internal states because meaning could be attached to these statements in relation to each other.

Thurstone's early work not only contributed to the idea that invisible phenomena like attitudes leave material, measurable traces—in this case, linguistic ones—but also led him to infer legible pictures of the relationships between all kinds of underlying, unobservable traits. He would go on to engineer techniques to build law out of chance in the intercorrelations among data sets that, like opinions, are presumed to have shared, latent influences or "common factors." Charles Spearman had pioneered factor analysis in the 1920s, when he posited that a single, general factor consistently effected the performance of individuals on tests—an assumption that would be the basis for IQ.[65] Thurstone argued, based on a set of statistical experiments that, as I will explain below, involve a technique called "rotation," there were in fact seven.[66] While Thurstone eventually gave up this idea, the substance of his disagreement with Spearman arises from the fact that both theories were purely statistical constructs that ultimately could not escape their indeterminacies.

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[64] Thurstone, 554.
[65] Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance,* 244. See also Charles Spearman, *The Abilities of Man: Their Nature and Measurement* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927).
[66] Gigerenzer et al.*,* 236.

The process of "multiple factor analysis" is a means of ascertaining the number of factors involved and the strength of their influence or "communality" on variables. A full understanding of the mathematics involved is beyond my capacity as a literary scholar; what I want to note is that, at a basic level, the processes of factor analysis function by repeatedly re-arranging and re-seeing relationships between data until a picture emerges that nullifies as much variance and explains as many relationships among data as possible. Much like "Attitudes can be Measured, " Thurstone's 1934 paper "Vectors of Mind," uses geometric and spatial analogies to explore "psychological complexities" that have traditionally been treated with "speculative, bibliographical, or merely literary" methods.[67] Using a data pool gathered from real descriptions of friends and acquaintances written by study participants, he asks: what factors can explain the relationships between the adjectives we use to describe personality? Why are people described as "congenial" frequently also described as "friendly, or courteous, or generous, even though we do not admit that these words are exactly synonymous"?[68] Do these traits have common factors, and if so, how many? Imagine, he says, a space with *n* dimensions. In the space, each adjective is a point defined by some coordinates. Regardless of how many dimensions there are, adjectives that frequently occur together in personality descriptions will form "clusters" or "constellations" in the space.[69] The "factors" are like axes established in this space through probabilistic methods; if they intersect particular clusters, then we can consider them to have a measure of influence. In order to seek out the simplest structural explanation for the data being looked at, statistics allows

[67] L. L. Thurstone, "The Vectors of Mind," *Psychological Review* 41, no. 1 (January 1934), 7.
[68]Thurstone, "Vectors of the Mind," 7. The idea that certain traits tended to appear together or "correlate" in an individual dates back to nineteenth-century statistics. See Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance*, 58.
[69] Thurstone, 15-16.

us to "rotate" the axes without moving the clusters. Thus, Thurstone had it, one could add as many axes as it takes until maximum influence is accounted for.

There are three major things distinguishing this process that I will take forward through the rest of this chapter. First, its success depends upon iteration. Since the placement of clusters shifts with the establishment of each axis, the placement of each subsequent axis is informed by the effects of the previous one—axes must get established in order. Second, although the variables remain the same, each rotation changes the relationships between variables, between variables and factors, and between factors and other factors. Third, as Thurstone and other interlocutors eventually realized, multiple factor analysis proved inadequate as an inferential tool, since it cannot test its own significance, which depends upon the picture one is looking for. It now survives primarily for exploratory purposes, used to help researchers who "have no given frame of reference to begin with" begin to devise their questions—and in this capacity, the possibility to reframe data in order to ask new questions and unveil new meanings, its dynamics are apprehensible in literary works.[70]

Before demonstrating how the strategies of factor analysis are mirrored in or by sociopoetic ones, I want to make one more stop at another project that addresses the interpretation of personality and which observes an increasingly indeterminate midcentury landscape of competing values. In *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* David Riesman, another faculty member at the University of Chicago for many years, investigates opinion and attitude at the public rather than personal scale. A stark change since the *Middletown* studies, his 1950 bestseller observes that a new generation of Americans had begun

[70] Thurstone, 8. For contemporary applications, see Leandre R. Fabrigar and Duane Theodore Wegener, *Exploratory Factor Analysis*.

to develop the capacity to "adjust" their own adjectives in order to correlate themselves along the lines of the dynamics of their peer-groups. The book maps transitions in "character" or personality onto transformations in a social order, distinguishing between "tradition-directed," "inner-directed," and "other directed" people. The "tradition-directed" person develops in a "relatively unchanging" or stable social order—like the Western medieval period—in which "culture controls behavior."[71] Like Burke's computer, he knows the rules and follows them. Inner-directed people must learn to belong to a more rapidly-growing society in which, through factors like social mobility, they will be presented with new situations, new rules and "competing traditions" along the course of life.[72] Like a "gyroscope"—and like Muncie inhabitants on the Lynds' account—the inner-directed person develops a strong ideological foundation or moral compass to stay upright while adapting to new external conditions. Finally, "other-directed" people, whose material and cultural environments tend to be American cities and the mass media, self-fashion by "paying close attention to the signals from others"—signals that come both from their "peer-group" and media sources.[73] In a culture of consumerism and bureaucratized, dispersed power, the life of Riesman's other-directed individual is a series of what he calls "adjustments."

Aside from making the obvious connection between sociological and literary attempts to get inside peoples' minds, factor analysis, rotation, and adjustment provide a useful backdrop as well as a lens for exploring textual juxtapositions, arrangements, and relationships. We might

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[71] David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, Abridged by the Authors (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 26. I have purposefully chosen an abridged version of the book printed by a commercial publisher following the academic version, published by Yale University Press.
[72] Riesman et al., *The Lonely Crowd*, 31.
[73] Riesman et al., 37.

also see parallels with the dynamics of statistics I have just described in Joan Retallack's essay-poem "What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?" That is, both statistical and poetic experimentation follow an impulse to invent in the face of "the chaotic interconnectedness of all things, the dynamic pattern-bounded indeterminacy in which we find ourselves, in which we must somehow find/make patterns among contingencies not intelligently designed for our convenience alone."[74] Like her essay, they play at "a mirage line between the descriptive and prescriptive," combining description "with prescriptive exhortation: Notice this. Notice this in a particular way. Value that noticing. This is real. Take it to heart. Make something of it."[75] At the beginning of this chapter I approached Hughes' "Johannesburg Mines" in this way, asking: what difference do the small changes in his repetitions make? Statistical rotation—a way of "taming chance," of mathematically isolating meaningful relationships between factors—might help us see the poem as renegotiating the relationship between variables like type of labor, location, and race. Rotating the grammatical and spatial relationships of the language, do we see something new about the factors involved in the problem of socioeconomic, racialized inequality?

Now that we know a little more about the statistical extraction of meaning from indeterminacy, I will give one answer by taking a detour through poet-critic Evie Shockley's 2011 "statistical haiku (or, how do they discount us? let me count the ways," dedicated to Hughes' "Johannesburg Mines." It entertains the same tensions between sociological and literary registers as its predecessor and sharpens this tension through a loose employment of haiku structure, such as the transformative juxtaposition of two elements joined by a "kireji." The oppositional pairing "count" and "discount" in the title, which plays on "counting" as a

[74] Joan Retallack, "What Is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?," *Jacket* 32 (April 2007), 10.
[75] Retallack, "Experimental Poetry," 1.

function of enumeration and mattering, is the first of many words, numbers, and relations to be destabilized and reframed by comparison. The polysemy of each word highlights that of the other, drawing attention away from the meanings that seem to best fit the context—to discount as to ignore and to count as to add up—and towards alternative meanings.

> only 3 of 100 black boys
> entering kindergarten will graduate college—
> in the night sky, shooting stars
>
> every day a black person
> under 20 years old commits suicide—
> plucked magnolia blossom's funereal perfume
>
> a black man is 700% more likely
> than a white man to be sentenced to prison—
> scattered thundershowers in may
>
> every 3 minutes
> a black child is born into poverty—
> pine needles line the forest floor[76]

Let us first examine the language that precedes the long dash in each of the sequence's haiku. At a basic level, it highlights the statistical rendering of relationships between units: "*only* 3 *out of* 100 black boys / entering kindergarten will graduate college" "a black man is 700% *more likely* / *than* a white man to be sentenced to prison" "every day a black person/ *under* 20 years old commits suicide." Shockley's enjambment in the first line reminds us that the units are not actually people, but variables expressing aspects of black life—not "black boys" but their rate of college graduation. Each comparison does some work of detaching the statistic from the anonymous, generalized people it presumes to count, calling up suspicion around linkages that each make different kinds of claims. While "3 out of 100" measures a single attribute of a small

[76] Evie Shockley, *The New Black* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 11.

part against a larger one that acts in lieu of whole, a sample population, the next haiku measures the frequency of the intersection of several variables, namely age, race, and suicide. The third uses yet another enjambment to compare the frequencies of the correlations between blackness, whiteness, and incarceration, and in the fourth, race, birth rate, and poverty. We take from the poem at least one hypothesis that a common factor influencing these circumstances is the systematic disenfranchment of black people from resources like higher education, psychological treatment, regular employment, domestic stability, and so on.

As a sociopoetic work, we can expect that "statistical haiku" will also inflect each form of representation with its partner. The long dashes, which function as the "kireji" or cutting device, mark a rotation, transition or transformation that also works on the double-meaning of "discount" and "count." The last line of each stanza opens at once onto something that "counts," but not in numbers, and approaches statistical uncertainty by a tender treatment of discounted, transient or unstable life. On the one hand, Shockley pairs statistics that index painful circumstances of black life with images of organic and astral phenomena, vast or uncountable: sky, stars, blossoms, raindrops, pine needles. These final lines fulfill the traditional haiku's required reference to seasons—we might observe a progression from wintry cold skies, to spring scents, summer showers, and the shedding of foliage in autumn—calling up kinder cycles than those perpetuated by poverty, lack of access to education and mental health resources, and a racist carceral system. On the other hand, the sudden appearance of "shooting stars" that may fade figures the wishes of uncertain childhoods, and the fallen pine needles memorialize babies born into a world of dried-up opportunity. Perhaps we might think of the haiku imagery as "confounding variables" to the statistical facts, influences that disrupt the nature of the relations drawn in the previously paired lines; perhaps it denaturalizes the correlations by producing

something like what statisticians call an "uncertainty coefficient." In either case, the associations we thought we recognized occupy a new patterning, a new way of counting the poem's subjects.

For Shockley as for Hughes, sociopoetics is evident as a strategy to reorganize, too, the real systems of biopolitical control seen as inextricable from statistics. In a more ideational way, inferential thinking can be mapped onto other, less explicitly political, avant-garde poetries invested in paratactic play, programmatic methods, and tropes around chance roughly correlating with the rise of statistical society as well as of computing. Many projects of Dada, Objectivism, Oulipo, Fluxus, Language writing, and conceptual poetry rely on rule-based means of artistic production to pose challenges to the possibility of self-expression, self-knowledge, and self-determination and engage with the productive tension between law, chance, and creative authority in their work. They run against the idea of the "individual genius" or inspired poet filled with some kind of divine imaginative power, fed on "honey-dew" to access visions of the "Xanadu" of Kubla Kahn, with its moons, suns, seas, rivers, and "caverns measureless to man."[77] The cut-ups of Tristan Tzara, for instance, highlight the visuality and materiality of language over and above its romantic properties. Many of the early transgressions of American modernism and the European historical avant-garde set a precedent for postmodern forms that Joseph Conte has called "procedural" and "serial," a continuation and intensification of constraint-based poetries like the sonnet or haiku. In the procedural writing of the Oulipo, for example, language games enable the poet to "encounter and examine that which he or she does not immediately fathom, the uncertainties and incomprehensibilities of an expanding universe."[78] A text like

[77] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Kahn," in Stephen Greenblatt, Jack Stillinger, and Deidre Shauna Lynch, eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period*, Eigth Edition, vol. D (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 446-8.
[78] Joseph M. Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 16.

Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, which retells an ordinary encounter with strangers on a bus 99 times in 99 different ways, explores the flexibility of language and the arbitrariness of distinctions between literary and other registers. The postmodern period also marked radical programmatic methods that applied arbitrarily devised formulae to pre-existing, non-poetic language, incorporating all kinds of everyday speech and meaning into what Barrett Watten has called "poetic vocabulary."[79] The varied experiments of language poetry to contemporary conceptual writing perform "composition as transcription, citation, 'writing-through,' recycling, reframing, grafting, mistranslating[,] mashing" to re-contextualize found, or language.[80] While bearing traces of sociological consciousness to different degrees, by regularizing chance as a means of writing, they carry the watermark of a "statistical society."

The layered textures of sociopoetics that use rule-based methods to both select and organize their contents are particularly vivid in the "Chance Operations" of Jackson Mac Low. While his interest in "egoless" writing and indeterminacy as a compositional method is closely tied to his study of Buddhism and Daoism, the appeal of creating artworks "as far as possible-without attachment and without bias" have a clear echo with the stance of the statistician to her objects.[81] Mac Low's programmatic work is distinctive in traditions of authorial effacement and programmatic writing not only because it served as guiding predecessor to the post-WW2 avant-garde, but also because of the particularly layered processes through which he arrives at the

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[79] Barret Watten, "New Meaning and Poetic Vocabulary: From Coleridge to Jackson Mac Low," *Poetics Today* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 150.
[80] Marjorie Perloff, "Poetry On the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric," *Boston Review* 37.4 (2012). See also her book *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, Reprint edition (University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[81] Quoted in Jonathan Stalling, "'Listen and Relate': Buddhism, Daoism, and Chance in the Poetry and Poetics of Jackson Mac Low," in *Writing As Enlightenment : Buddhist American Literature Into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Gary Storhoff and John Whalen-Bridge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 90.

"contingent formal values" of his poems.[82] As I will explore in a reading of Mac Low's "Numbered Asymmetries" below, he was prone to generating rules based on a combination of randomization, authorial choice, and patterns *within the source texts* themselves. Just as Thurstone's factors are animated by statistical rotation and patterns among clusters of data, Mac Low's "Asymmetries" are "self-generating"; they rely on internal methodological consistency to build their own rules and rulers.[83] Unlike the outputs of purely statistical programs, of course, these works are not always explicitly geared towards discovering the "simplest" explanation of the relationship between variables or words, nor the one with the most explanatory power. What they do show us is a sociopoetics constructed by data collection, formulas, and correlations that releases artistic production from the norms of authorship.

Mac Low's "Numbered Asymmetries" evolve out of aleatory, performative, and visually expressive texts composed in the mid to late 1950s that he saw as symmetrical, as "repeating patterns [of linguistic and silent] 'events'."[84] We might see symmetries as descriptive statistics that identify trends in social behavior. In contrast, the dimensions of asymmetries are governed by an "acrostic-chance method" that translates or transmutes a source text based on an "index word" determined at the discretion of the author.[85] The index, much like a common factor, would define a circumstantial arrangement of language further complicated by "chance-selection subroutines" arising during the compositional process and a *separate* set of rules for performance. The poems grow out of a backbone of two axes—horizontal and vertical acrostics of the index—from which the rest of the page is filled in using subroutines involving

[82] Watten, "New Meaning and Poetic Vocabulary," 173.
[83] Jackson Mac Low, *Asymmetries 1-260: The First Section of a Series of 501 Performance Poems* (New York: Printed Editions, 1980), 247.
[84] Mac Low, *Asymmetries*, 244.
[85] Mac Low, xiii.

punctuation, line breaks, spacing, and occasionally other textual features Mac Low chose to include. The mechanics of the technique are especially apprehensible in short example like "Asymmetry 54":

> LAST aspects situation today,
> approximately proportion pleasure renowned overtops[86]

The letters beginning each of the words in the first line spell out the index word, "LAST," while the next line, as it moves toward fulfilling the vertical acrostic, in turn leads off with a word beginning with the second letter of LAST; it, too is an acrostic of the first several letters of "approximately." Each word, Mac Low tells us—he is as forthcoming about his method as the most rigorous social scientist—is mined from a sequential reading of a given "spontaneously" chosen source text.[87] Remember that Thurstone's multiple factor analysis had to proceed iteratively, since the establishment of the previous factor would determine the "best" placement of the next one. Here, the rule for the second line of the "Asymmetry 54" is fixed according to the outcome arranged by a combination of the original index word, "LAST," and the new index word "approximately."[88] Even in its randomness, it is anchored by LAST almost as if the letters were coordinates on Thurstone's multi-dimensional space. Moreover, it touches on the subjects of several themes of statistical sociopoetics: a fixation on "aspects" and "situations," the spatial nearness of "approximate," the comparative function of "proportion" and "overtops." The correlations that emerge from a lexical organizing scheme are also, of course, aural, and the text

[86] Mac Low, 70.
[87] Mac Low, 243.
[88] In this case, it's not clear why Mac Low stopped after two lines. Perhaps he had come to the end of the page—the physical space of the notebook laid yet another constraint—or perhaps, as he says of another asymmetry, there was no word in the source text beginning with "x."

is furnished with a wealth of sonic resonances and cadences. Since Mac Low's "Chance Operations" were written with performances in mind, the contingencies that bring into being the alliteration of "approximate proportion pleasure" are further layered when translated into speech.

The poems delight in the loosening of rules as well as their enforcement. Over the course of composition, mistakes were accepted and retained, index words were extended into strings of words, and new rules invented by Mac Low. Computed and mystical orders collaborate to make refracted portraits of the source text, or of the writer in the moment of reading aloud. Other readers, too, were meant to participate in collective performances or "simultaneities" that bring the work into proximity with a public. Indeed, one of the most interesting things about them is the environment they capture; built from words in whatever Mac Low was reading at the time, they speak to the atmosphere of the early cold war, its authorities, enemies, technologies, habits, laws, revolutions, ideologies, and affects—its "new various ordinary."[89] As in Asymmetry 61, they provide snapshots like:

> newspaper evening,
> wisely sensing perceiving
> adapt people deteriorating
> equilibrium,
> quantity require,[90]

The poems apportion space, wrapping acrostic sequences and cascading language according to further rules and occasional accidents or impulses. In later asymmetries, Mac Low imported more authorial force into their textual production, deciding to use the same word each time a letter of an index-word appeared. The short poem "Asymmetry 196," based off the rather self-

[89] Mac Low, 75.
[90] Mac Low, 75.

reflexive index "idea," entertains the tension between what is given by rule or convention and what can be gained or made new by interrogating it:

> IDEA disciple even ask
>
> disciple IDEA susceptible created IDEA
> preceded lifetime even
>
> even variants even natural
>
> ask susceptible knowable[91]

The combinations of words place several of competing "ideas" into proximity—ideas of disciples, perhaps passed down from a "preceded lifetime," created ideas, ideas whose creation is "susceptible" to any number of influences. These "variants" overlap with and dissolve into one another, almost made equivalents by the recurrence of "even." The kinds of indeterminacies challenging factor analysis are capitalized upon here, as the poem functions to highlight is "created," self-constructed ambiguities, the random impacts of contexts and coincidence in linguistic meaning and inquiry, and the precariousness of what seems "natural" or "knowable."

A sociological poetics built of Mac Low's "chance operations," Shockley's transformative juxtapositions, Hughes' repetitions and rearrangements, Auden's assemblage of variables, Thurstone's rotations of common factors, Riesman's landscape of "amorphous power" and behavioral shifts, can give us new insight into poetic devices used to make relationships between fragments of thought, image or language uncertain; such a poetics can dismantle existing patterns and generate new ones by "rotating" readings of canonical works considered in relation to social science. One such work is George Oppen's 1968 "Of Being Numerous," which

[91] Mac Low, 180.

has been thought of as a poem about history and continuity, about the atrocities of war and the political environment during the escalation of the Vietnam War, about the built environment of New York City, or "humanity as a single thing."[92] Indeed, it meditates on the problem of being "among"—of situating oneself in a generation, a city, the news, a poem. Those inhabiting its social climate find themselves "pressed, pressed on each other, / We will be told at once / Of anything that happens."[93] This world is much like that of *The Lonely Crowd,* sparse yet busy, full of adjustments and other-direction:

> There are things
> We live among 'and to see them
> Is to know ourselves'.
>
> Occurrence, a part
> Of an infinite series,
>
> The sad marvels;
>
> Of this was told
> A tale of our wickedness.
> It is not our wickedness.[94]

Oppen's snapshot of collective sentiment admits and complicates the grounds of its togetherness. For what reader has not, by this historical moment, known themselves as an "occurrence, a part / Of an infinite series," a coordinate in a statistical distribution? Critics have pointed out the abstraction of this famous opening, its "disconnected world" populated not by people but by

[92] Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 93.
[93] George Oppen, *Of Being Numerous*, Second Printing (New York: New Directions, 1967), 12.
[94] George Oppen, *Of Being Numerous*, 9.

things, its tale told "without a teller."[95] Many accounts link the "tale of our wickedness" to the biblical fall and its rebuttal as, in Marjorie Perloff's words, a "response that it is circumstance, not native predisposition, that determines our fate."[96] I want to suggest that this tale is also about the way that we order and disorder what counts as "circumstance"—or influence, or correspondence—that links the "things / we live among" or the trend of "sad marvels" here. As the discussion of factor analysis intimated, statistical groupings of data are evaluated based on their ability to eliminate variance and illuminate verifiable correlations among data. The problem for Oppen is that tangible rules, tests, or even self-justifying arrangements are absent or unavailable within the parameters of his project to capture a meaningful sense of personhood.[97] The paratactical arrangements of the poem are spaced out unevenly on the page, and the relations between the fragments are inconclusive, as if performing a suspension of judgement and a disavowal: "it is not our wickedness." The statistical reckoning of our membership into categories such as "wickedness," how and to what variables we attribute it, and how poetic language may transform such relationships is the subject of the next and final section.

PART THREE: DEVIANCE, JUDGMENT, AND THE "UNGETATABLE"

As previous discussions in this chapter have established, statistics can be used for numerical description, inferring correlations, and the testing of hypotheses produced by its

[95] "The Shipwreck of the Singular George Oppen's Of Being Numerous," Marjorie Perloff, April 28, 2009, http://marjorieperloff.com/essays/oppen-numerous/. The article was initially published in *Ironwood* 26, 1985.
[96] Perloff, "Shipwreck of the Singular."
[97] Oren Izenberg includes Oppen in a tradition of poets that "seek ways to make their poetic thinking yield accounts of personhood that are at once *minimal*—placing as few restrictions as possible upon the legitimate forms a person can take—and *universal*—tolerating no exemptions or exclusions." Izenburg, *On Being Numerous*, 4.

experiments. The sociopoetic experiments examined thus far have addressed a series of problems that surface in these processes, from the treatment of people as bundles of variables to the radically uncertain character of minority life, to the preservation of singular, intentional authorship in the face of a social state of being constantly in comparison or "among." Beginning with a critique of the view of social conformity as a matter of rule-following and measuring, I have travelled through the murky waters of indeterminacy and observed that sociopoetic engagements with statistical models can set and bend their own rules to produce representations as multifaceted as a hall of mirrors. In this final section, I return to more determinate ground, exploring the borders between the speculations of statistical inference and the real social categories and institutional orders that become reified in the world as a result. I will do so with regard to the classification of the deviant, concretized and impounded in the contemporary carceral system. Deviance is highly relevant here in part because its contemporary definition of "straying from the norm" is tied to the contrivances of probability distributions. [98] Prior to leaps in mathematical statistics, deviance, sociology, and reform were also interlinked, for the realization that acts we now call "deviant" followed the same "law of large numbers" as normative behaviors played a role in affirming the existence of society and social laws. Quételet, for instance, saw the discovery of regularities in crime, vagrancy, prostitution, and the like as proof of a deep social order; since even "antisocial acts were products of the social condition," they could presumably be subject to intervention.[99]

[98] The earliest citations of "deviant" and "deviance" in this sense date only to the 1920s. "Deviant, n.," in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed August 29, 2019, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/51455.
[99] Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance,* 41.

As Howard Becker asserted in *Outsiders* (1963), despite these associations statistics actually has a weak explanatory power when it comes to the relation of deviant acts with their conditions. Rather than treating deviance as "a quality that lies in behavior itself," he situates it in a complex of rule-following, rule-breaking, rule-enforcing and "labeling."[100] As Becker points out, in a heterogenous social arena with competing value systems and conventions, a behavior may be designated as "abnormal" depending on whom one is talking to. As he further maintains, deviance is frequently a matter of people "*forcing* their rules on others, applying them more or less against the will and without the consent of those others."[101] De-essentialized and considered a result of judgment and power, a case of "supposed deviance" becomes defined on his account "in the interaction between the person who commits an act and those who respond to it."[102] A sequential pattern of behavior, interaction, and response, deviance must be understood as "a form of collective activity" embodied in a relational process that occurs over time, in stages, and among a number of social actors making accusations, deliberations, and compromises about what counts as a rule and whether it has been broken.[103] Deviance can be potential or secret; both the unfolding temporality and relative character of deviance make it obscure to tools like multivariate statistical analysis. As Becker puts it, statistical modeling is ill-equipped to

[100] Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies In The Sociology Of Deviance* (London: Free Press, 1963; New York: Free Press, 1997), 15. Citations refer to the 1997 edition. A sociologist of art as well as of deviance, among other topics, and a researcher who "never thought social science had a monopoly on what goes on in society," Becker has expanded the tradition of a book like *The Polish Peasant* in opening sociology to, as he puts it, "a larger realm of representational possibilities." His book *Telling About Society,* for instance, treats fiction, drama, films, photographs, maps, and ethnographies alongside "mathematical models" as "reports" or "representations of society." Howard S. Becker, *Telling About Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xi, xv, 22.
[101] Becker, 13.
[102] Becker, 8, 13.
[103] Becker, 178.

determine "the causes of unwanted behavior" because it "assumes (even though its users may in fact know better) that all the factors which operate to produce the phenomenon under study operate simultaneously. It seeks to discover which variable or what combination of variables will best 'predict' the behavior one is studying."[104] Put in the language of Thurstone's factor analysis, one could make an argument for placing the axes of influence in any number of arrangements. In the place of quantitative methods of examining deviance, Becker proceeds through "intensive field observation" and "a frame of mind that takes the commonplace seriously and will not settle for mysterious invisible forces as explanatory mechanisms."[105]

This same language might equally describe C. D. Wright's *One Big Self: An Investigation* (2001), a book-length poem that approaches an "*ungetatable*" encounter with inmates' experience in Louisiana prisons. Like Hughes' "Johannesburg Mines," it problematizes "making a poem" out of the material of "evidentiary writing."[106] As documentary reportage or sociological study, the subject of *One Big Self* is incarceration, the white-supremacist power structures that govern the carceral state, and the effects of being consigned to the images, discourses, and confined spaces of criminality. Its lyrical aspects, as Jennie Berner has observed, convey a vision of abstracted individuality that preserves "the integrity of all the 'selves' she investigates" while critiquing the "abstractions of the prison-industrial complex."[107] Embracing the conception of deviance as interactive, Wright uses literary forms in tandem with modes of statistical understanding—identifying variables, seeking influences, and evaluating the reliability of its own models through iterative experimentation—without decisively locating causes. Rather,

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[104] Becker, 22.
[105] Becker, 182.
[106] Wright, *One Big Self*, ix.
[107] Jennie Berner, "From Stenotype to Tintype: C.D. Wright's Technologies of 'Type,'" *Postmodern Culture* 22, no. 2 (2012), https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.uchicago.edu/article/494802.

her sociopoetics suspends judgment, tracking alternative correlations and commonalities among prison inmates, and potentially her readers and herself.

Just as the following reading of *One Big Self* is meant to draw together this chapter's threads of thinking around problems of law and chance, causality and arbitrariness, and judgment and deviance, it is in dialogue with the last chapter's themes of self-seeing and typicality. The assemblage of detailed facts and observations pertaining to Wright's visits to prisons in the South, combined with the mission to recognize the "human divinity" of those who live there, carries forward the tension between empirical and subjective registers of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and other documentary works in the Depression era. *One Big Self* is, like Agee and Evans' work, also part photo-essay, the textual accompaniment to a series of photographic portraits shot by Wright's friend Deborah Luster. It shares with all the texts in "Type/Self" both a generic multiplicity and an impulse to go on the road to bear witness to the everyday lives of humans who are in some sense stuck, immobilized in a particular sphere of existence, class, or geographical location by economic, cultural, or social realities. Moreover, the title calls up the figure of a "typical" person—not just "one self" but "one big self," a singularity that can be scaled up to an enormous whole compassing a wide range of selves. The "big self" here, however, is neither typical nor typified, but rather procured by the book's "relational tendencies," which are not just sociological but statistical in several regards.[108]

C. D. Wright picks up on both the reductive aspects of enumeration and, on the side of inference, the idea that causes are never completely determined, foregrounding chance in the matter of crime and suspending the allegations that, as Becker says, mark someone as deviant.

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[108] Suzanne Wise, "The Border-Crossing Relational Poetry of C.D. Wright," in *Eleven More American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics Across North America*, ed. Lisa Sewell and Claudia Rankine (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press).

The poem's engagement with enumeration begins on page one:

> Count your fingers
>
> Count your toes
>
> Count your nose holes
>
> Count your blessings
>
> Count your stars (lucky or not)
>
> Count your loose change
>
> Count the cars at the crossing
>
> Count the miles to the state line
>
> Count the ticks you pulled off the dog
>
> Count your calluses
>
> Count your shells
>
> Count the points on the antlers
>
> Count the newjack's keys
>
> Count your cards; cut them again[109]

The anaphora ligatures a strangely diverse set of things, at turns concrete and abstract, by virtue of their countability. "Count your fingers / count your toes" may remind us of a children's rhyme or a game that gets one simultaneously acquainted with the numbers 1-10 and the materiality of one's own body. The distinctive presence of "newjack," a slang term for a rookie Correctional Officer, among this list of ordinary objects and colloquial phrases like "count your blessings"

[109] Wright, *One Big Self*, 3.

suggests a progression or approach to incarceration, perhaps an early interaction that founds the possible conditions of deviance. The counting seems to index circumstances like poverty—the acquisition of "loose change" as blessing or luck—and transience or flight, hopping railroad "cars at the crossing," awaiting "miles to the state line," and the calloused hands or feet of a migrant or hard laborer. "Shells," positioned closely to "antlers" takes on a latent meaning of bullet husks and a kind of violence strangely contrasted by the monotonous act of cardplaying, something one might do to occupy the stuck time of prison. With undertones of seriality and randomness, "Count your cards; cut them again" contains the sole punctuation mark in the sequence which, much like Agee's colons and semi-colons, indicates a renewed attempt—a gamble—to be in relation with or proximity to the "*ungetatable*."[110] One hand has been dealt; we turn the page.

> Count heads. Count the men's. Count the women's. There are five main counts in the cell or work area. 4:45 first morning count. Inmate must stand for the count. The count takes as long as it takes. Control Center knows how many should be in what area. No one moves from area A to area B without Control knowing. If i/m is stuck out for the count i/m receives a write-up. Three write-ups, and i/m goes to lockdown. [111]

Now firmly rooted in the space of prison, the dimensions of this verse paragraph are denser, and its movements compulsorily—literally "sentenced" by the use of periods—composed along lines set by the imperious Control Center. Definitive in tone, its commands "lock down" rules, claim absolute knowledge, demarcate disciplinary zones, and threaten punitive measures for the inmate or "i/m" "stuck out for the count." Seeking to, as it were, transform the "i/m" into the self-possession held by "I'm," Wright faces the problem of "writing-up" subjects "not to idealize, not

[110] Wright, 71.
[111] Wright, 4.

to judge, not to exonerate, not to aestheticize immeasurable levels of pain," but to "convey the sense of normalcy for which humans strive under conditions that are anything but what we in the free world call normal."[112] The poem leverages an institutional critique of art as much as the US legal system, and insofar as it problematizes what is given to us as "normal" by something like statistics or genre conventions, it wants to redefine such labels rather than dismiss them. In doing so, it asks us to look again at the aspects that combine or correlate to shape our perceptions of individuals: "Behind every anonymous number, a very specific face."[113]

As an investigator seeking to reclaim the value of incarcerated lives, Wright's sociopoetics unfolds in an exploratory mode searching to apprehend the prison's invidious normal without replicating the numerical abstractions of its disciplinary machinery. Approaching a new domain of study with observable patterns and unseen underlying connections, Wright must ask, just as Thurstone did: which relations are accidental, and which significant? The daunting scale of this task is felt first in the collection of attributes and facts, preceded by the word "count," that percolate throughout the poem, spaced widely and irregularly as if searching for their interrelationships. Possible groupings begin to appear to the reader with an eye out for inventory, like "your chigger bites," "your T cells," "your mosquito bites" and "your broken bones"; "the times you said you wouldn't go back," "the days of summer ahead," and "the days years you finished in school"; "your kids after the housefire," "your cousins on your mother's side," "the friends you've got on the inside," "the ones who've already fallen," "your dead."[114] Wounds, relatives, periods of time are all proposed as feasible common ground, the shared conditions of influence and experience, of an anonymous "you" that is both singular and plural.

[112] Wright, xiv.
[113] Wright, ix.
[114] Wright, 14, 49, 45.

And yet it is not clear to whom such traits belong, nor can we be decisive about the coherence of similarities or alignments. Becker's concept of "collective deviance" seems actuated by Wright's further consideration of strange aggregates, like "Knots of men," "Children, children, buckets of children," a "forest of men and women," "The jury's collective shudder," a "Cloud of lovebugs," and "Baggies of hair and nail clippings."[115] More standard and sampled groups are also present in the sequence when Wright cites statistics, although the text remains as suspicious of the information they provide as with any other given observation. In one instance, she qualifies "135,000 take guns to school every day" with the preceding line, "For whatever its worth."[116] And the next lines shift our attention towards the intimate or visceral impact of gun violence, towards the "sound of that emotional collision / between perps and victims."[117]

The value that Wright posits resides in this very "emotional collision," in interactions—real and abstract, specific and generalizable—involving accusation and conflict as well as communality and correlation. The poem catalogs ordinary scenes, facts, and personal reflections that we cannot definitively fasten to one source or another except the models of the text itself, which generates tensions between modes of documentary, sociological fact and lyric.[118] For example, in "Black is the Color," a rotational logic unearths "common factors" underlying the lives of the poem's subjects within and beyond the mere state of being imprisoned.

> Black is the Color
>
> Of that big ugly hole

[115] Wright, 46, 57, 25, 59, 45, 13.
[116]Wright, 40.
[117] Wright, 41.
[118] For an extensive discussion of *One Big Self* as a "dialectic of documentation and abstraction" in conversation with "the history of lyric," see Berner, "From Stenotype to Tintype," https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.uchicago.edu/article/494802.

Of 77% of the inmates in Angola

Of your true love's hair

Of 66% of the inmates at St. Gabriel

Of the executioner's corduroy hood

Again, as we saw in the previous chapter, anaphora facilitates juxtaposition to highlight difference or incongruity. Blackness appears as a common factor materializing as color, demographic category, statistical finding, intimacy, and a sign of imminent death. The choice to use "of" as a linking word conjures up the grammatical form of grim statistical measurement alongside its more colloquial role as an attributing preposition. In the first four lines, we seem to be alternating between a sociological register and a more poetic one, which bears the insignia not of "%" but of spondee. Tone aside, each phrase might be overheard in everyday life outside prison, whether on the news or in the rhyme-games of a school yard. The final line, however, disturbs the pattern with a poignant banalization of capital punishment, a realization of "anything but what we in the free world call normal."[119] That is, it binds the hoodie, fixed by powerful, majority white social groups as a racialized symbol of deviance to the "executioner" who carries out the final judgment on severe rule-breaking—linked through the ordinariness and sonorous cadences of "corduroy." To have the punitive actor garbed in the "hood" of criminality—both garment and underserved neighborhood—is to question the legitimacy of criminal accusation. For as Wright puts it elsewhere: The Heisenberg Principle applies / you change what you observe / EVERYTHING IS PERSONAL."[120] Like a statistical experiment, she shifts the

[119] Wright, xiv.
[120] Wright, 32

parameters of inquiry as the poem goes on, away from the word "Count," or of being counted, to other axes on which a relation could be conceived.

Repetition and rotation, the means by which statistics assesses the productivity of its own models, is the central trope with which Wright questions the ethics and the forms of her investigation. Reiterated phrases and word strings knit the text together, as if a common experience of prison life is being focalized through a different speaker, whether a guard, visitor, or incarcerated subject. Sometimes the changes are typographical, sometimes grammatical; sometimes the lineation is different, or the punctuation, the word order, or the spacing between words. Voices or roles are occasionally particularized, implicitly distinguished by references to scars, tattoos—"MOM LOVE GOD"—and finger prints—"plain tented looped burned off"—pets, favorite meals, or memories from the outside.[121] We hear echoes of heard or overheard language in the recurrence of statements with varied emphasis and pacing, for example:

> She is *so* sweet. You wouldn't believe she had did all the things they say she did
>
> She is *so sweet* you wouldn't believe she had did all the things they say she did[122]

The speakers are layered here, with Wright acting as mediator for a hesitant claim about the guilt of an any-woman, "she," and the truthfulness of the allegations against her. In the first version, the isolation of "she did" on its own line seems to both confirm the act and, because of the punctuation, distance the question of belief and rumor from the avowal of her "sweet"

[121] Wright, 12, 13.
[122] Wright, 7, 12.

personality, dividing her into parts action and impression. In the second, the line break opposes "all the things they say she did" to a more tangled reality of being and doing with a stronger emphasis on "*so sweet,"* casting a higher degree of doubt on what "they say." Many of the repetitions in *One Big Self* reframe similar statements about criminal behavior in order to dispute the belonging of inmates in a category of deviance, withholding judgment or probing judgment's rational limits, asserting in multiple instances that "NOTHING AND NO ONE IS BAD FOREVER."[123]

If statistics has an incomplete grasp on how we make our verdicts about norms and rules, Wright wields indeterminacy to scatter and confound a highly disciplined, determinate environment in which her project of "writing-up" is implicated. Acknowledging that "Some run to type, but I am not qualified," the writing pauses and postpones, manifesting in successive moment of indecision.[124] On the same page, reluctance takes the form of a flashing cursor on a screen, a pop-up window that asks:

> Do you wish to save these changes
>
> yes no nevermind.[125]

The grammatical form of the multiple-choice question is pervasive, maintaining our indecisive, rotating orientation to the details clustering within the poem. The many crimes named within, for example, are thrown out of classificatory alignment, entangling the reader in a gesture of potential incrimination or pardon: "Did you ever do anything illegal / Maybe Maybe not

[123] Wright, 20.
[124] Wright, 11.
[125] Wright, 11.

Depends on your definition of legal.[126]" The use of frequent second-person pronouns converges the interiors and exteriors of prison in a series of epistolary poems, like "My Dear Conflicted Reader" and "Dear Prisoner," that address us as correspondents of inmates and implicate us in the project of bearing witness to their situation. Elsewhere, we become "Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury" subject to a judge's question: "Is this your true verdict / What say you one and all."[127] We may be reminded again that stipulating the dimensions of deviance is a collective act, and observe that the poem abstains from a reply. Instead, it continues its meditation on luck and likelihood, suggesting that a verdict "must be reached by exact spin."[128]

The absence of question marks in a book subtitled "An Investigation" is striking, especially given that, as in some of the quotations above, so many of its phrases take the syntactical form of the interrogative. This discordance draws increasing attention to itself as the imperatives to "count" gradually shade into litanies of questions.

> Why has the field line started so late
>
> Why does the light reproach us
>
> Why is the coffee so watered down
>
> What does it say on your blue sheet
>
> What will you lose if you stay
>
> What is your baby's name[129]

[126] Wright, 32.
[127] Wright, 71.
[128] Wright, 74.
[129] Wright, 37.

Wright conducts an inquiry into the prison mundane, into circumstances of bland mornings, delayed starts, reading and recording—the "blue sheet" is perhaps an administrative document—that also touches on the exceptionally intimate topics of loss and the arrival of new life. None of the poem's questions are answered, at least not with language that seems to rationally address whatever is being asked about. One of the poem's refrains directly states "Don't ask."[130] Even so, the list form above suggests that one question is somehow answering another, as if different lines of investigation were speaking to each other over the course of the poem. To return to the essay by Retallack cited in my earlier explication of rotation, "experiment is conversation with an interrogative dynamic. Its consequential structures turn on paying attention to what happens when well-designed questions are directed to things we sense but don't really know."[131] In Wright's "interrogative dynamic," one voice asks "What's your DOC#."[132] Another retorts, "What is *your problem.*"[133]

C. D. Wright, then, seems to answer Hughes' question, "What kind of poem / Would you / Make about that?", with a poem that refrains from finality and turns its investigation out onto the world, its institutions, and its readers. To take statistics, then, as the material and method of literary content and form, is not only to derail the process of deductive certainties or disciplinary social systems, as some of the works under study have done, but to trace a social sphere inhabited by previously unseen or unremarked upon relations. Creating axes on the grounds of "What" and "Why" above, Wright may dispense with question marks as a way to irradiate the enigmas of investigation—enigmas that likewise confront sociological methods of inquiry

[130] Wright, 24. The phrase "Don't ask" appears several times over the course of the book as one of its refrains.
[131] Retallack, "Experimental Poetry," 1.
[132] Wright, *One Big Self*, 70.
[133] Wright, 13.

puzzling over the indeterminacies not of numbers and equations but of words and questionnaires. In the next chapter, I track the ways that sociopoetics takes shape around such puzzles by turning to the instruments, opportunities, and problems of survey analysis.

CHAPTER THREE
SURVEY/VOICE

> "What is a question? Literally, it's a way of gathering information but not of processing it. As a mode of enquiry that's, linguistically, founded on doubt, on not having the words for what passed between you and another person at the end of a relationship, the question seals space. That tiny, bounded pocket of something that is also space is so free."
>
> — Bhanu Kapil, "The Umwelt of the Question: Notes on Territory and Desire," 2012

> "We still, it seems, ask of ourselves, 'Who am I?' as if the question permitted a single neat answer. We still search for a solid, predictable core of self even though the conditions for the existence of such a self have long since vanished."
>
> — Arlie Russel Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 1979

The 1939 Summer and Fall issues of the *Partisan Review* featured the responses of eighteen prominent authors—Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, Allen Tate, Louise Bogan, Sherwood Anderson, and Henry Miller, among others—to a seven-item questionnaire. The questions posed in "The Situation in American Writing" touch on such matters as audience, the American historical tradition, the commercialization of creative writing, the function of literary-critical supplements, the relationship of literature to politics, and the relationship of writers to their texts. [1] The answers are diverse not only in opinion and style, but also in their orientation towards the topic of inquiry. Frequently, the bulk of a given response interrogates the relevance or value of a question rather than providing a direct answer. The following question, for instance, provoked several challenges to its very terms: "Do you find, in

[1] There were two, slightly different versions of the question sent to two batches of writers and printed in successive issues. The practice of sending out questionnaires with variations in phrasing to separate sample groups remains a common practice in social research.

retrospect, that your writing reveals any allegiance to any group, class, organization, region, religion, or system of thought, or do you conceive of it as mainly the expression of yourself as an individual?" Jon Dos Passos countered by asking: "Isn't an individual just a variant in a group? The equipment belongs to the society you were brought up by. The individuality lies in how you use it."[2] Similarly, for Lionel Trilling, "The disjunction [between individual and group] is obviously not a valid one. I think of my work as the expression of myself as an individual *and* (not *or*) as revealing an allegiance to a group and to a system—or rather, a tradition—of thought."[3] And Gertrude Stein stated simply, "I am not interested." [4]

James Agee, who was also solicited to participate, had a more explosive reaction. His replies, which critique the language through which the magazine frames the contemporary literary scene, would later be printed in "Intermission: Conversation in the Lobby," one of the many tangents and asides of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). While the *Partisan Review* editors introduced their questions as "central to any discussion of American literature today," Agee found them to be "so bad and so betraying that they are virtually unanswerable; and are indeed more interesting as betrayals" to the "good work" of the authors they address.[5] If we are to accept their legibility, viability, or significance, he continues:

> Then God help 'American' or any other 'literature.' Or else let both suspect words become your property and that of your inferiors. The good work will meanwhile be done by those who can use neither word.
>
> You are supposed to be and I guess are the best 'American' 'literary' and 'critical' magazine. In other words, these questions, the best you can ask, prove a lot about American literature and criticism and about you, the self-assumed

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[2] Jon Dos Passos, in "The Situation in American Writing," *Partisan Review* 6.4 (1939), 27.
[3] Lionel Trilling, in "The Situation in American Writing, Part 2," *Partisan Review* 6.5 (1939), 110.
[4] Gertrude Stein, in "The Situation in American Writing," *Partisan Review* 6.4 (1939), 41.
[5] JamesAgee and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001.

> 'vanguard.' They prove you as bad for, or irrelevant to, good work, as The New Masses or The Saturday Review or Clifton Fadiman or all the parlor talkers or the publishers or most of the writers themselves.[6]

Agee articulates his aversion to highly politicized, intellectually elitist, and mass cultural print industries by interrogating the meaning of key terms—"literature," "American," "critical"—with which *Partisan Review* frames its inquiry. Pointing out that the magazine's questions "prove" something about its *own* thoughts on the state of "American literature and criticism," he emphasizes the fact that the questionnaire, seemingly designed to showcase a variety of perspectives, subtly privileges a single, institutional one. Inverting the logic of the questionnaire, he treats the "unanswerable" *questions* rather than possible *answers* as indicators of a particular "situation in American writing," one that is prescriptive, restrictive, and commercial.[7]

Throughout his "Conversation in a Lobby," Agee remains in dialogue with each survey item, highlighting "suspect words" in quotation marks and re-contextualizing them in acerbic quips. For example, regarding the possible links between writing and individual self-expression, on the one hand, and collective representation on the other, he writes: "I 'conceive of' my work as an effort to be faithful to my perceptions. I am not interested in 'expressing' 'myself' as an 'individual' except when it is suggested that I 'express' someone else."[8] Again, Agee critiques the underlying implications or "suggestions" of the question, which in this case valorize

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[6] Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, 314.
[7] Ian Afflerbach has recently connected "The Situation in American Writing" series with "a growing need to identify modernist literature's relationship to cultural politics" in its historical moment. While Afflerbach uses the *Partisan Review* to help periodize an "American Late Modernism," his project shares my own investment in a similar archive. See Afflerbach, "Surveying American Late Modernism: Partisan Review and the Cultural Politics of the Questionnaire," *Modernism/Modernity Print* + 4, Vol. 4, Cycle 1 (March 18, 2019), https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0102.
[8] Agee and Evans, *Famous Men*, 315.

authentic and independent self-expression as a literary aim as well as authorial intent. In complement with the thick descriptions and repetitive reformulations of *Famous Men,* Agee highlights his commitment to the reproduction of perception—empiricism as literary method—over and above self-expression. Moreover, he makes clear that his "expression" is not organic or self-motivated but coerced, defensive. Like a square peg in a round hole, his "effort to be faithful to his perceptions" seems categorically incompatible with the act of "'conceiving of' [his] work." The editors of the *Partisan Review* seemed to have agreed with Agee on at least this point; they did not publish his remarks with the excuse that he "had not answered the questions."[9]

The written reactions of Agee, Stein, Dos Passos, and Trilling each illustrate a problem, an incompatibility between conditions and desired actions, that arises in the form of a questionnaire: it's very language proposes a limited domain of potential responses, precluding the thoroughly sincere expression of any individual thinking in different terms. As these examples further show, this can manifest in a range of different ways. An individual may be inclined to refine or even redefine the question and then proceed to answer, as Dos Passos and Trilling do. Or, as in Stein's case, one's lack of interest may lead to a relative non-response. Agee's passionate non-compliance with the terms of the *Partisan Review*'s solicitation both exemplifies a case of more radical overreaction and a self-conscious attempt to name the shortcomings not just of this particular set of questions, but of surveys more generally. As I argued in chapter one, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* uses sociopoetics to at once invoke and dismantle the vocabularies and methods that transform individuals into "types." Here, in the same book, Agee uses a sociopoetic strategy to navigate a "Situation in American Writing" that pertains likewise to sociology, whose methods of survey analysis—the umbrella category

[9] Agee and Evans, *Famous Men,* 310.

encompassing questionnaires as well as well as polls, censuses, and interviews—were fast becoming not only widespread research technologies but also recognizable cultural forms.

I would like to linger with Agee a bit longer as a means of raising three major interlocking observations about surveys that, together, echo his insight that questionnaires have something in common with "conversations in a lobby" a place at which individual and institutions meet and influence one another.[10] First, insofar as surveys induce acts of self-reflection, they are sites at or in relation to which our understandings of ourselves and our social relations are constituted. Yet as Agee noted, their invitation to self-reflection is complicated by the fact that they "suggest" a pre-ordained range of possible ways of being; any reply, then, is to some degree the "[expression] of someone else."[11] My second point, then, is that surveys also induce acts of self-fashioning, the process of adjustment by which people create public-facing identities that accommodate legible social standards of being and behavior.[12] These standards

[10] An alternative reading of the function of the survey might entertain the question of address or even interpellation. While surveys and questions do address us, their purpose is more specific than address—they seek to retrieve information from individuals that will indicate broader regularities in a collective social sphere. And while they do pre-condition our responses to some degree, surveys do not have the rigorous powers of social control that Althusser attributes interpellation's hails.

[11] Sociologists were well aware of this issue, and critics of questionnaire methods observe that the objectivity of survey data is impacted by the non-neutral choice of questions—and the specific language in which they are articulated—on the part of the researcher. See, for one instance among many, Willard Waller, "Insight and Scientific Method," *American Journal of Sociology* 40, no. 3 (1934): 285–97. Waller argues that "the questionnaire is oriented by the empirical insight of the person who frames the questions, and it can seldom reveal anything that was not simply in those questions [or] discover anything new." Waller, 293.

[12] The concept of self-fashioning, as I use it here, is similar to David Riesman's concept of "adjustment" as a behavior characteristic of "other-directed" individual discussed in my previous chapter. In literary studies, the term "self-fashioning" was popularized by Stephen Greenblatt's influential book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983). While Greenblatt's account covers self-fashioning across forms of public identity—dress, education, manners, portraits, and so on—in this context I focus on linguistic representations of aspects of identity.

inhere at once in an individual's prior understanding of their social milieu and in the worldview imparted by the language of a survey, which always implies non-neutral value claims about "literature," Americanness, or whatever else. Third, even as survey analysis methods exercise some degree of control over the production and circulation of respondent voices, determining respondent eligibility, response validity, and the meaning of answers, they nevertheless produce opportunities for and records of individual self-expressive acts. Throughout this chapter I will use this triad of terms—self-reflection, self-fashioning, and self-expression—to coordinate my analysis of sociopoetics that draw on survey analysis across disciplines, genres, contexts and scales of inquiry.

Even as they are highly standardized, iterative research instruments applied to assess patterns at the level of the group, questionnaires formalize an everyday set of personal and social circumstances and practices around inquiry in general that we need to consider as part of the dynamics of survey sociopoetics. C. Wright Mills 1940 essay "Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive," which draws explicitly on Kenneth Burke's theories of motive and rhetoric in *Permanence and Change* (1936), is a helpful guide. In this early work, Mills outlines a new analytic framework for thinking about "motive" that takes into account recent developments in ordinary language philosophy, pragmatist theories of purposive action, social psychology, and other pervasive "sociological theories of language" that dislocate intention from the space of private or *a priori* states.[13] According to Mills, phenomena like intentions and motives are not "fixed elements 'in' an individual," but "the terms with which interpretation of

[13] C. Wright Mills, "Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive," *American Sociological Review* 5, no. 6 (1940): 904.

conduct *by social actors* proceeds."[14] That is, motives are linguistic strategies with "integrating, controlling, and specifying [functions]" that are used to navigate particular "crisis" situations in which individuals, particularly when engaged in non-normative behavior, are tasked with explaining themselves.[15] The "imputation and avowal of motives" as a response to such "situations [involving] *alternative* or *unexpected* programs or actions," Mills goes on, is concomitant with "the speech form known as the question."[16] As I take it, if motives are not elusive causes of action but answers to questions, then questions index something like the social production of interiority along normative lines. These questions need not be spoken aloud between two or more individuals; one can ask oneself a question as a means of self-reflection and self-fashioning. As Mills points out, the viability and legibility of motives are determined by historically situated, normatively defined "vocabularies of motive" shaped and managed by "[processes] of social control."[17]

As my readings of Agee and Mills suggest, questions and questionnaires are zones of recognition, encounters in lobbies and crises that illuminate the tensions between interior and exterior worlds, tensions that intensify for people situated outside the normative vocabularies of motive that set up expectations for behaviors. I take up and extend their insights in at least two ways to develop an analytic of my own for exploring sociopoetic modes of inquiry in this chapter. First, as I track how the mechanics of social processes that delimit zones of agreement and dissent, belonging and exclusion—each of which inhere in statistically-generated categories

[14] Mills, "Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive," 904. Similarly, for Kenneth Burke, whom Mills draws on, "A motive is not some fixed thing, like a table, which one can go and look at. It is a term of interpretation." Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 38.
[15] Mills, 905.
[16] Mills, 905.
[17] Mills, 906.

of normalcy and deviance or constructions of types—show up in the form and diction of questions and answers in the various objects of this chapter. Second, I use the concurrence of questions in social situations with the announcement or expression of subjective phenomena like depth, intent, or desire, to explore the ways in which situations of inquiring—formalized by the ubiquitous presence of surveys since the early twentieth century—play a generative role in our developing senses of self. From the perspective of literary studies, this interpretive angle has important consequences for lyrical expression that centers on the letter "I." It challenges the precedence of literary forms as gateways to self-knowledge, platforms for self-pronouncement, or catalysts for empathy or interpersonal understanding. Under Mills' rubric the psychological novel, or free-indirect discourse, or lyric poetry, for example, is perhaps less equipped to bring the self into view than critics tend to think.

In this chapter, I examine experiments that dramatize, theorize, dwell with, and disrupt existing models of asking, answering, and remediating responses in both literature and sociology. I identify works that directly employ the methods and forms of questionnaires as well as more vernacular forms of questioning in unconventional ways, making their machinery visible and drawing out the complex mediations of individual voice and collective vocabulary they both afford and record. In doing so, I expand the last chapter's discussion of sociopoetics strategies that draw on statistical frameworks to negotiate the conditions of being enumerated and abstractly in relation to others. If the methodological problem of statistics is indeterminacy, that of the survey is a balance of powers. The works gathered here confront problems of voice, agency, and tensions between subjectivity and objectivity at the level of language, digging more deeply into the tension between law and anomaly, logic and fancy that I raised at the start. The majority of the examples I analyze in detail were all published since the 1970s, after "big

project" quantitative sociology and its questionnaires had saturated bureaucratic channels and mass media outlets and had become dispersed as instruments across different fields of knowledge and cultural production. As in previous chapters, I consider texts through the lens of a series of common methodological problems, particularly around the value of subjectivity and the power hierarchies between survey or researcher and respondent. Sociopoetics speaks through the survey in a sort of pidgin tongue—in Mill's words, it mirrors "vocabulary patterns that have overlapped in a marginal individual and are not easily compartmentalized in clear-cut situations."[18] Assembling, arranging, and remediating questions and answers, it shifts the power hierarchies of respondent and researcher/writer, individual and institution, at once loosening singular, otherwise effaced voices from social mores and cohering around legible categorical orders.

The rest of this chapter will be organized into four parts. First, I begin to outline the frictions inherent in the structure of surveys through Charles Bernstein's poem "Questionnaire" (2006), which simultaneously invokes and estranges us from sociological as well as literary registers and vocabularies of motive. I will also introduce some of the basic mechanics of survey design in a technical sense, calling intention to the function of granular linguistic patterns and the management of ambiguity. In part two, I note the cultural diffusion of surveys and dwell with the response of sociopoetics to the standardization of asking and answering in John Ashbery's "Proust's Questionnaire" (1982) and Ron Silliman's "Sunset Debris" (1974-8). The remainder of the chapter examines objects concerned with the collection, interpretation and remediation of real survey responses as part of an aesthetically minded research process. Part three explores projects in the arts-based research field of "poetic inquiry," which developed in the 1980s and

[18] Mills, 912.

has advanced new ways of transcribing or "coding" open-ended responses and interviews as poems that foreground the dynamics of inquiry in terms of personal encounter. In closing, I weave these threads together in a reading of Bhanu Kapil's *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (2005), a book-length poem constructed from the replies of Anglo-Indian women. In this "book of looking for [a] book" Kapil interprets, arranges, and shares suppressed life stories through the expression of a collective "I."[19]

PART ONE: "SETTING THE ISSUE" OF SURVEY WRITING

Survey writing, like the writing of poetry, is highly attuned to the ways in which language can convey a multitude of meanings—as is evident if we turn towards a textual object that deliberately plays at the edges of both forms. Charles Bernstein's "Questionnaire," published in his 2006 poetry collection *Girly Man*, draws on one of the most pervasive survey research formats: a self-administered questionnaire (SAQ) with a closed-ended structure. One of the main progenitors of the "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" or "language writing" movement in the 1970s and 1980s, Bernstein has argued that socially normative channels of communication in the late capitalist Western world, including those of lyric poetry's imagined speaker, sell us a fantasy of individuality and creative self-expression.[20] As he put it in his essay "The Dollar Value of poetry, "Regardless of 'what' is being said, use of standard patterns of syntax and exposition effectively rebroadcast, often at a subliminal level, the basic constitutive elements of the social

[19] Bhanu Kapil, *The Vertical Interrogation of* Strangers, (Berkeley, Calif.: Kelsey Street Press, 2001), 42.

[20] See Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014) for an analysis of critical debates about the history and contemporary status of lyric forms. Regarding language writers, White notes that they "turned against the assumed naturalness of personal expression" to "[critique] a form of isolated subjectivity that seemed to define the limits of both art and political life in the United States." White, *Lyric Shame*, 12.

structure—they perpetuate them so that by constant reinforcement we are no longer aware that decisions are being made, our base level is then an already preconditioned world view."[21] As "Questionnaire" makes clear, the survey is one such channel of reinforcement, literally staging a scene in which we are asked to reproduce the language of multiple-choice items by selecting one that presumably matches our situation.

Like much language poetry, Bernstein's poem is intent on defamiliarizing this process—"Questionnaire" both notices problems within the field of survey methods and exaggerates them. It departs from the standards of a typical SAQ in several respects, not least in the absence of actual question marks. In place of the interrogative, it opens with the imperative that the reader align herself with one or the other of binary positions. The first of these considers two different angles on the sources and instruments of knowledge:

> Directions: For each pair of sentences, circle the letter, a or b, that best expresses your viewpoint. Make a selection from each pair. Do not omit any items.
>
> 1.a) The body and the material things of the world are the key to any knowledge we can possess.
> b) Knowledge is only possible by means of the mind or psyche.[22]

Bernstein's directions both incite a moment of self-reflection about a particular "viewpoint" and an act of self-fashioning within the limited terrain of what "best expresses" this viewpoint. Additionally, the wording of "a)" and "b)" plays on the kind of compromises that questionnaires ask their designers, respondents, and interpreters to make, especially when it comes to abstract or

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[21] Charles Bernstein, "The Dollar Value of Poetry," in *The Language Book: Poetics of the New* eds. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 140.
[22] Charles Bernstein, *Girly Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 67.

divisive issues. The use of "any" and "only" in the constructions of questionnaire items, for instance, pushes each option to a radical extreme, forcing a spectrum of phenomenological possibilities into an antithesis between two imagined figures: an empirical fact-gatherer and a self-reflective, conscious subject.[23] However, the dyad mimics the requirements of closed-ended questions without fulfilling them. Technically, options should be both mutually exclusive—"no two answers can overlap in conceptual meaning"—and exhaustive—" the answer choices must cover all logically possible answers for the question."[24] Moreover, Bernstein fails to meet the aim of SAQ design to "develop a query that every potential respondent will interpret the same way."[25] For even if the "conceptual meaning" of Bernstein's answers do not readily overlap, other kinds of meaning, like the rhyme between "key" and "psyche" and the uncertainty surrounding the repetition of "knowledge," infer subtle links and make room for interpretive confusions.

Subsequent questions present seemingly polarized perspectives and, by extension, personae who seem at turns passive and willful, certain or timorous, hopeful or apathetic, romantic or skeptical.

2.a) My life is largely controlled by luck and chance.
b) I can basically determine the course of my life.

3.a) Nature is indifferent to human needs.
b) Nature has some purpose, even if obscure.

4.a) I can understand the world to a sufficient extent.
b) The world is basically baffling.

[23] The alternatives also restage Du Bois' "paradox" referred to in my introduction and even a debate between two extreme positions of philosophy of the mind.
[24] Paul J. Lavrakas, "Closed-ended Question," in *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2008).
[25] Lavrakas, "Self-Administered Questionnaire," *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*.

5.a) Love is the greatest happiness.
b) Love is illusory and its pleasures transient.

6.a) Political and social action can improve the state of the world.
b) Political and social action are fundamentally futile.

7.a) I cannot fully express my most private feelings.
b) I have no feelings I cannot fully express. [26]

Each of the declarative sentences, when read in isolation, may seem clichéd or reductive or banal; taken as a progression, they reveal a nuanced sensitivity to the particular relationships between self and world, exterior and interior, which they propose.[27] Consider, for instance, the double occurrence of "my life" that bookends the alternatives in item two. One describes the life less of a subject than an object "controlled" by the unpredictable whims of "luck and chance." In contrast, the next figures an "I" announcing its willful agency, and the phrase "my self" is repeated with a new force of self-determination. The two options describe, on the one hand, a life that is grammatically but not actively "mine" and, on the other, an "I" that can only "basically determine" her "[life] course." Reconceived as the sum total of someone's choices, the second instance of "my life" remains an object that can be shaped and molded from the outside. A similar set of repetitions and reformulations occurs in item seven, in which the syntax complicates an otherwise simple binary. We could imagine that a sociologist aiming for clarity would pair "I cannot fully express my most private feelings" with a sentence beginning "I can." By including "I cannot fully express" in both options, Bernstein's lines draw attention to another

[26] Bernstein, *Girly Man*, 67.
[27] Order matters not only in terms of poetic patterning but in terms of SAQ composition; wording of questions aside, the logical sequence both of topics introduced and of multiple-choice answers should highlight what is relevant to the respondent and "[follow] general principles of conversation." Lavrakas, "Self-Administered Questionnaire," *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*.

set of opposing states, the possession of "private feelings" and their absence—"I have no feelings." On this reading, both options are haunted by a sense of communication breakdown, by the limited sense of self-expression characteristic of surveys in general.

Echoes between items further protract a sense of instability around the existence of self-determination, the compatibility between conditions and human action, and the prospect of knowledge about "nature" "the world," and elusive feelings like "love." Like statistics treats the indeterminate relationships between variables, these questions all complicate the protean relationship of interior consciousness to external situations. For instance, the abstraction "Nature" in item three is personified by its feeling of "indifferen[ce]" and assigned an enigmatic function or teleology, as if possessing a "life course" of its own; it signifies both individual entity and environment. The next item substitutes "world" for "Nature," first as an object of knowledge available to an "I" with "sufficient" understanding, and then as "basically baffling." Note that the second option contains no "I," figuring a world that stands on its own. And remember that item one set "the body and material things of the world" in opposition to the "mind or psyche" as epistemological resources. The world, then, is variously a means to knowledge, a knowable object, and a bewildering concept. Moreover, the use of "basically" as a modifier for both "world" and, looking back a few lines, for an "I" declaring her capacity to "basically determine the course of [her] life" draws individual and environment into an increasingly strange relation, at once symmetrical, confrontational, and mutually opaque. The drama staged here, I am claiming, is precisely that of giving voice to a subjective belief or opinion in the context of a survey that demands we "do not omit" any questions while controlling our possible answers.

While the patterns of repetition I have begun to trace reflect the iterative character and organizational flow of questionnaires in general, they also perform a sort of poetic rhyming. For

the text resembles a "make-your-own-adventure" sonnet whose lines could be assembled from one's choices in each couplet/item. The exception to the text's many syntactical regularities occurs in item nine, the *volta* of the would-be sonnet, which offers up the options "a.) It is possible to tell if someone is trustworthy. / b.) People turn on you in unpredictable ways."[28] The item contains the only second-person pronoun in the text, performing an about-face, an unexpected spin to directly address the reader rather than procure a moment of identification with a) or b). We can now see "Questionnaire" as being more about perception and address than choice, about the provisional character of understanding and the capacity of its own form to manifest knowledge by turning the world outside-in or bespeak feeling by turning subjectivity inside-out. The ending note of "Questionnaire" asks just what it takes to dismantle the "preconditioned world [views]" that Bernstein charges normative language with reproducing:

> 14.a) Art is at heart political in that it can change our perception of reality.
> b) Art is at heart not political because it can change only consciousness and not events. [29]

The dichotomy set up by "political" and "not political" is deceiving here. While it suggests different positions about the effectiveness of political art, it disguises a forced agreement, exaggerated by the clunky rhyme of "art" with "heart," regarding the association of aesthetic objects with the core organ of an individual, feeling, subject. While this situation seems to leave no space for works of art that work on cold, distant, or impersonal registers, Bernstein is nevertheless carving out just such a space by writing a poem as a questionnaire, or by framing a questionnaire as a poem. In doing so, he also makes the political field available for interventions

[28] Bernstein, *Girly Man*, 67.
[29] Bernstein, 67.

on behalf of art-as-questionnaire that may change our perceptions of reality, our social consciousness, and galvanize political events.

To put it more concisely, Bernstein is not merely being playful. Rather, his sociopoetic text makes a real intervention into our understanding of the ways that language and sociological forms of inquiry organize our lived experience and "vocabularies of motive." It not only highlights tensions in a very quotidian activity that may otherwise go unnoticed, but also points back to research procedures that seek to balance the expression of respondents with the acquisition of objective data. The ambiguities, repetitions, associative links, and other formal complexities of "Questionnaire" tie into real methodological problems that have been faced by survey analysis since its inception.

As Bernstein shows us, and as survey writers are keenly aware, the wording of its items and instructions, and even the layout of its formatting can manufacture positions in advance or leave too much room for respondent misinterpretation. As such, survey design has developed detailed, rigorously formalized composition processes that require poetic acuity on micro-orders of vocabulary, diction, format, and syntax to manage meaning for their readers. George Gallup, one of most influential surveyors in the field of public opinion polling, initially secured accurate results by removing language altogether from the data-gathering process. In early publications like his 1930 "A Scientific Method for Determining Reader-Interest," he recounts that his recruits went door-to-door with a pile of the previous day's newspapers and, turning the pages, directed interviewees to simply point to each headline, ad, or article they remembered looking at.[30] This was, of course, not a scalable model for the large public and private research projects

[30] George Gallup, "Scientific Method for Determining Reader-Interest.," *Journalism Quarterly; Minneapolis, Etc.* 7 (January 1, 1930): 1–13.

that were proliferating throughout the 1930s and 1940s. With the arrival of probabilistic sampling methods discussed in the previous chapter, which randomized the audiences of surveys, the need for broadly legible questionnaires intensified.

We can observe the basic strategies for constructing stable logical and linguistic frameworks in one of the first comprehensive volumes on survey research, Hadley Cantril's 1944 *Gauging Public Opinion.* The textbook's first two chapters, "The Meaning of Questions" and "The Wording of Questions," provide suggestions for composing clear directions and avoiding jargon, weighted ideological terms, and "threatening questions" that touch on information a respondent may be uncomfortable divulging. Beginning with the problem of what is called "setting the issue" or "framing," Cantril identifies sources of vagueness in the phrasing and ordering of questions down to the level of a single word or even punctuation mark. While he breezes through hundreds of examples to evaluate a wide array of formal constructions, just a few will suffice to show how questionnaires handle the caprice of interpretation. Take these two similar questions from 1941 polls taken by the American Institute of Public Opinion and the Office of Public Opinion Research, both orchestrated by Gallop.

> Should the United States enter the war now? (OPOR 9/17/41)
>
> Yes 17% No 76% No Opinion 7%
>
> Should the United States go into the war now and send an army to Europe? (AIPO 9/17/41)
>
> Yes 8% No 88% No Opinion 4% [31]

The results suggest that a fair portion of the sample did not necessarily, or not consciously,

[31] Hadley Cantril, *Gauging Public Opinion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 26.

register sending troops abroad as an implication of "[entering] the war." They also imply that that the sense of immediacy and specificity created by "go now" and "Europe," combined with the embodiment of "war" in an "army" of actual people, sparked an antipathic reaction for a larger percentage of respondents. The wording of answers also contributes to "setting the issue," as Cantril shows by comparing further permutations of the above questions with alternatives like "Go in, Stay out, No Opinion" or "Favor, Oppose, Don't know."[32] By drawing yet another example into comparison, we can clearly see the effects of different underlying "vocabularies of motive" lurking behind each item's construction and reception.

> If Roosevelt and our leading military experts say that Britain will be defeated unless we go into the war in the near future, would you favor, or oppose, going into the war within a few days? (AIPO 05/20/41)
>
> Favor 51% Oppose 41% Don't Know 8%[33]

Notwithstanding the intensification of conflict in the months between this poll and the previous ones, we might attribute the increase in positive responses (51% "in favor" compared with 17% and 8% "yes") to the way this question figures authority, consequence, and urgency. It takes the burden of knowledge off the individual, freeing her to agree with the president and "leading military experts," and uses the pronouns "we" and "you" to generate sentiments of nationalism. Unlike the above examples, it places her in the position of an interventionist savior. It is not Americans that are in danger—at least not yet—but the British. For someone "in favor," we might imagine that the official opinions of government members and the imperative to help others in need are both rational motives for behaving a particular way. We might also consider

[32] Cantril, *Gauging Public Opinion*, 26.
[33] Cantril, 26.

"in favor" as a gestural form of agreement that requires a bare minimum of assent, at least relative to "yes." The granular complications illustrated by these examples alone mushroom in the context of the many variables that influence interpretation: respondent predispositions, implied stereotypes, the relevance of issues to different social groups, the demeanor of polling staff, and so on.

The differences in the percentages above raises a further question that resonates with Bernstein's final item: did survey respondents leave the poll with an altered politics? How did it shape their perception of wartime? To adequately answer would require a different kind of inquiry than I am undertaking here. Instead, as a means of transitioning to sociopoetic objects animated by the situations of self-analysis brought on by a "self-report questionnaire" or "self-rating scale"—the latter of which invites respondents to measure the degree of intensity with which they hold a position—I offer a case that demonstrates the influence of survey language on public and self-perception. The landmark book of second-wave feminism, *The Feminine Mystique* originated in a questionnaire that Betty Friedan sent to fellow Smith alumni of the class of 1942. It asked its respondents, all of whom were women, to procure "an honest, soul-searching picture of what we have become," and it led many to establish common dissatisfactions for the first time.[34] The wording and ordering of questions, examined with Cantril's degree of attention, seem to subtly produce a sense of alienation. In the first section on "Vital Statistics," the first questions are about marital status, children, and "husband's age," "occupation," "income" and "college," implying respondents are extensions of male partners.[35]

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[34] "Smith College Class of 1942 questionnaire draft (page 1). (Betty Friedan Papers, MC 575, Box 31, Folder 416)," *Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University*, accessed August 17, 2018, https://schlesingerlibrary.omeka.net/items/show/1.
[35] "Smith College Class of 1942 questionnaire draft (page 1)."

In contrast to the assumption of employment encoded in "Husband's occupation?", the questions "Are you employed?", "Doing what?", and "Full-time or part-time?" reveal the disparity in the access men and women have to the non-domestic world after higher education.[36] Similarly, the section sub-headed "You, Personal" follows dozens of questions on "Your Marriage," "Your Sex Life," and "Your Children."[37] We can speculate that this ordering, whether consciously or not, re-enacted patriarchal power hierarchies and demystified their logics for participants in such a way that questions like "How do you visualize your life after your children are grown?" took on a new significance. As David Riesman and Nathan Glazer observed following their research for *The Lonely Crowd*, interviews were "cultural forms" that respondents might "adjust" to during a line of questioning just as they adjust to changing media cultures or the attitudes of peer groups.[38] The publication of an article on the survey in Smith's alumni magazine testifies to just this. As one participant wrote in a post-script, the survey "gave [her] a much-needed chance to evaluate the meaning of [her] life."[39] For Friedan, too, the survey results were revelatory. As she put it in the first chapter of *The Feminine Mystique*, it helped her finally identify "A problem that has no Name."[40] In the next section, I will account for the survey not only as an instrument for gathering social data across fields and markets, but also as a social site for re-imagining one's life and naming unarticulated problems.

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[36] "Smith College Class of 1942 questionnaire draft (page 1)."
[37] "Smith College Class of 1942 questionnaire draft (page 1) and (page 2)."
[38] Raymond M. Lee, "David Riesman and the Sociology of the Interview," *The Sociological Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2008): 289.
[39] Betty Friedan, "If One Generation Can Ever Tell Another: A Woman Is a Person Too," *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (Winter 1961): 69.
[40] Betty Friedan, Gail Collins, and Anna Quindlen, *The Feminine Mystique*, 50th Anniversary edition (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 1.

PART TWO: THE POWER DYNAMICS OF SURVEYS

Questionnaires, quizzes, and polls are today promiscuous mass cultural forms. We are likely to come across surveys daily in some context or another—not only as instruments of social science, public policy, or marketing, but also as promiscuous mass cultural forms, portals through which we can apprehend, assess, and fashion aspects of our own lives. In some cases, surveys exact power upon us, as when responding is mandatory if we are to gain access to spaces and services in medical waiting rooms, college admissions offices, or airport customs. In others, they may empower us, as when we are invited to fill out questionnaires, quizzes, and polls in magazines, TV shows, or on high-traffic websites like Buzzfeed, Facebook, and countless others—and enjoy doing so.[41] As psychologist Sherry Turkle has surmised in a 2014 *Wired* article about the popularity of the online quiz, "People want a read on the self, an order to it…[the quiz] gives people something to look at, an object to think with…a kind of focus for attention for thinking about yourself."[42] Even mandatory questionnaires do some work to anchor us, set us in relation to broader contexts and other people—and the potential pleasure or comfort of being surveyed dwells alongside potential senses of alienation, outrage, frustration, confusion, or boredom. As we have begun to see, such reactions are rooted in the language of surveys, and often obstruct sincere or authentic response.

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[41] The attraction of popular knowledge quizzes in mass media was studied as early as the 1930s. For instance, Herta Herzog's study of the radio show "Professor Quiz" outlines four dimensions of appeal: "the competitive appeal," "the educational appeal," "the self-rating appeal," and "the sporting appeal." Paul Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page: an Introduction to the Study of Radio and Its Role in the Communication of Ideas* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 64-93, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000328645. Herzog acknowledges Hadley Cantril for help on her study. Lazarsfeld dedicates the book as a whole to Robert and Helen Lynd, who were featured in my first chapter.

[42] Devon Maloney, "Our Obsession With Online Quizzes Comes From Fear, Not Narcissism," *Wired*, March 6, 2014, https://www.wired.com/2014/03/buzzfeed-quizzes/.

John Ashbery's poem "Proust's Questionnaire," first published in *The New Yorker* in 1982 and then in his book *A Wave*, invokes this set of ambivalences. The poem's title invokes a nineteenth-century manifestation of the questionnaire as a means of self-reflection, self-fashioning, and self-expression: the Victorian era "confession book." Comprised of lists of personal questions and fill-in-the-blank spaces designed to prompt disclosures amongst friends, the confession book became a popular aspect of European bourgeoisie sociality. Of the documented confessions that survive, those of 13-year old Marcel Proust in 1886 have had the most vigorous afterlife.[43] Rediscovered in 1924, the so-called "Proust Questionnaire" evolved into a mass media staple in the US, a monthly feature of *Vanity Fair* beginning in 1993 and an inspiration for the talk-show *Inside the Actor's Studio* in 1994.[44] While the specific wording of the questionnaire's items fluctuates from iteration to iteration, the themes are relatively consistent: greatest desires, regrets, and fears, favorite occupations, heroes and heroines, liked and disliked traits in oneself and others. An incredible number of writers, public intellectuals, scientists, and celebrities have responded to queries that, as *Vanity Fair* has put it, supposedly allow "an individual [to reveal] his or her true nature."[45]

For Ashbery, a known recluse and queer man writing "Proust's Questionnaire" at the beginning of the AIDS crisis, we can imagine that revealing the intimate dimensions of life held heightened stakes. [46] On one level, the poem seems to be responding, albeit unconventionally, to

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[43] Evan Kindley, *Questionnaire*, Object Lessons (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016),
[44] Kindley, *Questionnaire*, 18-23.
[45] Vanity Fair, "The Proust Questionnaire," Vanity Fair, accessed May 29, 2018, https://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/2000/01/proust-questionnaire.
[46] Proust is an important figure for Ashbery, who has cited the French author consistently in response to inquiries about his influences and favorite writers. For instance, see John Ashbery, "John Ashbery: By the Book," *The New York Times*, May 7, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/books/review/john-ashbery-by-the-book.html?ref=books

typical confession book questions such as "When and where were you happiest?" "What is your greatest fear," "On what occasion do you lie?" or "How would you like to die?"[47] On another, it is resistant to doing so, less a rote exercise than a meditation on the value of the specific brand of self-reflection the activity entails. The poem begins with a conventional lyric speaker in a contemplative moment:

> I am beginning to wonder
> Whether this alternative to
> Sitting back and doing something quiet
> Is the clever initiative it seemed. It's [48]

Ashbery's "I" is wondering about the value of the particular task at hand. In effect, if we are keeping C. Wright Mills' "Situated Vocabularies" in mind, it is wondering about the motive for a choice between two "alternatives," each of which are only vaguely described. Given the title, we can infer that "this alternative" both points back to the Proust Questionnaire and suggests a reference to writing the poem itself. As is typical of Ashbery, the dimensions of these "alternatives" become increasingly indeterminate following the enjambed line "It seemed. It's". The double reference redefines the reasoning behind the action, and what was once a semblance of "initiative," carried through from one referent to another in the next line, becomes "also relaxation and sunlight branching into / Passionate melancholy, jealousy of something unknown."[49] Soon the scene expands to include another individual, drawing in a distant reader or imagined interviewer through recourse to the poetic convention of second-person address and an unadorned vocabulary of common experience:

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[47] Vanity Fair, "The Proust Questionnaire."
[48] John Ashbery, *A Wave* (New York: The Viking Press, 1985), 50.
[49] Ashbery, *A Wave*, 50.

When the paper comes
And you walk around the block
Wrenching yourself from the lover every five minutes
And it hurts, yet nothing is ever really clean
Or two-faced.[50]

These lines could be anecdotally describing a state of "deepest misery" or an "occasion [on which one] lies," or it could have little to do with the specific questions of the Proust Questionnaire. Either way, they restage the act of wondering and choosing, circling or cycling around a painful oscillation between approach and withdrawal. Instead of articulating a "clean" or "two-faced" choice between (a) and (b), Ashbery toggles between a desire for intimacy and a concern about exposure—perhaps to sexually transmitted disease, perhaps to some kind of publicity, perhaps to romantic attachment. Yet another friction then develops, this time between personal and institutional registers, between an individual and an interrogator we might identify as the Proust Questionnaire.

It's a question of questions, first:
The nuts-and-bolts kind you know you can answer
And the impersonal ones you can answer almost without meaning:
'My greatest regret.' 'What keeps the world from falling down.'
And the results are brilliant:
Someone is summoned to a name, and soon
A roomful of people becomes dense and contoured
And words come out of the wall
To batter the rhythm of generation following on generation.[51]

In this verse paragraph, introduced as "a question of questions," language seems to be coming from everywhere but the confessional speaker with whom we began: from unrooted citations and an ambient roll-call, announced to a crowd as if by loudspeaker, issuing aggressively from the

[50] Ashbery, 50.
[51] Ashbery, 50.

walls of a suffocating space in which history unfolds. The sequence of colons facilitates a kind of "following on," extending and refashioning the "question of questions" and the situational vocabularies it affords. First, it's a question of the mechanisms of impersonal inquiry addressing a generalized "you" whose role in the Victorian salon game is "almost without meaning." Then, it's a question less of answering than regurgitating, indicating a situation that points back to its impersonal origins, whose "nuts-and-bolts" hold up the world. Perhaps this is "what" is most regrettable, or perhaps it's the ensuing "brilliant" situation of naming and knowing—the work of a sociopoetic strategy—that nevertheless feels hollow. The rhyming of "someone" and "summoned" reinforces the sense that people, like words or statistics, are collectively called into being and "contoured" by abstract, external powers. Yet the pattern or "rhythm" does get broken, as the room opens onto a revelatory vision and words spill anew from an "I" now navigating a state of radical disorganization:

> And I see once more how everything
> Must be up to me: here a calamity to be smoothed away
> Like ringlets, there the luck of uncoding
> This singular cipher of primary
> And secondary colors, and the animals
> With us in the ark, happy to be there as it settles
> Into an always more violent sea.[52]

It appears that the wondering with which we began is over, the prolonged "question of questions" answered. But if Ashbery's "I" seems to reach a moment of epiphanic willfullness through "the luck of uncoding / this singular cipher of primary / And secondary colors," he does so at the cost of the rest of a world left to endure conditions that are fully apocalyptic. The uncannily happy ending produced by "this singular cipher" is riven with the tensions implicit in

[52] Ashbery, 50.

sociopoetic acts that simultaneously level and constitute our sense of internal and external relations.[53]

The confession book, the crowded room and nuts-and-bolts of bureaucracy, as well as the question of happiness and the roar of the "violent sea" all reverberate backward to Ashbery's 1966 acclaimed "Lacustrine Cities." The poem first narrates a long view of human civilization, at once mythical and ordinary, "angry" and "forgetful," and "the product of an idea."[54] As we reach the present, a listener or addressee becomes embedded in the narrative, or rather the travails of history become resolved in the figure of an isolated individual: "Then you are left with an idea of yourself / And the feeling of ascending emptiness of the afternoon."[55] Ashbery continues:

> Much of your time has been occupied by creative games
> Until now, but we have all-inclusive plans for you.
> We had thought, for instance, of sending you to the middle of the desert,
>
> To a violent sea, or of having the closeness of the others be air
> To you, pressing you back into a startled dream.[56]

The institutionally organized character of this life, at once stifling and revitalizing, has much in common with the densely packed room of "Proust's Questionnaire." Indexing one crisis of Ashbery's generation, it calls to mind David's Riesman's "other-directed person" in *The Lonely*

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[53] In a review of *A Wave* in *Diacritics*, S. P. Mohanty and Jonathan Monroe write: "As against the popular misconception of Ashbery as a poet obsessed with the solitary Self and its varying fortune, we suggest that the central concern of Ashbery's poetic career can only be defined as the self-world relationships, with an investment in exploring the features of a social voice and identity as they can be available today." S. P. Mohanty and Jonathan Monroe, "John Ashbery and the Articulation of the Social," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 37, https://doi.org/10.2307/464746.

[54] John Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains*, 1st edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 9.

[55] Ashbery, 9.

[56] Ashbery, 9.

Crowd, the self-conscious individual who "seeks to have the character he is supposed to have."[57] As discussed in the previous chapter, Riesman observed that other-directed people desire approval from peer-group members over and above adherence to pre-established social traditions and moral rules, which were rapidly giving way to new global power structures anyway. Ashbery's addressee, too, is adept at navigating his immediate situation with a social landscape by constantly revising the "idea of [him]self." As the poem goes on to prophesize,

> The worst is not over, yet I know
> You will be happy here. Because of the logic
> Of your situation, which is something no climate can outsmart.

These lines summon someone to a flexible alignment of interior and external logics or situational vocabularies, even if it means developing something like a false consciousness that neatly stitches up the disparities between "climate" and personal feelings of satisfaction. What is most striking about putting "Proust Questionnaire" in conversation with "Lacustrine Cities" is an implicit claim that "an idea of [one]self" and forms like questionnaires are interlocking concepts. We might go as far as to say that the idea of a "self" has been culturally reified by surveys as being a *response* to questions rather than a creative, intentional consciousness. "No climate can outsmart" the logic of the situation, we could further say, because the climate has already provided the terms for the situation in which the speaker finds himself.

The consideration of Ashbery and his "question of questions" leads to further routes of inquiry about the ways in which the circulation of surveys have configured the question more generally as a site around which interiority and public-facing persona can be at once constructed, scrambled, and expressed anew. To risk a generalization, the role of the question in twentieth

[57] Riesman et al., *The Lonely Crowd*, 270.

century poetry writ large has expanded beyond its function as a pointed signature of emphasis, speculation, address, reflection, revision or redirection. On the one hand, this registers in a lack of question marks, a phenomenon related to the flexibility of grammatical structure in modernist and post-modernist works. From Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* to Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*, to works by language writers and others working in the anti-official paradigm of the New American Poetry, the absence of punctuation marks is readily apparent. Even so, open any anthology from this era and notice that the question mark is as frequently *replaced* by other punctuation—namely, the period—as it is greeted by blank space. On the other hand, as Thomas Fink has observed in his essay "The Poetry of Questions," the interrogative mode has become a major recursive devise used to inundate, berate and mystify readers with question marks.[58] In both cases, questions are used neither rhetorically nor to provoke a "Confession-book" style account of one's "true" self—and in the case of a sociopoetic leveraging of questions, which mimic the style of some self-report formats, it leaves little space for the scenes of self-constitution we have seen in Ashbery.

One of the most widely read poems composed entirely of questions is Ron Silliman's *Sunset Debris*, written and circulated in the late 1970s and published as part of his longer *The Age of Huts* in 1986. Silliman, like Bernstein, has strong affiliations with language writing. Often programmatic or procedural, Silliman is known for critiquing both lyricism and realism, forms which he tied to bourgeois capitalist politics, by undermining normative grammars and

[58] See Thomas Fink, "The Poetry of Questions," *Jacket*, no. 34 (October 2007), http://jacketmagazine.com/34/fink-questions.shtml. Fink explores work by five poets who have produced text composed entirely of questions: Ron Silliman, Tom Beckett, Steve Benson, Brenda Iijima and Eileen Tabios. While Fink does not draw a link between questionnaires or social science methods and the use of this "odd resource," his discussion of coercive authority and powerlessness, self-doubt and the search for reassurance and dialogue entertains many of the same themes of my inquiry.

destabilizing lyrical voices or personae while remaining grounded in everyday life. In an interview in 1985, Silliman described *Sunset Debris*—and we may be reminded of Ashbery's room here—as "a solid wall of words."[59] By his own account, the poem performs a sort of muzzling, dramatizing the power dynamics or "social contract" between writer and reader in which the former "gets to do all the talking" and the latter is trapped "consuming information" in "an act of submission."[60] "To have read these words," Silliman explains, "is to have had these thoughts, which were not your own."[61] Like the experience of filling out a questionnaire, reading *Sunset Debris* can be violent or violating (Agee) as well as pleasurable or provocative (Friedan's class of alums), or ambivalent (Ashbery).

In an exhausting stream of sentences, *Sunset Debris* asks about general knowledge of the world, the self and other people; parrots administrative or official idioms of inquiry; and explores the function of writing, reading, and the grammatical form of the question. While questions take on innumerable grammatical arrangements, we might map them back onto Mills' argument about vocabularies of motive. Broadly, in terms of content, they target something "inside" an individual, in social or institutional systems, or in language itself. And it is the play between these three spaces of reference and their relationships—causal, concomitant, mutually constitutive, antagonistic, arbitrary—that compel, like C. D. Wright's lists of questions in the previous chapter, further permutations of questioning. We could get a sense of the work's circuitry by delving in at nearly any starting point—I will take, for instance, an early passage that speaks on the cluster of registers I've just mentioned.

Do you have proper identification? Are not the reveries which are interspersed

[59] Ron Silliman, "Interview," interview by Tom Beckett, *The Difficulties* 2, no. 2 (1985): 45.
[60] Silliman, "Interview," 45.
[61] Silliman, 45.

> with the reading a part of its form? Is caution such a bad thing? What if, suddenly, you chose to be another? Is not your life a series of cycles, bordered by the same mistakes over and over? Have you noticed how slowly we approach? Why do you resent affection between your friends? Don't you see that by asking questions you avoid certain forms of statement? Why don't I just tell you? Where is the reptile farm? How many words do you think are 'ordinary?' Why did he suddenly get off the bus?[62]

The addressee is indeed caught in or forced through "a series of cycles" as it is set within a network of objects, identities, definitions, and values. Some of these questions point to a possible answer—we might, for instance, be able to locate a "reptile farm"—while others point rhetorically back onto the text or authorial voice—"Why don't I just tell you?"—and still others to abstract spaces or fanciful scenarios. The poem arrives again and again at the precipice of the prevailing disconnect between material and ethereal insides and outsides even as it lurches towards some temporary foothold. As in the passage above, it is full of interspersals, borders, approaches, avoidances, and betweens. It defamiliarizes otherwise "ordinary" words and activities, like the frequent boarding of and alighting from buses. The experience of "revery" in a submissive state, especially with regard to sexual pleasure, is another recurrent theme that parallels the conflicted moments of identification and constriction produced by questionnaires.

Running throughout the piece is a deep suspicion of declarative grammars and indicative moods: the "forms of statement" we "avoid." Likewise, the attainment of self- or social knowledge is perpetually postponed. "Proper identification" seems elusive as the referents of pronouns and deictics slip and slide around. If we feel momentarily recognized in one of the questions in the passage above, we are quickly forced "to be another" with little choice in the matter. On a given page we might be caught in the rain, on a road trip, a friend of someone

[62] Ron Silliman, "Sunset Debris," ubu editions (2002), 8.

named Joanne, about to have an orgasm, wearing a worn out shoe, afraid of an insecticide called phenothiazine, misunderstood, resentful of a joke, satisfied, or none of the above. We might be meditating on the precarious character of embodiment and the tenuous possibility of solidifying our experience of a moment, object, image, or self: "What time is it? Is it possible to reach center, touch bottom, or is there an impregnable core around it? What about the mornings when, staring into the mirror, there is no sense of recognition? Can you walk on it?"[63] At other times, questions express exasperation or doubt in the face of judgment, as in sentences like "What makes you think you have me figured out?," "How is a sentence true?," or "Don't you feel like a fool?"[64] The two strands of Du Bois' paradox between the calculable and incalculable repeats as truth and mystery, objectivity and subjectivity, authority and amateurism, social group and individual consciousness float around and become tangled up like the sonic duet of "What is a fact? What is affect?"[65]

Such semantic play might focus our attention on the materiality of the textual field over and above its referents, allowing us to get lost in its textures and patterns, if it were not for the persistent return of the second-person pronoun. In other words, reading *Sunset Debris* demands occupying an interminable state of self-reflection about processes like self-fashioning and self-expression without quite making time for them. From the perspective of the language writing movement, as I have mentioned, we could say that the text intensifies and demonstrates a western, late-capitalist, bureaucratic reality in which individual self-expression is akin to ventriloquism, an inevitable regurgitation of institutionally managed meaning. For instance, a passage near the poem's close interrogates the hyphen between self and expression:

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[63] Silliman, "Sunset Debris," 10.
[64] Silliman, 20.
[65] Silliman, 27.

> What is behind your language? Are you your vocabulary or are you your syntax? If we push you, shove you, what will we find? Can you hear what you are thinking under what you are reading? Does it at times drown the reading out?[66]

Silliman's charged "wall of words" illustrates a crisis in the relationship of language to whatever is "behind" it making meaning— writer, reader, historical contexts, disciplinary traditions, marketing campaigns, political slogans—or what Bernstein referred to as the "'most accessible' codes" through which "social forces" demand we filter experience writ large. The power dynamics of this broad situation likewise structure sociological forms of inquiry that rely on the inheritances of value-free science and the authority of the researcher to neutralize the slipperiness of human beings as objects of knowledge. To continue tracking such forms, I will now explore the experiments of sociologists in the business of extracting and interpreting words "not their own" to the end of reshaping the paradigms governing their discipline. The "research poems" I analyze in the next section are sociopoetic texts that make data intimate, challenge empirical, positivist sociological methods, debunk the myth of the researcher as a neutral node through which "affect" becomes distilled into "fact" or data into conclusion, and depart from the conventional use of prose as the medium in which sociological findings are reported.

PART THREE: THE DATA INTIMACIES OF "POETIC INQUIRY"

In the 1970s and 1980s, drawing on postmodern, postpositivist, structuralist, feminist, and other pluralistic discourses, strands of qualitative research began to consolidate into a defined, though multimethod, field of humanistic inquiry. During this "moment of blurred genres," qualitative sociology adopted a plethora of "interpretive genres," from Geertz'

[66] Silliman, 33.

ethnographic strategy of "thick description" to Goffman's dramaturgical approaches to narrative analysis.[67] Of the shifts within and against the quantitative status quo, many explicitly involved a turn towards aesthetic approaches to understanding human activity. Richard H. Brown's 1977 *A Poetic for Sociology* is one example of a treatise that uses a literary analog to navigate the situated, interpretative disposition of social science research. Rather than arguing about whether "knowledge" is located in or generated by the objects, processes, and products of empirical science on the one hand, or of art on the other—binaries we explored in Bernstein's "Questionnaire"—Brown emphasizes that each side of the debate is grounded in its own set of assumptions. Scientism, he notes, is an ideology, and "value-freedom itself has come to provide an ethic for bureaucratic control."[68] Understanding "aesthetic awareness" as an alternative approach that maintains the detached interest of scientific methods, he advocates for a "cognitive aesthetic theory of metaphor" that recognizes its own underlying logics. For Brown, metaphor invites us to seriously imagine counterfactuals, to "transcode the vocabularies of Being." [69] Thinking in terms of metaphors, then, "not only demands that we say 'No' to the organization of experience as it is given to us in pre-ordained categories…it also requires us to rearrange cognition into new forms and associations."[70] As one reviewer put it, his insights would likely "irritate and be dismissed" by most sociologists at the time.[71] However, they both extend earlier

[67] Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Introduction: Entering the Field of Qualitative Research," in *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues* ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1998), 18-19.
[68] Richard Harvey Brown, *A Poetic for Sociology: Toward a Logic of Discovery for the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 16.
[69] Brown, *A Poetic for Sociology*, 48.
[70] Brown, 84.
[71] Arnold Rockman, "A Poetic for Sociology: Toward a Logic of Discovery for the Human Sciences by Richard H. Brown (Review)," *Leonardo* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1979), 164. https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.uchicago.edu/article/598960/pdf.

lines of qualitative thinking about interpretation and prefigure those that would develop over the next several decades.

As I mentioned in my introduction to this chapter, the key interpretive process in survey analysis is called "coding," defined as a "heuristic—a method of discovery—to the meanings of individual sections of data."[72] Like literary critical methods such as "close" and "distant" reading, sociological coding can work at macro or micro scales. In the case of big-project quantitative studies that employ methods of inference discussed in chapter two, coding basically assigns numerical values to variables of different kinds under the guidance of a "codebook" created alongside a questionnaire. Not only ages or incomes but degrees of agreement, "don't knows," and logical inconsistencies must be marked up, tallied, and arranged into patterns by way of complex, usually computer-generated, statistical maneuvers. In qualitative sociology, coding schemes veer towards the linguistic register. Attempting to be maintain the authority of quantitative methods while remaining receptive to the nuance of individuals' responses, they claim to "represent and capture a datum's primary content and essence."[73] The evaluation of open-ended answers and interview transcripts, for instance, requires self-reflexive procedures through which researchers may assign words or phrases to units of data, sometimes called "stanzas," to track patterns as they emerge.[74] In one approach called "Process coding," codes are always words and phrases in the gerund tense (ending in –ING).[75] Reponses in a study of spending habits might be marked up with codes like "Pinching Pennies" "Picking up the bill" "Worrying," and "Withdrawing Money," which are then organized into larger categories like

[72] Johnny Saldaña, "Coding and Analysis Strategies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Patricia Leavy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 584.
[73] Saldaña, "Coding and Analysis Strategies," 585.
[74] Saldaña, 585.
[75] Saldaña, 586.

"Maintaining Balance," "Overspending," "Investing," and so on. "In Vivo Coding" uses nouns instead of verbs, taking its terms directly from the language of an interview participant.[76] "Dramaturgical Coding" writes interviews out like play scripts, and organizes its codes into six overarching categories: objectives, conflicts, tactics, attitudes, emotions, subtexts.[77] "Value Coding" is structured around the "worldview" of participants, indexing their beliefs, attitudes, and values.[78] These are just a few of numerous interpretive systems used in qualitative research to achieve "data intimacy," the goal of which is to not only respect the individuality of respondents, but also to self-reflexively involve the subjectivity of the researcher as she determines the most illuminating or meaningful combinations of data.

A radical version of "data intimacy" manifests in a body of works recently anthologized under the heading of "poetic inquiry" (also referred to as PI). This umbrella term encompasses dozens of coinages: "research poetry," "data poetry," "poetic transcription," "collective poems," "aesthetic social science," and "field poetry," to name a few. Monica Prendergast, one of the editors of the volumes *Poetic Inquiry* (2009) and *Poetic Inquiry II* (2016), usefully lays out some of the formal characteristics and methodological challenges of PI in her essay "'Poem is What?' Poetic Inquiry in Qualitative Social Science Research." Prendergast takes stock of the appearance of research or data-based poems in peer-reviewed social science journals since the 1980s, most of them produced in the twenty-first century; each piece is considered as a serious sociological project that "incorporates poetry in some way as a component of an investigation."[79]

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[76] Saldaña, 591.
[77] Saldaña*,* 595.
[78] Saldaña*,* 594.
[79] Monica Prendergast, "'Poem is What?' Poetic Inquiry in Qualitative Social Science Research," in *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences Monica,* eds. Prendergrast, Carl Leggo, and Pauline Sameshima (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), xxxv.

Even excluding books, performances, dissertations, "Poet's Corner" supplements, and other publication spaces, Prendergast identifies more than 230 works of this kind totaling a word-count of around 215,000.[80] Browsing through the examples that follow, one faces a diverse array of "ways" poetry is incorporated—as a procedure, as a form, as a value system. Prendergast notes PI's ties to modernist practices of citation and assemblage, to found and constraint-based poetry, to poetries of witness, and to "the work of poets across time who have written about themes of social injustice, poverty, war, alienation, and so on"—in other words, poets interested in "social problems."[81] Current practitioners tend to see it at once as a practical means of maximizing the potential yield of a study—it elicits new patterns and understandings—and an ethical project to highlight the subjective realities of researchers and subjects, especially those otherwise constricted by gendered, racialized disciplinary constraints or marginalized by normative social domains and statistic curves —"a young homeless person," "a gay teacher," "a terminal cancer patient," "a refugee." [82]

Laurel Richardson, one of the pioneers of PI and one of its most widely cited advocates, began exploring the potential of "poetic representation" as an alternative form of sociological writing in the early 1990s. Richardson describes PI as a "means for the reconstitution of worlds. It suggests a way out of the numbing and deadening, disaffective, disembodied, schizoid sensibilities characteristic of phallocentric social science."[83] The first female Ph.D. in sociology to graduate from the University of Colorado in 1963, and influenced by feminist-poststructuralist and postmodern theories, she came to see "writing as a method of inquiry" that could foreground

[80] Prendergast, "Poem is What?", xix.
[81] Prendergast, xxiv.
[82] Prendergast, xxiii.
[83] Prendergast, xxv.

the process of research while transforming the experience of those involved. One of Richardson's first efforts to produce "nonalienating sociology" by borrowing from literary methods arose out of her desire "to integrate the poet and the scientist within [her] and to explore the epistemological bases of sociological knowledge."[84] As poet-scientist, she is also an assembler; the language comprising "Louisa May's Story of her Life" (1992), "a transcript masquerading as a poem/a poem masquerading as a transcript," is drawn solely from the statements of one interviewee taking part in a study of unmarried mothers.[85] Seeking to capture Louisa May's style of self-expression, the poem purportedly echoes the patterns of her tone and diction, her rhythms and pauses, her emphases and volumes. Structured by her autobiographical narrative, and reminiscent of the arc of Ashbery's "Lacustrine Cities," it is organized in five chronological sections that move through major life-stages: her origins and the disintegration of her once "stable family"; her departure from home, marriage to and divorce from a "high school sweetheart"; a late-in-life unexpected pregnancy and subsequent contentions between herself and John, the father of her daughter Jody May; the formation of a new set of relations and non-nuclear family routines for which Jody May is the hinge; and a present state of things, the "happiest time of [her] life."[86] While on the one hand intimate, the text is also detached, self-reflexive; it swivels between clipped stanzas aligned to the left and indented, italicized parentheticals that seem to recall the scene of the interview. Rather than a dialogue between researcher and respondent, however, the back-and-forth seems to be between selections from the

[84] Laurel Richardson, *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 135.
[85] Laurel Richardson, "The Consequences of Poetic Representation: Writing the Other, Rewriting the Self," in *Social Research Methods: A Reader* ed. Clive Seale, (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), 127.
[86] Richardson, *Fields of Play,* 131-135.

original transcripts and reflective addenda, palimpsestic remarks from Louisa May bearing witness to her own voiced account as the tapes are played back to her by Richardson. From the first remediated and lineated exchange, the poem wraps up speech in its own reverberations, using slim, simple language.

> The most important thing
> to say is that
> I grew up in the South.
> Being Southern shapes
> aspirations shapes
> what you think you are
> and what you think you're going to be.
>
> (*When I hear myself, my Ladybird*
> *kind of accent on tape. I think. OH Lord,*
> *You're from Tennessee.)*[87]

"The most important thing / to say" establishes coordinates of value—invited by some unknown question, pinned down by some pre-given reasoning—in the vocal medium, only to arrest speech in the first long white space, perhaps an elided part of the transcript, the missing reference of the following "is that." The next lines anchor the constitution of the speaker, an "I" generalized into a more distant "you," at the accidental site of birthplace. And growing up in the South mutates into "Being Southern," which in turn conditions or precipitates self-reflection: "what you think you are." If pre-mandated by forces outside one's control, this "important thing" is not static, but breathing, shaped and reshaped by "aspirations." The sequence of tenses "being," "are," and "going to be" gesture toward change, and the repetition of several terms invites their semantic renegotiation. The aside, or other side of the conversation, more obviously dislodges the centrality of historical context and even speech in determining "what you think you are." For it is

[87] Richardson, "The Consequences of Poetic Representation," 131.

a moment of latent listening that transforms Louisa Mae into a singular, thinking "I" addressing herself by way of endearment—"*my Ladybird"*—and apostrophe—"*OH Lord, / You're from Tennessee*."

How far does hearing oneself speak—self-fashioning from an outside perspective—go in transforming the outcome of inquiry for researcher and subject? We seem to end up in the same place, or at least the same identification of person with place. Indeed, for the large part of Richardson's portrait, Louisa May represents herself in terms of stereotypes and happenstance, passively acted upon by external forces and embodying a sequence of norms. Pivotal transitions such as moving across the country or getting divorced are accompanied by dismissive phrases like "well, one thing that happens," "It was purely chance / that I got a job here / and Robert didn't," and a refrain: "So, that's how that was worked out."[88] Moreover, contingencies and surprises, plans and arrangements become almost analogous, flattened by their recurrent associations with normalcy. A miscarriage and an "increasingly horrendous" first marriage are features of "a normal sort of life" as much as a youth spent "in a very normal sort of way / on a very normal sort of street/ with some very nice middle-class friends."[89] Even the custody agreement Louisa makes with Jody Mae's father, which might be considered unusual—he comes to sleep at her house on the weekends instead of taking Jody Mae—is looped into this framework of "normal circumstances." This soothing gloss on stress and upheaval is punctuated by the poem's third section, in which Louisa May becomes pregnant at age forty-one. Reacting to the unexpected, actors become emotive and decisive, their voices raised by capital letters, their speech distinguished by quotation marks for the first and only time in the text. "Beside himself

[88] Richardson, 131-2.
[89] Richardson, 132.

with fear and anger,"

> awful, rageful, vengeful, horrid,
> Jody May's father said,
> 'Get an Abortion.'
>
> I told him,
> 'I would never marry you.
> I would never marry you
> I would never.
>
> 'I am going to have this child.
> I am going to.
> I am. I am.
>
> Just Go Away!'[90]

Louisa May, through Richardson's assemblage, becomes a rather loud arbitrator of her present and future; her unwavering statements of intent, intensified by anaphora, lead into "I am. I am." and the rejection of the influence of or fusion with another person. In Mills' terms, it is a crisis situation, rather than "a situation which is normal," that provokes this assertion of identity.

At least this is one reading. This text might also be seen as a rather dull, unsophisticated lyric poem oscillating between flashbacks and moments of meditation in tranquility (although Richardson did compose it during a nine-week poetry workshop). From another angle, it may look like deficient sociology, devoid of the basic data a social scientist would expect—the interview subject's age, profession, income, etc.—and lacking explanatory power for social behavior. Yet, at least insofar as it thematizes methodology, "Louisa May" does fall within the remit of Richardson's discipline. Saying, hearing, thinking: these are all stages of sociological inquiry, from interview all the way through to analysis. Read as a sociopoetic project that reveals

[90] Richardson, 133.

the apparatus of its making, the text opens a space for her subject to self-code, to speculate on the significance of her own data—the only question in the text begins the final section is "*(Is this helpful?)*". Louisa May's vocabulary also recodes Richardson's, as data intimacy goes both ways; the sociologist reflects that the phrase "so, that's how that was worked out" became a mantra of sorts she recited when confronting difficulties in everyday life.

More recent works of poetic inquiry take up the major themes and formal traits of Richardson's transcript-poem: the repetition of grammatical elements, indeterminate figurations of time and place, the dilated scene of interviewing, and, most importantly, the privileged voice of the answering subject otherwise lost to quantitative survey analysis. Poetic inquirers frequently justify their use of poetry based on the claim that it can represent the "affective dimensions" of life and "more authentically express human experiences."[91] One author, for instance, cites Mark Strand's assertion that poems "have a voice and the formation of that voice…may be the true occasion for their existence."[92] Another collates "I poems" in which each line has the structure of a first-person statement articulated by a respondent.[93] Prendergast herself suggests a loose organizing schema for PI based on the role of voice. Poems written in *Vox Autobiographia/Autoethnographia* (representing 49% of the samples) are sourced from the notes and findings of the researcher.[94] *Vox Participare* (35%) uses a hybrid, collective voice that includes both the utterances of the researchers and research subjects, who become active

[91] Prendergast, "Poem is What?", xxxvi.
[92] Anne McCrary Sullivan, "On Poetic Inquiry: Concreteness, Voice, Ambiguity, Tension, and Associative Logic," in *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Sciences*, ed. Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo, and Pauline Sameshima (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), 114.
[93] Lori E Koelsch, "The Use of I Poems to Better Understand Complex Subjectivities," in *Poetic Inquiry II - Seeing, Caring, Understanding: Using Poetry as and for Inquiry*, ed. Kathleen T. Galvin and Monica Prendergast (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016), 169–80.
[94] Prendergast, "Poem is What?", xxii.

participants in the conversation.[95] Finally, *Vox Theoria* poems (13%) are "*literature-voiced,*" meaning that they take "poetry and/or inquiry itself" as their topic, engaging with the theoretical discourses of their discipline and often with specific works.[96]

Literary scholars may be quick to challenge this apparent faith in poetry's capacity to enable self-expression, span the "emotional distance" between reader and writer, or convey the plurality and complexity of subjectivity.[97] As referenced in my introduction and previous chapters, the last decades have seen widespread critiques of the valorization of the individual voice implicit in practices of "lyric reading." The sociopoetic strategies I have examined so far as well as contemporary critical "sociological turns" in literary studies are motivated by their sense of the limits of just this humanist paradigm. However, the particular role of voice in PI may help resolve the "shame" that, for instance, critic Gillian White has observed in correspondence with the kind of social reading practices, and their corresponding ethics, associated with the lyric. "What can we make of poetry if we try to unshame it," she asks, "engaging (new?un-? something other than anti-) lyric readings of it?"[98] My readings of Richardson's research poem and two works to come understand PI to be offering a solution to this problem. For these texts, "voice" does not mean "lyric," since the expressions they convey are first of all, not a meditative individual voice being overheard, but a construct of voice or voices drawn from real research data that moreover conceives of itself *as research*. The following examples of *Vox Participare*, I take it, use sociopoetics as a way to interpret and remediate individual and collective voices as

[95] Prendergast, xxii.
[96] Prendergast, xxii.
[97] Kathleen T. Galvin and Monica Prendergast, eds., *Poetic Inquiry II - Seeing, Caring, Understanding: Using Poetry as and for Inquiry* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016), 121, 128, 169.
[98] Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 7.

well as obtain sociological knowledge. As with Richardson, they demonstrate an awareness of language's expressive failures and its utility as a strategy that bears on "matters of welfare."

The first of these is excerpted from Pauline Sameshima and Roxanne Vandermause's *Climbing the Ladder with Gabriel* (2009), a study grounded in extensive interviews with a methamphetamine addict and single mom assigned the pseudonym "Gabriel." I approach it by way of contrast to a quantitative study published in the same year: the 2009 edition of the annual *National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (NSDUH), sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The survey, which collects data from around 70,000 people aged twelve and up, is conducted through computer-assessed personal interviews in the "dwelling unit" of participants after they have agreed to take part and a human interviewer has determined their eligibility. The computerized questionnaire, which takes about an hour to complete, asks whether or not participants have ever used certain drugs, and at what "recency" over periods of thirty days, twelve months, and lifetime. Interviewers initiate the session by reading verbatim a script that describes the study and incentivizes participation. At one point, it provides a statement at once telling and banal: "You will represent over 4,500 other people who are similar to you. You may choose not to take part in this study, but no one else can take your place. We will pay you $30 when you finish the interview."[99] The co-existence of two claims in this pre-amble—"you will represent…people who are similar to you" and "no one else can take your place"—is an apt consolidation of the problems I have been tracking through this dissertation as a whole.[100] In this particular case, a publicly available 1212 page codebook elaborates on the way this data, including inconsistencies, hesitations, and refusals, will be

[99] Substance Abuse & Mental Health Data Archive (object name file0809ck, p. 90; accessed August 8, 2019), https://datafiles.samhsa.gov/info/nsduh-rdas-codebooks-nid17216.
[100] Substance Abuse & Mental Health Data Archive.

processed. The following figure is a sample codebook entry regarding a question on methamphetamine use; codes are designated on the left while the two columns on the right report frequency—the number of people who chose a given answer—and what percent of the sample population these people represent.

Have you ever, even once, used Methamphetamine, Desoxyn, or Methedrine that was not prescribed for you or that you took only for the experience or feeling it caused? Methamphetamine is also known as crank, crystal, ice, or speed.

NOTE: This variable incorporates the value from a probe question that was asked when the respondent answered REFUSED to this question.

METHDES Len : 2 EVER USED METHAMPHETAMINE, DESOXYN, OR METHEDRINE

	Freq	Pct
1 = Yes		
2 = No		
3 = Yes LOGICALLY ASSIGNED		
81 = NEVER USED STIMULANTS Logically assigned		
85 = BAD DATA Logically assigned		
91 = NEVER USED STIMULANTS		
94 = DON'T KNOW		
97 = REFUSED		
98 = BLANK (NO ANSWER)		

[101]

As we can see, codes exist not only for documenting how many responses came from the questionnaire itself, but also for automated processing in which the computer carries over previous responses, catches inconsistences, and performs other coordinating measures. For our purposes, I want to stress three things about this excerpt that highlight the friction between institution and individual vocabularies: the wording of the question, especially the phrase "for the experience or feeling it caused"; the limited domain of choices that includes "Yes," "No," and "NEVER USED"; and the classifications like "BAD DATA Logically assigned," "LEGITIMATE SKIP," "DON'T KNOW" and "REFUSED." While, firstly, the phrasing of the question implies that desire for an "experience or feeling" is a motivation for drug use, the

[101] Substance Abuse & Mental Health Data Archive.

available answers relegate the complex experience of addiction or even casual use into reductive categories. So, secondly, there is no room for the feelings or misunderstandings that a question might bring up for a respondent, feelings that may lead to problems like "BAD DATA." This third category of codes deals directly with the very tensions between questionnaire and respondent that sociopoetics, including many works of PI, seeks to name and possibly resolve. Of particular interest are the codes that document the automated assessment of whether the respondent is adhering to the instructions. "BAD DATA" indicates an irruption or mistake, an answer that may be untruthful or simply accidental, that the computer recognizes and "logically assign[s]" based on the answers to previous questions. Perhaps, in Silliman's words, they "suddenly [chose] to be another," or "what [they] were thinking…drown[ed] the reading out." It is just at such a moment, in which the incalculable intervenes in a calculation, that sociopoetics may be offered as a strategy to do more than merely document the issue.

In "Poetic Inquiry to Feel," Sameshima, Vandermause, and other members of their team dwell in the "logical inconsistencies" of Gabriel's timelines, making illegitimate skips—in chronology, lineation, syntax—as a methodological precedent. Rather than using a "pre-planned hypothesis design" and presenting findings in a linear narrative, the researchers foreground the provisional, processual, and personal dimensions of sociological investigation by asking "*What does it mean to experience methamphetamine addiction?* [and] *What does it mean to recover?*"[102] Acknowledging that variables like drug use frequency or relapse have no discrete, ascertainable relationship to roomy concepts like "meaning" and "experience," the researchers pursue a method called "Parallaxic Praxis," in which lines of thinking are conceived of as a

[102] Pauline Sameshima et al., *Climbing the Ladder with Gabriel - Poetic Inquiry of a Methamphetamine Addict in Recovery*, (Boston: Sense Publishers, 2009), 4.

series of interlocking circles that may lead into one another, shift direction, and loop around towards yet another intersection.

"*Transcript 1:1*-85 […] Starting to Sell," in the manner of Richardson's "Louisa May," is comprised solely of Gabriel's utterances during interviews. Its title foregrounds its mediated character, identifying the text as a transcribed version of a previous event. "Starting to sell," as a gerund phrase, is reminiscent of a "process code," and further frames the poem as a compilation of quotations that exemplify a behavioral trend. Aligned at the right of the page, nearly devoid of punctuation, it charts the trajectory of Gabriel's addiction unevenly, as if it were reluctant to pinpoint causal relationships or reach conclusions. The opening scene in which Gabriel visits Jake, her sometime lover and perhaps the father of her children, seems to have little to do with drug use; "hopefully he'd take them," she remembers thinking, "on Christmas."[103] Instead, "he went out with his girl / and left us in the apartment / with no fridge, nothing to eat…he never cared."[104] Faced with this data, we may think we learn something of the circumstances that can precipitate addiction or drug dealing: homelessness, hunger, abandonment, the unrelenting responsibilities of single parenthood. Only in the fourth stanza does Gabriel mention her first use of "*crank"* in a flashback to a scene of asking six months prior.

Sophie asked if I wanted *crank*
I didn't know what it was
but I needed something

it felt so good
only now and again
when I wanted to
not like I was addicted

[103] Pauline Sameshima and Roxanna Vandermause, "Methamphetamine Addiction and Recovery," in *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences*, ed. Monica Prendergrast et al (Boston: Sense Publishers, 2009), 275.
[104] Sameshima and Vandermause, "Addition and Recovery," 275.

kept me up at night
so I didn't have to
find a place to sleep
I'd take the kids places to sleep
and take off [105]

Much like the gerund tense of verbs in "process codes" indicates ongoingness or suspension, Gabriel's account is spatially as well as temporally unfixed, located in unnamed "place/places," set "only now and again / when." The drug, at first unknown to Gabriel, is figured as more of a feeling of need rather than a substance, a need accentuated by the missing syntactical anchors that could complete enjambed phrases: "when I wanted to [do it]," "not like I was addicted [to it]," "[it] kept me up at night." The only other two uses of "it" in the rest of the poem occur in the next two stanzas, as Gabriel remembers "I could sell better than the people who / were doing it // not like I was pushing it on anyone."[106] These instances of "it" conflate dealing and using, refusing to make distinctions between drug-related activities or pinpoint recency, insisting on being bad data. Later, in "*Transcript 4:1-36* […] Jail," dealing seems to represent yet another situation. The transcript selections focus on cycles of incarceration, release, recovery and relapse over an ambiguous time period, as in the lines "Nine months after/ I turned myself in / because I thought // it was time to start dealing / with my court issues."[107] If we think Gabriel is back to selling meth, the enjambment of "dealing" makes us reconsider the term as a reference to responsible, law-abiding action. Gabriel's "turning herself in" can also be a turn into herself, an act of self-reflection and a decision to restructure her behavioral patterns.

[105] Sameshima and Vandermause, 276.
[106] Sameshima and Vandermause, 276.
[107] Sameshima and Vandermause, 277.

Denser and more concrete than the poems about Gabriel, my next example speaks to and erupts from similar trends. "'Can you imagine….What if Women were Sentenced to Education?': Women Speaking Out Inside the Gate" comes out of yet another study of patterns of drug use and incarceration. This work of *Vox Particapare* is voiced by multiple individuals—its authorship is credited to Ann, Danita, Devon, Julie, Lynn, and Shelley. It opens:

> When they crack the gate—
> You're out you got a bus ticket
> Back to where you started
>
> *This system of Crime and Punishment is obviously not working. We need to educate the country, help people see that the system is archaic, locked up (in awareness). This system has to change: we need to get rid of some of the guards, slim down the prison population, provide resources outside. We need to be dealing with the problems on the street*.
>
> I'm doing time,
> I need positive things in here to do on the outs
> Negative talk, shit talk like that,
> You're stuck in the same place
>
> This is going to be a long process, ma'am [108]

The poem portrays two perspectives on the productivity of incarceration by speaking in two languages: an institutional language of public officials and the idiomatic language used within the prison system itself. The stuckness of "doing time," the cyclical nature of "Crime and Punishment," the twinning of addiction and institutionalization—crack as a gateway drug and way to jail, cracking the gate as the way back out—and the presence of unfulfilled needs at the level of individual and system all resonate with Gabriel's story. But instead of looking out from a single pair of eyes, we are drawn by multiple pronouns into a kaleidoscopic lens. The collective

[108] Ann et al., "Can You Imagine…," in *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences*, ed. Monica Prendergrast et al (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), 301.

imperative "We need to be dealing with the problems on the street," for example, bundles the perspectives of policy-makers or law-enforcers and those of users pressed into drug dealing as a way to ameliorate their own "problems on the street." Elsewhere, "dealing" corresponds with questions about the relation between social behavior, self-knowledge, and the impoverished access to forms of living, expressing, and coping felt by study participants.

> My pipe is my way of dealing with things
>
> Can you ever imagine another way?
> It's the only way I know
> This is what I do this is what I know …
>
> We are the voice because we are living it.[109]

The "pipe" is at once a device for getting high, a musical instrument, and a set of vocal chords—the means of both "living it" and talking about it. But pipes are also associated with smoking crank and with "negative talk, shit talk"; the found language of the poem does not merely reproduce the assumption that voice or song can nurture and harness subjectivity in a way that quantitative analysis cannot and poetry can. The codification of voice in these works of PI, to recall Gillian White's question, is neither lyric or anti-lyric. The authenticity of the choral pronouncements above is born out not in "imagining" but in dealing and doing, procuring knowledge for navigating situations of everyday life, not by choice but discipline, addiction, or other necessities.

PART FOUR: THE SURVEY DISMEMBERED

In my epigraph, British-Indian poet Bhanu Kapil offers yet another perspective on the

[109] Ann et al., "Can You Imagine…," 302.

question, one that speaks to the transformative encounter that, as I show in my analysis of works of PI above, sociopoetics can play on survey methods to produce. For reference, the quotation follows:

> What is a question? Literally, it's a way of gathering information but not of processing it. As a mode of enquiry that's, linguistically, founded on doubt, on not having the words for what passed between you and another person at the end of a relationship, the question seals space. That tiny, bounded pocket of something that is also space is so free.[110]

Kapil frames the question as a more utopic or promising echo of Agee's "Conversation in a Lobby," contemplating the generative, even revelatory role of inquiry in the creation of a "lifeworld…which arises as soon as the question is asked."[111] She conceives of the interrogative as the opening of a space that is at once "founded on doubt," "bounded" and "free," at least in the moment before it is answered. And the answering, a rupture of the space's "membrane," can refigure the relationship between "a body at the limits of its being" with an environment, an outside. If situations of inquiring can generate an encounter with the unsayable, a moment of "not having the words for what passed between you and another person at the end of a relationship," how can one process the information gathered by a question in a way that keeps this space alive?

Kapil engages frequently with sociological modes of inquiry throughout her oeuvre, using found texts and oral histories and doing her own research by, for instance, traveling to real sites at which the events and stories she remediates have actually occurred. Her poems are also

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[110] Bhanu Kapil, "The Umwelt of the Question: Notes on Territory and Desire," in *Jean Valentine: This-World Company*, ed. Kazim Ali and John Hoppenthaler (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2012), 233. Kapil's meditation on the question is in regard to Jean Valentine's poem "From the Questions of Bhanu Kapil," which is structured as a response to a twelve-item questionnaire that Kapil designed and implemented for *Vertical Interrogation*.
[111] Kapil, "The Umwelt of the Question," 233.

"projects" that regularly engender encounters with the experience of erased or obliterated moments of violence against minorities and women, drawing on and reimagining the archives of white, partriarchal institutions and regimes of power. In the case of Kapil's 2001 *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*, the project becomes a matter of synthesizing or, in the context of previous readings, doing a version of coding. Her book-length poem adopts survey methods—by then, long normalized as equipment for social and self-knowledge—as a poetic device at all stages of research and composition to produce a space for common but underrepresented narratives. [112]

The language in the poem is derived, Kapil tells us in a brief methodological introduction, from the responses of Indian and Anglo-Indian women, herself included, that she gathered over the course of four years of residing and traveling in India, the UK, and the US. She abstains from the real-time procedures of interviewing, providing a private room in which her subjects can write at open-ended leisure. The text proper begins with "Twelve questions," the wording of which invites a highly unrestricted range of reply. They are worth quoting in full:

1) Who are you and whom do you love?
2) Where did you come from / how did you arrive?
3) How will you begin?
4) How will you live now?
5) What is the shape of your body?
6) Who was responsible for the suffering of your mother?
7) What do you remember about the earth?
8) What are the consequences of silence?

[112] "Bhanu Kapil by Katherine Sanders," BOMB Magazine, September 2011, accessed August 26, 2017, http://bombmagazine.org/article/6073/bhanu-kapil. As Kapil recalls in a 2011 interview, *Vertical Interrogation* emerged out of the mock-surveys which she and her friends conducted outside popular tourist destinations like Buckingham Palace. Approaching young men and claiming to be students at the University of London, clipboard in hand, they would inquire: "Could we ask you a few questions? Great. Question 1: What is your ideal woman? Could you describe her? Do you think rapists should be castrated?"

9) Tell me what you know about dismemberment.
10) Describe a morning you woke without fear.
11) How will you / have you prepare(d) for your death?
12) And what would you say if you could?[113]

The subsequent poems seem only haphazardly organized by the survey from which they spring; numbered 1-98, they are irregularly headed by one, or occasionally two, of the twelve questions. At first glance, beyond its foundation in a questionnaire, *Vertical Interrogation* seems to engage little with sociological method or language. At a basic level it makes sense that the abstract objects of inquiry above—love, death, fear, beginning, arriving, living, suffering—and the intimate disclosures they invite seem ill-suited to the rubrics of sociological methods. Certainly, the wording of questions is ambiguous enough to evoke an unruly range of respondent interpretations.

Yet, in an initially disorienting and fissured text, the recurring language of the questionnaire does important work to create a shared locutionary space for researcher, respondent, and reader. The mechanics of inquiry are continually reproduced and defamiliarized in an attempt to contour the sealed space of the question and the textures of its membrane. The very first poem in the sequence, WHAT IS THE SHAPE OF YOUR BODY borrows formal elements from questionnaires and from some private or obscure interior:

Sometimes in the spaces, there is fear. Choose one:
1. The body of a woman, how she moves through the day.
2. Inside her: lolling oblongs, a little runny.
3. As seen through the mosquito net.
4. The translucencies of Sigmar Polke.
5. I don't know anything.[114]

[113] Bhanu Kapil, *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers,* (Berkeley, Calif.: Kelsey Street Press, 2001), 9.
[114] Kapil, 11.

Aside from the last, these shorthand phrases or snippets of thought seem themselves to issue from between the lines of standard questionnaire multiple-choice alternatives. Associative, grammatically un-parallel, they peek into the experience of fear as 1) embodied, 2) private sensation, 3) veiled yet perceptible, 4) abstracted in the work of a specific visual artist, and 5) unknowable. The structure of the questionnaire form, poetic imagery, and sonic echoes like "as seen through" and "translucencies" share the function of keeping these heterogenous phrases from dispersing. That is to say, the "Shape of Your Body" is articulated—voiced as well as hinged—by the bundle of subjective voices coded through a questionnaire. We might also see this passage as marking not a series of alternatives but a progression from a legitimate attempt to first answer the question by pointing at "The body of a woman," then by moving through a series of increasingly obscure gestures that lead to the conclusion "I don't know anything." Like Hughes "Johannesburg Mines," it suggests an air of defeatism. But we are only at the first poem and, also like Hughes, Kapil hesitantly but insistently tracks—or codes—and refines patterns in her data as she encounters unpredictable or inarticulable elements. In "67. WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SUFFERING OF YOUR MOTHER?," for instance, Kapil redefines her research question: "The subject is not the modern era, or the era we are living in now. The subject is not the metamorphosis of migrants, or the theory of limits, or the practice of seeing further into paintings. The subject is the human torso. Its dismemberment."[115]

Dismemberment is a useful frame to think about the text's many edges and distances—of and between genres, individuals and collectives, exoskeletons and fleshy interiors, thought and speech. The writing, like the body, is dismembered or always at risk of dismemberment; it is

[115] Kapil, 79.

unofficial, personal, fragmented, full of drafting notebooks, unfinished sentences, ellipses, marginal notes, and parenthetical asides. We glimpse the collective, collected "I" of the poem late at night, struggling to describe dreams of severed hands, wrist sockets that feel "queasily, potentially, separable from the surrounding flesh," and the sensations of leaking bodily fluids from various orifices or wounds.[116] Particular repeated images and terms stitch the poem together, keeping its torso from dissolving. And while we might call these motifs or refrains, we might also imagine them as the common elements in survey responses from which codes emerge: the red of flowers, trees, fish, of skies and wine, socks and silk ribbons, of palms, nails and fingertips, of rubies, and of blood, especially vaginal and menstrual bleeding; the blue of predawn, "iridescent glasses," and the dress of a woman struck dead by lightning; and the green of forests and "handfuls of monsoon frogs," of hands and sage. Particular body parts and bones, milk and water, smells and sensations all serve as heuristics for discovering patterns in the responses of the text and the shared recollections of real people who exist "between whole numbers."[117] The difficulty of doing so, a difficulty shared by any project to make the tangible and intangible social world apprehensible, recurs in a phrase that has a place in any sociological codebook: "I don't know." For example, 22. DESCRIBE A MORNING YOU WOKE WITHOUT FEAR begins "I don't know how to measure this," and the first line of "28. WHERE DID YOU COME FROM / HOW DID YOU ARRIVE? is "I don't know how this corresponds to the world."[118] In "49: WHO ARE YOU AND WHOM DO YOU LOVE?" Kapil's speaker, imagining the distance between the bodies of she and her loved ones, admits "I have a few

[116] Kapil*,* 63.
[117] Kapil, 83.
[118] Kapil*,* 34, 40.

questions to ask, but I do not know how to break the growing silence."[119]

As we progress through the poem, first-person statements appear to coalesce around an individual character, and a narrative arc crystallizes around the circumstances of inquiry, of "not having the words for what passed between you and another person at the end of a relationship." An unfolding romantic love story, fraught by gendered power imbalances, tracks closely to a story about the gendered politics of literary—and, on my reading—sociological writing. From the outset of the work, a collective "he" is looking over the shoulder of, or being fed by, or sexually penetrating, or marking up the manuscripts of a collective female "I." "He is always with me," Kapil discloses, "These are the scraps."[120] "He" is a lover as well as a series of lovers, at turns violent, careless, and occasionally tender. He is a series of husbands, a father, the father of a friend, a boss who brings his daughter to work, a bicycle mechanic, a theorist, a writer, Whitman, Fellini, Monet, and Beethoven. He appears as an overbearing presence as well as an absence, a placeholder for longing and distance, and a constant source of agitation for the burgeoning writing practices of Kapil's evolving speaker. The racialized, sexualized female body and writing practices are conflated or linked, especially insofar as they are jeopardized by male presences, as in 14. DESCRIBE A MORNING YOU WOKE WITHOUT FEAR: "he has pressed closer; nuzzles his face against my knee. Rubs his forehead against the bone. I must live by these sentences. Writing is dangerous…I am bleeding heavily…and come upstairs, and make a fire, and write."[121] The attempt to "begin"—used in connection with writing but also in figurative senses—is one of the most prevalent codes. It signifies a need whose fulfillment is continually rebuffed or held off, often by "his" editorial interventions in the margins: "*You are always*

[119] Kapil, 61.
[120] Kapil, 13.
[121] Kapil, 26.

pretending," *"You exaggerate.*"[122] As the sequence progresses, it is almost as if two competing coding schemes emerge, the one "always there" and the other floundering "the scraps." In a much later recurrence of the question "WHAT IS THE SHAPE OF YOUR BODY?" in poem seventy-five, a masculine physical form and vocabulary, rational and definitive, interrupts the provisional, ongoing project of the poem:

> Perhaps I have not been making the body of a woman, but the body of
>
> *Ergo*: *The man's body constitutes the negative space that is ostensibly generated by the excision of* —what?—*the woman's*—I beg your pardon?—*throat box.*[123]

The voice of "Ergo" concludes rather than inquires, though on the poem's account his logic is off. For this staging of embodied self-expression treats voice as singular, as if to speak or write requires jostling for a lone microphone; as Kapil declares near the end of the poem sequence, "I am not a box."[124] The remediations of *Vertical Interrogation* reframe expression, then, as a collective recognition of the fragility of the singular—not *the "woman"* but "the body of a woman"—animating the "lifeworld" of the question.

In summary, Kapil's sociopoetics names embodied situations of precarity and violence alongside the difficulty of stitching together a heterogenous persona, of speaking as and with her respondents. Like C. D. Wright's *One Big Self*, she is interested in the problem of being in relation—of expressing without excising—and in doing so evading typifying codifications like "man" or "woman" as well as the structures of unequal authority implicit within those gendered

[122] Kapil*,* 80, 69.
[123] Kapil, 87.
[124] Kapil*,* 105.

designations. And her circumlocutions in response to the book's twelve interrogating questions are concomitant with survival, as we learn in the last sentence: "I do not think I will die today."[125] Yet, the announcement "I am not a box," which affirms a further resistance to the restriction of a subject's opinions, beliefs, or feelings by a survey's check-box, remains only tenuously answered by a dismembered form of embodiment. The fourth and final chapter, to which I now turn, probes the borders and bounds of containment that demarcate individuals, social and ethnic groups, nations, and disciplines through the lens of Richard Wright.

[125] Kapil, 111.

CHAPTER FOUR
CASE/PROBLEM

> "There is pamphleteering; there is inquiry. In so far as an age is bent, a writer established equilibrium by leaning (leaning either as his age leans, or in the direction opposite to his age)—and this we might call 'pamphleteering.' A writer will also desire to develop an equilibrium of his own, regardless of external resistances—and this we might call "inquiry.'"
>
> — Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 1931

In the foregoing chapters, I have constructed an archive, an exhibition aiming to show the capaciousness of sociopoetics across genres, disciplines, and decades while showcasing its particularities. Whether navigating situations created by methods of typification, statistical enumeration and inference, or surveying—and these are not exhaustive categories—I have been arguing that sociopoetics animates new connections, enabling us to discern otherwise unnoticed patterns, lineages, responses, inheritances, and innovations in literary, cultural, and interdisciplinary histories. As a strategy for writing with an active orientation to the world in which it is produced, it confronts an equally diverse range of social problems: incongruities between conditions and desired actions. Many of these are lived, material inequalities structured along the lines of class, race, and gender that leave humans to suffer the conditions of poverty, exploitative labor, incarceration, addiction, and other afflictions. The more abstract problems sociopoetics explores revolve around disciplinary practices of inquiry, authority, representation, interpretation, and the ways that we know and express ourselves as beings constantly in relation with each other, our institutions, and our knowledge paradigms.

The problem of singularity and generalization–of how to describe or understand the phenomenon of an "individual" in a "society"—is chief among these, and it is a problem that is

reproduced in the frameworks through which sociologists, artists, and literary critics all approach their respective objects. The quandary appears in quantitative sociology, for instance, in the effort to generalize scientific conclusions from data extracted from sample populations that survey researchers call a "universe." For literary writers and humanist scholars it often arises in debates about the value of approaches that emphasize exemplarity—close reading, the impulse to particularize, and the search for singularities that "unsettle dominant systems and structures."[1] My own methods have cycled between sustained, formal readings at a granular scale and the consideration of broader, historical and cultural contexts, in part because sociopoetics invites and even requires such flexible attention. As I mentioned in my introduction, I draw in part from C. Wright Mills' "sociological imagination," a model of inquiry that has "the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self…from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry."[2] In doing so I join critics reacting to what Caroline Levine has called "a *moralizing of scale*—an insistence that only the detailed and the local can yield ethical, valuable knowledge."[3] What gets lost in focusing on singularity? A rejoinder: what falls away when we zoom out?

In this final chapter, which also acts as an epilogue, I propose that the sociopoetic strategy can help rectify tensions between micro- and macro-level heuristics precisely because the problem of singularity, inextricably tied to "the most intimate features of the human self," is the most enduring problem that it faces. The sociological half of my central term can offer illuminating perspectives to literary critics on this matter, for the human self has remained both a

[1] Caroline Levine, "Model Thinking: Generalization, Political Form, and the Common Good," *New Literary History* 48, no. 4 (2017): 635.
[2] Mills*, The Sociological Imagination*, *7.*
[3] Levine, "Model Thinking," 635.

zone of relative obscurity and a methodological source of error in the long history of the social sciences. C. Wright Mills, remember, saw the "sociological imagination" as a way to bridge "biography" and "history." For Emile Durkheim in 1895, defining the objects of sociology meant discerning that "which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations" and "the consciousness of each individual" for which it manifests.[4] In 1902 Du Bois registered that individual conscious could not be so easily neutralized, summing up the situation as a paradox of two incompatible premises: "1) The evident rhythm of human action; [and] 2) The evident incalculability in human action."[5] And while Robert Lynd worried in 1939 that sociologists had "lost 'the person' below their horizon, as they move along busily ploughing their respective research furrows," I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation that evolving sociological methods have consistently tried to tackle the problem of "the person."[6] As Andrew Abbott put it in his 2016 *Processual Sociology,* because universalizing "ends up…ignoring one of the defining aspects of human experience—being a particular someone, somewhere, sometime…we must create forms of unified practice that simultaneously pursue both universal and particular understandings, subject to the limits each places on the other."[7] The kind of solutions or negotiations that sociopoetics works through with regard to the relationship between the particular and the general can be a model for social scientists and literary critics fascinated and aggravated by the narrowness of exemplarity and the reductiveness of generalization.

[4] Emile Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method*, 2nd printing edition (New York: Free Press, 1982), 59, 54.
[5] Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant," 41.
[6] Lynd, *Knowledge for What?,* 11.
[7] Andrew Abbott, *Processual Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 278, 280.

As a means of complementing the broad scope of previous chapters and of revisiting the strands of sociopoetics in the context of a single authorial source, I will conclude by performing a "case study." The case study is an agreed-upon structure for knowledge- making across all kinds of research practices, one through which we distill meaning from the ether of perceptible and imaginable information. As Lauren Berlant writes in her introduction to a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* "On the Case," "The case represents a problem-event that has animated some kind of judgment…it expresses a relation of expertise to a desire for shared knowledge [that] points to something bigger, too, an offering of an account of the event and of the world."[8] As an interdisciplinary instrument, the case study is used to determine whether its object can "bear the weight of an explanation worthy of attending to and taking a lesson from" or not, and if not, whether it might "incite an opening, an altered way of feeling things out."[9] It is "always normative" but also, as an "enigma" distinctive enough to attract our attention, it is "always a perturbation in the normative."[10] In other words, it has something to say to Du Bois' paradox of rhythms and anomalies and the other challenges to sociology and literature outlined above. In an effort to "point to something bigger" I will turn to the case of a writer preoccupied by material social problems and caught up in the struggle between what he frequently called "personality" and "environment": Richard Wright.

I am drawn to Wright for three primary reasons, which are related insofar as sociopoetics can help us redefine what we already know about this canonical figure and about the problem of the case. First, his use of sociological methods and his friendships and collaborative professional

[8] Lauren Berlant, "On the Case," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2007), 663.
[9] Berlant, "On the Case," 666.
[10] Berlant, 670. For a longer treatment of case studies in literary history, see Simon Goldhill, "The Limits of the Case Study: Exemplarity and the Reception of Classical Literature," *New Literary History* 48, no. 3 (2017): 415–35, https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2017.0023.

relationships with sociologists like Louis Wirth, Franklin Frazier, Horace Cayton, St. Clair Drake, and Gunnar Myrdal are already well established.[11] Rather than recite the extensive remarks of biographers and critics, I try to sketch an account that makes existing ones cohere around the problem of the singular—as type, as lyric voice, as individual in relation. Sociopoetics explores such historical and intellectual connections as more than just disciplinary borrowings, especially in the contexts of changing historical, political and disciplinary conditions. Second, Wright's dedication to ameliorate racial inequality and antiblackness both in America and on the global stage has made his work a contested site of "protest writing" that flattens, as James Baldwin put it in his famous essay, the "resolutely indefinable, unpredictable" character of felt experience.[12] To understand Wright's work through the lens of a sociopoetic strategy is to add an alternative to binary categories like "autonomous" and "committed" literature that continue to spark critical debates. Finally, the tension between the singular and general that haunts the case study is also constantly at stake in Wright's work in explicit ways that are bound up in the currents of social scientific thought of which he partook. He repeatedly credits sociology as having shaped his views on the relationship between the self and society, individual and collective, or "personality" and "environment." In what follows, I will use this case study to first briefly respond to the first two concerns above by examining Wright's discursive claims about the function of sociology in his work**.** Attending to Wright's navigation

[11] Wright first came into direct contact with Chicago Sociology through Louis Wirth, a German, Jewish scholar and the spouse Mary Wirth, the social worker who got him a position at the Michael Reese Hospital working as an orderly in 1933. Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 68, 81.
[12] James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 15.

of personal and abstract registers in historical context and on the basis of his own articulations of black experience**,** I will then track how sociopoetics plays out in three of his works.

PART ONE: WRIGHT'S "SWINGING PENDULUM"

Wright's interest in sociology as a means of illuminating structural, shared problems is evident in his account of the gestation and composition of his most acclaimed book, *Native Son,* published as an introduction to the novel in 1940. In "How Bigger was Born," Wright narrates his development of the novel's black protagonist, Bigger Thomas, "a product of a dislocated society" and a psychological and material victim of the conditions of Chicago's Black Belt.[13] In the plot of the story, Bigger is driven by a history of racialized oppression, paranoia, and suppressed rage to accidentally smother the daughter of his white employer, and, in the midst of a desperate cover up and mounting terror at being caught, also kills his girlfriend; Bigger is eventually found, tried, and sentenced to the electric chair.[14] Wright emphasizes that although the narrative is focalized through "one point of view: Bigger's," as the character's name suggests, he was conceived as representative, symptomatic, one of many "variations in the Bigger Thomas pattern."[15] Wright explains his protagonist's multiplicity first by way of remembered encounters with several "Biggers" in real life, sequentially described by appending the numbers one through five to their names.[16] At the same time that he is a series of individuals, Bigger supersedes a litany of cases; he is almost a conflation of person and environment, at once a "distinct type," "a snarl of many realities [who] had in him many levels of life" and "a hot and whirling vortex of

[13] Richard Wright, "How Bigger was Born," *Native Son* (Harper Collins ebooks, 2009), 446
[14] Placeholder for note about defense & narrative about communist politics and crime as a result of environment.
[15] Wright, "How Bigger was Born," 459, 437.
[16] Wright, 435-6.

undisciplined and unchannelized impulses."[17] With frequent recourse to a sociological idiom evident in phrases like "the results of these observations" or "I saw data of a surprising nature," Wright also tracks the evolution of Bigger in his mind through impressions gleaned from western literature, the history of slavery and post-Civil War America, and the rise of fascism and socialist labor movements.[18] Together, these "items of knowledge" led Wright to arrive at "the problem of what will happen to Bigger."[19] "Why should I not," he asks, "like a scientist in a laboratory, use my imagination and invent test-tube situations, place Bigger in them…[and] work out in fictional form an emotional statement and resolution of this problem?"[20] The science referenced here is specifically that of Chicago School Sociology; as Wright notes in his preface to Cayton and Drake's *Black Metropolis*, the "huge mountains of fact [about urban Negro life] piled up" by men like Robert Park, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth provided him with the "quota of inspiration necessary" for the composition of all his major work to date.[21] Using this same science, Wright procured "a pair of spectacles whose power was that of an x-ray enabling [him] to see deeper into the lives of men," and whose perspective catalyzed "the pivot of [his] life": the realization that Bigger was white as well as black.[22] To see "deeply," on this account, is also to see widely. For here the bird's-eye view that we have seen excavated by *Middletown*, Auden's Bureau of Statistics, and other works is, moreover, proposed as an instrument to apprehend the "deep" expanses of interiority.

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[17] Wright, 439, 446, 449, 445.
[18] Wright, 445, 444.
[19] Wright, 445, 447.
[20] Wright, 447
[21] Richard Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), xviii.
[22] Wright, "How Bigger was Born," 441, 440.

As contemporaries like James Baldwin pointed out, Wright's double effort to articulate a specific, black self in an era of legalized segregation as well as a generalized, human self through the normative gaze of social science risks producing the basis for its own failure to ameliorate antiblackness in America. Indeed, humanist practices that dwell with particularity remain vital for scholars in black studies and critical race theory aiming "to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction" as well as for public social movements like Black Lives Matter.[23] For Baldwin, Bigger was both white and black only insofar as he "admits the possibility of being subhuman," propagating the "monstrous legend" of blackness manufactured by white America.[24] His 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" includes *Native Son* in a genre of "protest" that overwrites the singularities and intricacies of human life, flattens its paradoxes, and reproduces the tendencies of modern "mechanizing" civilization to "[cut man] down to size."[25] Baldwin cites the sphere of the social sciences—and along with it the "peculiar triumph of society"—as a major locus of this kind of reductive analytical practice, which maintains the cultural and legal structures engineered and encoded by white supremacy under the guise of liberal progressivism.[26]

> One is told to put first things first, the good of society coming before niceties of style or characterization. Even if this were incontestable—for what exactly is the "good" of society? – it argues an insuperable confusion, since literature and sociology are not one and the same; it is impossible to discuss them as if they were. Our passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have

[23] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 7. See also, Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016). Sharpe aligns with Hartman in her use of personal registers of inquiry.
[24] Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in James Baldwin and Edward P. Jones, *Notes of a Native Son*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 23.
[25] Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 16.
[26] Baldwin, 15.

> boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl, clutching the straws of our definitions.[27]

Far from achieving its well-intentioned aim of "bringing greater freedom to the oppressed," then, protest writing has the effect of "ramifying the framework" of American racism and reproducing black stereotypes.[28] I agree with much of what Baldwin says here. Certainly literature and sociology are not the same—if they were, there would be little point in my project to track where they overlap, how, and why—and Wright's sociopoetics, particularly later in life, engage with this very "breakdown of meaning" and the meaningfulness of categories like race, deviance, and the typical city. Even so, by now I have shown that sociology did, and does, possess an awareness that its categories and paradigms are not static, even if some strands try to protect and redefine them to greater or lesser degrees. The theoretical debates in the 1920s and 1930s, the inventions of statistics and probability theory, the dozens upon dozens of books concerned with accuracy, bias, and error, with wording and coding questionnaires, all attest to the continued "paradoxical distress" named above. If *Native Son* falls short of communicating the "resolutely indefinable, unpredictable" character of felt human life as Baldwin says, I suggest it does so because Wright sensed that sociological classifications and definitions had by then become an indelible part of how we conceptualize and represent life's character; for Wright, such methods had real inferential power to grapple with the indefinable.

As much as sociology supplied Wright with a differentiated, fact-based view of race in America, it also inflected his understanding of his own felt experience—to use Mills' words, the relation of biography to history. Again in *Black Metropolis,* he notes, "I did not know what my

[27] Baldwin, 19.
[28] Baldwin, 18.

story was, and it was not until I stumbled upon science that I discovered some of the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me…I found that sincere art and honest science were not far apart, that each could enrich the other."[29] [30] [31] A similar sentiment is echoed in "How Bigger was Born" with regard to moving between "the concrete picture and the abstract linkages" that molded Bigger in Wright's mind: "the process [of moving between concrete and abstract] was like a swinging pendulum, each to and fro motion throwing up its tiny bit of meaning and significance."[32] We might see this swing also in motion, too, in his last-minute choice to call his autobiography *Black Boy*, in which he "write[s] himself into a case study."[33] Wright's story is both personal and generalizing, expressive of "Black Boy" as not merely a title "but also a kind of heading of the whole general theme."[34] We might see it in Wright's declaration that "Always, as I wrote [*Native Son*], I was both writer and reader."[35] The "to and fro" process is, I am claiming, a key part of how the sociopoetic strategy functions in this case.

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[29] Richard Wright, introduction to St Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), lx.
[30] Although I will not discuss the text here, the genesis of Wright's autobiography is also tied to a sociology department, this time at Fisk University in Nashville in 1943. Encouraged by Cayton to accept an invitation from the sociology Chair, he gave what he called "a clumsy, conversational kind of speech to the folks, white and black, reciting what I felt and thought about the world; what I remembered about my life, about being a Negro." The reception to his candid remarks along both sides of the color line—he "had not noticed the panic in his audience as he systematically destroyed the veils that protected their easy consciences"—led him to shift his energies from fiction towards an autobiographical narrative. Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973), 249.
[31] Various reviewers of *Black Boy* (1945) saw it as a companion piece to Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944). Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938-1987* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 247.
[32] Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," 441.
[33] Carla Cappetti, "Sociology of an Existence: Richard Wright and the Chicago School," *MELUS* 12, no. 2 (1985): 33. Cappetti's article provides a a fuller discussion of Wright's "appropriation of a theoretical framework from sociology" in *Black Boy (American Hunger).*
[34] Wright, letter to his publishers, cited in Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest*, 254.
[35] Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," 458.

Oscillating between the concrete and the abstract, personalized narrative and collective proclamation, and literary and sociological modes, Wright's sociopoetics takes the form of this pendulum as it seeks to restore a balance between conditions and desired actions skewed by what Du Bois had forecast as "the problem of the twentieth-century": "the problem of the color line."[36]

I will now track the changing momentum of Wright's "swinging pendulum" through two of his works at some length: one from early on his career that focuses on race relations in the United States, and another from late in his career, published only a handful of years before his death, on the subject of race abroad in a global, post-colonial context. The first, *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), is a documentary photographic essay, an attempt to "render a broad picture of the processes of Negro life," that drew on the data files Cayton had accumulated towards the study that would be published as *Black Metropolis* in 1945.[37] The second, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1955), initially entitled "The Human Race Speaking," takes up an even more expansive universalizing mission that nevertheless refracts through Wright's own subjective experience as well as those of five respondents to a questionnaire. I illustrate how, at the height of Cold War tensions, Wright composes questions and remediates responses in innovative ways that blur the lines between expert and informant, subjectivity and objectivity, and destabilize established categories and assumptions underlying racial and ideological divides.

[36] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 372.
[37] Richard Wright, in preface to *12 Million Black Voices*, by Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002), xxi.

PART TWO: THE COLLECTIVE HUMANITY OF *12 MILLION BLACK VOICES*

12 Million Black Voices is, grammatically, a selfless book. The word "I" appears only in a few rare instances of song lyrics, quoted speech, and in Wright's two-page preface; even there, he announces its project with the more distant phrase "this text."[38] He uses the first person only when describing his methodological borrowings from sociology and his use of Cayton's data "to seize upon that which is qualitative and abiding in Negro experience, to place within full and constant view the collective humanity whose triumphs and defeats are shared by the majority."[39] While all the photographs were fairly contemporary—taken in Chicago or mined from the US Farm Service Administration Archives—the text has a large scale, chronological organization. [40] Its four parts cover 300 years of black history in America, from the origins of chattel slavery and the growth of the plantation system, to the post-emancipation Jim Crow South, to the Great Migration of millions of black folk to northern urban centers, and to a culminating vision of the "*living* past living in the present," a "crossroads" and an annunciation: "Our problem is being solved."[41] *Black Voices* marches toward this resolution using formal characteristics of each of the three major categories of sociopoetics—typical, statistical, surveying—in the loose taxonomy

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[38] Wright, in preface to *Black Voices*, xx.
[39] Wright, xx.
[40] Though I won't discuss the role of the photographs here, it's worth noting the historical relationship between photography, racial typography, the inventions of black criminality, and the development of sociological technologies like statistics and surveys—one only need to look back to the composites and questionnaires of Francis Galton. For fuller discussion of *Black Voices* in a broader history of documentary photography, see Benjamin Balthaser, "Killing the Documentarian: Richard Wright and Documentary Modernity," *Criticism*, no. 3 (2013): 357-390.
[41] Wright and Rosskam, 146-7. This kind of stadial, progressive historical narrative is commonly used in the history of sociological inquiry. Comte designated broad phases of history, and Park & Burgess remind readers of *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* that their discipline "had its origins in an effort to make history exact" (6) and that "As soon as historians begin to emphasize the typical and representative rather than the unique character of events, history ceases to be history and becomes sociology." (8) Similar echoes include Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, discussed in chapter 3.

outlined in previous chapters. Like *Let Us Praise Famous Men* and other members of the documentary tradition, the project is propelled by a desire for national self-reflection, a call to a majority white readership to "look at," both literally and figuratively, unromantic but accurate pictures of black life.[42] The book is teeming with types, from the subjugating southern "Lords of the Land" and the "Bosses of the Buildings" in the North and West, to the subjugated black folk, largely defined by labor, transience, and systematic control. Working types in the narrative are embodied in captions attached to photographic images and portraits: "the black maid," "the black industrial worker," "the black stevedore," "the black dancer," "the black waiter," "the black sharecropper."[43] Even abstract economic forces are personified by a capitalist archetype, "Queen Cotton," whose "laws…rule our lives."[44] The sociopoetics of *Black Voices* are also rotational, repeatedly readjusting the gaze of its majority-white addressees, professionally specialized and socially segmented, who can "see but a little phase of the complex process of their lives."[45] Finally, as the title suggests, the book seeks to revise dominant institutional representations of black life circulated by "the mighty artists: the movies, the radio, the newspaper, the magazines, and even the Church,"[46] through the remediated collective voice that I have attributed to survey sociopoetics. It incorporates scenes of question and answer, of call and response and, as a whole, enacts the co-constitution of "personality" and "organizing forces" that manifests in the questionnaire.

The reception and critical legacy of *12 Million Black Voices* tends to associate its generic hybridity, either directly or obliquely, with its project to articulate a collective history and living

[42] Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*, 147.
[43] Wright and Rosskam, *Black Voices*, 18-23.
[44] Wright and Rosskam, 39.
[45] Wright and Rosskam, 24.
[46] Wright and Rosskam, 35.

present grounded in Wright's curatorial perspective. A New York Times' review, for instance, commends the re-articulation of a story "factually told at encyclopedic length" as a "more poignant recital in the voice of the folk themselves…Respecting the historians, the economists and the sociologists, [Wright's voice emerges] out of his own consciousness as a Negro."[47] At once "astringent" and tinged "with the quality of folksong," its tones are vernacular to its author and the "folk" it speaks for or as.[48] In the numerous reviews of *Black Voices* in academic journals, sociologists appear to have reciprocated the respect Wright paid them, acknowledging his commentary as a contribution to the study of what Du Bois had coined the "Negro problem." This contribution, moreover, is closely tied to its aesthetic aspects: its "superb, exciting, lyrical prose" and "artistic simplicity and directness" (*Rural Sociology*),[49] its "running semipoetic text" (*American Journal of Sociology*),[50] and its "aesthetic persuasiveness…restrained but convincing" (*American Sociological Review*).[51] A review in *Social Science* by the journal's editor, economist Leroy Allen, admires *Black Voices* for the affective potential he associates with literature. According to Allen, Wright's book is "distinctly helpful" in the development not only of an American "sociological I.Q.," but also an "E.Q. (Emotional Quotient)," a means of "emotionally activated intellection" essential for understanding the "network of complications that we call the Negro problem."[52] "E.Q" joins the collection of appellative oddities that describe the sociopoetic enterprise, its bundling of coldness, objectivity, and statistical calculation with emotion,

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[47] William Shands Meacham, "The Bitter Saga of the Negro: The Drama of Centuries Compressed Into a Short Book Written in Astringent Prose," *New York Times*, 1941, BR11.
[48] Meacham, "The Bitter Saga of the Negro," BR11.
[49] Arnold W.1 Green, "12 Million Black Voices (Book)," *Rural Sociology* 7, no. 1 (1942), 101-102.
[50] "Current Books," *American Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 4 (1942), 665.
[51] "Book Reviews," *American Sociological Review* 7, no. 3 (June 1942), 462.
[52] Leroy Allen, "Review of 12 Million Black Voices. A Folk History of the Negro in the United States, by Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam," *Social Science* 17, no. 4 (1942), 432.

subjectivity, and "moving text"—text that "activates" not only a kind of feeling but a kind of thinking or "intellection" towards the resolution of a problem.

Beyond its historical moment, literary scholars have likewise treated *Black Voices* as a site where Wright's use of sociological theory and data is on display. As Jeff Allred has noted, the book is "deeply indebted" to the Chicago School paradigms with which Wright was by then familiar, adopting the Chicago School's rubric of urban ecology, its pragmatism, and its impetus for social reform while also taking a suspicious stance to the authority of an expert observer in the social "field."[53] Wright is not merely an objective scientist taking an impartial bird's eye view, as is clear by the continued and considered use of "we" in the text. This departure from "disinterested knowledge production" leads Allred to assert that *12 Million Black Voices* is "part of a political program that seeks primarily to transform, rather than manage or describe, the current order."[54] "To transform, rather than manage or describe" articulates a very sociopoetic orientation to the world. This is how sociopoetics operates when it dismantles and reconstitutes types, when it rotates and rearranges variables, or when it recodes and remediates voices through questions and answers. To sharpen our perception of the dynamics of the "swinging pendulum," I will focus on part three of the text, "Death on the City Pavements," which renders and problematizes the "current order," or environment, as constitutive of personality. In particular, I will touch on its oft-referenced "kitchenette" refrain, its acts of misrecognition and re-seeing, and its meditations on black cultural production as a means of generating collectivity.

Part of a narrative of discriminatory practices in the unequal distribution of housing, insurance, jobs, and other civic services, the kitchenette sequence is unique in the text. Its fifteen

[53] Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*, 155.
[54] Allred, 157.

short paragraphs are structured as anaphoric refrains; grouped with otherwise uncaptioned photographs, they read both as captions and prose poetry. They also document a microcosm whose conditions are determined by antiblackness, capitalism and, as Wright puts it in *Black Metropolis*, "the overwhelming contemporaneous reality" that leaves black folk "*bewildered* as to their duties and meaning."[55] In the urban environment, which Wright compares to "living inside a machine" and describes as a "world of *things*" rather than people, the kitchenette embodies abstract "cold forces" responsible for the "heavy toll in death" and suffering inflicted upon arriving black populations.[56]

> The kitchenette is the author of the glad tidings that new suckers are in town, ready to be cheated, plundered, and put in their places.
>
> The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks.
>
> The kitchenette, with its filth and foul air, with its one toilet for thirty or more tenants, kills our black babies so fast that in many cities twice as many of them die as white babies… [57]

The kitchenette, as if a mercenary for the Bosses of the Buildings, is prison and executioner, an author of exploitation whose laws have replaced those of the "Queen of Cotton" and trump the corrupt state justice system. While concrete, an environment personified as a single entity, it is also a site of collectivity, "a new form of mob," however antithetical to the one Wright seeks to call forth. The kitchenette consumes selves, "assaults not only the lone individual" and the group but also the very idea of individuality or agency. The diction is deterministic as it renders the kitchenette as a creator of monstrous multiplicity. The kitchenette is "the seed bed for scarlet

[55] Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis*, xxii. Emphasis added.
[56] Wright and Rosskam, 100, 93.
[57] Wright and Rosskam, 105-106.

fever, dysentery, typhoid, tuberculosis, gonorrhea, syphilis, pneumonia, and malnutrition for a litany of diseases" as well as "an enticing place for crimes."[58] It is full of "crowded rooms and incessant bedlam," "giving birth to never-ending quarrels of recrimination, accusation, and vindictiveness, [and] producing warped personalities" while it "piles up mountains of profits" for the Bosses.[59] This sense of accumulation, of boundless scale, is captured too in the "ceaseless" "incessant" and "never-ending" passage of time, the condensation of people "into an unbearable closeness of association," and the expanse of its influence as it "reaches out with fingers full of golden bribes to the officials of the city" and "scatters death."[60] The sequence names literal phenomena, documented behaviors and statistical comparisons while interpreting them as an outcome of ecological origins. Moreover, the arc of this passage, with its plurals, repetitions, and infinite temporality, seems to convey a suffocating situation, a crushing generality, against which the individual can only struggle against for so long.

To emphasize the distanced, predictive outlook of Wright's verse paragraphs, we might mark their contrast to Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "kitchenette building," first published in her 1945 *A Street in Bronzeville*. Like Wright, she speaks in the voice of a "we" experiencing a world of people as disposable objects at the disposal of abstract forces, "things of dry hours and the involuntary plan."[61] The language through which she manifests the kitchenette and the possibility of an otherwise, however, registers as lyrical, domestic, and intimate. Rather than

[58] Wright and Rosskam, 106, 108.
[59] Wright and Rosskam, 108, 111.
[60] Wright and Rosskam, 106, 108, 111.
[61] Gwendolyn Brooks, *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*, ed. Elizabeth Alexander (New York: Library of America, 2005), 1.

depict a battle between personality and environment, Brooks summons a "dream"—similar to the "enchanted vision" that Wright associates with the figure of the preacher—to do the work:[62]

> But could a dream send up through onion fumes
> Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
> And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,
> Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms
>
> Even if we were willing to let it in,
> Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
> Anticipate a message, let it begin?[63]

The speculation is broken off, left as a hypothetical when the speaker/s rush to take their turn in the "lukewarm water of" an overcrowded bathroom.[64] We can observe that Brooks at least allows for an imagined interiority able to nourish a dream to "fight" with slum conditions wielding weapons like light, color, and song; though the aria is notably a product of white Europe, it is nevertheless a far different music from the ring of Wright's "death toll." Ultimately the poem returns to the bleak everyday with its final line, "We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it."[65] Still, this ending note transforms a thought into a hope, albeit a banal one, poised on the brink of being realized. Brooks, as author, is also "in it," speaking from *inside* the kitchenette. In contrast, Wright orates as if from a podium to illustrate that the troubling subsumption of singularity in a crowded, automated world is a communal problem beyond as well as within the kitchenette. The dweller in his kitchenette must be spoken of abstractly

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[62] Wright and Rosskam, *Black Voices* 68-75. Wright's description of worship recalls again the "swinging pendulum: "Our hearts and bodies, reciprocally acting upon each other, swing out into the meaning of the story the preacher is unfolding." Wright and Rosskam, 68.
[63] Brooks, *Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*, 1.
[64] Brooks, 1.
[65] Brooks, 1.

because, as he puts it, "We cannot see or know a *man* because of the thousands upon thousands of men."[66]

12 Million Black Voices, abiding by the limits of this reality, orchestrates its project of self-seeing at the level of many. As critics have observed, the book has a pedagogical arc, an argument that makes tangible its vision that "collective humanity whose triumphs and defeats are shared by the majority."[67] From the outset it charges its white audience with misrecognition outright: "when you see us black folk…you think you know us…[but] we are not what we seem."[68] Although at times this "we" seems all-encompassing or universalizing, the narrative voice of twelve million is not static but "moving in all directions," "shunted to and fro by cataclysmic social changes."[69] Wright diversifies "collective humanity" by modifying its pronoun so that "we" morphs into "some of us," "others of us," "a few of us," "many of us," " the majority of us," and so on. While on the one hand these variations merely document a fidelity to reality, on the other they have the effect of staging encounters with black collectivity at different registers and from different angles. One scene in particular exposes and denaturalizes the process by which the presence of growing numbers of black individuals becomes a source of irrational fear for white folks.

> When they see one of us, they either smile with contempt or amusement. When they see *two* of us, they treat us as though some grave thought were on their minds. When they see *four* of us, they are usually silent. When they see *six* of us, they become downright apprehensive and alarmed.[70]

[66] Wright and Rosskam, 100.
[67] Wright and Rosskam, xx.
[68] Wright and Rosskam, 10.
[69] Wright and Rosskam, 143.
[70] Wright and Rosskam, 103.

Again, as in many other places, Wright uses rhythmic, anaphoric prose to build a sense of anticipation about the outcome of antagonistic dynamics between "us" and "them." While the "we" is slowly building—in this passage and throughout—"they" change not in terms of number but orientation, as the minority grows into a "collective humanity" whose "triumphs and defeats" that majority must share. In the final pages of the book, at a climactic moment of identification, the poles are reversed, and Wright returns to the second person to tell the white reader: "we *are* you, looking back at you from the dark mirror of our lives!"[71]

The possibility of recognition is powerfully prefigured in the treatment of cultural production, especially music, prayer, and song, as an expression of black sociality that has attracted the admiration of, and appropriation by, white culture. "Blues, jazz, swing, and boogie woogie" can transform the kitchenette: "Alone together with our black folk in the towering tenements, we play our guitars, trumpets, and pianos, beating out rough and infectious rhythms that create an instant appeal among all classes of people."[72] The popularity of this "flood of melodies," Wright speculates, may be "because so many of those who live in cities feel deep down just as we feel."[73] Deliberately tying working-class black folk with other immigrant white populations, *Black Voices* announces the possibility of the chorus produced "alone together with our black folk" to potentially expand its "we" until, eventually, "our music makes the feet of the whole world dance…Where we cannot go, our tunes, songs, slang, and jokes go."[74] In this formulation, he posits the "environment" as the stage of shared feeling that nevertheless remains incomplete and under the sway of an unequal distribution of power. For the "spirituals of the city

[71] Wright and Rosskam, 146.
[72] Wright and Rosskam, 127-8.
[73] Wright and Rosskam, 128.
[74] Wright and Rosskam, 130,

pavements" intone a "paradoxical cleavage," an incongruity between personal feeling and the material conditions of the kitchenette, the factory, and other discriminatory cruelties exacted upon Chicago's Black Belt.[75] In a sense, the undefinable mysteries of human life that Baldwin sees as the subject of literature has been transferred to the abstract realm of social forces, of the iconic Bosses of the Buildings and the personified kitchenette. Music, then, attempts to bridge this paradox, to become "an expression of our bewilderment and despair in a world whose meaning eludes us."[76]

Wright would soon follow the global circulation of the music of black folk, leaving the US permanently to live in Paris in 1947 and traveling throughout Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia during the 1950s. The decolonization movements of these latter continents opened a new vista for international solidarity among people of color to which Wright, now an ex-patriot, would turn his attention. Throughout the 1950s he increasingly borrows from sociological methods and texts—he preferred reading them to contemporary novels—as resources to confront global race relations, which were also the site of important early Cold War battles between the democratic West and communist East. For the State Department, hoping to make allies of newly postcolonial states, was intent on concealing the existence of institutionalized racism within the United States, an embarrassment that threatened "the legitimacy of the U.S. claims as leader of the 'free world'."[77] The "tunes, songs, slang, and jokes" that Wright refers to in *Black Voices* not only made "the whole world dance," but their dissemination was carefully managed by the state, which orchestrated global tours of "Jazz Ambassadors" like Dizzy Gillespie and Louis

[75] Wright and Rosskam, 128.
[76] Wright and Rosskam, 128.
[77] Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 177.

Armstrong, sports icons like the Harlem Globetrotters, and other black intellectuals, artists, and activists.[78] This sponsorship was at times invited, at others enforced, and always ideologically charged. It was in this changed environment that Wright accepted support from the Congress for Cultural Freedom, later revealed as a CIA outfit and considered "America's principal attempt to win over the world's intellectuals to the liberal democratic cause" during the Cold War.[79] In 1955, the Congress would fund his trip to Bandung, Indonesia to attend the first major gathering of African and Asian unaligned, postcolonial states. Bandung, which "smacked of tidal waves, of natural forces," offered the opportunity to represent an organic, concrete unification of people of color only imagined in the "we" of *12 Million Black Voices*.[80] Whereas the plurality of the earlier work stayed within the bounds of the United States, the goal of *The Color Curtain* was no less than to broadcast the voice of "the human race speaking."[81]

PART THREE: *THE COLOR CURTAIN* AND "THE HUMAN RACE SPEAKING"

If *12 Million Black Voices* is a selfless investigation into collectivity, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* might be called a selfish one. Among the report's assemblages of narrative passages, personal meditations, anecdotes and observations, questionnaire replies, formal interviews, statistics, newspaper headlines, and conference

[78] For historical narratives the appropriation of such figures by the state during the Cold War, see for instance Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).
[79] Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), xi.
[80] Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen!* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 440.
[81] Wright, *Color Curtain*, 440, 487, 440.

speeches, Wright is constantly on view narrating his search for a balanced perspective grounded in the subjective valuations of a single self. He is the anchor from the opening scene, in which he narrates his reaction to an announcement in the paper.

> Idly, I picked up the evening's newspaper that lay folded near me upon the table and began thumbing through it. Then I was staring at a news item that baffled me. I bent forward and read the item a second time. *Twenty-nine free and independent nations of Asia and Africa are meeting in Bandung, Indonesia, to discuss "racialism" and colonialism"*…What is this? I scanned the list of nations involved […] My God! I began a rapid calculation of the populations of the nations listed and, when my total topped the billion mark, I stopped, pulled off my glasses, and tried to think. A stream of realizations claimed my mind […][82]

Over the course of this passage, Wright moves from being "baffled," overwhelmed by how many of the "despised, the insulted, the hurt, the dispossessed" peoples would be represented at Bandung, to being enthralled by the "stream of realizations" that awareness of the meeting unleashed within him.[83] The theme of the double-take, which begins with Wright's return to the headline "a second time," endures and multiplies over the course of *The Color Curtain* as he strives to apprehend and communicate the import of Bandung. For the inconceivable, abstracted total of one billion people stands in tension with the singularity of the event as a case and of Wright as an individual reporter that, he soon tells us, is uniquely qualified for the task. Over the course of the next few pages, we follow his thought process as he paces the room, reflecting on the question of Bandung—"What is this?"—and arrives at an imperative: "I felt I had to go to that meeting."[84] On the one hand, he divulges in his ponderings, the appeal of the conference stems from its exceptionality, its opacity to Western institutions and intellectual traditions. It is a

[82] Wright, *Color Curtain*, 437.
[83] Wright, 438.
[84] Wright, 438.

gathering that "no anthropologist, no sociologist, no political scientist would ever have dreamed of staging."[85] Moreover, since its call "*had not been sounded in terms of ideology,*" it might, Wright optimistically presumes, stand outside the polarizing rhetoric of the "Iron Curtain."[86] On the other hand, his desire and capacity to amplify this extraordinary message is figured as specific and personal. In a series of staged conversations, he recounts that his fascination set him apart from friends, acquaintances, and the press, who are each "suspicious, skeptical" about the purpose of the conference.[87] He himself cannot say "for whom" he would compose his report.[88] Audience aside, he is firm in his belief that he has the "emotions" necessary to grasp Bandung's significance, emotions bred by the "burden of race consciousness," the experience of "common labor," and "the politics and psychology of rebellion."[89] For a black intellectual abroad whose passport could be revoked at any time if he stepped out of line with the rosy picture of race relations being promoted by the State Department, this was an ambitious project.

Importantly, then, as Wright scales up to speak for "the human race," he develops a self-conscious, first-person voice very different from the prophetic rumbles of *Black Voices*. The arc of the report, which takes the form of travelogue, follows Wright not only on an expedition to Indonesia, but also on a mission to attain what Gunnar Myrdal, the leader of the influential study on American race relations published as *The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, called the "specific objectivity" of Wright's approach.[90] The "clear

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[85] Wright, 439.
[86] The subtitle of his first and longest chapter which gets repeated throughout is "Beyond Left and Right." Wright, 435.
[87] Wright, 440-44
[88] Wright, 440-1.
[89] Wright, 440-1.
[90] Myrdal, foreword to *The Color Curtain*, 434; Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944). Wright's own admiration for Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* led him to think that social

definition of the very personal point from which he views" that Myrdal observes was, however, also refracted through the answers of a small cluster of respondents to a questionnaire. [91] The unprecedented space of the text—nearly a quarter—devoted to the implementation and sociological coding of five sets of responses to a sixty-eight item survey is the most concerted, explicit adoption of sociological tools across Wright's published works.[92] Wright clearly viewed it as a crucial element of the project, insisting on its inclusion after his editors balked on this point.[93] This choice must be contextualized not only in terms of the close relationship Wright had forged with sociologists over the last decade, but also in the context of the role of sociology in the advancement of civil rights in the 1950s. Wright's "list of relevant questions," as he refers to it, was designed in consultation with Otto Klineberg, one of several social psychologists whose testimony on the deleterious effects of "environmental handicaps faced by the Negro" became integral to the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling against segregation.[94] Yet the Bandung

understanding was best acquired through a foreigner's gaze. See Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 270.

[91] Myrdal, foreword to *The Color Curtain*, 434.

[92] For notes on *The Color Curtain*'s combination of literary, journalistic, and social scientific registers, see Virginia Whatley Smith, "Richard Wright's Passage to Indonesia: The Travel Writer/Narrator as Participant/Observer of Anti-Colonial Imperatives," in *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections*, ed. by Virginia Whatley Smith (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 80; Yoshinobu Hakutani, "*The Color Curtain:* Richard Wright's Journey into Asia," *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections*, ed. Virginia Whatley Smith (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 68; and Amritjit Singh, afterword to *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, by Richard Wright, in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen!* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 612.

[93] Whatley Smith, *Richard Wright's Travel Writings*, 90.

[94] Kenneth B. Clark, "The Social Scientist as an Expert Witness in Civil Rights Litigation," *Social Problems* 1, no. 1 (1953): 5–10. Wright himself suppressed Klineberg's role in the questionnaire. It was not until the publication of his next book, *White Man, Listen!*, that he credits Klineberg, and he was cautious about doing so: "Needless to say, the interpretations which I drew from the results of that questionnaire are mine and are not to be laid at his door." Wright, *Black Power*, 636.

questionnaire is not merely an expository device for collecting and delivering information to inform the judgments of his own readers. As Amritjit Singh and others have observed, the presence of "unorthodox techniques" in the book, especially the adoption of sociological methodologies, enables Wright to approach Bandung with a "balanced perspective and avoid the worst pitfalls of homogenization."[95] Indeed, introduced during Wright's transitional journey from West to East, the coding of responses employs a kind of testimonial parataxis that functions pedagogically to prepare author and reader, outsiders looking in, to face "the swirling currents of the Asian maelstrom"—a description that recalls the "hot and whirling vortex" of Bigger's collective identity— materializing at Bandung. [96]

At one level a "stratagem" to help Wright apprehend "the basic Asian attitudes" that would shape discourse at the conference, the questionnaire section also appears as a sociopoetic strategy navigating the pendulum swing between the particular and the general. [97] Carrying over the insights of previous chapters, I will focus the following readings on the ways in which Wright dramatizes the process of coding or remediating survey data discussed at length in the last chapter through a layering of narrative devices like free indirect discourse, direct quotation, dialogue, and interior monologue contained in a sociological regulated, recursive structure. He does so, I propose, as a means of transforming the politically charged terms of racial and national categories in the Cold War, of privileging the complex identities and experiences of the "underdogs of the human race," and of self-reflexively speculating on the success of his own endeavor.[98] In other words, Wright posits a method of inquiry that departs from that of fiction

[95] Singh, afterword to *The Color Curtain*, 617.
[96] Wright, 445.
[97] Wright, 445.
[98] Wright, *Color Curtain*, 438.

works like *Native Son*. Rather than embroiling the reader in a protagonist's psyche or reproducing stereotypes, he offers us glimpses of reticulated minds that, in response to Baldwin, Wright finds "resolutely indefinable" indeed.

Before I elaborate on the layers of mediation and juxtaposition in *The Color Curtain*, I will briefly describe the overall shape and tone of the questionnaire itself. The questions posed to a "continuum of Asiatic subjects," four men and one woman of color with exposure to both Eastern and Western social worlds, are listed in full over several pages. [99] Acting as a roadmap to the impending report, they elicit respondents' views on topics like religion, military service, education and literacy, interracial marriage, ethnic self-determination, industrialization, and forms of government, among others. [100] At turns they call up personal histories—"Have Westerners ever made you feel self-conscious because your race, religion, color, or culture?"—elicit individual perspectives on collective issues—"Do you think that a classless society, in an economic sense, is possible?"—and invite the interpretation of abstract concepts—"What does Left mean to you? What does Right mean to you?"[101] As Wright is distressingly aware, like any good survey writer, individual words carry contexts of ideological influence and "social consciousness" that are too often ignored. "Black" and "colored," he reminds us, are "American nomenclatures" weighted with the valuations of the "whole white world."[102] This is exactly the sort of variation that survey methods are designed to manage, although for the working sociologist the management goes on behind the scenes. In contrast, Wright showcases the disorientation that the researcher may confront when assessing survey responses and challenges

[99] Wright, 449, 464, 442, 478.
[100] Wright, 453.
[101] Wright, 446-447.
[102] Wright, 572.

the authority of the researcher to group and label them. Relaying each series of responses one by one, he juxtaposes quotations, paraphrases, asides, and conjectures that move between registers of fact, citation, and opinion; often, these snippets cannot be readily attributed to the distinct person they purport to describe. He confuses individual and collective feelings and beliefs by closely piling pronouns, jumping between "I," "you," "he," "we," "they" and "us" to vertiginous effect. Wright also relays replies using a panoply of verbs that alter the tone of statements, encouraging us to read them through ontological, empirical, legal, affective or other lenses. Among many formulations, for instance, he writes of his female informant: "She knows," "she fears," "she believes," "she confesses," "she identifies herself with," "she [desires]," "she values," "she is convinced", "she was," "she has," or "she reacted" in the space of a handful of paragraphs.[103] Often these modifiers take on the quality of undisguised narrative judgments such as "he snapped" or "he complained," reminding us of Wright's presence as a subjective interpreter.

Such repetitions, which recall the uses of anaphora, comparison, and rotation analyzed in previous chapters, have the function of destabilizing normative racializing idioms as well as social and political categories defined by majority-white institutions. Supplied sequentially, Wright's records of responses present an opportunity to revisit the same topics from perspectives variously concrete and abstract, further unsettling weighted words like "nation," "race," "know," and "feel." Take the five responses, regurgitated over the course of the section, which can logically be traced back to the question "What is your idea of a great man?"[104]

[103] Wright, 456-461.
[104] Wright, 447.

1) There are no men now living whom he would call great. Simple men are great men; therefore, there are many great men in the world. "Greatness is how you live your personal, individual life."
2) Her idea of a great man is someone who is true to himself.
3) How can a man's worth be measured when he votes?
4) Great men? There were no such things.
5) A Great man is a man concerned about mankind.[105]

The syllogistic fallacy of the first answer, which states both that there are "no [great] men living" and that there are "many great men in the world," already shows the fluctuating meaning a term can take on from any single point of view. The punctuation marking direct speech, invoked frequently throughout this section, draws attention to the layers of mediation involved in the questionnaire's constellation of voices. If Wright is quoting the "young Indonesian-born Dutch journalist" here, we may wonder how close the rest of these statements are to the original replies, and to what degree the author-researcher is responsible for their different syntactical structures: rhetorical questions, aphoristic phrasings, and simplistic, assertive truth claims. Disconnected as they are from individual speakers, they also draw attention to the question of individual versus collective value. On some accounts, greatness resides in "individual, personal life" or in being "true to [oneself]"; on others, to be great is to be "concerned about mankind" or otherwise politically engaged. The third reply in the above list, "How can a man's worth be measured when he votes?" is excerpted from a longer anecdote used by a "Westernized" Asian to answer "difficult questions" about democracy—as he sees it, voting in the east is a "mere counting of heads" that erases the possibility of self-worth from the get-go.[106] Once we begin to notice such networks of meaning, in which definitions of greatness become entangled with positions on

[105] Wright, 453, 461, 469, 478, 483.
[106] Wright, 468-9.

democracy and its applications, among other issues, we can intensely register the difficulty of Wright's task. Much later in *The Color Curtain,* Wright volunteers his own conception of a great man in the person of Prime Minister Nehru of India, whose greatness Wright attributes to his middle-ness, his deft straddling of East and West.[107] Myrdal posits yet another example in the figure of Wright himself, whose "approach to greatness" consists in the special brand of "specific objectivity" being established here.[108]

While comparing different responses to a single question pictures a sociopoetics busy defamiliarizing terms, concepts and ideologies, attention to a single answer at length reveals the mixed "psychological [landscapes]" in dialogue with Wright's own equivocal position as a black writer and intellectual.[109] In this instance, sociopoetics not only demonstrates the plurality *within* an individual that Baldwin called for in "Everybody's Protest Novel," but also the tenuousness of the understanding between researcher and respondent.

> Great men? There were no such things. How could there be, when he and his kind were suffering…? The aim of education? Ah, he was true here…. "That's why we got rid of the Dutch," he had told me. His eyes had shone as he had shot that boldly home. *He meant the West had been stupid and had taught him enough to make him know that the West was his enemy!*
>
> In the morning's light I stared at the tilting olive groves on the Spanish mountainsides; the train jolted toward Madrid….I frowned, trying to judge just what coefficient I could have given him as a representative of Asian reactions.[110]

[107] Wright, 562.
[108] Myrdal, foreword to *Color Curtain,* 434.
[109] Wright, *Color Curtain*, 445.
[110] Wright, 478.

Here we are faced with a rapid movement between grammatical forms, narrative perspectives, and thickly clustered facts, beliefs, opinions—most of them unattributed—that constantly recontextualize the terms in which they are expressed. The informant seems at first skeptical—"Great men?"—then definitive, almost indignant—"There are no such things."—and once again uncertain, at a loss, struggling to reconcile the realities of racialized oppression and trailing off in ellipses. Then again, given the free-indirect discourse, who introduces "the aim of education" as a new question? Rather than an answer, we are faced with the oddly phrased "He was true here" and more ellipses. True how? To himself? As an index of a broader, collective reality? Does this truth grant explanatory power to the statement "That's why we got rid of the Dutch?" Still, because "that's" has no definite referent, this does little to clarify what is being explained. Perhaps the truth Wright acknowledges inheres in the conviction of the informant's "bold" tone or shining eyes, or in the interpretive revelation "*He meant.*" Following this impassioned proclamation, the text shifts into a new paragraph, returning to the first-person as Wright watches the light being cast on the landscape through the glass of the window like a scientist through a scope, speculating on the source of his informant's recalcitrance. The "typical and basic Asian" to which Wright had initially attributed a "ready acceptance of reality, the 'given' in his environment," turns out to resist any judgment that would "assign him a coefficient."[111] In the end, our investigator suggests that this subject "did not know what kind of a world he did want…The world was a problem to him, and he was a problem to himself."[112]

Finally, this formal enactment of the indefinite makeup of the "Asian mind," the fluctuating relationship between self and environment, and the ambiguous meaning of individual

[111] Wright, 472, 476.
[112] Wright, 477.

statements, is complemented by Wright's interrogation of his own methods. All the interpreted summaries of the informants' replies are occasioned by interstitial meditative periods in the chronology of the travelogue, periods in which Wright mulls over what he has learned, re-evaluates the effectiveness of his methods, and dwells with the manifold contradictions of his results. He begins by "perusing his notes" until he hits up against a contradiction, complication, or other sort of problem.[113] In search of a way to negotiate it, he then introduces an informant and meditates upon her replies, inhabiting a dilated narrative coding time.[114] At length, he emerges out of the milieu of voices back into a novelistic, realist temporality and more lyrical prose, "swaying with the rushing train," or "[staring] at the tilting olive groves on the Spanish mountainsides."[115] Inevitably another dilemma occurs to him, he returns to his notes, and the pattern repeats. And as he moves on from the questionnaire section of the text, he concludes: "the reactions that I had been able to gather could not possibly describe Asian reality; the questions that I had posed had not been designed to elicit that. But those replies did, to some degree, illuminate that narrow zone where East met West, and that zone was hot and disturbed."[116] If the questionnaire, we are now told, was not aimed at describing "Asian reality," was it successful in comprehending, the "Asian mind?" Having faced the incongruities relentlessly uncovered by the questionnaire, we can at least access the conference from a position that admits the conflicted state of a postcolonial world in which "dark facts clashed with the blindingly bright sunshine."[117] Armed with multiply imbricated types of knowledge—personal, statistical, sensory—Wright declares at the end of his first chapter: "I was now ready to go to

[113] Wright, 464.
[114] Wright, 449.
[115] Wright, 478.
[116] Wright, 485.
[117] Wright, 506.

Bandung to the conference."[118] Understanding the questionnaire section of *The Color Curtain* as preparatory work for an encounter with a complex and unknown environment, then, clarifies the role of its sociopoetics in equipping its author and its readers for apprehending the meaning of Bandung.

As the fifties wore on, the "hot and disturbed" Cold War environment was hard on Wright, who became increasingly pessimistic, subject to bouts of paranoia and illness. Speaking in 1956 at the first meeting of the Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris, he lamented the "legion of ideological interests…choking the media of communication of the world today…all public utterances are dragged willy-nilly into the service of something or somebody…Knowing the suspicious, uneasy climate in which our twentieth-century lives are couched, I, as a Western man of color, strive to be as objective as I can when I seek to communicate."[119] Unlike Bandung, the Congress of Negro Writers and Artists was directly organized by cultural institutions under CIA auspices and deliberately excluded outspoken radical black thinkers and artists like Paul Robeson and Du Bois. The very possibility of neutrality, it seemed, was illusory. "What does being objective mean?" Wright goes on to ask.[120] Certainly, it could not mean playing "a scientist in a laboratory" and "invent[ing] test-tube situations" to resolve problems for Bigger as he had in *Native Son*.[121] And yet, Wright holds on to objectivity as "a fabricated concept, a synthetic intellectual construction devised to enable others to know the general conditions under which one has done something, observed the world

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[118] Wright, 531.
[119] Richard Wright, "Tradition and Industrialization," *White Man, Listen!,* in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen!* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 701.
[120] Wright, "Tradition and Industrialization," 701.
[121] Wright, "How Bigger was Born," 447

or an event in that world."[122] "Objectivity," then, is conceived as something like an agreed-upon method of discussion or perspective from which it issues. Objectivity is not just an attitude of the expert scientist, not just expertise, but rather consensus—a willed, collective attitude. Back in the text of *The Color Curtain*, Wright leaves Bandung dubious about the possibility of such concurrence. For in order to have an harmonious future, post-war East-West relations must somehow be construed outside the terms of antiblackness, national interest, and capital's "mercurial [reality]": "New terms will have to be found, terms that will fit the nature of the human materials involved."[123] And, Wright remarks, it is only in *practice* that any new attitudes and terms—including a sociopoetic orientation to problems—can be founded, for "logic cannot solve problems whose solutions come not by thinking but by living."[124]

CODA: COMING TO *THIS OTHER WORLD*

In 1960, months before Wright's death at the age of 52, he compiled a manuscript of haiku, the poetic form he had been practicing almost obsessively in the last eighteen months of his life. As his daughter Julia recalls, "He was never without his haiku binder under his arm. He wrote them everywhere, at all hours."[125] The 817 haiku in *This Other World: Projections in the Haiku Manner*, recently published with its original title, were chosen from among more than four thousand poems. Julia Wright attributes this prolific phase to Wright's declining health, his shortness of breath, and the difficulty he had sitting for long periods of time at a typewriter. Perhaps it was also the programmatic nature of haiku that drew the aging author, who told his

[122] Wright, "Tradition and Industrialization," 703-4.
[123] Wright, *Color Curtain*, 608.
[124] Wright, *Color Curtain*, 471.
[125] Julie Wright, introduction to Richard Wright, *Haiku: This Other World*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert L. Tener, (New York: Arcade, 1998), vii.

daughter, “it’s always five, and seven, and five—like math. So you can’t go wrong.”[126] But it is the haiku form’s subduing of conflicts between self and world, subordinated to a focus on nature, the cycles of seasonal moods, colors, plant and animal life that interests me in Wright’s case. I have already observed in “Statistic/Relation” that haiku binds constraint-based practices with the abstraction of self. As editors Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert L. Tener note in the afterword of *Haiku: This Other World*, the traditional haiku poet seeks enlightenment through an encounter and fusion with the natural world, muting the social, political, emotional self—“[he] recognizes little division between man and nature, the subjective and the objective; he is never concerned with the problems of good and evil.”[127]

We might think of Wright’s haiku, then, as a kind of cessation in the struggle between “personality” and “environment.” Or, rather, they represent an easing away from social sites towards organic ones, as Wright composes an environment from natural elements like sun, snow, rain, dewdrops, and blossoms, horses, spiders, and crows. As a case in point, the first poem of the collection devests the “I” of itself.

1

I am nobody;
A red sinking autumn sun
Took my name away.

This speaker cedes its specificity to sunset and season, yielding to an atmospheric, almost cosmic force as powerful as the kitchenette yet gentler. Its tone is in keeping with the organizing principles of tradition haiku: the importance of harmony or “unity of sentiment,” the joining of

[126] Julia Wright, *Haiku*, viii.
[127] Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert L. Tener, afterword to Richard Wright, *Haiku*, 249.

"complementary and antithetical qualities," and the aim of "expressing sensation [while] generalizing and hence depersonalizing it."[128] Seen as an inlet to a serial, iterative practice that seeks to achieve these aesthetic solutions "by living them," this poem might be understood as the beginning of an endeavor to relocate oneself outside of social conventions like naming that individuate one person from another. As in Emily Dickinson's "I'm Nobody! Who are you?", in which to be "public" is not to be "Somebody" but to "Tell one's name...to an admiring Bog," "I am nobody" carves out an alternative communal space.[129] To put it more precisely, the search for "this other world" is the search for a world without "individuals" or "society," without social problems in which conditions delimit the horizons of certain courses of action for certain social groups—like travel, or sharing public spaces, or free speech. *This Other World* again calls up Du Bois' "unasked question" in *Souls of Black Folk*, suppressed in the silence "between [he] and the other world...How does it feel to be a problem?"[130]

The project is ongoing and ultimately unresolved. As Hakutani and Tener put it, Wright "never totally learned to eliminate his political and personal attitudes."[131] However, we can observe him again and again trying to call "this other world" into being, to let the push and pull of individual agency and deterministic social forces dissipate. Especially earlier on in the collection, an "I" habitually appears and exerts some measure of control over its environment, as in "I grant to sparrows / The telegraph wires that brought / Me such good tidings!" or "I give permission / For this slow spring rain to soak / The violet beds."[132] The self in these instances

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[128] Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert L. Tener, afterword to Wright, *Haiku,* 253, 275, 250.
[129] Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 260.
[130] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 363.
[131] Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert L. Tener, afterword to Wright, *Haiku*, 282.
[132] Wright, *Haiku*, 2.

has the authority to "give permission" or "grant" the happenings of telegrams and weather. Still, the objects populating *This Other World* recur, producing echoes and reshaping encounters with industrialized society. A later haiku also involving birds and long-distance communication, for instance, listens in on the natural world and interprets it within, or binds it to, a human framework and an act of writing: "The trilling sparrows / Sound as if they too had got / A letter today!"[133] At other moments, regardless of whether the sensation expressed in the haiku is grounded in a speaker, it conveys the emotional "swirling maelstrom" or "whirling vortex" of the racialized subject. "Past the window pane / A solitary snowflake / Spins furiously" conjures the feelings of closed borders, isolation, disorientation, anger, and lack of control.[134] Similarly, "Burning autumn leaves / I yearn to make the bonfire / Bigger and bigger" exudes an unfulfilled desire to extinguish the environment with a destructive orientation that resonates with the interior world of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*.[135]

It may seem a stretch to claim that these haiku bear the marks of a sociopoetic strategy. After all, they are working in a form far predating modern social science—although pieces of the twentieth-century Western world, like telegrams, pavements, rusty wires, and railroad tracks also inhabit this other environment Wright envisions. I am nonetheless committed to reading them as a collection of texts that explore sociopoetic traversals across the strange borders between self and world, fragment and whole, and question and answer, both in the context of Wright's career as a black author and the context of this dissertation. They do the work of a sociopoetic strategy as they negotiate the "crisis moment" of Du Bois' "unanswering fact," performing acts of inquiry tantamount to the expression of motives.

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[133] Wright, 54.
[134] Wright, 10.
[135] Wright, 13.

203

Did somebody call?
Looking over my shoulder:
Massive spring mountains.[136]

809

Why did this spring wood
Grow so silent when I came?
What was happening?[137]

In the first of these, Wright mistakes the call of the "massive spring mountains" for a human summoning, turning only to confront a huge product of enduring geological time caught in a moment of ecological renewal and revitalization—spring. It would be tempting to read the "I" in haiku 809, as we near the end of the sequence and of Wright's life, as something other than an "individual" encoded in social terms, which are the only ones we know. Yet the encounter between different "vocabularies of motive" (Mills) or the conversation in the lobby (Agee) is still going on in *This Other World*—the environment and personality, the general and particular, are still bewildering to each other. The isolated self is still a problem, as testified by a five-syllable phrase percolating throughout the collection: "how lonely it is."

Even so, in repeating, in sequencing, in persisting, sociopoetics reckons with the problem of the case as well as of the self. For although these haiku are singular in their own right, they become general by accumulation, accruing a collective sense of significance. To borrow Kenneth

[136] Wright, 51.
[137] Wright, 203. In Yoshinobu Hakutani, *East-West Literary Imagination: Cultural Exchanges from Yeats to Morrison* (University of Missouri Press, 2017), 149. Hakutani connects haiku 809 to the "Zen mondo," a form of question and answer.

Burke's words, we might say that "Art's very accumulation (its discordant voices arising out of many systems) serves to undermine any one rigid scheme of living."[138] As we have seen through its many acts of drawn out iteration, sociopoetics tends to unfold at length, keeping the texts it activates open and adaptable. In Wright's haiku, sociopoetics rotates perspectives through sustained modes of orientation, unites or harmonizes multiplicities of different sizes, like a snowflake and snow, and impels transformative progressions, as when snow becomes rains, which then becomes mist or dries in the heat of the sun. Literature and sociology are not, per Baldwin, the same. But Wright's collective voice, his subjective, balanced objectivity, and his inquiry into the pseudo-socialized spaces of the haiku—along with the many other demonstrations of sociopoetics compiled in this dissertation—all attest to the intricate histories and functions of these disciplines' mutual approach. Without landing on one "exemplary" haiku that might capture the way accrual reaches towards the naming of recurrent but yet to be declared situations and structures, I will give Wright the last word. In the lines below, located towards the middle of the series, an unbidden but reciprocally intended convergence takes place.

463

Of generations
Comes this wild red rose to me,
As I come to it [139]

[138] Burke, *Counter-Statement*, viii.
[139] Wright, *Haiku*, 116.

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