

The Language of Ethical Encounter: Levinas, Otherness, & Contemporary Poetry

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## ABSTRACT

According to philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, alterity can exist only in its infinite and fluid nature in which the aspects of it that exceed the human ability to fully understand it remain unthematized in language. Levinas sees the encounter between self and *other* as the moment that instigates ethical responsibility, a moment so vital to avoiding mastering what is external to oneself that it should replace Western philosophy's traditional emphasis on *being* as philosophy's basis, or "First Philosophy." Levinas's conceptualization of language as a fluid, non-mastering *saying*, which one must continually re-enliven against a congealing and mastering *said*, is at the heart of his ethical project of relating to the *other* of alterity with ethical responsibility, or *proximity*. The imaginative poetic language that some contemporary poetry enacts, resonates with Levinas's ethical motivations and methods for responding to alterity. The following project investigates facets of this question in relation to Levinas: how do the contemporary poets Peter Blue Cloud, Jorie Graham, Joy Harjo, and Robert Hass use poetic language uniquely to engage with alterity in an ethical way, thus allowing it to retain its mystery and infinite nature? I argue that by keeping language alive in a way similar to a Levinasian *saying*, which avoids mastering *otherness* by attending to its uniqueness and imaginatively engaging with it, they enact an ethical response to alterity. As a way of unpacking these ideas, this inquiry will investigate the compelling, if unsettled, convergence in the work of Levinas and that of Blue Cloud, Graham, Harjo, and Hass by unfolding a number of Levinasian-informed close readings of major poems by these writers as foregrounding various forms of Levinasian *saying*.

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## GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This project grounds itself on questions of what makes something that is outside of oneself unique, and of how to use language to let that entity, or *being*, retain its uniqueness alongside the human quest to understand the world that is always in danger of overtaking the not-I. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas thought these questions were the critical ones for reframing basic issues of humanity. His work asserts that in order to become conscious selves and to relate to other people without dominating them, it is necessary to open up to the force of the encounter with those who are different from you, and whom you cannot fully conceive, allowing them to remain partially inconceivable. The site for relating in this ethically responsible way exists in language that constantly acknowledges that it cannot capture the object of its descriptions, as opposed to language that attempts to appropriate the other through its usual operations. A unique intersection between these ideas regarding ethics occurs when one considers contemporary poetry, which engages with similar considerations. Therefore, by reading four contemporary poets with vastly different cultural backgrounds: Peter Blue Cloud, Jorie Graham, Joy Harjo, and Robert Hass in a way that considers how they use language to relate ethically to the world beyond their material and intellectual grasp, it is possible to see how Levinas's ideas might operate in actual language sensitive to these issues.

*For Dad*

*Also for Rebecca & Premala*

*And for Mom ~ Who is Always in My Heart*

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## *Introduction*

In *The Poetic Species*, a book on “intersections between poetry and science,” poet Robert Hass and evolutionary field biologist Edward O. Wilson discuss the biological fact that “[e]very species lives in its own sensory world” (Wilson and Hass 54). Hass then recalls a line from a late Wallace Stevens poem in which “he [Stevens] imagines as a kind of final act of nature a bird singing ‘without human meaning, without human feeling, a foreign song’” (Wilson and Hass 54-55). The thrust of the conversation is that, while in the Western world we have been trained to “be at home in the world by understanding it,” this mindset has often denigrated the imagination as a mode of thought, and according to French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, has created an attitude of “allergy” in which the radical difference of alterity becomes something that must be appropriated to the ego or subjective self, or done away with entirely (Wilson and Hass 55; Robbins, *Prodigal Son* 101).<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the point that Hass makes is that the imagination can offer non-appropriative ‘glimpses’ into the existence of *other* creatures “and therefore also [a new view of] the meaning of being a self, a person” (Wilson and Hass 56). This sense that the infinite and dynamic nature of the world is in productive tension with what can be seen as the limits of the drive to reduce the world to a knowable totality informs the work of Levinas and the contemporary

poets in this study, all of whom see language as an area to explore the ethical possibility for dealing with this tension and the various dangers it holds.

According to Levinas's ethics, the *other* is the incarnation of radical difference. When an individual consciousness—a self or subject—whose existence is traditionally seen as the foundational issue of Western philosophy, encounters the *other*, a moment of pre-verbal relationality, or dialogue, is instigated.

The irreducible and ultimate experience of relationship appears to me in fact to be elsewhere [than totality]: not in synthesis, but in the face to face of humans, in sociality, in its moral signification. But it must be understood that morality comes not as a secondary layer, above an abstract reflection on the totality and its dangers; morality has an independent and preliminary range. First philosophy is an ethics.

(Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 77)

This *discourse* initiated by the *face* of the *other* commands the self to respond to and for the *other* in a way that avoids assimilating it to the self in *sameness*, which would be a mode of violence against its presence and its difference.<sup>2</sup> “This is where the language of face (*visage*) and *face-à-face* enters Levinas's thought, describing a relation between self and other that does not reduce the latter to a projection of the former,” Williams writes (Williams 221). In fact, as Levinas states in *Totality and Infinity*:

The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows



the plastic image it leaves me. . . . It does not manifest itself by these qualities. . . . It *expresses itself*.

(Boetzkes 149; Levinas, *Totality & Infinity* 50-51)

Through the face of the *other*, then, the self must take responsibility for the *other* in proximity — “difference which is non-indifference,” avoiding any attempts to master or thematize it (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 139).<sup>3</sup> After this pre-verbal meeting, *actual* language becomes the site of relationality and further ethical consideration. According to Levinas, ethics implicates two elements of language’s structure: the fluid *saying*, capable of hinting at the infinite, and therefore inconceivable nature of *otherness*; and the finite and concrete *said*, the static form in which language cannot help but congeal and make the *face* into a reductive *image*. The *saying* is where the infinite nature of *otherness* can exist because it is the place where language holds the possibility for “thinking the *other*” beyond what is deadened by the stagnant, yet necessary component of language’s ultimate form as the *said*.<sup>4</sup> Poetry, as we will see, is the site where the ethical implications of the *saying/said* tension is quite forcefully enacted.

Occurring when the subject engages with *otherness* without appropriating it or erasing its inconceivable mystery, establishing the appropriate distance of proximity (as Levinas calls it) demonstrates ethical responsibility. Such responsibility emanates from the pre-verbal/primordial encounter with the

*other*—which Levinas conceptualizes as discourse. In the translator’s introduction to Levinas’s *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, Alphonso Lingis states that “In Levinas’s work responsibility is . . . set forth as the determinative structure of subjectivity, and the very form of the supplement of intelligibility philosophy’s reductive methods aim to bring to theoretical disciplines” (Levinas *Otherwise Than Being*, xvii).<sup>5</sup> More important even than its constituting nature for the subject, discourse in Levinas leads to responsibility through language that forms the space of relationality—the space of ethics—and delineates the meeting place of subject and *other*. For Levinas, this pre-verbal level of discourse, where the self responds to the *other’s* call through an encounter with its face, is the original, vital opening to relational/ethical language, but is yet to be language proper.

As poet Steve McCaffery writes in “The Scandal of Sincerity: Towards a Levinasian Poetics,” Levinas takes the Saussurian and Jakobsonian models of communication and alters them radically (McCaffery 170). Using Levinas’s influential early work *Totality and Infinity*, McCaffery argues that Levinas frees the signifier from the sphere of knowledge “in an ethico-linguistic negative relation to both sign and signified,” meaning that the signifier “elud[es] signification” and “attains primordial manifestation as the face . . . (cf. CPP: 112)” (McCaffery 170). The face therefore, is both “‘first discourse’ (CPP: 96) and

the 'essence' of language (TI: 64)" (McCaffery 171). This suggests, then, that poetry, in responding to the "face" of language as *other* as well as to language in its communicative nature, is a significant arena in which Levinas's insights are in play.

Levinas's formulation of language's practical structure, constituted by the *saying* and the *said*, draws out these ethical repercussions and forms the site where responsibility, as the response to discourse and to the demand of the *other's* unassimilable existence as face, is manifested. Language's *said* functions as the basic, empirical "language of everyday communication," which is inextricably entwined with ontological goals like discovering whether "propositions about things in the world (including in the imagination)" are true or false (Williams 222-223). As the mode that grounds Western philosophy, the *said*, as it denotes *being*, is predominant (Williams 222-223). The aspect of structure that is vital to ethics, however, is the "substratum" of the *said*, Levinas' *saying* (Williams 222-223):

This [*saying*] represents the dialogic aspect of language, the condition of exposure to the other that dialogue implies. Whereas the Said seeks to understand or represent the world for the benefit of the self, the Saying orients the self, as giver or receiver of speech, toward the other. The Saying has no content; it has no meaning outside this orientation.

(Williams 223)

The *saying*, like *otherness*, "cannot be experienced or understood, it can only be

approached, only detected in traces” (Williams 222-223). Therefore, like the disruption of the self by the encounter with the *other*, the *saying* disrupts ontology’s consideration of *being* represented by the *said*, through “my responsibility, my capacity to respond, even my posture of response, which subtends” or supports, dialogue (Williams 209, 223). Once again, this understanding of the way *saying* opens up space for an encounter with the *other* is richly applicable to a variety of poetic situations. In an interview with Triplopia, for example, Joy Harjo, one of the poets included in this study, speaks in Levinasian terms of the possibility of relational/ethical manifestations in poetry beyond empirical language:

I think words, yes, have the ability to control. It depends on who’s speaking them, it depends on the intent. I think of pure communication as communication beyond words. When there is nothing between speaker and audience, no misunderstandings, no lies, no hidden agendas—there’s no need for translation. When we speak and are in the presence of each other, that is, poet and audience, for instance, there’s also communication that happens beyond words—the speaker and audience both are part of the poem, energetically, literally.

(Harjo and Winder 21)

These notions of communication beyond the straightforward use of words, “[a] gesture of recognition of the other, a handshake, a saying without a said,” are at the heart of Levinas’s view of ethical language (Levinas, *Proper Names* 43). Similar to Levinas’s distinctive approach to the structure of language as *saying* and *said*, contemporary poetry reflects on the possibility of opening up

new spaces within language through fluid performative enactments of the tension between fixing and letting go. These performances are often focused on the acknowledgment and constant redress of the deadening effect that language can have on *otherness* in the form of the *said*.<sup>6</sup>

Though the intersections of poetry and science at the heart of Hass's and Wilson's conversation are outside the scope of this inquiry, the ideas they touch on introduce the ethical context which Levinas's work opens up within poetry: the infinite nature of *otherness* that exceeds human understanding and ethical ways of responding to it in imaginative uses of poetic language that poetry enacts. Specific to my project, then, is the following question: how do the contemporary poets Peter Blue Cloud, Joy Harjo, Robert Hass, and Jorie Graham use poetic language to engage with alterity in an ethical way, thus allowing it to retain its mystery and infinite nature? I will argue that by keeping language alive in a way similar to a Levinasian *saying*, which avoids mastering *otherness* by attending to its uniqueness and imaginatively engaging with it, they enact an ethical response to alterity. As a way of unpacking these ideas, this inquiry will investigate the compelling, if unsettled, convergence in the work of Levinas and that of Graham, Hass, Harjo, and Blue Cloud by unfolding a number of

Levinasian-informed close readings of major poems by these writers which foreground various forms of Levinasian *saying*.

The way each uses language is of course multi-faceted; however, I will focus on crucial connections in the ways in which their work opens up to *otherness*, arguing that such uses of language are in harmony with Levinas' ethical project. I will suggest that this opening up occurs through Graham's techniques for *recomplicating* her own and the reader's relationship to the world's infinite flux, which often involve the body; Hass's engagement with loss as a way to develop *intervals* in which to acknowledge human limits and to keep the world alive in a linguistic dance; Harjo's gathering the world's songs into herself and sending imaginative poetry/music/song out centrifugally to "keep sky open" in her imaginative perspective; and Blue Cloud's mental journeys, enacted in poetic imaginings in which he experiences *others* as thoughts in Creation's mind, thus renewing ties between Creation and human responsibility, which return in "*round dance*" to the imaginative potency of Creation.

The provocative relationship between ethics and language initially discussed in Levinas's ethics and variously enacted in the poetry of Graham, Hass, Harjo, and Blue Cloud, forms my conceptual ground for asking how the poetic language and imagination of these writers acknowledge *otherness* in a profoundly ethical way. A fundamental element of this ethical relationship deals

with power, as Jacques Derrida points out in “Violence and Metaphysics,” his seminal essay on Levinas’s departure from philosophy’s traditional emphasis on subjective existence, or *being*. There, Derrida highlights Levinas’ perspective on the connection between the human desire to cognitively *grasp* the world and the human tendency to master the *other*. Attempts to totalize entities conceptually so that they are fully conceivable from one’s own perspective (of *sameness*) engender such mastery. Derrida quotes from Levinas’s *Le Temps et L’Autre*: “If the other could be possessed, seized, and known, it would not be the other. To possess, to know, to grasp are all synonyms of power” (Derrida 113). Essentially, what I am examining in this study are ways poetic language subverts this drive to mastery, turning the notion of “power” on its head and revealing the depth of response made possible by relinquishing control.

In this study, I intend to show that quite different contemporary poetic projects enact moments “when the ego or the Same is called into question by alterity,” resonating in different but intertwined ways with Levinas’s understanding of ethics (Zhou 201). Describing Levinas’s ethics, Simon Critchley quotes *Difficile liberté*, and *Totalité et Infini* (and its English translation *Totality and Infinity*), stating:

Ethics, for Levinas, is critique; it is the critical *mise en question* of the liberty, spontaneity, and cognitive emprise of the ego that seeks to reduce

all otherness to itself. The ethical is therefore the location of a point of alterity, or what Levinas also calls 'exteriority' (*exteriorité*), that cannot be reduced to the Same. . . . moral consciousness is not an experience of values, 'but an access to exterior being' (DL 409). This exterior being is named 'face' (*visage*) by Levinas, and is defined as 'the way in which the other [*l'Autre*] presents himself, exceeding the *idea of the other in me*' (Tel 21/TI 50).

(Critchley 5)

Tension between the world's infinite nature, its face, and the finite nature of the human and philosophical desire to find totality ground Levinas's ethics and influence the language of the poets in this study. As we will see, these tensions both compel and enable Levinas and the poets to struggle to keep the fluidity of language alive. Keeping language's fluidity alive has ethical implications.

Critchley states that "ethics is simply and entirely the *event* of this relation" of the I/subject and the face or presence of the *other* "whom I cannot evade, comprehend, or kill and before whom I am called to justice, to justify myself" (Critchley 5, *my italics*). This relationship that neither appropriates, nor remains closed-off to the *other*, is one of establishing a suitable distance/proximity. In contemporary poetry, this ethical proximity is most clearly seen in poems that enact acknowledgment of human limits. Moving past these limits in linguistic readjustments and imaginative encounters, such poems attend to and avoid thematizing the *other*. Aware of the tendency of human beings to try to master the world, these poets use techniques that avoid such violence, instead



demonstrating an ethical proximity to the *other* so as to “marry” the world without “claim[ing] to possess it” (Gardner, *Regions* 139).

Levinas and these writers each view the world through a personal perspective since they come from varied backgrounds and ways of life. Spanning European, American, and Indigenous cultures, and unique world views and lived experiences, they are undeniably different from one another. Yet the concerns they share regarding ethics and language are profound and undeniable as well, and are deeply inscribed in their work. The fundamental and varied motivations of each relate to the nature of language in its ethical possibilities, which they use writing to investigate, both explicitly and coincidentally. Ideas enacted in their work concerning alterity/*otherness* and its vital, yet delicate entwinements with language extend Levinas’s ethical project, and offer fresh ways of laying out the poetics of each poet.

That Levinas saw his biography according to his own words, as “dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror,” according to Levinas scholar Jill Robbins, reveals a crucial aspect of his understanding of the human tendency to master the *other* (Robbins, *Prodigal Son* 17). His time as a Jewish military prisoner during World War II and the loss of several family members in the Holocaust, motivated his conceptualizations of power and

*otherness* and his shift from philosophy's traditional emphasis on the question of subjective *being* toward considerations of relationality and ethics (Robbins, *Prodigal Son* 17). In response to the rise of Nazism and philosophy's preoccupation with subjective *being* (which arguably fueled its mechanisms) Levinas committed his theoretical work to *reinscribing* (Jill Robbins's term) ethical responsibility to the *other* as the proper basis of philosophy, or as "First Philosophy" (Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 77).

Levinas saw the arts and literature as creating representations that do violence to the *other* by reducing it to an *image* or theme for the ego's appropriation and leading to the viewer's/reader's negative *participation* in a kind of uncritical automatism that might lead to violence against alterity. Therefore, Levinas generally considered aesthetics to be incompatible with fostering ethical responsibility, arguing that, where language or art strive to create totalizing *images*, "[t]he said is reduced to the Beautiful, which supports Western ontology" (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 40). In contrast, he is drawn to a language that works against reducing *otherness* to a theme, or totality, thereby implicating ethical responsibility. Since a predominant element of contemporary poetry is its own critical reflection on how poetic language can avoid congealing the world in thematization or trying to possess through language, many contemporary poets and scholars (including Jill Robbins, Richard Kearney, David Antoine Williams,

Steve McCaffery, Eloisa Venezuela-Mendoza, Cynthia Hogue, and others) see productive convergences occurring between Levinas's work and poetry, in a way he himself did not directly anticipate.<sup>7</sup>

Levinas's view of poetry is notably ambivalent, and often negative, especially in his earlier work. Later in life his views of aesthetics, particularly poetry, softened slightly, in part due to his friendship with writer and philosopher Maurice Blanchot, and in works like *Proper Names*, he acknowledges the possibility of ethical poetic writing, but always with caution. Scholars often read his work as opening up to certain types of poetic endeavor against its own disapproving declarations regarding aesthetics and literature. As Richard Kearney points out in "Levinas and the Ethics of Imagining":

Levinas' suspicion of images is not directed against the poetic power of imagination per se but against the use of such power to incarcerate the self in a blind alley of self-reflecting mirrors. In other words, the exercise of a poetic imagination open to conversation with the Other (as Levinas claims is the case with Leiris, C elan, Jab es, and Blanchot, among others) is already one that allows the face to exceed the plastic form of the image representing it. Such poetic imagination responds to the surprises and demands of the Other. It never presumes to fashion an image adequate to the Other's irrecuperable transcendence. Consequently, an ethical imagination would permit "the eye to see through the mask, an eye which does not shine but speaks" (*TI*, 38). It would safeguard the saying of the face against the subterfuges of the said.

(Kearney 87-88)

In Levinas's case, Jewish texts and procedures of Midrashic commentary influenced his conceptualizations of ethics and language, even as he strove to

delineate and separate his work with them from Western philosophy. Midrash functions as a “network of relations *within* scripture” that is intralinguistic rather than referential. It is arguably less concerned with determining the meaning of the text than in creating complexities that consider scripture’s textual elements (including the way it was developed), and avoids closing off readings to a singular meaning (Robbins, *Prodigal Son* 14). In this way, he arguably was able to incorporate many “poetic” elements into his thinking, perhaps without labeling them as such. His lineage of Semitic scholarship, along with his poignant personal and cultural experiences of Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust became woven into his ethical sensibilities and integrated into his philosophical work, ultimately forming a unique perspective on language and *otherness*.

The poets’ approaches to relating to *otherness* in their writing call on personal experiences in a similar way. In their poems, Blue Cloud and Harjo work through losses of Indigenous life, land, and language, which have impacted their own lives. Blue Cloud (now deceased) fulfilled the role of poetic witness to the major Indigenous struggle over the colonization of Alcatraz.<sup>8</sup> Harjo’s struggles as a mother and Indigenous woman familiar with the many ways of tearing social fabric, gave her her poetic voice. The shadow of Robert Hass’s childhood, plagued by his mother’s severe alcoholism, as well as his painful divorce in later years, mold his views of human limits and *otherness*,

bringing him into conversation with the world of nature and of loss. Jorie Graham, who came to America as a young woman after growing up in Italy and France, states that:

At some point, when I was a bit older, I realized I came from people who were Russian, Lithuanian, and Austrian on one side of my family, and on the other, from people who held one of the first land grants in Virginia. In other words, I came from people who were put in ovens and from people who kept slaves. And I realized that there was nothing, truly nothing, one human being wasn't willing to do to another—that, for all of the so-called progress of the story we call history, the barbaric gleams right under the surface of all human skin.

(Gardner, "The Art of Poetry" 21)

Poetic language, in opening up these interconnections of past and present and the human future, as well as in working for the redemption of the natural environment, demonstrates, in a unique way, the broad applications of Levinas's counter-linguistic response to *otherness*. For Harjo, for example, this includes being able to say things that she cannot say easily in other ways. She says that "[w]riting poetry enables [her] to speak of things that are more difficult to speak of in 'normal' conversations" (Bruchach 94). Their views of time, memory, history, and the non-human cosmos, encompass and extend the concept of *otherness*, an idea made clear as personal and cultural experiences surface in the nuances and enactments of the linguistic explorations unfolded in their work.

The experiences that underlie the poetics of the writers clearly encompass many facets of life: history, culture, family, knowledge systems, nature,

materiality, feelings, loss, and love. While their writing explores many levels of human experience, the ways they respond and *perform* language consistently demonstrate an underlying engagement with ethical responsibility. For example, when asked whether the barbarism of human nature is a fundamental concern in her work, Graham answers in a way that corresponds to Levinas's approach to the infinite, nonthematizable nature of the world in its relation to language, stating, "Well, it certainly involves and affects my understanding of what poetry can, must, and will always do for us: it complicates us, it doesn't 'soothe'; it helps us to our paradoxical natures, it doesn't simplify us. We *do* contain multitudes" (Gardner, "The Art of Poetry" 22).

Ethical responsibility and "response-ability," come into play most clearly in the poets' critical analyses of their own engagement with the process of writing, usually occurring as acts of writing and reading enacted within the poems themselves. Kearney argues in a similar way that Levinas "repeatedly endorses such critical self-interpretation" able to "retriev[e] art as 'a relation with the other'" (Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow" 117; cited in Kearney 87). Such endorsements surface in *Proper Names*, where Levinas voices approval of the French poet Agnon's use of language as letting life speak "unravel[ing] the ultimate solidity beneath the plasticity of forms that western ontology teaches" finally calling Agnon's technique a form of "Hebraic saying" (Levinas *Proper*

*Names*, 8-11; cited in Kearney 87).<sup>9</sup> In fact, Levinas sees this type of poetry as signifying “not in its theme,” but “as song” (Levinas, *Proper Names* 8). Similarly, in Levinas’s discussions of Celan and Proust from the same book, he considers their writing as opening up “a path ‘toward the other’” through such methods as (in Celan’s case) writing “an alterity exceeding the imagination of the author himself” (Kearney 87). This conceptualization of *otherness* relates to Descartes’ “idea of infinity, as a thought which overflows my thinking of it,” often construed as excess in Levinas’s work (Robbins, *Prodigal Son* 102).

By writing in a way that is sensitive to the infinite, exceeding, nature of the *other*, then, the possibility for cognitively opening up to the existence of the world’s *others* in their uniqueness and *separation* (from the self/same) enacts ethical responsibility in language. What the poets confront in their individual projects and imaginative enactments is the complexity of *otherness* as it comes in conflict with the human desire to *grasp*, to know, and to possess. These confrontations lead to two corresponding but interrelated facets of ethical language that avoid the violence of thematization and mastery—its opening to the infinite mystery of the *other*, and its vital interruption of the self/*sameness* through enlivened language.

Generally, responsibility calls to mind the notion of intention and agency. However, Levinas focuses on the importance of interruption or intrusion into

subjective consciousness that works outside of or prior to agency. Through the *other's* call or command to respond (to it) with responsibility, the subject must open to the infinite nature of the *other* and respond without killing or mastering it, in a dynamic that ultimately constitutes the subjective self. The encounter with the *face* of the *other*, as a unique and unassimilable presence, is intense in its impact, and the force of this encounter is what subsequently informs the constitution of the self. By positing the foundation of selfhood in the interruption of individual consciousness that is finally constituted by undeniable responsibility to the *other*, Levinas *reinscribes* ethics as First Philosophy, replacing the egoistic, solipsistic question of subjective *being* underlying Western philosophy with responsibility to the *other*.

Graham, who often references art in her teaching and her poetry, discusses a similar sense of interruption and relationality in the use of space in Caravaggio's painting, *Supper at Emmaus*. Contemplating how the space of the painting and the *real* gallery space merge through the host's gesture of extending his arm through the shallow plane of the painting, seeming to enter the viewer's world, she explains:

What he [the host] does, by going like this [bringing his arm into the viewer's space], is enact what it is to be "taken" by surprise, to be, suddenly, in that spiritual place where the otherness of the world, of *possibility*, "turns" one's soul—taking one off the path of mere "ongoingness" onto the other path of "journey."

(Gardner, "The Art of Poetry" 10)



This “journey” of possibility and *otherness*, in Graham’s statement, as in Levinas’s formulations, emanates from the encounter with a presence that remains unassimilated, but is met (even greeted) by the subject. The surprising interruption of this meeting of the other in proximity (Levinas’s appropriate distance) calls the subject/viewer into a response of ethical responsibility.

The Cartesian definition of infinity as that which exceeds my human understanding of it grounds Levinas’s view of alterity as something irreducible to (individual) human understanding. While Levinas views the *other* as human, many scholars and poets—like Hass as he considers Stevens’s bird, existing “without human meaning, without human feeling, a foreign song” —have extended this view of *otherness* to include any type of entity that exceeds the grasp of human knowledge and interrupts the referential mode of the self. Peter Atterton, a philosopher whose work reimagines and sometimes radicalizes Levinas’s contributions, argues that Levinas’ emphasis on the human is an example of speciesism, the systematic discrimination of species in which one favors one’s own, but that Levinas’ work holds greater possibilities for including non-human *others* than a superficial reading allows (Atterton 25).

As an ethically constituted being, an individual is responsible for *others*. Atterton argues that Levinas’s logic regarding inconceivable *otherness* opens a

space to consider more than the human realm as part of an ethical world and that “Levinas’s phenomenological description of the face justifies extending moral considerability to animals that can suffer and are capable of expressing that suffering to me” (Atterton 25). Atterton’s essay attempts to expand the sphere of those who have been oppressed through the workings of an allergy to otherness, which for Levinas, included “anti-Semitism, racism, and totalitarianism” (Atterton 25).

In a similar vein, Ted Toadvine writes that “since the Other is beyond being, no revision of ontology, however radical, will provide us with insight into the non-worldly source of ethical orientation” (Toadvine 161). Toadvine quotes from Levinas’s *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, the only text of Levinas’s to consider the question of animal *otherness*. In the text, Levinas states that “moral consciousness is not an experience of values, but an access to external being: external being is *par excellence*, the Other” (Levinas, *Difficult Freedom* 293; cited in Toadvine, 162). While Levinas (at least explicitly) locates merely a limited responsibility to the environment through the use of justice that is only subsequent to any sort of ordinary responsibility to an *other*, and even denies non-human animals a face, Toadvine’s work uncovers a richness in Levinas’s thought in which it plausibly extends to the non-human world.

In another expanded version of Levinas's paradigm, philosopher Luce Irigaray emphasizes two articulations of the *other's* exceeding nature. The first element is its "fundamental inconceivability," which forms the basis of the "face-to-face" encounter. Second is its overflowing nature, which "exceeds any category of subjectivity that has been affixed to it" (due to its inconceivability) (Boetzkes 149).<sup>10</sup>

What Irigaray emphasizes and expands in terms of the *other's* excess is the "consideration of how to relate to otherness without submitting it to the demands of logic," according to Tina Chanter (cited in Boetzkes 57). For poetic language, the question of how to relate in a manner beyond logic becomes: in what ways *beyond* traditional knowledge can one ethically relate to *otherness*? The work of Graham, Hass, Harjo, and Blue Cloud suggests that emotional, corporeal/visceral, and relational modes that reflect uniquely on memory, cosmic interconnection, emptiness/interval, and one's responsibility in the renewal of Creation, reach holistically beyond logic.

The call to responsibility comes from the presence of the *face* as it impacts the subjective self before and *beyond* language, and subsequently implicates the ethical use of language. "A gesture of recognition of the other, a handshake, a saying without a said—these things are important by their interpellation rather

than by their message; important by their attention!" (Levinas, *Proper Names* 43).

In many respects, the issues of attention and interpellation regarding responsibility to the *other* are generated by the limits and possibilities of language as it relates to *other* beings in the world. While posed in different terms, this discussion is similar to queries in contemporary poetry. In his book explaining the literary-philosophical ground of contemporary poetry, *Regions of Unlikeness: Explaining Contemporary Poetry*, Thomas Gardner begins by stating simply that "a number of our most important contemporary poets frame their work as taking place within, and being brought to life by, an acknowledgment of the limits of language" (Gardner, *Regions* 1). While the book's emphasis initially centers on the inability of language to represent or make reference to the world, its deeper significance comes from its demonstration of poetic responses to language's limits that are implicitly or explicitly ethical in nature.

For instance, philosopher Stanley Cavell, a major figure in Gardner's approach to limits, sees the skepticism inherent in certain responses to language as "attempt[s] to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle" in order to escape from uncertainty (Cavell, *Claims* 493; cited in Gardner, *Regions* 3). This way of disengaging from the concerns of living in the world arguably includes evading those related to ethical responsibility. Embracing the uncertainty and finitude at the heart of the human

condition, according to Gardner, leads to several new ways of using language, all with ethical impact. Gardner suggests that, as contemporary writers deal with issues of reference, “they are being drawn to situations in which the limits of knowledge, our finite skin, are in play and in which responses other than knowing (or turning in disgust from a failure to know) are possible” (Gardner, *Regions* 4). Much as in Levinas’s *said* and *saying* distinction, this disappointment in the ability of language to represent and know exists alongside the desire to refuse to convert the *other* into a knowable essence that can be mastered.

An essential element of the human use and “possession” of language, Gardner argues, extending Cavell, comes from the capacity to be disappointed by its (and our) human limits. However, by attending to its limits in the act of writing and refusing disappointment, contemporary poetry “attempt[s] to explore our actual life ‘in words, in the world’” (Gardner, *Regions* 4). By acknowledging both the desire to know and the realization that the desire will remain unfulfilled, contemporary poetry keeps language (and the world it relates to) alive through what Cavell calls “endless specific succumbings to the conditions of skepticism and endless specific recoveries from it, endless as a circle, as a serpent swallowing itself” (Cavell, *Disowning* 30; cited in Gardner, *Regions* 6). The juncture between contemporary poetry and the theory of language in Levinas’s system rests in the possibility of individuals

simultaneously attempting to appropriate *others* to the ego/same while at the same time seeking out the possibility to enliven language in ethical responsibility to the *other*. As Bernard Waldenfels states in “Levinas on the Saying and the Said”: though the *saying* is “*indicated* in what is said, the Saying *surpasses* what is said.” It functions as an *event* that is irreducible to things or acts, which seem to vacillate between the words and the things they indicate, never coming to a finite close (Waldenfels 87). This description suggests a performative element to the *saying* that cannot be genuinely reduced within a structuralist model of language, but is instead freely expressed within poetry’s focus on its own interrupted encounter with the *other*. The statement also locates *live* language outside of the self/*same*, once again finding its origin in the encounter with the *other*.

Rather than attempting to describe or record the world’s entities, or their own thoughts, in static representations that function merely as *images*, the work of Graham, Hass, Harjo, and Blue Cloud attempts to awaken language to a sense of alterity.<sup>11</sup> As we will see, their poems function as linguistic enactments that greet *otherness* using language in a way that struggles to “marry” the world without “possessing” or totalizing it. In their own ways, Graham, Hass, Harjo, and Blue Cloud enact ethical responsibility in Levinasian language that “orients the self, as giver or receiver of speech, toward the other” rather than using

language for mastery (Williams 223). These poets, like Levinas, believe that language at its most basic is a site of ethical contention with ethical fallout. Their poems make it clear that one must remain vigilant, continually enlivening, even undoing, language in order to hold its congealing and mastering nature at bay. Writing, they suggest, is a distinctive way to engage with life through language and, if approached with a sincere effort to avoid mastering the world, it can circumvent the congealing nature of the *said*, keeping language alive through an “attempt to explore our actual life ‘in words, in the world,’” as *sayings* (Gardner, *Regions* 4). The four poets I examine develop understandings of what mastery encompasses, employing their own versions of reflective *critiques*, which resonate with Levinas’s concerns regarding infinity, totality, and *otherness*. They acknowledge the possibility that their human desires to know, to possess, to represent, pose the risk of engendering writing that deadens or congeals the world’s infinite flux. Of course, each poet sees and responds uniquely to this risk of thematizing language.

Chapter one, *Enacting Response to the Other: Jorie Graham’s Poetics of Sensing*, discusses the work of Pulitzer prize winning poet Jorie Graham. Throughout her large body of work, she employs techniques for *performing* language. Her dynamic, intricate, sometimes opaque poems arguably function as Levinasian *sayings* due to the fluidity and constant linguistic readjustments she

makes in them. Graham believes that poetry can reveal the complexity and infinite flux of things/others that have been oversimplified or reduced through embedded perspectives and the rational thought that dismisses other ways of knowing, and she expresses a desire “to return to the vital, wide-ranging questions opened by modernism’s entry into the finitude of speaking or writing” (Gardner, *Regions* 8). In her collection *Never*, for example, she states that she “wanted to create an energy field that would be able to carry sensation over to the reader without the reader having to intervene too early on with what you call ‘thought’. In other words, [she] wanted the reader to *look* and *feel* and *see* and then, obviously, think—but very late in the particular process of these poems” (Gardner, “The Art of Poetry” 22-23). By engaging with different levels of perception, simple thematization becomes more nuanced.

This attempt at *recomplicating* things, as Graham names the overarching move in her work, leads to the realization of an invisible or spiritual—perhaps *infinite*—component of life, which poetry can inspire in the reader and writer. Such openness to what the world offers corresponds to the idea of face as “the way in which the Other presents itself, exceeding *the idea of the Other in me*’ (ibid.: 172)” (Williams 221). In fact, Graham responds to the face of another *other* as well. By bringing the reader into the enactment on the page, poet Joanna Klink argues, Graham’s poems “fight to feel beyond the confines of a single self into a



realm of collective experience,” an element of the challenge in reading them, she adds (Klink 160).

Graham’s poems often play out through enactments that engage readers’ bodies and senses since, according to Graham, without the understanding that comes from having a body, compassion towards *others* is impossible and leads to the ethical risk regarding the world of “not-even-feeling-*it-is-there*, the not-even-feeling-*others-are-real*” outside of assimilation to the ego/same of subjective identity (Gardner, “The Art of Poetry” 34). Often, Graham’s unique poetic acts of description and attunement to the way that varying rhythms can engender different modes of inquiry bring about an acute material and bodily awareness of the world in opposition to moral danger. Quoting William Carlos Williams, she even says that “a new rhythm is a new mind” (Gardner, “The Art of Poetry” 23).

In this chapter, I consider poems that perform language by allowing for the way “things resist your desires—where they insist on their own nature apart from your subjective designs” (Klink 161). Graham considers these constant linguistic readjustments as “an attempt to change the power ratio of witness to world, to give the world—the subject—more power” and to be “open to being ‘corrected’ by the given” (Gardner, “The Art of Poetry” 12). Techniques that work toward openness and critically reflect on the interruption of the self by the *other* engender poems that operate to keep language alive in a form in which it

acknowledges that as soon as it is written, it has already begun reducing the *other* to a thematization. Graham's poems, therefore, like Levinas's *saying*, acknowledge their limits in relation to the world's face, and re-enliven irretrievable traces in language to engage the reader with materiality and infinite flux.

Chapter two, *Carving Out Space for Ethical Attention: Robert Hass's Tender Intervals*, discusses the work of former U. S. poet laureate Robert Hass. The poems appear less concerned than Graham's with the world's infinite flux than with how to respond tenderly to the desire to grasp the world in language. Acknowledging but turning away from ways of using language that either don't engage with, or "touch," the world, or those that "strangle. . . what cannot be held," becomes central in Hass's work (Gardner, *Regions* 117). He involves himself in this tension by "taking responsibility for those responses playing through his own acts of writing and engagement with the world" (Gardner, *Regions* 116). By confronting desire and its manifestations in language as it inevitably grows into a sense of loss, he finds in those expressions of loss intervals or spaces in which to engage tenderly with the world through language which no longer imagines it can master the world. Reflecting on the finiteness of his life, which itself engenders and defeats desire, "forces him to attend to the world on its own terms" (Gardner, *Regions* 123).

Within the spaces in which the desire to possess the world creeps into language and thought, he attempts to retain the imaginative power of what he calls, “as if,” an imaginative opening toward the world that seeks to meet or engage with it. Without mastering, without bruising, but merely by accepting and *praising* its ephemeral nature, he uses language to attend to *others* in a way which is both “casual and intense.” In his work, the feelings of loss generated from knowing that, as a finite human, the world, and perhaps love and other desired things will escape his grasp, makes possible the poet’s celebration of individual finitude. Striving to move past desire and loss, he eventually finds a way to “inhabit” his life through language that responds to the world in a kind of dance where he meets the world on its own terms. What he refuses to do is “to give up the live intricacies of thinking and describing for something easy” — a refusal that corresponds to Levinas’s concept of *saying* (Gardner, *Regions* 130).

Chapter three, *Spiraling the Universe Centrifugally: Joy Harjo’s Songs to Keep Sky Open*, considers the award-winning poetry of Joy Harjo. Harjo is a visual artist, film-maker, poet, and musician whose performances combine spoken and sung poems with jazz saxophone playing. Bridging her Muskogee/Creek and European heritage, she “reinvents” English — “the enemy’s” language — in a direct response to the physical and cognitive colonization of Native Americans, as Laura Coltelli states in the foreword to *Soul Talk, Song Language: Conversations*

*with Joy Harjo* (Harjo and Winder xi). Her imaginative endeavors place her in a position “to speak directly in a language that was intended to destroy us [Native Americans]” (Harjo and Winder xi). That is to say, she discovers the possibility of *saying* within the *said*’s stultifying nature.

Growing up in a house where her mother’s singing was “often holding [their] home together,” “sounds do much more than play to the senses in Harjo’s poetry” (Harjo and Winder ix). The “natural continuity” of oral presentation, music, and written poems forms a convergence that helps her “find a way to sing,” in which the musical energy of song becomes the connection (in her poetic enactments) between her heart and the external world (Harjo and Winder x). From an interview with Triplopia in *Soul Talk, Song Language*, we learn that by performing “rigorous studies, of the human soul,” Harjo’s poems exceed theoretical inquiry (Harjo and Winder 5). These “studies” energetically “penetrate,” weaving cosmic entities in a dynamic web of living (Harjo and Winder 5).

Deeply committed to art that positively impacts the world, she takes artistic responsibility seriously (Harjo and Winder xii). For the poet to fulfill this responsibility, she must help others engage “all parts of [their] being,” rather than merely their intellects (Harjo and Winder xiii). Using sound fuses “oral and written poetry” and music (Harjo and Winder 4). By listening for what she calls

*songs*, the unique expressions generated by parts of the cosmos exterior to herself, she gathers earth, sky, and stars to her heart. These things in turn pull her heart outward, and ultimately, as memory—a very important element in her work—put into her heart things that are also whirling themselves and her outward “centrifugally.” Remembering, therefore, puts things into her heart, but in a way that reaches out, and whirls out, to the whole universe, whirling her out, as well, a powerful demonstration of the fluidity of Levinasian *saying*.

Chapter four, *Returning to Creation’s Mind: Peter Blue Cloud’s “Mind-Weaving” Dance of Poetic Consciousness*, discusses the work of Peter Blue Cloud. Blue Cloud, now deceased, was from Canada, but spent much time traveling and living in the United States. He spoke his Native Mohawk in the home where he stayed “as a kid” with his grandfather, as well as reading Shakespeare (Bruchach 27). There, he learned to feel the mental rhythms from the songs and “the repetition of the chants” around him (Bruchach 27). He developed oral poems and by the time he was about thirteen, began writing them down. Over the course of his career, he edited several Indigenous publications including *Indian Magazine*, which at one point, had so few submissions that he ended up putting in much of his own poetry under various pseudonyms (Bruchach 33).

In his preface for Blue Cloud’s anthology, *Clans of Many Nations: Selected Poems 1969-94*, poet Gary Snyder revisits the words he wrote for Blue Cloud’s

early book, *Turtle, Bear and Wolf* in which he wrote, “Blue Cloud’s poems are living proof that the power and beauty of the Old Ways cannot be lost” (11). Snyder explains that in this case, “‘Old’ means true, right, normal in the flow of the universe,” as well as, perhaps, trusted because of coming from well-worn spiritual systems like Taoism, Buddhism, and Indigenous ones (*Clans*, 12). Blue Cloud’s poetry, he says, reveals, “the true mind-Nature; human nature one with Nature,” which is in tune with—or “Is it all lost? Was it ever real?”— “[a] life where men and women, trees, grasses, animals, the wind were at ease with each other? Virtually spoke to each other?” (Blue Cloud *Clans*, 11). While Snyder places his work “squarely in the mode of twentieth century American poetry,” he suggests that the vastness of Blue Cloud’s cultural and personal experience is explored in his work “with many voices—narrative, lyrical, celebratory, mythic, interspecies” (Blue Cloud *Clans*, 11).

These many voices help Blue Cloud awaken language to a sense of alterity by “returning” him and the reader to the infinite mystery of Creation through an augmentation of it that is both personal/intimate and imaginative in relation to what is exterior to himself. Taking a word from one of his poems, I call his process of thinking within language, *mind-weaving*, the enacting of his role in Creation by his use of imagination to investigate the expressions and infinite mystery of *other* beings. Everything in the universe is an element from Creation’s

mind; therefore, openness to the expressions of *other* beings is openness to Creation itself.

In “The Anarchical Goodness of Creation: Monotheism in Another’s Voice” from *Facing Nature: Levinas and Environmental Thought*, philosopher James Hatley revisits creation in relation to Levinas in a way that resonates with Blue Cloud’s poetic project. He states:

Merely to persist in one’s being, in one’s having been illuminated *as* creature, is not a sufficient response to having been created. . . . Rather than signifying a continuum of sustained existence, creation is revealed to be a renewal that cannot be quelled, a call to responsiveness and responsibility that cannot be limited or anticipated.

(Hatley 258 and 264)

For Blue Cloud humans are an integral part of creation and must engage with it on its own terms. This leads to *mind-weaving* by performing a cognitive opening to *otherness* on the page.

Levinas asserts in *Otherwise Than Being* that the *saying* exposes one consciousness to another through language “in the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability” (Levinas 48). While Levinas saw this responsibility to attend to the *other* through enlivened language as ethical, Richard Kearney suggests that

If ethics is left entirely to itself, or allowed to dictate to poetics at every turn, it risks degenerating into cheerless moralism. Ethics needs poetics to be reminded that its responsibility to the Other includes the possibility of

play, liberty, and pleasure, just as poetics needs ethics to be reminded that play, liberty, and pleasure are never self-sufficient but originate in, and aim toward, an experience of the other-than-self.

(Kearney 94)

What I unfold in the chapters to come is the way that four distinct individuals open themselves to the vulnerability and struggle of sincere but playful engagements with language that attempt a *saying*. Imaginative language, I argue, gives ethics a stage to enact our responsibility to the *other* in all its unexpected liberty and freedom.



*Enacting Response to the Other: Jorie Graham's Poetics of Sensing*

The resonance between the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jorie Graham is tied fundamentally to the idea of *otherness*. For Levinas, philosophy's traditional emphasis on subjective *being* denies the significance of entities external to the self, and the moral necessity of developing inter-subjective relationships with them. In his formulation, these are human *others*, experienced by the subject through encounters with the presence and inconceivable *excess* of their faces. Moving beyond Western philosophy's totalizing notion of *being* through the interruption that the face of the *other* brings about leads to a type of consciousness in the subject that avoids solipsism, and that is therefore vital to the existence of *others* in their truest autonomous identities.<sup>12</sup>

The act of "thinking the *other*" in language so as not to reduce it to an assimilation of the same, a mere version of the *self*, is a way to remain open to its inconceivability and excess—its infinite nature.<sup>13</sup> In Levinas's system, this openness to *others*, stemming from their very presence, replaces philosophy's emphasis on *being* with a responsibility to avoid doing violence to or mastering *otherness*. The call to this responsibility, as opposed to the thematization of the *other*, comes from the intensity of the experience of encounter, which is more significant than a purely phenomenological moment, but also exceeds conceptualizing through reason and logic. Instead it is a holistic and experiential

awakening to the infinite inconceivability of the *other* that overflows against the tendency of the subject's assimilating nature.

The predominant site in which violence to the *other* occurs, but can be counteracted, is in the thematizing and congealing nature of language, the tendency of the *said*, against which Levinas struggles to perform his ethics. Opposed to a type of knowing that assumes the *other* can be intellectually mastered or possessed through static thematization in language, the response outside of logic that relates to the *other* through the appeal of its presence/ face reconfigures the boundary of self to *other* through *proximity*, distance without dismissal. In this sense, *proximity* is a way of relating to an *other* without reducing it to an element of the *same* (self) and it encompasses the way that the infinite nature of the *other* can retain its own identity and power. So while language's tendency to congeal as soon as it is written does violence to the *other* by reducing it to the finite designation of a *said*, there remains the possibility for re-enlivening language, as a Levinasian *saying*.

Graham explores similar ideas, with the world often in the role of *other*, and also often, with the reader in that role. She believes that the human appetite "instinctive[ly] and unavoidable[ly]" "desires metaphysical and intellectual, as much as material, gain," yet the world is constantly in flux, dynamic, changing through time (Vendler 54). One's experiences with people, animals, nature,

Irigarayan elementals, and processes are part of this dynamic interaction, which language can only partially express.<sup>14</sup> In moves paralleling those of Levinas, Graham attempts to acknowledge and counteract the violent thematizing of the *other* to the *same* within the language of her poems, which function as expressive extensions of dynamic experience, critic Willard Spiegelman notes:

Because her major subject is our perceptual negotiations with the world, she keeps struggling to create or discover adequate aesthetic forms for her philosophical problems: how the world appears, how we register its appearance, and how it inhabits and expands our minds.<sup>15</sup>

(Spiegelman 221)

Similar to Levinas's attempt to perform a *saying* of ethics in language, she explores the border between self and *other* through language that is aware of its limitations, yet strives to enact more than the limits seem to allow, imagining a way to exceed them by "feel[ing] her way into the heterogeneity, simultaneity, chromatic change, spontaneity, and self-correction present in all acts of noticing" that hint at the world's excess (Vendler 54). When reason breaks down for her, it is the body, perhaps more specifically, the senses, which help her and her readers to inhabit the world differently and relate more openly and fully to it.

Rather than philosophy's typically intellectual way of knowing that assumes the world can be reduced to the subject's cognitive grasp, Graham's poetry strives to access and enact feelings of experiences that come to life through engaging with the world with the range of understanding of one's

whole body. According to literary scholar Helen Vendler's description of Graham's process, "[n]ot until inner feeling and outer perception begin to meld, and the poet's body becomes kinesthetically, a form of the world's fluid body, can the world be re-created in language" (Vendler 54). Therefore, Graham's poems enact encounters with the world like those Levinas describes as ethically significant by invoking the senses as a vital component of thought by "translating ideas into physical realities, bringing them down into the body so that they are particular, concrete, visceral, known" (Klink 157).

We might call the new relation in each of their ways of engaging with *otherness* and the world, ethics, since it reinscribes into the constitution of the self and into the approach to avoid mastering the world, the significance of relationality to *others*. The *something* they each perform or enact entails a type of attentiveness that comes from the response to encountering the *other's* presence/face, and develops into responsibility through attempts to allow for and foster the *other's* excess in a re-enlivened type of language. Both Levinas and Graham, therefore, to varying degrees, perform or enact a new way of listening to the world that corresponds to a distinct way of describing or relating to—beyond merely describing—it in language. Levinas calls it *saying*, while Graham might call it "recomplicating the world." The distinction Graham adds is the role of the body, specifically, the senses, in this ethically charged performance.

In describing feeling or sensing in Graham's poetry, poet Joanna Klink states that Graham uses these ways of accessing the world in order to bring out the realness of both "experience and idea," two often "explosively incompatible" aspects of life (Klink 157). Klink, as a reader finds herself deeply affected by the way Graham brings the two into conversation: "To bring together what I experience of the world in my body, and the ideas by which I understand this experience, or to restore the body and the senses to the mind, is the 'dream of the unified field,' the prayer behind every poem" (Klink 157). In fleshing out these ideas in terms of their deeper significance to Graham's poetics, Klink states:

To feel an idea means to inhabit the problem with the full force of your body and your mind, rather than just to think it. It creates a situation out of words that is concrete, visceral, real; one in which you are forced to consider deeply, to choose, to act, to be known by your action. The way you work for meaning when you read Graham's poems is part of this process, and so are the moments when you feel that something has been arrived-at, broken-through-to, or revealed.

(Klink 168)

This conceptualization underscores, not only Graham's attempts to enliven language through the body so that it does not congeal and thematize the world of *others*, but also the importance she places on the responsibility of using language to create an open space for *otherness*. The flux and infinite nature of *otherness* affects the self through the impact of its presence on one's body, and Graham uses language that does more than reflect that; rather, it embodies it.

Consider “Vertigo” from *The End of Beauty*, a poem in which the narrator goes with a group of people to look over the edge of a steep cliff, staying at the top after her friends have gone down to ponder the perceptions that this viewpoint engenders (Graham, *Beauty* 66-67). *Sensing* the world from this perspective fosters an openness to the world’s way of exceeding logical thought and, in this way, the poem uses the body to create nuanced responses that *recomplicate* the world and the narrator’s perspective of it. Engaging the body’s senses inspires attentiveness to the world that a finite logical perspective cannot because, while this engagement acknowledges reductive reason, it also discovers felt, sensory nuances related to the external world beyond the subject’s cognitive grasp and compares them to, and tries to reinscribe them into, logical thought. Consider the way the following passages engage the senses and reflect on thinking.

She thought of where the mind opened out  
 into the sheer drop of its intelligence,  
 the updrafting pastures of the vertical in which a bird now rose,  
 blue body the blue wind was knifing upward  
 faster than it could naturally rise,  
 up into the downdraft until it was frozen until she could see them  
at last  
 the stages of flight, broken down, broken free,  
 each wingflap folding, each splay of the feather-sets flattening  
 for entry. . . . *Parts* she thought, *free parts*, watching the laws  
 at work, *through which desire must course*  
 seeking an ending, seeking a shape. Until the laws of flight and fall  
increased.  
 Until they made, all of an instant, a bird, a blue

enchantment of properties no longer knowable. What is it to understand, she let fly, leaning outward from the edge now that the others had gone down.

In attempting to understand the world's entities more fully and more openly following this encounter, the narrator engages with their physical properties and movements. For example, she uses various, sometimes opposing words that call on a personal experience of movement and its visceral feeling in the body. She puts her consciousness into question by reconsidering these terms related to movement— “opening out,” “drop,” “updrafting,” “vertical,” “knifing upward,” “downdraft”—in relation to thinking and to understanding the world around her, which brings out the bodily elements of thought and puts the very idea of thinking in question.

In her reconfiguration of thinking, there is also a desire to understand the *free parts* of the bird's flight through thinking that is non-mastering—that is ethically responsible. These parts of the bird are free to form something that “enchant[s],” beyond “factual content” or the logic and reason of traditional knowledge, through “properties no longer knowable” in a reductive intellectual sense. Allowing for the way that the parts ultimately come together as something avoiding complete possession in reductive knowledge, that must, in the end be sensed as well—as the amazing act of a bird in flight—Graham

recomplicates the world by enacting visceral, materially based, poetical experiences of it.

In discussions on the ethical significance of poetry, Graham asserts that this *bodiliness* and its continuity with a physical place are vital tools for feeling and acting compassionately and relating ethically toward *others*. The “sensation of presence” that the connection of body and mind bring to the understanding of the material world, functions as “the ambassador of something else,” which evokes *something* while at the same time, acknowledges the limited ability of language or logical thought to encompass it (Gardner, “The Art of Poetry” 35).

Consider this passage toward the end of “Vertigo”:

She leaned out. What is it pulls at one, she wondered,  
what? That it has no shape but point of view?  
That it cannot move to hold us?  
Oh it has vibrancy, she thought, this emptiness, this intake just  
prior to  
the start of a story, the mind trying to fasten  
and fasten, the mind feeling it like a sickness this wanting  
to snag, catch hold, begin, the mind crawling out to the edge of the cliff  
and feeling the body as if for the first time—how it cannot  
follow, cannot love.

While the mind is always trying to grasp intellectually, always at the edge of the cliff, here Graham considers the world’s *otherness*, “everything else in the world” in an approach in which it “appeared as kinds of falling,” a feeling quite distinct from reasoning. This distinction between knowing and feeling, allows for a holistic understanding coming from the destabilizing effect on the senses,



which expand understanding toward the “love”/compassion that the bodily recomplication of awareness makes possible in the presence of the *other*.

By activating the senses, re-adjusting language, and engaging readers in such a way that they too must *recomplicate* their understandings of words, the world, and their place in it, Graham develops an ethically significant form of Levinasian *saying* through the poetics of sensing. The poems that follow each consider aspects of how the body can be reinscribed in thought through language holding just such possibilities of opening to *others*.

Graham extends Levinas’s view of alterity to include *the world* in a way similar to philosopher Luce Irigaray, for whom the *other* is such because of its inconceivable/exceeding nature, whether human, animal, or elemental, and in contrast to Levinas’s view of *others* as only including human beings. In the following poems, Graham strives to develop a type of attentiveness to the world of *others* that is holistic, using language uniquely to engage the senses to enact the experiences grounding the poems. Ultimately, she develops a way of expressing a type of thinking that uses the body and bridges logical and visceral ways of relating to the world. This recovery of the body is a way of responding to the world more fully without mastering it, instead creating the possibility for *proximity* that allows the inconceivability of *otherness* a space in which to be free, unassimilated to the *same*.

“Something is left out, something left behind” begins “Framing,” a poem by Graham from *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (35). It continues:

As, for instance,

in this photo of myself at four, the eyes  
focus elsewhere, the hand interrupted mid-air by some enormous,  
sudden,  
fascination.

Something never before seen has happened left of frame,  
and everything already known  
is more opaque for it.  
Beyond the frame is why

the hydrangea midsummer will go no further, though it continues,  
why this century, late and turning,  
turns away ; beyond  
is where the story goes after all the knots are tied, and where . . .

We see in this early poem Graham’s fascination with language as it relates to the unyielding quality of things. In continuing to engage with the of question of “why” things happen beyond, or exterior to—both Levinasian terms—the picture’s frame, Graham’s descriptions in “Framing” provide a way of conceptualizing the *exceeding*, uncontainable, or irreducible nature of such things as the hydrangea, which has completed its growing season, but lives past the time of growth, or the completed story that still contains possibilities and goes somewhere “after all the knots are tied.”

An early poem, "Framing" contains the seeds of what becomes Graham's preoccupation with the way the language of poems can enact attentiveness to something beyond subjective *being* by interrupting the static, ego-centered thinking of the self. In "Framing," Graham questions the finite perspectives of herself as poet, and also those of the readers, by investigating and comparing the photo to the way that the boundaries of individual consciousness frame thought, although her consideration and use of the body in this early poetic investigation is still unclear. Mirrored by the picture in which the girl's eyes focus elsewhere and her hands are suspended in a finite moment, Graham is, as yet, unsure of the body's role in a different way of thinking, but is certainly questioning subjective thought and developing a type of awareness coming from the body in relation to the world's *others*. What occurs in the exterior realm beyond the photo's edge interrupts the girl's consciousness, jolting the child out of the limits of the frame by "[s]omething never before seen."

The frame's limits arguably represent the limits of human knowledge and perspective. By revealing the dynamic nature of the *others* she engages with in "Framing," such as the word "beyond," and all she associates with it, she forms the space in which these *others* exceed the human grasp of language. Against the fluid "beyond" of these *others*, the girl is congealed, with the danger of being lost in finitude surrounded by the world's flux. It is the attention, the listening to the

things that *speak to* her from outside of, or “beyond,” the frame, which creates the possibility to transform static knowledge and break the freezing hold on her existence. This makes “everything already known / . . . more opaque [or complex/*recomplicated*] for it.”

Only hinted at in this early poem, the attempt to marry sensing/feeling to logical thought in order to understand the dynamism of the world in a more holistic way that does not limit it to logical reduction will encompass much of Graham’s subsequent poetic techniques. In her essay, “Jorie Graham’s Subversive Poetics: Appetites of Mind, Empire-building, and the Spaces of Lyric Performativity,” for instance, Mary S. Strine explores “Graham’s lyric interrogations of the imagination’s restless will to mastery and struggle for form, the taproots of modernist aesthetics, Western epistemology, and imperialism alike” (Strine 3). Ultimately highlighting the moral aspect of Graham’s performative poetics, Strine begins her discussion by laying out the idea that:

Arguably, her uncompromising struggle to know the world with imaginative freshness through genuine lyric engagement, yet to resist the colonizing force of epistemic closure, centers her performative poetics. For Graham, the poetic process is foremost a drama of creative interaction—a staging of encounters—between consciousness and its other; in her words, poems are quintessentially ‘dialogues between the song of man and the silences of God,’ and a passionate struggle with those silences to say something that is true (“Some Notes on Silences” 413, 415).  
(Strine 5)

From Strine's statement, we can see that Graham struggles to develop modes of poetic *saying* that perform opening encounters with beings exterior to her by writing in a way that resonates with Levinas's ethical project. Furthermore, by engaging with the potency and fluidity of a world constantly in flux, Graham's writing also affirms the Cartesian formulation of infinity as "a thought which overflows my thinking of it," an important inspiration for Levinas's conceptualization of alterity and for language that acknowledges alterity's excess (Robbins, *Altered Readings* 102). This overflowing nature comes into play through the inconceivability of "beyond" in "Framing," and what Graham calls, the destructiveness of "beyond":

. . . beyond  
is what the wind  
leans towards, easy as can be, the sheep  
  
we have already counted,  
the world too large to fit.  
Within, it would have been a mere event,  
not destructive as it is now, destructive as the past remains,  
  
becomes, by knowing more than we do.

The destructiveness of "beyond" — with "beyond" representing the nature of *other* beings or thoughts who/that are uncontainable in human thought — creates a space in which things expand outside of what humans know or can know of them. The object of the destructiveness may be the human belief that we can actually grasp fully such excess, when we cannot.

For Graham, humans can only access, or “bear-in,” and express a fraction of the world through the senses and writing since its overflowing nature exceeds the human grasp of it. The significance of questioning the self that the unexpected interruption by something external to it inspires resonates with Levinas’s call or demand for responsibility from the *other* in the way it works to open thinking up and relate to the *other*. In “Framing,” the edges of the frame, its limits, represent consciousness, and suggest the transformative effects of the call of an *other* through the mode in which the poem engages with infinity’s excess, as well as through its opening of the self’s perspective. The sense of productivity or fluidity inherent in excess corresponds to the desires and limits of the act of description itself, as well as its need to remain fluid in order to remain open to *otherness*. The questioning nature of exteriority, which the at first, closed-off perspective of “Framing” highlights, is an important consideration in much of Graham’s work that leads to poetic investigations that delve more deeply into the ways humans access and understand the world. Within the tension between the written poem and the world’s spiritual—perhaps exceeding—silences, Graham states that “my choices in poems are never merely aesthetic or technical, but always, somehow, moral. That I am implicated by them and responsible, finally responsible, for each choice in the poem as if it were an act in the street. (415)” (Strine 6).

Consider the poem “Cagnes Sur Mer, 1950” from *Place*, in which Graham imagines herself back to an earlier use of words, before knowing or distinguishing (Graham, *Place* 6-8). The unexpectedly visceral impact of the narrator’s memory of her mother compels her to work her way back to the earliest impression she can remember, the poem moving backwards to a time when her relationship to the world, more blatantly tied to a visceral way of attending to it, seemed more open to *otherness*:

I am the only one who ever lived who remembers  
my mother’s voice in the particular shadow  
cast by the skyfilled Roman archway  
which darkens the stones on the down-sloping street  
up which she has now come again suddenly.  
How the archway and the voice and the shadow  
seize the small triangle of my soul  
violently, as in a silent film where the accompaniment  
becomes a mad body  
for the spirit’s skipping images—abandoned homeland—miracle from which  
we come back out alive. . .

In seizing the narrator’s soul, the feeling that this memory conjures compels reflection on the changes in her way of thinking and relating to the world, which have occurred over the course of her lifetime. Memories of her mother—those she experiences as the catalyst for writing the poem and those she reflects upon from a time when she and her way of thinking were much different—unify the poem’s examination of thinking and feeling. They help her to access a time when she attended/listened to and understood the world around

her simply as impressions and visceral instantiations of *others*, things external to her self. These memories compel the narrator to trace the transformation in her way of thinking and engaging with the world from infancy to the moment when she writes the poem. Reversing the changes by trying to access a part of herself that can now, seemingly, only exist through a relationship to the world that has come to use language predominantly as a form of reason and logic, at the expense of a type of sensing and feeling capable of inspiring openness to the world, she struggles to discover how these changes occurred, perhaps recovering some of the earlier reliance on feeling in the process:

. . . So here from there again I,  
read it off the book of time,  
my only time, as if in there is a fatal mistake of which  
I cannot find the nature—or shape—or origin—I  
pick up the infant and place it back again  
to where I am a small reservoir of blood, twelve pounds of bone and  
sinew and other matters—already condemned to this one soul—

Acknowledging that it is likely hubris allowing her to think she could revisit the time of her infancy, the narrator says: “—as if I could travel, I back up / those arteries, up the precious liquid, across the field of methods, agonies, / astonishments--.” Yet she is determined to try to access *something*—some openness—a different way of relating to the world that was not so closed off in its way of engaging, and accepted what the cosmos offered.



Perhaps this openness will flow from remembering a time when her perspective did not come from a definitive, judging mode of thought. When “[h]er mind ran everywhere and was completely still at the center. And that did not feel uncomfortable.” By considering these origins, she attempts to discover the productive ethical or moral connections between the different facets of her engagement with the world, which involve the visceral openness of infancy, as it implicates the reasoning thinking of later life, her very *self* encompassing the common element in her association of one to the other:

. . . —I  
will sit once again so boldly at my beginning,  
dark spot where one story does not yet become another,  
and words, which have not yet come to me, will not yet try to tell  
where each thing emerges, where it is heading,  
and where the flow of tendency will shine  
on its fast way downhill. . .

In the act of writing, she reflects on the significance of the ways she has related to the world throughout her lifetime. “[T]he field of methods, agonies, and astonishments” that developed during her life experiences occur after the time of heightened openness. The struggle in language represents the attempt of her contemporary self to relate them back to the visceral, feeling, preverbal world of infancy. By writing that “my beginning, / dark spot where one story does not yet become another,” she distinguishes the infant-perspective in which words and language do not yet control and organize understanding. Instead, her

description engages the senses with the world in a way that does not attempt to master, but rather allows impressions to come fluidly without thematization or judgment. The time she describes “was before [she] knew about knowing. / [Her] mind ran everywhere and was completely still at the center.” In those lines, she investigates and enacts ways of knowing that include the body by reflecting on memories that can now be understood only from the distance of the adult thinker who has learned through the “methods” of intellectual types of “knowing,” methods absent in the narrator’s remembered moments of sensing.

In this work, Graham looks for rifts in experience and ways of thinking over the course of the different stages of her life. These moments open up her engagement with the world because they enact encounters with something—an *otherness*—that have led to her own “astonishments,” something relating to the infinite nature of the world, the experiential world. As Levinas writes in *Proper Names*, quoting Jean Wahl, not to “the cold world of eternal ideas or of impersonal history,” but of the “lived world,” “this domain of feeling . . . through which we can mingle with the universe,” and develop an ethical relationship to its *others* (Levinas 115-116). Her investigation in “Cagnes” also uses a distinctive descriptive style that seems impressionistic and spatially oriented, and therefore, corresponds to the infant’s different way of knowing, based more on sensing and feeling than logic or domination. The line “A bird

sang, it added itself to the shadow / under the archway," for instance, reveals the way an impression might have entered the infant's mind, and conjures the sense of the momentariness of a passing thought. This type of simplicity avoids linguistic thematizing of the things conjured in the memories. Instead, it attempts simply to reveal them in an open way corresponding to the perspective of the narrator as a baby.

She reflects on the infant's way of feeling, acknowledging that within the enactment of the poem, she is thinking "from this distance," the position of her contemporary self that "knows about knowing." In returning to the time before she physically walked, she contends that "my soul walked everywhere without weight." By describing this early time before her *mind* knew and her *body* ambulated—as they do at the time she writes the poem—we see the significance of relating to space and sensory input in a way that relies on the body to create an understanding of the world. Even the description of the spatial layout of the town parallels the visceral way of engaging with the world encompassing the infant's vastly different way of thinking. When speaking about her preverbal nature, the narrator remarks that the adult use of words tends to create linear thought that "will shine on its fast way downhill," the gravity of going downward like an inevitable force pulling the mind toward logical thought. Much of the poem's description melds the spatial organization of the town with

the infant's visceral understanding, encompassing its sensory, feeling way of knowing, which implicates the moral entanglements of linear way of thinking subtly:

Where the road sloped downhill there was disappearance.  
Which was exactly what I imagined should happen.  
Appearance and disappearance.  
In my only life.  
When my mother's voice got closer it had a body.

In the memory described toward the end of the poem, the narrator's mother brings a basket of lemons as she comes toward her. Ultimately, it is her mother's physical body that encompasses the center of her spatial and visceral understanding of the world. Consider the relationship of her mother's body to the poet's memory: "My mind now / can go round her, come in front, and wrap her / as her arms wrapped that basket. . ."

. . . And when her body arrives  
it is with the many lemons entirely struck, entirely taken, by sunshine,  
which the heavy basket is still now carrying,  
and her bright fingernails woven into each other,  
and her face with its gaze searching for me,  
gaze which felt like one of the bright things she was carrying  
in front of herself, a new belly.  
All I was to invent in this life is there in the wicker basket among the lemons  
having come from below the horizon where the sound of the market rises  
up into the private air in which she is moving. . .

These lines describe both an interruption of the narrator's consciousness by something external to herself, and perhaps, the first moments of the separation of herself in ethical *proximity/distance* to *others* that the intensity of the encounter

with her mother's presence brings about. Moving in her mind toward *others*, the inconceivability of *otherness* is preserved through a sense of the *otherness* that is exterior to her.

What the poetic performance demonstrates is the narrator enacting and reviving the sense of open engagement from her fledgling encounter with the world's *otherness*, and its ethical significance to her as she writes the poem. In returning to this early encounter by trying to engage with its infant thinking, a vital way of engaging with the world of *others* develops, as the following lines make clear: "[a]ll I was to invent in this life is here in the wicker basket among the lemons / having come from below the horizon." The gaze of her mother—not an uncovering, thematizing gaze, but a searching, loving gaze—occurring at "the moment of [her] being given [her] name," her designation, aided in her developing a distinction between self and *otherness*, but one in which she will work to remain attentive and open to the *other*. The poem has enacted how her way of feeling-as-thinking "there" in infancy influences her thinking "here" and now as poet.

In "Gulls," also from *Never*, Graham focuses on the world—specifically, on a flock of gulls in the surf, then the red of the sun going down (Graham, *Never* 26-30). Graham's use of description here is reflective, improvisatory, and

changing as she opens herself to the *heterogeneity* and *spontaneity*, to use Vendler's terms, of the gulls and their surroundings. Through her constant linguistic reconfiguration, enlivening of the movement and color of the scene, and her own reflection on the correspondence of what she is writing to what she is viewing, the gulls, the waves, and the red sun's reflection, become recomplicated in their infinite flux. Thinking the *other* by complicating description to the point where it nearly collapses, Graham enlists the body in the possibility of enacting a connection to the *others* that make up the world of the gulls. We feel the red in our eyes, imagine it slapping onto our feet in the form of breaking water, and understand the *otherness* of gulls, waves, and sun through the environment's rhythms, which "come / and go," expand and collapse, with a "unified inrolling awayness." "Gulls" is a fine example of Graham's technique of "porting," in which she adjusts her language in real-time rather than reporting what she sees as a fixed moment in a static seen that is frozen as soon as it is written. Consider the description of the gulls in the opening lines of this four part poem:

Those neck-pointing out full bodylength and calling  
outwards over the breaking waves.

Those standing in waves and letting them come and  
go over them.

Those gathering head-down and over some one  
thing.

Those still out there where motion is  
primarily a pulsing from underneath



parentheses, she tries to get at what the red “is” by considering what it does and how it affects her as she views its movements and instantiations:

[Or onto my feet, then into my eyes] where red turns into “sun” again. So then it’s sun in surf-breaking water: incircling, smearing: mind not knowing if it’s still “wave,” breaking on itself, small glider, or if it’s “amidst” (red turning feathery) or rather “over” (the laciness of foambreak) or just *what*—(among the line of also smearingly reddening terns floating out now on the feathery backedge of foambroken looking)—*it is*.

The realization that the red is the sun, “turns into ‘sun’ again,” grows as she feels it affect her physically, striking her feet or entering her eyes. Even though the red is known to be sun, beyond this name, its nature is as yet, amorphous, and the “mind” wonders how to describe it more poignantly—searching for words that investigate its relationship to other parts of the environment, including to the poet herself. Is it “amidst,” “over,” or “just-what” is it as it smears red the terns floating on the edge of the onlooker’s gaze?

In the final section of the poem, Graham examines words themselves, noticing that, at least in certain ways of using them, they seem to want to *still* the fluid world, but cannot because the world’s flux overtakes them. The drive to know that thematizes and designates through congealing language, Levinas’s *said*, is what the narrator realizes her attempts at description are in danger of enacting, what Garth Greenwell has called, “the eye’s avarice,” in conjunction



with Graham's ethical motivations (Greenwell 123). In Greenwell's essay,

"Beauty's Canker: On Jorie Graham," he writes:

Graham has always been suspicious of the eye's avarice, what rises in us to claim whatever we find beautiful. Yet it is not just avarice the self feels when confronted with beauty, and a representation of sense experience that tries to side-step the moral ambiguities of looking ("that will not see / Because he doth not feel," as Gloucester says on the heath, indicting himself among others) also relinquishes, these poems suggest, its access to what Graham calls "the eye-thinking heart."

(Greenwell 123)

This ethical motivation and language's inevitable congealing, inspire Graham's imaginative response to the possibility of human language's mastering effect. Beginning the fourth section of the poem by metaphorically making the words into gulls, language retains the birds' fluid, *recomplicating* movement in relation to the world:

The wind swallows my words one  
by  
one. The words leaping too, over their own  
staying.  
Oceanward too, as if being taken  
away  
into splash—my clutch of  
words  
swaying and stemming from my  
saying, no  
echo. . .

The narrator "strains" to "grasp by [her] meanings," aspects of the world "spoken out by [her]." The words she uses try to congeal, but remain somewhat fluid, as they are "wedged-in between unsaying and / forgetting—." They would



suggests that words might function like flowers—“open and attached / so hard to / what they carry” —attempting to move and see, not only forward, but backward, beneath, and behind themselves, drawn to the world’s infinite nature “as if there were a / sun / back there they need.” Only looking forward at “reference,” “admission,” and “resemblance,” is a betrayal of words and the world in their reduction of *otherness*. In this poem, therefore, *otherness* shifts Graham’s language as much as language struggles to avoid capturing the world.

In “Via Negativa,” the narrator speaks to an *other*, here in the form of “you,” and watches herself at that relational boundary using and negating words (Graham, *Never* 79-80). It is as if she is trying to enter the collapse of language, the *via negativa* that she has been investigating, to give the *other* its space. The poem begins with the narrator considering what is gracious:

Gracious will. Gracious indistinct.  
Everything depends on the point where nothing can be said.  
From there we can deduce how  
from now on nothing will be like.

Perhaps she is wondering if the will of a subjective *being*, whose words tend to congeal and thematize in assimilation, can be gracious. Perhaps graciousness is tied to a lack of distinction that might create openness through the collapse of language: a space where the capacity to deduce and to understand comes from acknowledging that, in a way, nothing that truly resembles the experience of the

world can be stated, “the point where nothing can be said” or can truly resemble or be “like.”<sup>16</sup>

In entering the collapse of language in this poem, Graham relies on reflections and thoughts of a “you” in the role of *other*, to investigate how people make sense of one another, and to open up the possibility of responding in alternative ways to the enigmatic nature of what we, as human beings, cannot fully conceive. As the poem develops, these notions lead her to investigate ethical dilemmas that a particular mode of engaging with *otherness* engenders, one that the poem suggests, does not rely intensely enough on sensing and feeling, and therefore, does not acknowledge the dynamism, excess, and significance to the narrator’s constitution of consciousness, of the presence of “you,” as *other*, in the poem:

. . . Do I have, for example,  
a heart? Does it only *feel* if you make “sense” of me?  
Can it, for example, make me “see”?  
Can it make me not see?  
That we shall never know, of each other now, more.  
That there is a no more. Hot and singular.  
Surrounded by our first-persons: the no-more.

What saves the narrator from misunderstanding, or congealing “you,” the *other*, in language and in the concerns of the self, which would imprison her in her own consciousness, is the act of thinking “you,” and thinking with the

“heart.” This heart-based thinking engages more holistically with the body, as well as the emotions, to open up and carve out spaces for *others*.<sup>17</sup>

But I do know you by heart.  
Also know other things by heart.  
Interior, spiral, damnation, your name.  
What would be the opposite of “you”?  
When I “think,” it is near the future, just this  
side of it.  
Something I can’t conceive of without saying *you*.  
The desert is fueled. My desert is fueled.  
Daybreak a chaos in which things first come forth  
then mix  
as in an oasis, thirsty  
for distinguishment.

Through the narrator’s intense feeling in the face of the chaos of daybreak and her confessional address to “you,” she seems to be trying to develop a space for engaging with the world in a different way, one which “know[s] you by heart. / Also know[s] other things by heart.”

The border between words and what they resemble, like the finitude of individuals, is bounded, finite: “[h]ot and singular.” Words are “thirsty / for distinguishment.” Aware of this, then, if she attempts to describe without acknowledging it, like the singularity of individuals, words would not allow for what is beyond our “first-person,” whereas a sense of proximity would respond to the call of “more” constituting the excess of the *other*, while not reducing it to the *same*, “singular,” self. This sense of singularity and solipsism, is something we must escape from by moving toward the *other*, here represented by “you.”

“Via Negativa,” therefore, investigates how we can come to understand that there is “more” of *others*—of “each other”—that “we shall never know” through language’s collapse. In the *negativa*, the collapse of language’s correspondence to the world, therefore, we begin to use the body to respond uniquely to *others*, through knowledge that comes “by heart.”

When she writes of knowing things by heart, as opposed to solely through reason, she chooses to write of things such as: interior, spiral, damnation, your name. Mere factual knowledge of these things—so particular, and so difficult to describe in a way that does them any justice—is much different than understanding them viscerally, through the body in a way that comes from “know[ing] them by heart.” Attempting to describe them is nothing like experiencing them in a sensory and emotive way, rather, it provides an example of Klink’s view of feeling in Graham’s work, and of the way that her work “place[s] you back into your body and make[s] you feel alive,” while also “ground[ing] your belief in a poem” (Klink 160).

As the work progresses, the human need and appetite to distinguish and to know are contrasted with what remains indistinct. The daybreak in the poem is “a chaos” instead of a time of *enlightening*, and can be considered a ground for thinking about the collapse of language. The use of words, like the dawn, according to the narrator, *should* illuminate more fully, “breaking light further.”<sup>18</sup>

Instead, the descriptions, statements, and designations, “the way my words, encountered, are canceled, especially if true” is what comes to light. The “canceling” and “erasure” of words as they encounter the world suggest that words can only express a moment of the changing, inconceivable, infinite nature of the world as *other* before they congeal and thematize it, and before it transforms into something else.

Words, she says, “insist on encounter” with the material world. Therefore, the poem’s emphasis on erasure is a way to consider the thematizing nature of description, the danger of not ‘thinking the *other*’ but instead, assimilating it. Erasure, therefore, becomes a warning, an ethically powerful directive if attended to, pointing to the lack of absolute perspective on the world. The line, “[o]mit me: go back out: go back in: say: / no way to go in: go in: measure,” leads to the end of the poem, which repeats the word “say” at intervals, and appears to attempt different kinds of Levinasian *saying*. The idea of measuring and factually recounting represented by the phrases: “say twenty seconds, say wall” illustrates a type of *saying* that immediately begins to congeal. The sentences that follow, however, attempt to access feeling and to *say* in a way that considers the heart, time, and experience differently, through engagement with the body. The final lines appear in parentheses, perhaps expressing the different function they have, that of attempting a *saying* that is more feeling in

nature. They enact, as opposed to flatly illustrating, a way of relating to the world that seems to call on the heart and the senses of the reader, since these descriptions are open-ended and sensory. They conjure feeling itself, as a visceral engagement which interrupts the self, rather than as representative descriptions of specific things:

(at the same time there is a specific temperature)  
(so that eventually the light goes down all the lights go out  
together)  
(till the level is reached where a fall begins) (more or less)  
long).

The final poem I examine, “Young Maples in Wind,” from *Materialism*, demonstrates many of the underlying considerations of the previous poems in the chapter (Graham, *Materialism* 136-138). Reflecting on various ways of knowing the world, the interruption by *otherness*, the space of language’s collapse, and the development of different ways of relating to the *other* are all integral elements in “Young Maples in Wind.” Two other significant gestures occur here, Graham’s direct address to the reader, and her attempt to work her way out of language’s collapse, which come together with the previously discussed considerations uniquely in this poem.

In “Young Maples in Wind,” Graham is responding to the *otherness* of a grove of nascent maples trees, ultimately calling on the *otherness* of the reader to







existence of the trees as dynamic, infinite *others*—with their corresponding absences, which cannot be inventoried or contained.

The indication that “scuffling / at the edges of [this visible world] is / no edge,” is an opening that corresponds to the space opened in the subject’s consciousness by a type of language that engages the body to question exemplification. This rift creates a poetic drama that shifts the problem of these *others* to the realm of the human world, the edge between the *others*, *their* world, and those of us immersed in the poetic enactment of it, which Graham sees as a catalyst for creating new, better responses to *others*. This edge is also the place where the failures and possibilities of linguistic expression occur. And it is this blurry zone between the narrator and the trees, which are bound by no edges, that appears to create a thinking-sensing space where an opening to the *other* can occur. By recomplicating rather than reducing them, or the poet’s and reader’s relationships to them, to each other, and to language, Graham writes on the edge between presence and absence—dynamic trees and sun and wind, against an inscribed, static reduction of them.

Considering alterity as a framework, the discussion of edges indicates that the world we experience cannot be reduced or thematized in the sense of being understood, fathomed, or categorized fully through words or quantifications since there seems no simple answer to the questions: “wind and leaf and

postponement and fact and fragrance—where is your inventory of events? what plank, what underneath to fortify?—.” These thoughts interrogate the familiar philosophical frameworks that ground value, worth, and integrity in the theory, rational structure, and completeness of reason and logic, and instead call on the body, or as “Via Negativa” would say, the heart, to respond to the trees holistically.

As in her other work, Graham’s language in “Young Maples” activates the senses and the body to extend her involvement in these experiences ever further into the enactment and expression of poems with enlivened language. Here, she directly addresses the readers, explicitly drawing them into her ethically open engagement with the world of the poem. The language of description continues to intensify as the encounter with the trees’ fluid, dynamic nature, overflows the finite capacity of the narrator to grasp them in her thoughts, inspiring an attitude of openness in the poet that positively balances her human drive to describe and master. To reach beyond her own perspective, she calls on the reader to help her develop a way to relate more ethically to *others* in an understanding that comes partly from a collective engagement of the reader, herself, and the bodily senses of them both:

. . . Reader, do you taste  
salt now if

I say to you the air is *salt*—that there is iodine from fresh  
after-rain ozone rising in wafts between me and this

illustration . . . Reader,  
wind blowing through these lines I wish were branches,  
searchlight in daylight, trying as I  
am trying  
to find a filament of the real like some twist of handwriting glowing  
in the middle  
distance . . .

And crucial to this enlistment of the reader and the possibility of listening to  
*others* through our senses—our bodily imaginations—the narrator asks:

. . . —can we,  
together,  
make a listening here, like a wick sunk deep in this mid-  
temperate  
morning-light, can we make its tip—your reading my  
words—burn, you  
in some other time than this, maybe under an arc lamp  
tonight?

The ritual of language that the poet and reader share here, enacts this  
overflowing and inspires a different way of relating. It works against the  
dominating power of description in a way that Graham has described as  
significant to the ethics of poetic responsibility:

Can we look into the very act of description to find where our instinct for  
destruction sets in. Where are its seeds? In the words themselves, in the  
mind's capacity to figure, elaborate, imagine? Will a communal action—  
via a writer's and a reader's meeting on the page—create a tenable "we"?  
Can that "we" combat our capacity for destruction and self-destruction?  
(Gardner "The Art of Poetry," 9)

The way the trees and the narrator's encounter with them, particularly  
through her enlistment of the reader, form an experience overflowing her

thinking of them is an instance of human thought that illustrates Cartesian infinity, and *calls* on poet and reader to reconsider these *others* in a way that allows them to retain their infinite nature. This sustains them within a space beyond the mastering grasp of human thought—in inconceivability. And it is this acknowledgment of their overflowing nature that activates some of the most imaginative elements of her poetics, the way it uses sensory description and relies on the reader. She describes the trees, as well as the play of light and wind on them, which appear to bring them to life, realizing that words hide as much as they reveal as soon as they are recorded as a *said*.

Like the other poems in this chapter, in “Young Maples” Graham’s use of language is sparked by its collapse, by “[t]he appetitiveness of the mind, and the infinity of the world’s stimuli” —the infinite nature of the world (Vendler 54). The techniques Graham uses to engage the senses and call on the reader by constantly readjusting and enlivening language fuse in “Young Maples.”

Eventually Graham’s focus returns from the reader to the spring wind enlivening the trees. It’s as if the writer/narrator learns something from her dialogue with the reader in the role of *other*, as well as from the non-human *others* that were the catalysts for the expansiveness of encounter in the poem. Through her experiments with language, like a Levinasian *saying*, she has performed a poetic ritual to enliven understanding of the infinite nature of the *other* in the

form of openness and non-mastery, which the encounter with the trees' and the reader's *otherness* activated in her language. The narrator's relationship and response to the trees has come to more fully acknowledge their infinite nature.

The end of the poem states:

Oh

spring wind . . . I watch the edges of everything you fret and  
scribble. Is there an argument in all this turning and turning?  
Is it towards presence—as it seems? Is it turning an *absence*  
towards us,  
giving it face? And you, green face—mournful, tormented, self-  
swallowing, graven,  
navel-and-theory face, what is it you turn towards, green history-  
face,  
what is your migration from?

(Graham *Materialism*, 138)

She has made the trees into a face/presence, whose ineffable traces she and the reader have opened up to together in this shared poetic, non-thematizing, 'face-to-face' encounter. The breadth and range of her sublimely imaginative poems, grounded in the deeply moral concern of thinking the *other*, continue to recomplicate language in unanticipated and unpredictable ways, responding to *others* in a way that fosters their similarly enigmatic depths.

*Carving Out Space for Ethical Attention: Robert Hass's Tender Intervals*

Hass, like Graham and Levinas, discovers in language and its limits, the possibility of attending to the world without self-centered absorption. His work deals profoundly with the knowledge that human ways of relating to the world are predominantly an expression of personal perspectives, which often deal with feelings that don't have "room for the world" overflowing beyond them (Gardner *Regions*, 154). These human modes of relating to the world are based on desire and the corresponding attempts to grasp and possess the objects of longing. Language, with its limits and its congealing nature, is one medium where such attempts at mastery often occur. Against these tendencies of language, Hass's poems conceptualize and carve out space—sometimes called an interval, sometimes emptiness, or even "as if"—in which the writer and reader can attend to the world in a more discerning, imaginative, and *tender* way, a way that avoids mastery. It is in this space that the possibility for a more open, Levinasian way of responding to *otherness* exists.

In Hass's intervals, "two opposing currents" are often encountered, representing two general responses to both the finite perspective encompassing the human "frame of things" in which individuals work to find their place in the cosmos, and to the limits of language that correspond to these self-focused perspectives (Hass, *Sun* 47; Hass, *Human Wishes* 81-83; cited in Gardner, *Regions*,



148, 152-156). One *current* acknowledges the way that human desire attempts to possess and to know in a manner that congeals or “kills” the world’s fluid nature through its mastering drive.<sup>19</sup> The other embraces human gestures of openness or release that can lead to an enlivened, attentive response to the world. By carving out a space where attentiveness can occur within the company of what would negate its openness, (interval, a space within emptiness, or “as if”), these gestures create a place where the opportunity for Levinasian response becomes possible (Gardner, *Regions* 149, 152).

Whereas Graham creates a poetics charged with visceral dynamism mirroring the world’s fluctuations by reflecting on and enacting various modes of thinking including thinking with the body, Hass, by reflecting on the limitations of his own human perspective, is able to open up “a place of radiant attention” to the world’s fine gestures of *otherness* (Gardner, *Regions* 140). This interval, the opening exposed “by the failure of the drive to discern meaning and make sense,” creates a possibility for reflecting on, not only one’s finite position in the world, but on the very nature of attention (Gardner, *Regions* 140). Along these lines, Bruce Bond, in his essay, “An Abundance of Lack: The Fullness of Desire in the Poetry of Robert Hass,” asserts:

Through Hass's clarifying lens, we see words as gestures of longing rather than vestiges of truth, as motivated by a sense of their own failure, a sense

of lack that no discourse can finally fill. As though always on the threshold of saying what it cannot, Hass's language is both haunted and invigorated by an "immense subterranean" absence, an absence which we imagine nevertheless as a kind of presence, a "counter pressure" akin to a displaced unconscious.

(Bond 46)

It is this pressure that is capable of opening up attentive gestures in Hass's language.

Similar to, yet distinguishable from what we see in Graham's work focused on flux, in the foreword to Hass's *Field Guide*, Stanley Kunitz suggests that Hass's poems are "committed to making 'felt connections' between words and body, between body and world" and, specifically, "are as much an expression of an organic principle as the activities of which they are an extension—walking, eating, sleeping, love-making—and they are equally pleasurable, equally real" (Hass xvii).

These poetic expressions correspond to what Gardner considers "figures" of everyday life. For Kunitz, the "organic principle[s]" which the act of writing poems extend, open the poet and reader to the possibility of embracing an excess inherent in the world, far beyond personal perspectives (Gardner, *Regions* 124; Hass, *Field Guide* xvii). The idea that the body and bodily experiences grounding the use of language can be, like language, numinous or spiritual, inheres in the view underlying Hass's poetics. Kunitz and Gardner each note that Hass's down to earth, nonchalant way of engaging with the world through quotidian human

actions that are touched by this numinous quality is a key to understanding the way he considers and constructs relationships between words and the world they cannot possess.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally for Hass, while at the same time allowing the *other* its excess, this open attention grounded in everyday experience provides an important means for making the world *habitable* for the individual<sup>21</sup>. Through this attention, a specific method develops for preventing the loss or pain of emptiness from compelling one to attempt to dominate the world through a language of mastery. Ethical significance arises from the way that Hass reflects on various emptinesses in relation to language and his own writing in order to foster the live/reflective elements of “thinking and describing” that avoid taking the world’s nuances for granted in a thematizing use of language (Gardner, *Regions* 130). A meaningful way of dealing with the pain that produces or accompanies this attention also occurs.

Both Hass and Graham, therefore, engage with the overflowing or inconceivable nature of alterity. For Graham, it is through bodily connections to the infinite flux of the world, which words and poems enact through *recomplication*, often through a feeling of vertigo, of destabilization, or of improvisation. For Hass, it is in poetry’s way of reflecting on the finite nature of the self and being drawn by it to attend to the *interval* in which radiant attention

can be given. His poems attempt to discover how one might respond to the world responsibly — without thematizing mastery — knowing that, as he says, “it moves its own way, gathering and dispersing, leaving its ‘theme[s]’ ‘unstated’” (Hass, *Human Wishes* 7; cited in Gardner, *Regions* 140).

To use a musical analogy, you could say that Graham’s work is in some ways more improvisatory, layering a sequence of ideas stirred by the infinite nature of the world as they come to be felt by the poet in time (even if subsequently edited). The reader must follow these improvisations, carried along by the sometimes cacophonous music of the poems. Hass, on the other hand, uses *rests* — those moments in music when there is no sound, and in poetry, when attention is more fully engaged — when one feels the intensity of sound due to its absence, or the world’s inconceivability due to its irreducible excess, and is forced to re-consider the profound nature of listening. This form of attention, like Levinas’s version of *dialogue*, focuses on intersubjective relationships and the shift that must occur in the self to open up to the *other*; it is not about making designations or thematizing through description, but about realizing the implications of the drive to do so.

Against the certainty of humans’ mastering “drive to discern meaning,” therefore, Hass brings to his poems two tendencies that counteract that drive and create a space for attention: first, what Kunitz calls “the awareness of his

creature self, his affinity with the animal and vegetable kingdoms, with the whole chain of being,” a sort of humility and care for the larger world; and second, what Gardner describes as an exploration of the human ability to “accept[] and relinquish[]” the world, a way of interacting openly with it— “marry[ing]” it, while avoiding “claim[ing] to possess it” (Hass, *Field Guide* xii; Gardner, *Regions* 139).

Hass’s encounter with *otherness* and the way it enlivens language within this space of attention, begins with a feeling of awe for non-human nature, or sometimes, for the unique mystery of intimate human relationships. Awe arguably creates a reflective space in the self, but makes that reflection about something outside of it. Once awe sets up an encounter with *otherness* that carves out a moment of reflection, there is an opening in which a unique attentiveness, and an awareness of it, grows. Consider the way awe functions in the brief poem “Mouth Slightly Open,” from *Time and Materials*, in which the narrator describes a bird in the woods and the inner response of someone watching it before it moves suddenly out of view (Hass 78). It begins with a colorful, evocative description:

The body a yellow brilliance and a head  
Some orange color from a Chinese painting  
Dipped in sunset by the summer gods

Less significant to this poem than the beauty, the color, and the movement of the surroundings, “. . . that twitchy shiver / In the cottonwoods. . . ” are the suddenness with which the bird flies away, and the change within the consciousness of the person watching it, its departure causing the narrator to question whether it could even have been noticed, was even actually there:

Where the bird you thought you saw  
Was, whether you believe what you thought  
You saw or not, and then was not, had  
Absconded, leaving behind the emptiness

What this space, this charged emptiness that the bird (or the bird that maybe was there) leaves behind, produces in the mind of the one watching is significant to the preoccupation in Hass's poems with the opening of space for reflection. The space where the bird had been produces a *rest*, an interval: “that hums a little in you now, and is not bad / Or sad, and only just resembles awe or fear.” These lines reveal that encountering the bird's presence becomes much more significant after the bird's absence occurs. Its absence, even though built on loss, is not sad, neither is it awe or fear exactly. Rather, it has set up a new possibility for attentively reflecting on the world, a consciousness of it that hums in you (watcher, writer, reader) *now* as sheer alert attention.

The final line in this brief poem states that “[t]he bird is elsewhere now, and you are here,” what amounts to an illustration of Hass's idea of marrying the world without trying to possess it. The bird has made a deep, awe-inspiring

impression on the viewer through its absence, its inability to be possessed by the gaze or congealed in description, having flown away leaving a space for attention. That the bird is “elsewhere now” and “you are here” is testimony to the role that the bird’s *otherness* and the space/absence necessary to acknowledge it play in the ethical constitution of the self. This bird, as *other*, seen or imagined in its habitat only momentarily before it continues to live its awe-inspiring, non-thematizable existence, has engendered through the space of its absence the kind of rapt attention in the viewer that grows more attuned to the world of *others* through such encounters.

In this sense, awe, and Hass’s open intervals for attentiveness which awe leads to, may seem ethically important in themselves. However, they gain moral and poetic force in the way they re-enliven language’s capacity to maintain “live intricacies of thinking and describing” instead of giving up those vital processes to some formulaic understanding of motifs, often of loss or of human failure, mirrored by linguistic collapse (Gardner, *Regions* 130).<sup>22</sup> That is, in addition to carving out spaces for attention, Hass’s work takes to heart language’s inability to truly correspond to the material world and finds within it the possibilities for enlivened attention to those “intricacies of thinking and describing” that this failure engenders. The question of how to move past the fact that language fails in its attempts to correspond to the world and to write something meaningful,

responsible, in that space, grounds Hass's poetics with its reflection on ethically charged intervals that compel the reader to ever more fully "accept and relinquish" the world in its *otherness*.

These qualities of the experience of the encounter with the *other* in Hass's poems implicate both phenomenological and ethical aspects of Levinas's understanding of encounter, particularly through the tension in Hass between awe, such as that seen in "Mouth Slightly Open," and desire, a tension Hass frequently describes as existing between the drive to mastery and the possibility of relinquishment. Hass's "quiet but continuous re-seeing of how that reflective taking-on of responsibility occurs" over the course of several books amounts to a Levinasian *saying*, since the constant reconsideration and enlivening of ways to communicate the process of responding to the world with attention are accomplished uniquely through Hass's varying ways of using language (Gardner, *Regions* 116). For Hass, awe, with its possible tinge of fear or sadness, comes from the encounter with what is outside of an ego-based view of the world, an *otherness* in which the self might not belong (might not even be welcome—"this world did not invite us," he remarks in an early poem) (Hass *Field Guide*, 13).

The idea that the lack that constitutes unfulfilled desire, loss, or even pain, might hold possibility rather than *merely* loss, is enacted in Hass's "Regalia for a



Black Hat Dancer" from *Sun Under Wood* (Hass *Sun* 47-58). Continuing to bring into focus what "Mouth Slightly Open" revealed through the motif of presence and the loss/absence of the bird from the viewer's sight, "Regalia" enacts both the emptiness and the attentive response to the world that emptiness might engender. Whereas "Mouth Slightly Open" reveals the charged, rapt attention that comes from recognizing the space of attention that loss carves out, "Regalia" deals with the loss generated by the poet's more complex, personal, and poignant experience of divorce. It is a more social space. Throughout the poem he struggles with this loss, which at one point he describes as sheer pain:

When I think of that time, I think mainly of the osprey's cry,  
a startled yelp,  
the cry more a color than a sound, and as if  
it ripped the sky, was white,  
as if it were scar tissue and fresh hurt at once.

Yet side-by-side with these expressions of pain, he attempts to re-envision loss's emptiness as possibility, and digs into the nature of his feelings related to it:

Under sorrow, what? I'd think. Under  
the animal sense of loss?

As the poem unfolds, the implication grows that by embracing the idea of loss, pain, and emptiness, one can develop an attentive perspective that is open to the world's possibilities. At one point, walking in a cave in Korea, the narrator says:

Back inside,  
in the cool darkness carved with bodhisattvas,  
I presented myself once more for some revelation.

Nothing. Great calm, flowing stone. No sorrow, no not-sorrow.  
Lotuses, carved in the pediment, simple, fleshy, open.

Here, a charged nothingness presents itself to the narrator in place of the pain, revealing a different way of responding to emptiness.

Similar to “Mouth Slightly Open,” “Regalia” develops a process in the empty interval that comes from loss for responding meaningfully to the world. By traveling uniquely through several nuanced emotional pathways and figures of life experience, it delves deeply into the function of two types of *emptinesses* and their role in responding to the world more openly. What Hass comes to understand through “Regalia” is that two types of emptiness exist. One is driven by desire, which ultimately cannot hold onto or possess the thing that it longs for. The other is represented by the actual object of longing, which proves empty as well, because, like the bird in “Mouth Slightly Open,” it cannot be assimilated into human knowledge, or mastered. Instead, it remains outside of language and possession, overflowing human conceptions and limitations of language. As the narrator says:

So there were these two emptiness: one made of pain and desire  
and one made of vacancy.

And later in the poem:

Emptinesses—  
one is desire, another is the object that it doesn't have.  
Everything real nourished in the space between these things.

The profitable poetic (and ethical) space for Hass, therefore, is the interval between the emptiness of desire and the emptiness encompassing the objects that exceed human grasp. This in-between space is where Hass works at opening himself up to the promise inherent in the nature of emptiness, the possibility of a Levinasian response to the world through the space of attention that the corresponding re-enlivening of language can foster.

It is “[u]nder sorrow,” or loss, that this space of attention may be found. In it, you can feel two things at once, grief and joy or hilarity, as the poem reveals through the narrator’s new romantic relationship. This relationship, like the cave in Korea, helps him understand the opposing possibilities within emptiness. Whereas his divorce brought about pain, the new, joyful, passionate, and comfortable relationship teaches him that emptiness might lead to something else:

The way neither of us needed to hold back, think  
before we spoke, lie, tiptoe carefully around a given subject,  
or brace ourselves to say hard truths. It felt to me hilarious,  
and hilarity, springwater gushing up from some muse’s font  
of crystal in old poems, seemed a form of emptiness.

Ultimately, the narrator wants to dwell in that empty space of attention in spite of knowing that it may hold the unbearable pain of loss, because at the same time, it holds the possibility of meaningful attention, and the possibility that sometimes, such attention might actually be returned:

I didn't know you could lie down in such swift, opposing currents.

Also two emptinesses, I suppose, the one  
joy comes from, the one regret, disfigured intention, the longing  
to be safe or whole flows into when it's disappearing.

From these emptinesses, he "invents a ritual" to help him move past his private pain—to try to grasp its scale—and eventually to "walk back to the world." Like many Hass poems, in which he re-considers the impossibility of perspective, a "place from which to stand," and its relationship to language, here he works to open himself to nothingness, to emptiness, and then, with this re-enlivened attentiveness to the interval, returns to material life, "walk[ing] back to the world" and to language with all of their imperfections<sup>23</sup>:

Some guy was barbecuing halves of baby chicks on a long, sooty  
contraption  
of a grill, slathering them with soy sauce. Baby chicks. . .  
I thought in this flesh-and-charcoal-scented heavy air  
of the Buddha in his cave. Tired as if from making love  
or writing through the night. Was I going to eat a baby chick?  
Two pancakes. A clay mug of the beer. Sat down  
under an umbrella and looked to see, among the diners  
feasting, quarreling about their riven country,  
if you were supposed to eat the bones. You were. I did.

Hass, I would argue, often uses language in a way that "make[s] the  
conjunction of our finite acts and the world beyond us seem 'casual and  
intense'—both ordinary and charged" (Gardner, *Regions* 142). His language  
filters through deeply impacting encounters with aspects of the world that are  
uncontainable within personal perspectives, encounters which are in tension

with the limits of personal desire--and which encompass loss. The grace in his poems comes from his ability to create personally, ethically, and linguistically meaningful intervals of attention within loss.

Consider "Spring Drawing," the opening poem in *Human Wishes*, in which Hass juxtaposes lived experiences with the carving out of poetic spaces for attention (Hass, *Human Wishes* 3-4). Like "Mouth Slightly Open," and "Regalia," "Spring Drawing" also engages with loss related to the failure to find the right word. Hass illustrates this linguistic emptiness through a comparison with the way that the narrator's lover moves away from him in a corresponding sense of loss. Among "Spring Drawing's" poetic and ethical implications are the ways in which the poem makes the empty interval of loss *habitable* precisely because of its inability to fulfill desire. It begins with a writer's failure to translate an image from his mind to the page, with the poet once again trying to express worldly things in words aware of their own inherent breakdown:

A man thinks *lilacs against white houses*, having seen them in the farm country south of Tacoma in April, and can't find his way to a sentence, a brushstroke carrying the energy of *brush* and *stroke*.

Searching for a way to express the loss inherent in the act of expression, the narrator begins to recount its similarities to human relationships, their unfulfilled desires, and the human distance that remains even in intimacy. For instance, by attending to the movement away from him of the narrator's wife or lover, with

its rituals for reentering a new space of shared domesticity, the poem carves out space for attentiveness, reconsidering language through this human experience:

and she, after the drive from the airport and a chat with her mother and a shower, which is ritual cleansing and a passage through water to mark transition,

had walked up the mountain on a summer evening.

Away from, not toward. As if the garden roses were a little hobby of the dead. As if the deer pellets in the pale grass and the wavering moon and the rondure—as they used to say, upping the ante—of heaven

were admirable completely, but only as common nouns of a plainer intention, *moon, shit, sky,*

The interval or space of loss of this intensifying *separation*, this emptiness, is what the narrator fills with attention, to his lover, to writing, to desire, to the world. The poem, having begun with more intimate metaphors for the failure of the artist to “find his way to a sentence,” “—as if he were stranded on the aureole of the memory of a woman’s breast,” moves to more conceptual considerations of the world in relation to language, in which he imagines “radiance” and “justice” to be the basis of the “need to reinvent” an imaginative form of wishing, and to be essential to meaning:

as if radiance were the meaning of meaning, and justice responsible to daydream not only for the strict beauty of denial,

but as a felt need to reinvent the inner form of wishing.

Returning at the poem's close to the initial situations in the poem, the human struggles to express connection through art or through love, the narrator suggests that the space of "if" which he had just been explaining—the possibility for imaginative attentiveness—is key to meaningful responses to the world:

Only the force of the brushstroke keeps the lilacs from pathos—the hes and shes of the comedy may or may not get together, but if they are to get at all,

then the interval created by *if*, to which mind and breath attend, nervous as the grazing animals the first brushes painted,

has become habitable space, lived in beyond wishing.

Throughout the poem, Hass has filled the space of "if" with attention ("the interval created by *if*, to which mind and breath attend"), asserting that such attention, by diminishing our drive to engage with the world through desire or "wishing," makes the world habitable. This imaginative way of attending to space mirrors the way Hass sees Basho's haiku, which "lays claim to the world, coming and going, alert, secret, common, in the way that the image does, and it doesn't possess it, or think that it can. And so it has become a figure for that clear, deep act of acceptance and relinquishment which human beings are capable of" (Hass, *Pleasures* 305; cited in Fisher-Wirth 17). Like Levinas's project, this is a way of utilizing language that inspires a non-mastering relation to the world beyond the loss inevitably stemming from desire.

I would argue, then, that Hass's work develops an original way to acknowledge two main ways, or *currents*, in which humans relate to the world: through mastery or an accepting type of relinquishment. First, there is an encounter with something exceeding finite human perspective, or possibly desire, that inspires a moment of awe (awe that often includes both admiring wonder and trepidation); perhaps in "Spring Drawing" the plainer intentions (*moon, shit, sky*) and the relationship with the lover embody this sense of awe. Then, there is the carving out of intervals of attention within this sense of awe. In these intervals, the act of attending to makes the world "habitable," because it is a response that is no longer driven by desire or "wishing." Rather, like Levinas's ethical encounter, this response moves past self-absorption, leaving space for *otherness* and for more open ways of engaging with it. Ultimately, the poems enact gestures of acceptance in the face of the failure of human desire and of language.

"Meditation at Lagunitas," from *Praise*, explores the nature of human desire and loss and the different ways of engaging with the world generated by their failure by focusing even more specifically on skeptical responses to language's limits (Hass, *Praise* 4-5). In spite of human finitude and the limits of language, or in part, because of the relationship between finitude and how humans "possess language," Hass finds in the problem of loss a sort of



emotional, intellectual drama (Gardner, *Regions* 21). In fact, "Meditation at Lagunitas," seems to carry out what "Spring Drawing" had proposed. By placing considerations of a failed romantic relationship alongside its considerations of the effect of the rhetoric of post-structural theory, "Meditation" opens up to loss uniquely. It reveals how the idea that humans' drive to reduce the world to theoretical generalities congeals (or kills or "dissolves") particular "physical 'presence[s]'" of the world, and works instead to find a space of attention or human habitation within loss. The poem begins:

All the new thinking is about loss.  
In this it resembles all the old thinking.  
The idea, for example, that each particular erases  
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-  
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk  
of that black birch is, by his presence,  
some tragic falling off from a first world  
of undivided light. Or the notion that,  
because there is in this world no one thing  
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,  
a word is elegy to what it signifies.

The above lines lay out the idea that there are ideas and there is the world, and the way that we speak about the relation between them has implications. One night, the narrator and a friend discuss these concepts, and "After a while I [the narrator] understood that, / talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice, pine, hair, woman, you, and I.*" Hass acknowledges that the world and language do not correspond, that the world exceeds its representations in language and that the

human desire to encompass the world in the finitude of words ends up erasing, rather than capturing or enlivening the world. The list of dissolving words suggests that this problem extends into the realm of human relationships as well. The philosophical discussion with his friend, in which material things end up reduced to nothing by theory, brings the narrator to the edge of what he can accept about words and the world, compelling him to try to find his own way of handling the disparity between them—one that still engages tenderly with both the world's particulars, and the difficulty of expressing them.

During the discussion with his friend “late last night” and the realization of the ultimate loss of objects of representation when one focuses on the limits of words, the narrator explored memories of the loss of a lover. He considered in both philosophical and emotional terms, the erasure of the world and the loss of the woman he once held, as he became mired in the feeling of loss. But, revisiting that space of loss in the *now* of the next morning, the narrator handles it much differently. Instead of the generalities of theory, or the reluctant acknowledgment of romantic loss, he—present tense—allows the particularities of his memory to come to life through a new way of speaking about them:

But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,  
the thing her father said that hurt her, what  
she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous  
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.

In place of the skeptical, theoretical way of talking about loss that the narrator had been caught up in the night before, this morning, he is radiant with attention, remembering his lover and saying the words. *Speaking* these particulars brings the drama to a close with expressions that configure language and the material world as numinous spaces to be inhabited:

Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,  
saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.

There are, in Hass's work, many different ways of entering these Levinasian spaces of attention. Whereas "Meditation at Lagunitas" enacts attention through directly linking loss and failing language, the later "The Problem of Describing Trees" presents the relationship of words to the world quite differently (Hass, *Time* 10). Similar to "Mouth Slightly Open," a sense of awe regarding nature runs through the poem.<sup>24</sup> However, here the limits of human knowledge and language are unfolded playfully, as if they were common knowledge. The poem begins by trying to describe an aspen tree and its effects on the human soul:

The aspen glitters in the wind  
And that delights us.

The fluttering and turning of its leaves that keep it "from drying out," have the grace of a dance, and charm and engage the narrator, making him want to

interact with them. Yet he knows that these movements are really biological adaptations, the product of evolution:

The gene pool threw up a wobbly stem  
And the tree danced. No.  
The tree capitalized.  
No. There are limits to saying,  
In language, what the tree did.

Whereas “Meditation at Lagunitas” discovers spaces of attention within failing, but sensuously felt language (“*blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*”), in “The Problem of Describing Trees” the narrator asserts that “[i]t is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us.” In acknowledging that “[t]here are limits to saying / [i]n language, what the tree did,” the narrator carves out a *disenchanted* interval or empty space where he is able to attend tenderly and to say something in a Levinas-like way about the way that the world engages, or calls, to him—in this case, to dance with it:

*Dance with me, dancer. Oh, I will.*

Mountains, sky,  
The aspen doing something in the wind.

This playful, artful act of “as if” imagining (I am thinking here of “Spring Drawing”) insists that it is only “as if” the world said “[d]ance” and he said “[o]h, I will.” Of course, he knows that this way of engaging is not guaranteed. But within this disenchanted space, a Levinasian call to dance is issued. We see call and response, rather than an attempt to capture it in words. This casual,

disenchanted space is central to Hass's way of explaining how Levinas's non-mastering way of relating to the world is possible.

These are examples in which awe and loss carve out a space for attentiveness to the world's excess and open up possibilities of responding to the world without the mastering drive of desire, all made possible by working at language's limits. "Consciousness" continues this same pattern of reconsidering loss in order to carve out a space for attention (Hass, *Time* 83-85). Its subject is unique however: consciousness itself and its implications for engagement with the world. It is distinguished from the other poems discussed thus far by its attentive reach. In this poem, Hass reflects on the difficulty of defining what consciousness actually is. The inability to do so once again engenders the sense of loss or emptiness that opens up an empty space for attention, but now a much broader one. In the same space in which he finds himself wrestling with the difficulties of defining consciousness, the narrator also remembers his father's death and his views on life, which at first glance seem insurmountably unrelatable to him:

When I came into the room where he was dying of cancer, my father gave me a look that was pure plea and I felt a flaring of anger. What was I supposed to do? He was supposed to teach me how to die.

And a few minutes later when he was dead, I felt such a mix of love and anger and dismay and relief at the sudden peacefulness of his face that I wanted to whack him on the head with his

polished walnut walking stick which was standing against the wall in a corner like the still mobile part of him.

It becomes clear, upon working through the poem, that through the poetic consideration of consciousness, the narrator has found a way of attending to it that leads him to a deeper understanding of its possibilities and, within that, of his father's point of view. The poem's opening lines are impressions that seem abstract, suspended in isolation, offering at best perhaps a few inklings of consciousness itself:

First image is blue sky, nothing in it, and not understood as sky, a field of blue.

The second image is auditory: the moan of a foghorn.

After these sketches, the narrator reflects on a conversation with his friend about what consciousness is, or might be:

We had been arguing about the nature of consciousness, or avoiding arguing, talking.

Dean had read a book that said that consciousness was like a knock-knock joke, some notion of an answering call having brought it into being which was, finally, itself anticipating an answer from itself, echo of an echo of an echo.

Within this failed space in which they cannot define consciousness, the narrator's mind moves with attention in "seven places at once," through a range of different ways in which to configure or imagine it. These various imaginings range from his observation of two coyotes that inspire "an idea of mammal

consciousness come over the event horizon in some pure form, hunter-attention, life-in-the-body attention," to thoughts of Walt Whitman on the mystery of life and consciousness, to a number of other considerations of life and the difficulty of figuring out what consciousness is and means, and how it relates to the world when one can only look at it through its very lens: "It's hard to see what you're seeing with, to see what being is as an / activity through the instrument of whatever-it-is we have being in." This builds on the series of "as if" statements in "Spring Drawing," but with a breathtaking opening up of its subject matter.

The narrator's treatment of the idea of consciousness leads to an interesting emotional and ethical opening to his father. By working different angles in order to understand consciousness, constantly reconsidering it and playing around inside the interval he carved out within the term, he is able to see his father, who had been unsympathetic to him in his un-relatable perspective, in a different light:

Outside the sound of summer construction starting up. From my window I see a chickaree come out of the dry grasses, pale gold in the early morning light, and raise little puffs of dust as it bounds across the road, going somewhere, going about its chickaree business, which at this season must be mostly provision.

It was years before I understood that my father was telling his young son that he hated the job he had to go to every day.

By creating an interval within the emptiness of the indeterminate nature of consciousness that allows for attention to his finite perspective, he has become

more open to his father. His ultimate considerations allow him to finally *see* his father:

Consciousness, "that means nothing," Czesław wrote. "That loves itself," George Oppen wrote. My poor father.

These turns in Hass's work—the recognition of the difficulty of ethically opening to the world through the limits of language and human consciousness; the intervals created by awe; the tension between gestures related to awe and desire; and the re-enlivening of language through its failure—all move toward attentiveness. It is a particular type of attentiveness that deeply engages consciousness, yet leads to a relinquishment of the world. It is a non-grasping knowledge of it. As Hass writes in "Art and Life," "Something stays this way we cannot have, / Comes alive because we cannot have it" (Hass, *Time* 27-30).

"Art and Life" brings home the way that Hass's poetry marries the world without trying to possess it, asserting that such possession kills the object of desire, congeals the awe-inspiring nature of the world. Hass's attention in that poem radiantly focuses on a milkmaid within a painting, while yet leaving her un-possessed and un-mastered. Exploring the world in the relinquishing way we have been unfolding, he opts out of mastery, instead playfully engaging with the charm of the world through his imagination. In "Art and Life," the narrator uses a painting in The Hague by Vermeer as a backdrop for bringing us slowly into the act of attention itself, allowing his imagination to consider what the lives



of the art restorers must be like, what it might be like to be a part of the extended radiant life of the painting, in order to approach the woman in the painting whose attention “is so alive” and focused on pouring the milk. Imagining the words of the restorer as he interviews her in his mind, he writes:

I am an acolyte. I peel time, with absolute care,  
From thin strips of paint on three hundred year old canvas.  
I make the milk that flows from the gray-brown paint  
Of a pitcher held by a represented woman, young, rose  
And tender yellow for the cheek the light is lucky enough  
To seem to touch, by a certain window that refracts it.

He considers the beautiful feeling of life as he looks at the painting of the milkmaid, the bright white of the milk, the ruddiness in the girls’ cheeks, yet realizes that this pointed representation is not life, though he may desire something of its radiance:

To have seen how white it is, and alive, as seeing people  
Reading their poetry or singing in a chorus, you think  
You see the soul is an animal going about its business,  
A squirrel, its coat sheening toward fall, stretching  
Its body down a slim branch to gather one ripe haw. . .

The inability to possess the woman or live in the radiant emptiness that is the painting once again opens up the interval for attention. The realization that the objects of desire, the woman and the radiance of the painting cannot be possessed, or would be congealed through their possession, is apparent in the narrator’s supposition of the restorer’s thoughts, which in turn speak for his own ungrounded response to the painting’s call:

I am the servant of a gesture so complete, a body  
So at peace, it has become a thought, entirely its own,  
And, though it stills desire, infinitely to be desired,  
Though neither known nor possessed by you  
Or anyone else. . .

Desire seems to be the first step toward fulfillment, yet the poem makes clear that possession drains the life out of the object of desire, as “the burden of another person’s life / Seems insupportable,” or as a poorly restored painting loses its luster.

Ultimately, all of Hass’s poems discussed in this chapter enact what the final lines of “Art and Life” actually state:

Something stays this way we cannot have,  
Comes alive because we cannot have it.

What brings much of Hass’s perspective on attentiveness together, therefore, is his Levinasian view that experiencing the world through possession and mastery deadens the radiance of the world. His poetic imaginings, his “as if” conjectures, allow the world to charm him as he enacts a relationship with it at the limits of language. Consider the ephemeral nature of the world’s infinite force as it drifts through individual consciousnesses, resisting human desiring, as it is delicately and intensely sketched alongside the fragility of language in the early poem “To a Reader” (Hass, *Praise* 25):

I’ve watched memory wound you.  
I felt nothing but envy.  
Having slept in wet meadows,

I was not through desiring.  
Imagine January and the beach,  
a bleached sky, gulls. And  
look seaward : what is not there  
is there, isn't it, the huge  
bird of the first light  
arched above first waters  
beyond our touching or intention  
or the reasonable shore.

We could say that the entire arc of his career-long consideration of this possibility, traced in this chapter, comes down to his attempt to share this insight and this space with his readers.

*Spiraling the Universe Centrifugally: Joy Harjo's Songs to Keep Sky Open*

In Joy Harjo's work, we see another unique way of awakening language to a sense of alterity that encompasses the world's dynamism. The world is a "web of motion, /meaning: earth, sky, stars" that moves fluidly through time (Harjo, *How We Became* 41)<sup>25</sup>. Harjo is not merely an observer of this web—though she listens to it carefully—but "an intricate part" of its design (Harjo, *How We Became* 41). She is a conduit for the world's energies, and her poems perform a healing ceremonial function.<sup>26</sup> Her form of ceremony listens to the world's *others*, talks to them, and engages imaginatively with them in language that attempts ethically responsible gestures of *saying*. Significant to her poetics is the fact that these gestures of relationality and connection are multi-faceted. They relate in a complex way to the cosmos by way of memory, "that undying arabesque" that "underlies all of Harjo's poetry" and manifests, I would argue, through the interpenetration of sound (Lang 48).<sup>27</sup>

Harjo's memory is a powerful non-linear force that places into her heart things from the cosmic web, like the earth, sky, stars, and other living beings.<sup>28</sup> The energy from these dynamic entities is whirling and pulls Harjo's heart outward "centrifugally" (Harjo, *How We Became* 41). Remembering in an open way allows these beings and their energies, which memory has placed in her heart, to exist there in a way that engages profoundly with *her* being. This

remembering sends or spins them and herself centrifugally outward to reach and acknowledge the infinite cosmos through poetic language. In the essay "'Twin Gods Bending over': Joy Harjo and Poetic Memory," Nancy Lang highlights the levels of connection between the world and memory in Harjo's work.

Harjo's ongoing circularities of memory, story, history, and ancestral voices all work together to create and explain natural cycles underlying human existence, and thus to define the interconnectedness of life itself. Out of the earth and ancestral lands and peoples comes memory, out of memory comes the present, and the resulting inter play of tensions fuses together into story and life.

(Lang 46)

Memory, along with the capacity of "our bodies—or our skins, which are the parts of us that most immediately touch and relate to the rest of the world around us" as a type of "map" for relating to the world and for charting our existence, are predominant forms of opening to *otherness* in Harjo's work (Warrior 345).

As she listens to the world speak or perhaps sing to her, she resists forgetting by performing memory in poetry imbued with music. Poetry becomes the point of connection where memory and *otherness* come alive, because the convergence of music, song, and traditional song-like writing constituting poetry for Harjo, possesses the capacity to "keep sky open in [her] mind" (Harjo *Conflict Resolution*, 133). This sense of "[b]eing open to the world," writer Robert Warrior states is "a deeply Creek trait [according to Native scholar Craig Womack],

making Harjo's poetry part of what he calls 'a very old song'" (Warrior 344). The right—necessary—poetic "song" is a song of connection that will sustain open thinking toward the world. It will make it possible for the web's intricate parts, including the poet as artist-healer, to play their roles. Such an imaginative song emanates from memory, which Harjo says is:

like saying "world" .... In a way, it's like the stories themselves, the origin of the stories, and the continuances of all the stories. It's this great pool, this mythic pool of knowledge and history that we live inside. (Carabi, Spiral, 138-9)

(Kolosov 45)

Her corresponding task as poet-musician is to find the poetic sounds that can penetrate and accompany the human soul and keep it open to remembering imaginatively, as a connection to *otherness* spanning, not only individual differences, but different temporalities as well.

"[S]ounds do much more than play to the senses in Harjo's poetry," according to Laura Coltelli in "A Carrier of Memory," the foreword to *Soul Talk, Song Language: Conversations with Joy Harjo* (Harjo and Winder ix). The "natural continuity" of oral presentation, music, and written poems forms the convergence that helps Harjo "find a way to sing" (Harjo and Winder x). The musical energy of song becomes the connection in her poetic enactments between the things placed in her heart through memory and experience, and the expanse of the exterior world. For Harjo, music penetrates, breaking through the

boundaries of language's limits and reawakening the possibility for energetic connections that "unite[] people, plants, and animals" without mastery or hierarchy (Harjo and Winder x-xi). Her view that "written text" is "fixed orality" further inspires her intimate entwining of poetry and music (Harjo and Winder x-xi).

The idea that the human voice is capable of invoking power connected to the universe's *creating* or originating energy, "which gives motion to everything that moves" within the world's fluid web (as James R. Walker asserts regarding Native ceremonies) grounds hundreds of Native American literatures (Lincoln 1-2). In Karl Kroeber's essay, "Poem, Dream, and the Consuming of Culture," he considers similarly the ways in which the "Indian dramatic lyric" invokes the power of the human voice by discussing song-like aspects of American Indian *poems/songs* in relation to dreams or visions (Kroeber 328). Taking two song-poems that originate as personal dreams, he reveals how individual psychic experience often grounds the reciprocity of Native song to the natural world. The role of culture "in the complex of processes constituting the natural world" is defined by singing (Kroeber 329, 330).

Kroeber's examples originate in hunting dreams and compel the dreamer to sing the song, asking the people of the tribe he assembles to sing it too (as well as to act out an animal-inspired dance). Kroeber asserts that those who sing

these songs perform a kind of ceremony, “verbally recreat[ing] part of it [the dream]” — the imaginative source of power — in a “transactional event, a process by which dream power is realized as cultural potency” (Kroeber 327, 330).

So the song works to keep a balance of energy not just in literature, not just in culture, but throughout the world: life-power moves through dream to song to ceremony to the hunt sustaining life through death.  
(Kroeber 332)

Harjo’s poems are quite distinguishable from the works that Kroeber considers, incorporating several unique cultural and artistic experiences of her own. However, the idea that the human imagination and voice have a power that implicates cultural and cosmic survival in a process of reciprocal flow with both the audience and the larger world is fundamental to her work.<sup>29</sup> Like Levinas’ *saying*, these components of Harjo’s expression generate language that fosters “an engagement and not a dominant concept’ but something ‘that opens everything up’” (Harjo and Winder xi). It aspires to connection while letting “the things of life emerge” unassimilated by language, even as they share collective experiences (Harjo and Winder xi).

Music, therefore, is what generates Harjo’s poetics of engaged openness. Seeing poetry in a “natural continuity” with singing and music, she integrates these sound arts into her work in various ways, often reworking poems into songs or performing them with her own jazz and Native influenced saxophone playing as instrumental accompaniment (Harjo and Winder x). Arguably due in



part to her early musical experience encompassing the power of music to “hold... our home together” through the voice of her mother, a professional singer, “find[ing] a way to sing” was the impetus for her poetry, and for playing the saxophone, as well (Harjo and Winder ix-x).<sup>30</sup> Harjo has been performing jazz saxophone for decades, partly as an act of revitalizing “music born and cultivated in the tribal environment,” according to Coltelli (Harjo and Winder xi):

The jazz saxophone for Harjo is a healing voice and such players as Charlie Bird Parker, John Coltrane, and the Native American Jim Pepper, who was developing “a music that married the traditional elements of jazz with Muscogean and Plains tribal musics” . . . are not just outstanding individuals but distinctively artistic healers, shamanistic in their mysticism; the jazz cult that they speak for includes a multicultural group, not entirely ethnically distinctive. The transformation in the Harjo elegy for Jim Pepper (114-15) is a sublime movement from the pain of separation to ecstasy in a remembrance, which joins all existence.

(Haseltine 101-102)

In her foreword introducing the Harjo interviews Coltelli states that “[s]ince poetry is a sound art, as she [Harjo] affirms, music, singing voice, and spoken poetic word converge together ‘as one voice’” and poems as “a performance she [Harjo] remembers,” have the capacity to bring the audience and poet together by “transmit[ting] an oral act, in which the moment of speaking and listening unites the poet and her audience in a single inseparable unit” (Harjo and Winder x).<sup>31</sup> Thus, the sound of poems contains the power to connect the object of the poem, the poet/performer, and the reader/audience

member in a collective space of communal energy. Jacqueline Kolosov considers Harjo's to be a poetry with communal elements that support processes of transformation for Native Americans, rather than a sense of victimhood. "This poetry offers the possibility of survival and redemption through bearing witness within the collective consciousness of poetry" (Kolosov 40). The collective nature of poetry comes from the penetrating quality of music, according to Harjo, who states in the interview with Triplopia, "Becoming the Thing Itself," that "[m]usic was and is my body. I don't think I ever felt a separation between music and my body. Words make bridges but music penetrates" (Harjo and Winder 5).

Her poetics is grounded in music's power to penetrate, to connect, and to open one's mind to the world's role—to *others'* role—in inspiring such music. The poems often seek out or strive to develop an appropriate poetic song to respond to the world's expressions. "Fall Song" from *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* illustrates Harjo's listening and imaginative engagement with a creature from the world's web of motion, in this case, a bird (Harjo, *Conflict Resolution* 133). This *encounter* leads to an expansive opening of thought beyond the poet's present self. Consider this example of poetic give and take between the narrator and the world, which begins:

It is a dark fall day.  
The earth is slightly damp with rain.  
I hear a jay.  
The cry is blue.

The narrator hears the bird cry, which activates her imagination. As it takes a place in her mind and heart, it inspires her expressive response to the sound. In a sense, it draws/pulls her out in a new relationship with the world, as she calls the cry “blue.” Through that description, she plays a part in the give and take of cosmic energy that also occurs through language, drawing the imagination out centrifugally. The effect is significant:

I have found you in the story again  
Is there another word for “divine”?  
I need a song that will keep sky open in my mind.

Her imaginative expression of the world, represented here by the “blue” that she feels in the jay’s cry, helps her to forge a connection to the bird and to find “you in the story again” by opening up to the world exterior to herself, whether “you” addresses a lost love, the reader, or something else. These connections feel “divine,” and lead her to subtly reflect on the way in which the word “divine” escapes full expression in language. The poem enacts her search for another way to express these thoughts, knowing that to give justice to their profound nature, she “need[s] a song that will keep sky open in [her] mind.”

Musical energy could penetrate where words fail, and her task is to find or create a song that will keep the open connection, the rhythmic exchange of the world’s motion with her own. She listens for it, and responds imaginatively to it,

keeping open the space of “now,” which she imagines perhaps forever will be like—a perfect day together.

If I think behind me, I might break.  
If I think forward, I lose now.  
Forever will be a day like this  
Strung perfectly on the necklace of days.  
Slightly overcast  
Yellow leaves  
Your jacket hanging in the hallway  
Next to mine.

While some of her poems enact such connections similarly to “Fall Song,” others, like “A Postcolonial Tale,” speak of or *say* these connections in a more theoretical way (Harjo, *How We Became* 104-105). “A Postcolonial Tale” is built around the “shimmering power of dreaming stuff,” and investigates the imagination and its power as a multi-faceted part of the world’s motion. Imagination is a living part of the poet and the world, and joins them in reciprocity against the violence of colonization. The poem’s title suggests that reflecting on imagination, particularly its loss, implicates the colonization of Native Americans’ minds in addition to their lands. As an antidote to the loss of this imagining—a type of unawareness or forgetfulness extending farther than the Native American community, which Harjo sees as “sleepwalking” to numb memories of painful experiences—the poet reminds us that *imagining* is a living thing that we must praise, and which, in return, “illuminates us.”<sup>32</sup>

Every day is a reenactment of the creation story. We emerge from

dense unspeakable material, through the shimmering power of dreaming stuff.

This is the first world, and the last.

Once we abandoned ourselves for television, the box that separates the dreamer from the dreaming. It was as if we were stolen, put into a bag carried on the back of a white man who pretends to own the earth and the sky. In the sack were all the people of the world. We fought until there was a hole in the bag.

The following stanza is a refrain repeated twice in the poem:

When we fell we were not aware of falling. We were driving to work, or to the mall. The children were in school learning subtraction with guns.

Through the banal actions of need, habit, or the drive to possess: “driving to work, or to the mall,” “we fell.” Through violence against innocents: “[t]he children . . . learning subtraction with guns,” “we fell.” This falling was the loss of a type of imagination that connected people to the larger world. It was concealed by a loss of awareness so profound that those who fell did not even know they were falling. In between this refrain of falling and obliviousness, the narrator suggests that “[w]e found ourselves somewhere near the diminishing point of civi-/lization, not far from the trickster’s bag of tricks.” In two senses, one positive and one negative, they found themselves. In the negative sense, they ended up living near the “diminishing point of civilization” within reach of the problem-causing trickster. In a more hopeful sense, they found themselves able to rediscover connection. They saved themselves through the imagination

that unites the unique parts of the web: “. . . near the diminishing point of civilization, . . . Everything was/ as we imagined it. The earth and stars, every creature and leaf imagined with us.”

The refrain appears a second time after the interlude in which the people imagine in communion with “every creature.” Its repetition emphasizes the act of falling out of awareness and may be “reflective of the performative repetitiveness which constitutes its [ritual’s] persistence as a practical social force” (Kroeber 331). The recognition of the loss of mindfulness leads to the understanding that “[t]he imagining needs praise as does any living thing,” and “[w]e are evidence of this praise.” Eventually, rediscovering the attentiveness inherent in the power of imagination:

Our children put down their guns when we did to imagine with us  
We imagined the shining link between the heart and the sun.  
We imagined tables of food for everyone.  
We imagined the songs.

These lines reveal that imagination is an integral part of “us,” as well as of people in the greater sense, and of the other entities constituting the world’s web; it is active and powerful. By praising and using our imagination, we can link our human energy to that of the cosmos. We can imagine compassionate connection, as well as the world’s songs. As we activate our imagination, the world “illuminates us,” it interrupts our solipsistic perspectives through encounter. This

constitutes a call and response like the rhythmic give and take of a dance. It questions and changes us, and makes us realize our continuity with the world:

The imagination conversely illumines us, speaks with us, sings with us, drums with us, loves us.

The moves Harjo makes in “A Postcolonial Tale” also implicate Harjo’s conceptualization of her role as poet-truthteller and the way imagination operates in that role. In “Memory: The Spiral in the Poetry of Joy Harjo,” Susmita Paul considers Harjo’s imaginative use of time aimed at healing through expansive understandings of memory. The fact that multiple levels of history are invoked simultaneously hints at some of the significance of these complex ways of imagining things in Harjo’s work as she states: *“If I am a poet who is charged with speaking the truth (and I believe the word poet is synonymous with truth-teller), what do I have to say about all of this?”* (italics in original) (19)” (Paul 334). What she has to say is an imaginative utterance that opens out to *otherness*.

“In Praise of Earth” also emphasizes the responsiveness of human language and imagination to other entities with their own expressions of the world (Harjo, *How We Became* 175-176). It reflects on the way in which these imaginative responses can activate an openness and a deeper awareness of connection to the world. The poem recounts the unceasing togetherness and continuity of people with the earth and with the multitude of entities in the cosmic web. Praising the earth and its creatures is like a ritual that helps humans

listen to the world's unique elements. By opening to what the world offers,  
people understand the continuity between them, be they insect, stone, or sky:

We kept on dancing last summer though the dancing had been called subversive.  
We weren't alone at the end of this particular world and knew  
it wouldn't be the last world, though wars  
had broken out on all sides.

We kept on dancing and with us were the insects who had gathered at the grounds  
in the grasses and the trees. And with us were the stars and  
a few lone planets who had been friends  
with the earth for generations.

One of the things that the poem suggests is that humans share the need of praise  
(and of the act of praising) with all of the cosmos regardless of their human  
faults, "our tendency to war, to terrible/ stumbles. . .":

So do the stones who were the first to speak when we arrived. So does the flaming  
mountain who harbors the guardian spirits who refuse to abandon  
us. And this Earth keeps faithfully to her journey, carrying us  
around the Sun,

But instead of praising, humans get caught up in selfish personal or trivial  
thoughts and without listening to the world's expression, they fail to become  
open to the gifts that an actively praising human being needs and desires. This  
failure to imagine that comes from forgetting breaks the cycle of give and take  
between people and the Earth or the universe:

All of us in our rags and riches, our rages and promises, small talk and suffering.  
As we go to the store to buy our food and forget to plant, sing so  
that we will be nourished in turn. As we walk out  
into the dawn,

With our lists of desires that her gifts will fulfill, as she turns our tears



into rivers of sweet water . . .

Without taking the world's songs into the heart and responding in song, humans forget how to connect fully with the world, and cannot "be nourished in turn."

By renewing the connection through musical language that whirls energy out from memory, pulling our human perceptions with it, centrifugally, a person can become open and aware of continuity with the universe. In this dynamic, the quality of language changes. This active, listening-based, imaginative expression is *ceremonial* language:

We are linked by leaf, fin, and root. When we climb through the sky to each new day our thoughts are clouds shifting weather within us.

When we step out of our minds into ceremonial language we are humbled and amazed,

at the sacrifice. Those who forget become the people of stone who guard the entrance to remembering. And the Earth keeps up her dancing and she is neither perfect nor exactly in time.

She is one of us.

And she loves the dance for what it is. So does the Sun who calls the Earth beloved. And praises her with light.

While "A Postcolonial Tale" and "In Praise of Earth" speak of the need for being open to the pull of those *others* that are placed in one's heart, which compel human imagination and poetic song to expand or open perceptions to the world, other poems like "Trickster" enact this process (Harjo, *How We Became* 72). It begins with the narrator simply noticing a crow:

Crow, in the new snow.

You caw, caw  
like crazy.

Seeing and hearing the crow stimulates the narrator's imagination, and compels her to address crow directly:

Laugh.  
Because you know I'm a fool,  
too, like you  
skimming over the thin ice to the war going on  
all over the world.

When she writes, "Laugh," it is as if she has realized her connection with the foolish crow, leading her to acknowledge that they are both surviving ("skimming over the thin ice") in a world full of war.

It becomes evident through even a few of Harjo's poems that the way people awaken themselves to their continuity with the cosmos comes from their imaginations, which are fostered by memory and often take shape as poetic song. Much of Harjo's poetry acknowledges that humans (and particularly Native Americans who have had their languages destroyed in large part) have forgotten how to imagine and sing in communion with the world. The act of remembering, however, constitutes a dynamic process in which individuals can cultivate the rhythmic power of the universe if they are willing to listen to it—or in Levinasian terms, to let it speak to them and to respond to and for its *others*.

Acts of remembering make possible the understanding that the cosmos, its people, and its other various types of beings, are part of a cosmic network, each

with their own stories, songs, and dances, of which the reader is also a part, connected by the cycle of life. By “collaps[ing] the boundaries regarding time, space, myth, and personal experience in order to enrich/deepen possibilities for finding meaning” Harjo’s “fluid” “spiral” of memory, according to Womack, “resists fixed shape of definition . . . (Womack, 250)” (Kolosov 46-47). “Skeleton of Winter” and “Remember” from *She Had Some Horses*, speak about forgetting and encourage such fluid acts of remembering in order to revive lost connections (Harjo, *How We Became* 40-41, 42)<sup>33</sup>. They suggest that memory inspires a singing type of language that can bring the human soul into communal song with the world’s rhythms.

“Skeleton of Winter” begins with the narrator speaking about her disengagement from acts of expression in the darkness of winter: “These winter days/ I’ve remained silent / as a white man’s watch / keeping time. . .”

It is almost too dark  
                    for vision  
these ebony mornings  
but there is still memory,  
the other-sight  
and still I see.

Through the act of remembering, parts of the world come back to life through the narrator’s imagination in its reactivation of forgotten elements of *truth*. She creates poetic sounds out of her imagining, which encompass *something* that “echoes / all forgotten dreams, / in winter.”

A tooth-hard rocking  
in my belly comes back,  
something echoes  
all forgotten dreams,  
                    in winter.

What brings forgotten things back to life is their connection to the narrator, who is a conduit of memory transmitting them.<sup>34</sup> Her memory uniquely encompasses another layer of the world's complexities. It is an "other-sight" that can express dark winter's forgotten dreams through the expressiveness of singing that illuminates like light:

And sound is light, is  
movement. The sun revolves  
and sings.

Finally, she considers herself in relation to the world around her (she's "not just a name"). Her existence creates part of its meaning because elements of the world survive in her memory in a *centrifugal* dance with her poetic imagination.

Encountering the world activates a response that garners the power of other-sight in her language, which brings connection and memory to life:

I am memory alive  
                    not just a name  
but an intricate part  
of this web of motion,  
meaning: earth, sky, stars circling  
my heart

                    centrifugal.

In "Skeleton of Winter," she reflects on her personal relationship and experiences with the world and the interrelationships between memory and language. In "Remember," she persuades those who might develop an attentiveness to the world of the significance of remembering:

Remember the sky you were born under;  
know each of the star's stories.  
Remember the moon, know who she is.  
Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the  
strongest point of time. Remember sundown  
and the giving away to night.  
Remember your birth, how your mother struggled  
to give you form and breath. You are evidence of  
her life, and her mother's, and hers.

By revealing the importance of memory to imagination and connection, "Remember" implores the reader to use recollection as a type of mindfulness for relating to *other* parts of the world, and for seeing the dynamic relationship of which one is part. In her discussion of "Remember," Paul asserts that "[t]he macrocosmic perception of life accommodates the differences and refrains from categorising" (Paul 332). Much of the world is inconceivably different from "you," the poem asserts, but if you respond by talking and listening to its elements, you will remember and remain open to what distinguishes them from you, as well as ponder time in a more fluid way:

Remember the earth whose skin you are:  
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth  
brown earth, we are earth.  
Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their

tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them, listen to them. They are alive poems.

Ultimately, remembering provides Harjo a key for understanding the infinite complexities of language and of life. (For instance, in regarding the “pain of contemporary life” Harjo states that “the complexity of the mind behind the larger system of knowledge is stunning and will break through any way it can” against the “sleepwalking” of “forgetting” (Warrior 346)). Remembering will help you to delineate a place for yourself, while at the same time keeping the world, of which you are a vital part, from being congealed in simplistic or mastering description:

Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.

Remember language comes from this.

Remember the dance language is, that life is.

Remember.

The act of remembering, therefore, is a vital way for humans to begin to listen, or in a Levinasian sense, to receive the speech of *others*. This helps them open up to hearing the world’s songs, to connecting with *others*, and to imagining the world with a more dynamic sense of temporal relationships. “The act of remembering becomes a continuous process of action and memory becomes an ‘occurrence’, ‘occurring right now’ (‘Story’ 24)” (Paul 333).

Some of Harjo's poems, like "It's Raining in Honolulu" and "Speaking Tree" are examples of listening to the poetic song of non-human parts of the world (Harjo, *Conflict Resolution* 108-109, 118-119). They move beyond human language to consider the expressiveness of the world and its processes as "alive poems." In "It's Raining in Honolulu," as in the previous works, there is a give and take that occurs through the human imagination as it exposes itself to expression through acts of remembering and listening for what the world offers, in turn responding with its own poetic contribution. The poem situates the scene in the "mist at the brow of the mountain," where:

Each leaf of flower, of taro, tree, and bush shivers with  
ecstasy.

And the rain songs of all the flowering ones who have called  
for the rain

Can be found there, flourishing beneath the currents of  
singing.

Again the poet is listening carefully as the plants "call for" rain. She imagines them "shiver[ing] with ecstasy" in her act of attention toward the world. We are made aware of the affinity of all things on the earth in their need for water or some type of refreshment. Water links all these things together through Harjo's poetic listening and imagining, which opens itself up to "the rain songs of all the flowering ones who have called for the rain":

Rain opens us, like flowers, or earth that has been thirsty for

more than a season.

So she first listens carefully to the rain songs outside of her, then brings them into her heart by listening and perhaps, remembering. She then discovers that the rain discovered or placed within "opens us" and makes us feel "like flowers or earth" needing to "drink mystery"--that is, that larger outside energy that the rain is just one manifestation of. The inner image of rain has whirled her out centrifugally to this larger energy. It has opened within her. It has humbled her before mystery and allowed her to drink it in. If humans open up to these different types of songs and ways of being, they begin to understand themselves in connection to the world around them without trying to master or to know in a way that dominates or assimilates:

We stop all of our talking, quit thinking, to drink the  
mystery.

We listen to the breathing beneath our breathing.

We hear how the rain became rain, how we became human.

In other words, we learn something deeper than what we can express in human language and we remember in a fluidity existing in continuity with the cosmos.

"To understand each / other is profound beyond human words. / This is what I am singing" (Harjo *Conflict Resolution*, 55).

The wetness saturates and cleans everything, including the  
perpetrators



Of the second overthrow.

We will plant songs where there were curses.

Therefore, through the rain's purification, it also becomes possible for people to listen and to sing together with ceremonial power, rituals that the reader of the poem becomes part of.

All of the poets in this study have their own way of reflecting on the inconceivable nature of alterity. Graham sees it as the ungraspable complexity of the world's flux. Hass's considerations relate more directly to his own human limitations for understanding the world and his struggle to see loss and emptiness as possible spaces for relating tenderly to *others*. I read Harjo's way of dealing with the infiniteness or inconceivability of the world's alterity as an attempt to preserve its mystery, while at the same time understanding and deepening her sense of connection to it by finding or developing her *sky-opening* songs grounded in memory. At one time, she "believed that myth was alive and was the mothering source of stories, poetry, and songs, and within this field [she] would find the provocative answers to the riddle of being a human without wings or gills, or directions to a map for a lost wanderer," Harjo states in "I Used to Think a Poem Could Become a Flower" (the Introduction to *Ploughshares*, December 2004) (Harjo and Winder 134).

She ultimately came to question whether the power of “truth-telling” in that way rings true and subsequently she asserted that, perhaps literature’s “ultimate purpose” is to make people aware that human knowledge is limited, and to “humble us to our knees, to that know-nothing place” (Harjo and Winder 134).<sup>35</sup> In “It’s Raining in Honolulu,” when we listen to the song the world offers and imagine the different layers of life and expression going on, we are able to “drink the mystery.” We do not reduce it to knowledge or designate it in writing, we feel our connection to it in our bodies and souls and it has the power to influence our expressive responses: “[w]e will plant songs where there were curses.” Having spent her life developing songs to “keep sky open in her mind” and to “accompany us” humans, she offers her readers “gifts for challenge, for inspiration, for sustenance” (Harjo and Winder 134).

A similar thing happens in “Speaking Tree,” where Harjo implicates mystery as the idea that some things are “unspeakable” (Harjo, *Conflict Resolution* 118-119). Even though these things are not graspable in language, if one “understand[s] poetry,” some of this mystery can be experienced through the world’s unique songs—if only by imagining them:

Some things on this earth are unspeakable:  
Genealogy of the broken—  
A shy wind threading leaves after a massacre,  
Or the smell of coffee and no one there—

Some humans say trees are not sentient beings,

But they do not understand poetry —

Nor can they hear the singing of trees when they are fed by  
Wind, or water music—  
Or hear their cries of anguish when they are broken and  
bereft--

Similar to her poetic enactment in “Honolulu,” here, Harjo takes images into her heart. From within, they generate a sense of longing that whirls her out centrifugally to a *deeper*, more holistic, way of dreaming, or of knowing, which she “moves with” because she has it open inside her heart. The sounds of the wind or rain in the trees are types of singing that she has listened to carefully. Not only does she hear their songs, “cries of anguish when they are broken and / bereft--” the affinity she develops with them through her poetic imagining compels her to think of herself as a tree: “Now I am a woman longing to be a tree, planted in a moist, / dark earth . . .” There is an interdependence between herself as “a woman longing” to be planted in the earth, who, like the trees, feels anguish and “cannot walk through all realms—[she] carr[ies] a yearning [she] cannot bear alone in the dark—”:

What shall I do with all this heartache?  
The deepest-rooted dream of a tree is to walk  
Even just a little ways, from the place next to the doorway—  
To the edge of the river of life, and drink—

She has heard trees talking and she relates through her imagination to what they have said in a dream- or vision-like way (consider the resonance with

the quote of Sandra Cisneros before the poem's first lines, which reads: *I had a beautiful dream I was dancing with a tree.*). Her final response is to:

*Imagine what would it be like to dance close together  
In this land of water and knowledge . . .*

*To drink deep what is undrinkable.*

The mystery of life is what is undrinkable, and as if she is a tree imagining the ability to move and dance close together, she opens up to human desire, the dream of understanding mystery. However, she realizes that if it were understood, it would no longer be mystery. Like Hass, who in "Meditation at Lagunitas" finds himself lost in, and losing the world through theoretical speech and struggling to keep language tender and open against the human desire to possess, Harjo sees the danger of congealing the world in using certain types of language. To engage compassionately with the world, it is necessary to be holistic, to "[s]tudy with all parts of your being, not just your intellect," which means alternatively, that "[t]he more theoretical [poetry is], the more removed it can become, and then you lose a relationship between the soul and the world. You talk at it rather than move with it" (Harjo and Winder xiii, 5-6).

As previously stated, music is capable of encompassing the more holistic element that Harjo seeks, and two frequent reflections on it exist within her poetry. At times, she praises it as the basis of the power to sustain connection.

At other times, she takes her own unique and elaborate experiences of it and melds them in a rhythmic and linguistic enactment, sometimes combining them with vocal and musical performance. In the essay "Becoming Bear: Transposing the Animal Other in N. Scott Momaday and Joy Harjo," Patricia Haseltine states that around the time when Harjo wrote *In Mad Love and War*, jazz was particularly important to her (Haseltine 98). She quotes Harjo:

The language of jazz kept me up at night or woke me up early in the morning as I wrote in the manner of the horn riffs that carried me over the battlefield. I needed a saxophone so that poems would have accompaniment for the songs of love and war. The horn could laugh, could cry in a direct, physical manner. Poetry and music belonged together. (xxiv-xxv)

(Haseltine 98)

Harjo wrote "The Place The Musician Became A Bear" as an homage to her friend, Jim Pepper, a Kaw-Muscogee Creek jazz musician (Harjo, *How We Became* 114-115). According to Haseltine, the poem is also a "poetic jazz-like response... to Momaday's reinscription" of the Native American mythic motif of "human to bear" transformation, one function of which is to aid Native Americans in confronting and resisting assimilation and colonization (Haseltine 82)<sup>36</sup>:

In the imagination of Harjo and Momaday, the mythic bear-man is a living palimpsest hybrid artistically facing off against assimilation into the mainstream society and reservation "captivity." And, in its sublime completed transcendence to the stars as Ursa Major, the bear-man enters the cosmic order of the universe.

(Haseltine 82-83)

In a note related to Pepper, Harjo says that he “married the traditional elements of jazz with Muscogean and Plains tribal musics” (Harjo, *How We Became* 224). “When he died I knew he had gone to the Milky Way and had left us his gift of music—I think of him at the ceremonial grounds when I see the fire climb, turn to stars” (Harjo, *How We Became* 224). In the poem written for him, the melding of jazz and Harjo’s conceptualization of music as a powerful force entwined with the universe, provide the means, or as Harjo puts it, “the how,” to help sustain connections to places that are vital for our souls “to go to become ourselves again in the human comedy” (Harjo *How We Became*, 114):

Our souls imitate lights in the Milky Way. We’ve always known where to go to become ourselves again in the human comedy.

It’s the how that baffles. A saxophone can complicate things.

Directly addressing Pepper she says that “[y]ou knew this, as do all musicians” who understand the necessity of returning to find themselves again. This knowledge might come from musical experiences, such as jazz improvisation, in which a person “becomes a wave of humanness and forgets to be ashamed of making the wrong step.” However it arrives, it exists as a way of balancing the world’s destabilizing effect on human beings. Therefore, music can lead us into awareness about what it means to sing or *play* the world into place—against human skepticism—and can heal.

As she states in a commentary, a literary device “created . . . as a reflection of an oral experience of poetry” that bookmarks the poems in *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*: “In music, we can become tragically and beautifully lost. . . and found again” (Harjo and Winder x; Harjo, *How We Became* 33). It also provides a good example of the way that “[t]he very inconsistencies in her explanations align with a poem that is fundamentally centered on the contradictions and fluctuating classifications of human identity” (Valuenzela-Mendoza 50)<sup>37</sup>:

The wings of the Milky Way lead back to the singers.  
And there’s the saxophone again.

It’s about rearranging the song to include the subway hiss  
under your feet in Brooklyn.

And the laugh of a bear who thought he was a human.

As he plays that tune again, the one about the wobble of the earth  
spinning so damned hard

it hurts.

“We Were There When Jazz Was Invented” (Harjo, *Conflict Resolution* 21-23) cultivates this same dynamic musical connection to life, in which the “transforming-self,” what, Mary Leen in “An Art of Saying: Joy Harjo’s Poetry and the Survival of Storytelling” views as Harjo’s “having a multiple-subject position in her poems,” comes into focus (Haseltine 101). It fulfills the second type of reflection on music by Harjo, enacting the musical power of language

beyond merely stating it. It is more improvisational and rhythm driven than “The Place The Musician Became A Bear.” These elements, combine dynamically with a Native sense of *creative* remembering, which fluidly reinvents time and life experience in an expression that aids in personal and cultural survival. In these ways, it stands as a perfect example of Paul’s articulation of unique way Harjo re-envision history as an active force. “Entwining *what is* with the normative claims of *what might be*, oral histories tell the past in order to tell the future- not to predict, to reveal, or to foreclose on it but to catch it in ethical threads drawn in the act of telling. (88)” (Paul 332). This Indigenous use of memory forms the basis for Harjo’s improvisatory jazz-like language in “We Were There.”

In addition to considerations of Native views of memory, it is helpful to fleshing out the discussion to consider Harjo’s use of musical language in relation to the thoughts of American jazz musician and composer, Lee Konitz, regarding the function of jazz. Konitz says “[j]azz tunes are great vehicles. They are forms that can be used and reused. Their implications are infinite,” which resonates, in some sense, with the idea of ritual (Berliner 63). Their structure consists of melodies in tandem with harmonic progressions as templates, which encompass the basis for improvisation (Berliner 63). In *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, Paul Berliner describes improvisation as in part, a



type of invention coming from a unique balance of well-practiced skills supporting “multiple associations” of ideas (Berliner 217). Furthermore, in describing the “improviser’s world of consciousness,” he states:

Besides those unexpected transformations that periodically arise from the discrepancy between conception and execution, improvisers constantly strive to put their thoughts together in different ways, going over old ground in search of new. The activity is much like creative thinking in language, in which the routine process is largely devoted to rethinking. By ruminating over formerly held ideas, isolating particular aspects, examining their relationships to the features of other ideas, and perhaps, struggling to extend ideas in modest steps and refine them, thinkers typically have the sense of delving more deeply into the possibilities of their ideas.

(Berliner 216)

Berliner’s description of the improviser’s world of consciousness provides a provocative way of considering some of the moves that Harjo makes in “We Were There When Jazz Was Invented.” The poem not only confronts the inventions of jazz music conceptually, it also enacts improvisatory invention in its use of language. Even its considerations of memory and cultural significance seem to perform the “ruminating over formerly held ideas” and extending them that Berliner talks about. Harjo’s fluid perspective of time gives these inventions personal and cultural significance as the narrator listens to the world, trying to remember and “rearrange” the important things she has forgotten in counter-memory.

The musical contribution of “We Were There” to memory is complex since the connections it wants to make are fragile and in danger of being lost in dominant conceptions of time and the passing of time itself. The combination of memory, imagination, and music plays a role in creating the ceremonial power in Harjo’s poem, like the workable forms of jazz music with their infinite implications for ritual-like repetition:

I have lived 19,404 midnights, some of them in the quaver of  
fish dreams  
And some without any memory at all, just the flash of the  
jump  
From a night rainbow, to an island of fire and flowers—such  
a holy  
Leap between forgetting and jazz. How long has it been  
since I called you back?  
After Albuquerque with my baby in diapers on my hip; it  
was a difficult birth,  
I was just past girlhood slammed into motherhood. What a  
bear.

Perhaps what she is calling back is the memory of her past.<sup>38</sup> She calls it back through the “holy/ Leap” of the recuperative power of jazz. This leap might be sacred enough to bring memory back in a way that will let her “rearrang[e] the song” (as she says in “The Place The Musician Became A Bear”) so that it “keep[s] sky open in her mind” in order to help her relate to parts of the world “[b]eyond the door of [her] tongue,” her limited human speech and mode of thinking:

Beyond the door of my tongue is a rail and I’m leaning over

to watch bears  
Catch salmon in their teeth. That realm isn't anywhere near  
Los Angeles. If I dream

Perhaps it is the use of English language that forms the limitation, the rail,  
beyond her tongue. But "If [she] dream[s]":

It all back then I reconstruct that song buried in the muscle  
of urgency. I'm bereft  
In the lost nation of debtors. Wey yo hey, wey yo hey yah  
hey. Pepper jumped  
And some of us went with him to the stomp. All night,  
beyond midnight, back  
Up into the sky, holy.

In the previous poem, Jim Pepper became a bear and went to the Milky Way to  
be with the singers who bring the world into being. In "We Were There," the  
narrator not only mentions Pepper as the leader of those who would stomp  
dance and connect with the world in a holy way through jazz.

In the subsequent stanza she begins to riff like Pepper might have, to  
improvise on the loss of Native culture, on her personal loss of youthful  
innocence in the burden of childbirth, and on the power of music and dreaming:

It was a holy mess, wholly of our folly, drawn of ashes  
around the hole  
Of our undoing, Back there the ceremonial fire was  
disassembled, broken and bare, like chord breaks  
forgetting to blossom. Around midnight, I turn my back  
And watch prayers take root beneath the moon. Not that  
dreams  
Have anything to do with it exactly. . .

These rhythmic lines improvise on sound and meaning. They also create complex relationships between cultural disintegration in the metaphor of the “disassembled” ceremonial fire. She compares its brokenness through the use of a simile in which the harmonies (“broken and bare, like chord breaks”) that do not come to anything creatively are like the dying fire. It seems that as the “ceremonial fire was / disassembled” like her Native culture, the narrator was “slammed into motherhood. What a bear” (with “bear” representing forms of transformation). At some point, she realizes that remembering in a particular way can take her beyond the limits of language and even rigid understandings of time, allowing her to get back in touch with the larger world and the world of nature (“to watch bears / Catch salmon in their teeth”). Imagining, or “dream[ing],” can give her the power to “reconstruct that song” that will help sustain a different connection to the world, one that can “rearrange” life experiences, perhaps even time and history in a way that is holy. What is necessary to finding her way back to the sacred is music:

. . . I can only marry the music;  
the outlook’s bleak  
Without it. I mean it. And then I don’t. Too many questions  
mar the answer. Breath  
Is the one. And two. And. Dream sweet prophet of sound,  
dream  
Mvskoke acrobat of disruption. It’s nearing midnight and  
something holy  
Is always coming around. . .

The beauty of Harjo's poetic vision is her habitual response to the world's despair. Like crow, who is only good at "finding gold in the trash of humans," she "collect[s] the shine of anything beautiful [she] can find" (Harjo, *How We Became* 142.) However, this beauty is based on the personal and cultural struggle to survive, and exists in tension with what Harjo sees as the entrenchment of commodification, the "buying and selling" that stands-in for a deeper American culture (Harjo and Winder xi-xii). In response to this "over-culture," she asserts that artists have responsibilities to "regenerate art and culture," with poetry holding the possibility to engage with the world and bring about change (Harjo and Winder xii). Harjo responds to the difficulty of regenerating culture through unfamiliar linguistic tools in part three of "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings," "GIVE CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK" (Harjo, *Conflict Resolution* 81):

We speak together with this trade language of English. This trade language enables us to speak across many language boundaries. These languages have given us the poets:

Ortiz, Silko, Momaday, Alexie, Diaz, Bird, Woody, Kane,  
Bitsui, Long Soldier, White, Erdrich, Tapahonso, Howe,  
Louis, Brings Plenty, okpik, Hill, Wood, Maracle, Cisneros,  
Trask, Hogan, Dunn, Welch, Gould . . .

In this world in which English supplants Native languages, Harjo consistently looks to music as a saving grace and a necessary connection to other musicians, as well as to the cosmos<sup>39</sup>:

This would be no place to be without blues, jazz—Thank



And that is what Harjo's poems do over and over again, allow her, and the reader, to rearrange thought, to open and renew relationships, so as to perform her own rebirth in the penetrating spirit of the dynamism of a musical poetics.

*Returning to Creation's Mind:  
Peter Blue Cloud's Mind-Weaving Dance of Poetic Consciousness*

The idea that Creation is consciousness, a unified yet pluralistic *mind* made up of the world's elements, is at the heart of much of Peter Blue Cloud's poetry. "As a poet, he is a seeker, a crier of visions, a meditator on the world spirit" (Ruppert 92). His poetry recognizes that all the world's elements emanate from this spirit-mind like thoughts in a dynamic and ongoing *dance* of expression. In this sense, Creation *is* the world in its infinite nature. Humans are part of this interplay of expression, as well, but are not always conscious of the way that *others* in the world's flux play their parts in the dance. This lack of awareness obscures the significance of Creation's mysterious and infinite spirit and dismisses human responsibility (since the Earth was "given us / in guardianship from the Creation") to think or to imagine *others* in a Levinasian approach that is ethically open and nuanced (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 148). Instead it intensifies the mastering and destructive side of humans, "born twins of good and evil" (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 22).

Through various motifs and modes of process-oriented imagining, Blue Cloud's poetry continuously reminds the reader of the predominance of Creation's spirit-mind in the cosmos and in the play of cyclical time. For instance, in discussing "Milkweed," from the collection *Turtle, Bear, & Wolf*, one of several poems of Blue Cloud's using the milkweed motif, Indigenous literary



scholar James Ruppert states that Blue Cloud imagines uniquely in the sense that “[t]he insight at the beginning of the poem is made possible by the observation of the narrator at the end after he has gone on the travels of the milkweed” (Ruppert 93). Such imaginatively engaged, linguistic responses to the world are based in oral tradition, in which, expression and experience come together to form “true songs” that function as what Native writer Simon Ortiz calls “the complete voice of a person” (Ruppert 93). Blue Cloud’s and the reader’s thoughts and experiences, his work reveals, constitute elements of Creation’s thinking; therefore, by understanding life as thoughts in the dance of Creation’s spirit-mind, he and the reader acknowledge their existence in a unique configuration of the world. This configuration engenders their mental and spiritual return to Creation “in a round dance together” (Blue Cloud, *Sketches* unpaginated).<sup>40</sup>

The idea of returning to the circle of Creation through imagining is an integral way to engage with life’s mystery that Blue Cloud’s poems call attention to and enact. As he states in an interview with fellow Native poet, Joseph Bruchach:

I believe that there is an essence in us, our own personal mystery, which is the power, which is the Creation. There is something in us that’s alive, and when we die we don’t die completely. There’s something, maybe part of our mind, goes back to the gene pool, the mystery, the essence, back to Creation, and is passed on to other people. The good and the bad.  
(Bruchach 40)

Blue Cloud's poems call on humans to join in Creation's dance of consciousness by using their own minds to observe, to listen to, to imagine, and to acknowledge the mystery of *otherness*, as well as their own roles, productive and destructive, in Creation's cycles. Blue Cloud's concern "with the spirit of the old world heralded in the stories and songs which tell of the days when man and animals lived together, talked to each other and understood each other" influences his poems, which function as "songs of vision and illumination" (Ruppert 92). "Though his vision may be of the interweaving of the world of activity, or of the cycles and balances that bring endings back to beginnings, they are still highly personal visions born in meditation" that are "recreation[s] of a poetic and spiritual penetration" (Ruppert 92).

Attempting to engage with the world's spirit in this personally intimate, yet searching way of relating to *other* entities echoing Creation, Blue Cloud creates a type of poetic consciousness, *mind-weaving* as "Reflections on Milkweed" calls it, that *returns* humans to Creation by reminding them that Creation is spirit-mind, and by fostering an understanding that the world's *others* are equal in their origins as elements of this pluralistic mind.<sup>41</sup> By tapping into his imagination through the encounter with *others*, he entwines his mind's energies with the world's *others* through poetic journeys on the page. As an enactment of Levinasian *saying*, this *mind-weaving* plays out differently from the

attempts at *saying* of the other poets in this study. Graham's mode of *recomplicating* perceptions of the world by observing its infinite flux has her entering language in a way that concerns itself more with material minutiae than Blue Cloud, who seems to float with the milkweed, run with coyote, or create with mythical Coyote. And while it could be asserted that both Blue Cloud and Hass rely on space to find possibility and write with an affinity for haiku, Blue Cloud's space is cosmic, rather than social.<sup>42</sup> While Harjo takes the world into her heart and sends it out centrifugally, Blue Cloud gently and rhythmically drifts through the moments of forever by imaging the journeys of natural entities through his *mind-weaving*.

As he writes: "This nation / each and every one of us, / we are a voice, / a song, / no person more or less than another / all is sacred, we are sacred, / for we are children / of the Creation." The elements and entities of the cosmos are distinct from, yet connected to him. His *mind-weaving*, in recognizing this, returns to Creation by reflecting poetically on the uniqueness of each thing:

At many points in his work, Blue Cloud attempts to merge with things and float off, speaking from inside another creature or thing. In such poems the voice may move from observation to description to *persona*, or may center in one. Yet, through this voice he finds unity and completion: all is merged in one and spirit is everywhere.

(Ruppert 93)

*Mind-weaving* constitutes Blue Cloud's process of reflecting on his personal perspective: "man's art in thinking / mind-weaving / singular ties / is but

returning” (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 94). *Mind-weaving* is not only an opening of one’s own mind, but a returning to Creation in the rhythms of its created entities. Furthermore, and ethically significant, it is a means of relating to *others’* expressive manifestations (of Creation’s mind) by using language to echo what Blue Cloud sees as their expressions and rhythms.

Acts of observing, listening to, and imagining the roles of Creation’s *others* activate Blue Cloud’s mind, calling on him to engage linguistically with the unique *rhythms* of those expressions by “experiment[ing] with form,” sometimes “picking up the beat of the dance or the chant” (Ruppert 94). *Mind-weaving*, therefore, by engaging with these other rhythms, integrates the threads of human thought into the cosmic dance of Creation’s mind. This creative, process-oriented way of engaging with language is fleshed out in a review of Blue Cloud’s book of Coyote tales, *The Other Side of Nowhere*, by Native writer, Simon Ortiz in which he links Creation, as ritualistic action, to his view of the tradition of storytelling in Native American cultures:

Essentially, storytelling as art is a way of coming into existence when it is a way of life—and art is a way of life in Native American culture. One can say that storytelling is more than “telling” because of its concept as an art; indeed, in this sense, *art is a way of creating*. Stories are to engender creation, and one can simply and directly say that stories are creation.  
(Ortiz 598)

In his review, Ortiz asserts that Blue Cloud’s writing dynamically illustrates the most significant aspects of storytelling: the way it enacts through creative and

ritualistic processes that draw in the reader/listener to the act of creation (Ortiz 600). Ortiz says that it “is really ‘story’ itself that is important when it is a way of coming into being, that is, creating existence or coming into consciousness,” which, similar to Levinas’s approach, keeps language alive.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, it allows *others* to maintain their own mysterious (or inconceivable) threads, or rhythms, even as humans engage with them, a configuration harmonizing with Levinas’ linguistic and ethical approach to *others* and *otherness*.<sup>44</sup>

Blue Cloud’s work acknowledges its human perspective, and by utilizing imagination to engage openly with *others*, fulfills what he considers to be its human role: to use language imaginatively to reconfigure and express personal thoughts that relate openly to *others* as part of the dynamism of Creation—to *mind-weave*—thus *returning* to Creation through non-mastering engagement with *others*. In the case of “Milkweed” (distinct from “Reflections on Milkweed”) Ruppert states: “[a]s the poet moves out from the poem, he brings the spirit touched by his fusion back into contact with the world around us and divines the milkweed spirit’s importance in gluing the changing world together” (Ruppert 92). This use of language as poetic consciousness helps humans return to the infinite mystery of Creation’s thoughts, and to mitigate their [humans’] destructive nature. The way his poems perform the *mind-weaving* of returning varies. As we will see, some poems focus on Creation, some on the cyclical

nature of the world as related to the “round dance” of Creation (Blue Cloud, *Sketches* unpaginated). Others experiment with language, using it to open up imagination to the mystery of *others*, like animals or the void of space, or even to inhabit their perspectives. Often, in highlighting and acknowledging the destructive nature of humans, the works counteract it by conscientiously bringing imagination back into harmony with the spirit of Creation.

Several poems spanning his career refer to Creation simply as the “mind of Creation”: sometimes as a dream or as “a song, a trickling become / a gurgling, chuckling water voice” (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 147-148).<sup>45</sup> Consider the brief poem, “Earth And Creation” from *Clans of Many Nations: Selected Poems 1969-94 (Clans)* (Blue Cloud 118).

He held the drum up  
to the heat of  
morning sun,  
    and the sound was Earth.

She held the child high  
to breath the  
air of morning,  
    and heard Creation.<sup>46</sup>

Since the mind of Creation is sometimes a sound (a “howling cry which was / an echo in the emptiness of nothing”) Blue Cloud’s poems often interpret the world through what he feels when he observes or listens to the sounds constituting

*others* from Creation's mind (Blue Cloud, *Elderberry Flute Songs* 8). Invoking his sense of the expressions or rhythms of these *others*, be they animal, natural, cosmic, or human, his careful observations, much like the figure holding up the drum in "Earth and Creation," lead him to imagine and to articulate in language their vital places in the "circle of living" (Blue Cloud, *Sketches* unpaginated).

The use of language in another brief work, "Crow," from *Sketches in Winter, With Crows* and *Clans*, is an example of the way that Blue Cloud brings the expressions, here, the "conversations" and images of crows to life in a way that activates his own imagination:

Back and forth cawings between black,  
Wet trees and crows, early morning  
Joyful conversation, a light drizzle  
Accents the gleam of flapping wings,

While the sensual details of the first lines—the blackness, the wetness, the flapping wings, and the "back and forth cawings"—make the crows *real* to the reader, the way that the narrator subsequently imagines their rhythm brings them to life in a unique way. He opens his mind to them, and weaves himself into them by engaging his whole being with them in an imaginative reflection:

Spring scents the air  
in promise of green corn shoots,  
and the breeze carries a richness  
of thawing soil and "caw"  
and answering "caw" lifts my body  
upward  
and I flap mightily

to climb above the trees  
and look over my shoulder  
for one, last, joyous  
“caw”

As “Crow” illustrates, rather than using animals “in their mythological contexts primarily,” or “in their cultural contexts,” “Blue Cloud uses them as instruments—paths into the self—into people around us and the unified spirit of man and nature” (Ruppert 94).

Some animals or components of the cosmos hold a special place in Creation’s mind as Blue Cloud interprets them. For example, in “Elderberry Flute Song,” from the book of the same title, the mythical character, Coyote, in the guise of Kokopelli (the mythical hump-backed flute player), “raised the flute to lips” and subsequently from this act, “. . . note followed note / in a melody which wove the fabric of first life” in an act of primordial creation (Blue Cloud, *Elderberry Flute Song* 137-138). In this instance, Coyote is performing the *mind-weaving* of Creation in the act that Blue Cloud sets up. In “The Cry,” the opening poem in *Elderberry Flute Song: Contemporary Coyote Tales*, the mind of Creation tries to figure out its own beginnings. This example emphasizes the mind in the act of creating. It starts with a howling cry that caused Creation’s dream to awaken:

Well, thought the dream, opening its mind,  
so now I am awake and there is something.  
The dream floated above itself



and looked into its mind.  
It wanted to see what the cry was.  
    What it saw was a dream  
within its own dreaming.  
And that other dream was Creation.  
And Creation was the cry  
seeking to begin something,  
but it didn't know what,  
and that is why it cried.

After setting the Creation dream free, Creation "floated all over the nothing, /  
dreaming of all the things it would do," but was often interrupted by crying

(Blue Cloud, *Elderberry Flute Songs* 8):

    So, it wasn't me crying after all,  
Creation thought.  
Then it thought again,  
but it is me because I dreamed it.  
So, I have begun Creation with a cry.  
    When I begin to create the universe,  
I must remember to give the cry  
a very special place.  
    Perhaps  
I'll call the cry  
    Coyote.

So this cry of Coyote, then, in engaging creation, also constitutes an act of mind-  
weaving in its opening of consciousness and imaginative engagement with the  
dream of the world.

Relating humans to Creation, the mythical "play for voices," "White Corn  
Sister," originally published in a book of the same name, reveals another  
example of *mind-weaving* by interpreting and imparting elements of Creation's

mystery (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 15-33). By formulating a story about the “sinew” composed of the threads of “meaning of our mystery,” the *ties* connecting “elder to child / and child to Creation” its voices weave themselves into the act of Creation (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 30). It interprets the development of humanity and indigenous nationhood, and confronts the human struggle between harmony and destruction. The poem considers these issues through the roles and perspectives of several tribal archetypes, the *voices* of first speaker, second speaker, the woman, the man, medicine man, clan mother, and the hunter. In a section written from the perspective of the woman, Blue Cloud addresses the human and cultural significance of understanding Creation as a mind:

Through the mind of Creation we  
were given the sacred ceremonies,  
and given to know that the very universe  
is a round dance in time  
ever returning to beginnings.

The pebbles and stars, the dust  
of earth in hottest summer,  
    all elements  
possess the life force,  
    the mystery,  
which is the spirit of Creation.  
Perhaps in my yesterday  
I was part of the earthworm  
    tunneling and turning  
the soils of earth to richness.

I cannot know my tomorrow  
    but can rejoice  
that I am one with earth.

When people fall out of touch with Creation's consciousness, they fail to perceive the symbiotic connections between all beings or to open themselves up to the unique qualities and rhythms of entities distinct from themselves, the poem suggests.<sup>47</sup> A return to Creation in Blue Cloud's work, however, constitutes an opening to the world's *others* constituting Creation's *thought-things*, as well as a return to enlivened consciousness brought about in the act of *mind-weaving* to return to thinking, enlivened language. Both this opening to *otherness* and the enlivening of language acknowledge and reenergize traditional indigenous ways of life. According to Blue Cloud, this return to "our beginnings, where we should be" is vital to our human role in the world (Bruchach 29). In the face of cultural loss, emotional detachment from the Earth, and human limitation, returning to Creation's mind, *mind-weaving*, through thinking that is vital and open to *other thought-things* in its way of engaging with them, is a way of understanding and striving to live in harmony with the cycles of life ("the center is harmony / the center is beginning") as opposed to causing devastation (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 65).

"Autumn by the River" from *Sketches in Winter with Crows*, sets a scene by describing a fall day near a river. At first simply describing the scene, it ultimately accentuates the continuing cycles of the mind of Creation, calling on the reader to attune him/herself to the concepts of continuity and returning, and

to use the power of human thought conscientiously. The sliding use of indentation in the four brief introductory stanzas, suggests the movement of a river, a metaphor for both change and stasis. Through the delicately painted scene, the reader relates to the poem's descriptive details of autumn by fleshing them out in his or her mind through similar personal experiences.

Orange sun morning  
by body feeling winter  
    just a taste of spring.

Fresh cut wood hinting  
at warmth of comfort later,  
    a dog bark echoes.

However, these pleasant, familiar sensations and images do not resolve in simple description. Distinguishable from these placid lines, the next stanzas confront poignant feelings of loss related to the fading of summer, of time, and perhaps, of culture. They also urge the reader to avoid being stifled by such feelings since both past and future are important within the cyclical view of Creation and in relation to present thinking:

It can be lonely  
to dwell upon what is gone,  
    tasting so mellow.

Hand and heart grasping  
at shadows of fading days,  
    giving in to pain.

Enough of sorrow  
as white clouds drift by,

come taste of today.

Drink deeply wanting  
as flowers open to earth,  
seedlings fall to nest.

To “drink deeply wanting” is to fully embrace or weaver yourself into the present moment of this autumn, in which there is loss. The poet optimistically reminds us that such loss is productive: “seedlings fall,” but they fall “to nest,” and will grow into new plants and flowers as they regenerate in the spring. The important thing to know is that:

Creation welcomes  
all of her many children  
into her seasons.

Joining her rhythm  
in a round dance together,  
ours is forever.

A continuing  
of season into season,  
circle of living.

So the circle of Creation is the collective expression of the unified spirit-mind as its thoughts come to exist in all the world’s elements — “all of her many children” that have been, are, or will be part of the world. As we see here, the investment of one’s own mind in the world is a powerful and necessary way to engage with, to *mind-weave* with, the *other* thoughts of Creation, which fulfill their own roles

within the “circle of living.” Such imaginative engagement helps us to situate ourselves as humans productively in the world.

For example, in “Reflections on Milkweed,” from *Clans*, the narrator remarks:

a twisting, turning  
flight above, dry  
brown grasses  
    pods of milkweed seen.

a glimpse of motion  
I perceived in journeying  
    mind and eye lent joy.

As the poem progresses, he considers the physical and creative role of the entities that his mind ponders:

thoughts of white cloud ribs  
drifting the vast  
blue sky world  
    to swallow a star

or the lone seedling  
like a bubble  
reflecting  
    a current of air.

The role of contemplation brought about in the human mind by *others* like the milkweed is spiritual and brings or *calls* awareness back by returning it through the act of *mind-weaving* to the importance of the collective world, which is the dance of Creation:

given these moments

to contemplate  
and wonder  
    a great peace descends.

man's art in thinking  
mind-weaving  
singular ties  
    is but returning.

the seeds within us  
and that which  
brought us living  
    is an ancient breath.

stone to stone the spark,  
fire into dream  
into birth,  
    we are Creation.

Myriad elements of Creation, from milkweed, to crow, to various *others*, activate Blue Cloud's mind. As we have seen, his response is *mind-weaving*. While aspects of Creation are distinct from him, Blue Cloud sees them as parts of the cohesive mind of Creation. The previous chapter illustrates Harjo's view of her poetic role and responsibility as a musical conduit and facilitator between humans and the world. Blue Cloud's conception of the place of poets and poetry is distinguishable, but related. His focus is on the human mind, in both its imaginative and emotive capabilities, as they occur in holistic interactions with the world of *others*. In his discussion with Joseph Bruchach of his "fictitious" "White Corn Sister," Blue Cloud says that the "play for voices" constitutes an emotional expression of his "thinking, from what [he'd] learned from the

philosophy, about the way the people [of the Six Nations] live, the history” (Bruchach 38-39). However, he wanted this work to move beyond any sort of anthropological account, instead “mak[ing] non-Indians feel what happened, how it feels to have your children murdered and your cornfields burned and your houses burned down” so that they can understand in a deeper way (Bruchach 39). Emotional connection, too, it seems, inspires a *return* in one’s thinking to origins and to Creation that can open up and strengthen relationships with *others* in the circle of living.

One of the ways in which Blue Cloud performs this type of *returning* to origins is by enacting the impact of the seasons on his mind through his poems. For instance, in “Sweetgrass,” from *Clans*, the return of thought from the poem’s present winter to a bygone summer, which will return again in its time, comes about through a memory conjured by the narrator’s incidental touch of dried sweetgrass. Within the sweetgrass and the narrator’s grazing touch, the presence of summer endures:

Sweet rains of summer  
remembered in wintertime  
in drying sweetgrass.

The fragrance is a sweet warmth  
as soft as a blossom’s promise  
as I early morning huddle  
by the woodstove dreaming,  
berries ripe there were  
scattered in their seasons



on tree and bush and nesting  
in grasses tall, waving,  
calling in scented voice  
to pleasure the day, to dream  
undisturbed by outward signs  
of traffic or throngs scuttling  
to frantic destinations.

The scent of the grass poignantly conjures summer in the narrator's senses. As he pulls "gently, one by one / the long whispers of grass / and hearing frog song and / watching a cattail bending / to the weight of a light question / a red-wing blackbird asks" . . . the touch returns him to summer in his mind:

I add a piece of wood  
to the singing of the stove  
and drift my mind to feel  
again the hot sun on shoulders

He imagines himself back in that hot, harmonious summer, "gathering with mind's fingers / a meadow of grasses, a hillside of forest / a clear brook curving / and widening to reflect / a white roundness of cloud." That is, through the touch of the grasses, which hold the sweetness of summer in their being, he is able to *mind-weave*, to echo the summer that has passed and to return in his mind to other personally and culturally significant moments in Creation's cycles. This return inspires sensitive reflection, openness, and connection to *other* entities and times:

I curve my mind to rhythms  
touched and tasted back then  
here on winter's shelf

I sort memories and moods  
and dwell on yesterday  
and all because my body  
brushed, in passing,  
the bunches of sweetgrass  
hanging in winter's house.

Similarly, in "Winter Food," from *Sketches in Winter, With Crows*, the first several lines suggest that the poem will simply entice by describing the foods that the narrator will eat during the winter:

Ash-cured hominy  
bubbling odors,  
pork, cabbage,  
squash, beans,  
turnip and spices.

Tomorrow, meat pie  
with cranberry sauce,

While it is placed in a book of winter-themed poems, it dawns on the reader that this poem is about foods harvested at the height of other seasons in the cycle, in summer and fall. As in "Sweetgrass" the reader of these winter poems begins to engage with the seasons of warmth and growth in a nuanced way. In the present winter of these poems, the echo of the seasons resounds in the form of human sustenance. It is as if there is an understanding that past moments in the cycle still hold significance, and will continue to exist and echo with significance in human life if one understands the circle of living. In fact, Blue Cloud says that most of the Indians he "ever met, live in the past, in the present, and in the

future. You have to. It's a continuous thing. And the future is just as important as the past because they all tie in. The circle. Going back to the circle. . . back to itself" (Bruchach 40). The initial impression that the poem is going to settle for nostalgia about the warmth of the growing season is reversed when the final lines emphasize temporality and the idea of cyclical return:

next summer we  
will feast on winter.

"White Corn Sister" broadens Blue Cloud's reflections beyond the themes of Creation's cycles and seasons to reveal the importance of language for human thinking in the return to Creation (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 15-33). When ancestral men and women came together to ponder the future of their children and nation in council: "Creation heard / and answered with the voices / of our elders" (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 25). The communicative connection between Creation and human beings who weave their thoughts with it proves to be very powerful for Blue Cloud. This connection is most visible in the wisdom in the elders' words. "And season into season / like the sapling pine / grew the thinking of our elders / into a great tree, / and the laws by which / our nation was to live / became known as the Great Good" (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 25). Similar to the pluralistic structure of Creation's mind, "...these laws were like / seeds of corn, / each separate, yet bound / to a single core, / and these laws were spoken / often to our people / that

none forget," in an act of *mind-weaving* reflected even in the material artifacts of everyday, shared experience (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 25):

And the memory of these laws  
were woven into beaded belts  
    like rows of seed corn,  
and the words were said  
to the hearts and minds  
    of the people  
as a living part of life  
    and not mere words  
to drift away upon a breeze.

Thought and language, therefore, are more than representations; they *are* life— newly-woven facets of Creation's consciousness.

The existence of all beings as *thoughts* from Creation's mind brings them together into the circle of living. Humans engage with Creation through language. Animals, as thoughts of Creation are equal to humans, and possess similar powers to manifest Creation or to respond to the world through the unique rhythms of their experiences and expressions. Animal perspectives and their impact on the shared space of Creation's spirit-mind (the world) do not occupy a lower sphere of life or understanding from that of humans. In fact, Blue Cloud often sees animals as possessing the grace or wisdom of kin from which humans can learn. Sometimes, Blue Cloud's writing actually elevates animals above humans since at their worst, as one of the voices in "White Corn Sister" states, humans' "gift to earth and Creation / will be his own hidden

desire: / to perish once and for all / and forever, to have done / with the Creation”  
(Blue Cloud, *Clans* 28).

The emphasis on the devastation caused by human ignorance is a powerful thread woven through Blue Cloud’s body of work. Several poems confront this issue directly; in others it resonates under the surface. Sometimes the object of devastation is other humans or culture. Often, Blue Cloud witnesses the destruction of the natural environment and of animals, which are usually “much more interesting than people are to [him]” (Bruchach 29). In “Searching for Eagles,” from *Clans*, the narrator sees the world outside of his mind as marked by the denigration of cultural conquest. The poem is a general response to the greed of industrialism, and specifically to the effects on the ecosystem near the Akwesasne coming from decades of contamination by the ALCOA aluminum smelting plant (Cocola 33). As he moves through the poem, he realizes that the only way to counteract this degradation is by relying on the imagination:

A pair of great blue herons should  
be feast enough for anyone’s sunset.  
Still, I chant an inner prayer  
to glimpse but one, a circling,  
soaring eagle close to  
this river at my doorstep.

Knowing that “[t]his bit of Mohawk territory, encircled / by cities, towns,  
freeway and seaway, / cannot be what my ancestors dreamed,” he wonders how  
the changes forced upon it would affect their thoughts:

I pretend this river at my doorstep,  
for it is a backwash of the seaway,  
not flowing, but pulled back and forth  
by passing ships. No more the taste  
of fresh fish, what swim here are  
sickly, polluted, and dying creatures.

The electric haze of light coming from human intrusions blocks the starlight, and  
people mistake “the reaction to troubled reality” for “peaceful sleep.”

Ultimately, the narrator must admit that:

No, no more eagles soar here, only  
those kept harbored deep within.

In a similar vein, *Clans’* “Dogwood Blossoms” questions human ignorance  
and the reckless behavior stemming from it. The beauty and meaning of  
Creation are, ironically, ignored in the human pursuit of knowledge, which  
views the world from a decidedly anthropocentric perspective. Blue Cloud uses  
his imagination in order to write in a way that opens up this perspective to  
nature’s *others*. The poem begins with a sketch of dogwood blossoms:

It’s a question of bright stars  
and of four petals cupped  
to catch sun and reflect  
a hovering circle of white.

These first lovely lines of description are cut short in the poem's second stanza when human interference becomes evident:

Here, where the big trees  
were so recently logged-off  
and the jagged teeth of stumps  
and broken arms of branches  
question the meaning of sanity.

The "dogwood and maple are bowed / under weight of future burial" due to mudslides and the movement of stones caused by human tampering. The narrator, opening to the beauty and rhythm of the *otherness* of the trees insists:

It's a question of the last act  
before a man-made dying  
that hundreds of blossoms  
shout a final triumph  
for earth and sky to behold.

Here, as in several other poems, Blue Cloud elevates entities that can return to Creation's mind—who understand the beauty of the "circle of living"—above humans. The poem suggests that if humans could develop a different perspective, even in the guise of a snake, "an armless, / legless race of creatures / belly-crawling through life / perhaps we could learn of beauty" and attune to the earth:

but instead we cut down  
the very answers we seek  
in torn earth, and the secrets  
remain unseen by us, as we  
plunge forward blindly,  
brushing aside blossoms.

In contrast to this language-less blindness, bringing a sense of awe about the beauty of the world's rhythms, "We Sit Balanced," from *Turtle, Bear, & Wolf*, and "Glacier Country," from *Clans*, weave human language into a manifestation of Creation through an energetic poetic style, in which Blue Cloud experiments with such techniques as "running lines together to reflect the weaving of all creation with each other" (Ruppert 95). This "running together," as we will see, compels the reader to *mind-weave*, to weave the words together to make sense of the expression. Through this act of poetic consciousness, the poems' rhythms bring human language and thought into harmony with the dynamism of the world. The title becomes the first line:

"We sit balanced"  
  
    between  
end and beginning  
upon the back  
    of turtle  
and the pools  
    of light  
    we see in water  
is sky deepness roots  
    moist earth womb  
seedling hawk  
    born  
screaming joy

When we read lines such as, "and the pools / of light / we see in water / is sky deepness roots / moist earth womb," we are compelled to pull back and





as breast down  
floating)

The braiding and weaving here is of time or perhaps more precisely, no-time/forever-time, and like the trees, it is introduced through a reflection in the water. It moves fluidly, reflected into tomorrow, or sideways, as a dance of life that echoes in the free-floating path of breast down. Once again, in his and the reader's *mind-weaving*, we follow the path of natural things through a vicarious, poetically enacted, sense of their movements. In "We sit balanced," the element of Creation that dances with time is corn, which functions as a symbol for Native culture, its "shoots / giv[ing] life to eyes / which see / again / the people" (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 74).

"Glacier Country" uses language in a similar way to *mind-weave* one "day's round dance" within Creation (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 38). Using simple stanzas to describe its sights and sounds, the feel of a day in glacier country comes to life:

white cloud  
wind-worn  
feather etchings,

golden eagle  
soaring  
air  
piercing crystal  
cry,

snow fields

sun breath  
cascading,

Here, cloud, feather, eagle, air, crystal, cry, and breath are all woven together.

And later:

Feathered shaft  
moon dawn  
naked stone,

owl stories  
echoing hollow  
dry burnt  
blackened snag,

Drawing together facets of the world around him, Blue Cloud again compels the reader to develop a poetic consciousness by *mind-weaving*. It is the reader's creative effort, along with Blue Cloud's poetic one, in bringing the lines to life which, arguably, draws out the linguistic possibilities of the images in relationship to another here. One could imagine, for instance, the moon as a feathered shaft of light and shadow against the stone, and the owl's cries echoing the hollowness of the burnt-out snag with the reader playing the role of weaving together these fluidly relating facets of the world. In this way, the stone becomes a feathery one, the moon's light is at the same time a shadow; the rich sound of the owl's call is also an absence entering the heart like the hollow snag. The creative possibilities return in the possibility of another day, the poem ending by closing the day's circle in which the sound of a woodpecker tapping and

chipmunks “join / days round dance” that will echo into tomorrow (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 38).

Coyote, as is already evident, is one of the *others* with a complex place in Blue Cloud’s poetry. Blue Cloud has written several Coyote poems and tales (like “The Cry”) in stand-alone books, which often blend myth and satire with a variety of elements (“philosophy, history, mak[ing] fun of current events”) (Bruchach 30). Alternatively, he writes about many animals in a naturalistic way, such as coyote (in contrast to mythical Coyote), or sometimes as a totem, through his knowledge of their natural rhythms. The following excerpt from “Sweat Song” shows another example of imagining and echoing the rhythm of animal *others* in another attempt to connect to Creation through *mind-weaving* his own with a place for coyote’s perspective (Blue Cloud, *Turtle* 7; and in *Elderberry Flute Song* 22). In “Sweat Song,” as in “Crow,” he inhabits the animal perspective, attempting to echo its experience in language based in the oral tradition. As “Sweat Song” from *Turtle, Bear, & Wolf* illustrates, the songs and chants of oral tradition influence the way that Blue Cloud opens up to and enacts the animal *other’s* perspectives through an interpretation of its rhythms. In this illustration of coyote’s powerful instinct to run and the way this running weaves into the world, Blue Cloud entwines coyote and its power into the excerpted lines of the poem:

coyote  
    running  
running  
    coyote

deserts  
    of ice  
rivers  
    crystal pain  
mountains  
    breathing  
    coyote

sweat bath  
    cedar shadow  
mirror hawk  
    dream feel  
coyote coyote  
    obsidian claws  
hey, coyote  
    hey, coyote

He imagines these *others* through his human perspective, his “singular ties” of thought, knowing that he cannot fully conceive the animal or cosmic perspective. Still, through his reflections and linguistic experiments, he fosters and expresses deep emotional connections and a sense of responsibility based in feelings of kinship with them—“swift deer,” “brother deer,” “I sing you forever / strength for my child,” as he rhapsodizes in “First Brother” (Blue Cloud, *Clans* 34). As the *medicine man* in “White Corn Sister” states: “And the drum / we have fashioned is the heartbeat / of all things living. / And the rattle / is the wind and storm / and the tall, dry corn, / dancing.”



Creation. The work suggests that at one time, people listened to the wolves, hearing their wisdom. The early integration, or weaving, of the wolves' ways into their lives was significant because that is how the "songs" of Creation were supposed to function, as an interlacing gesture that moves: "beyond beginnings the earth her many tribes / and clans their life songs merge into one / chant /"

(Blue Cloud, *Clans* 62):

the moaning low of wolves to ears of men  
first wisdom gained by another's quiet  
    song  
        of meditation  
        circle of council  
bound together by their basic power.

The connection between wolf and man became stronger as time went on:

in thanks the minds of curious men  
sought further wisdom from the brother  
    wolf  
        his clan  
        a social order  
of strength through lasting kinship,

Eventually the "wolf song" was sung "in thanks / to brother wolf, / now your song will sing in our voices."

But against this interdependence that grew into a traditional relationship of respect,

again the rifle shot and snapping jaws  
of steel traps and poisoned bait,  
the bounty hunter and fur trapper  
    predators

of greed  
whose minds create vast lies.

and moaning low in death chant  
the one remaining wolf staggers  
and falls  
to death  
as winds carry his voice into tomorrow.

The presence of the wolf's voice exists as "an accusation howling / within the brain heart pulling sinews" and "hang[s]" his death around the neck of humans, calling on them to mourn the destruction of nature and of innocence.<sup>48</sup> The wolf, as part of Creation, "in dream has petitioned / for his voice to be heard in council," to which the narrator responds: "now / in this place / let us open our minds."

In the final section of the poem, Blue Cloud *mind-weaves* the sinew of his human perspective together with what he imagines the wolves' perspective to be. The following is their expression in Creation's dance, as he imagines and entwines it with human language:

I dance upon my three remaining legs,  
look,  
the memory of the fourth keeps my balance,  
see,  
my wispy white and cyanide fog-breath,  
hah!  
taut sinews vibrate the sky's held thunder,  
huh!  
steel traps I weave a necklace of your making,  
hah!  
puffs of dust I quick-stomp with paw feet,



huh!

As the wolf dances and “weave[s] a necklace” out of human steel traps, he is “becoming you dancing for them, / hah!” he “jump[s] upon your back a heavy robe, / huh! / my shadow will nip your pumping ankle, / huh! / you will think you me in the full moon night, / huh!” Finally, the wolf takes on human form to bring humans into Creation’s dance through an act of devastation equal to that of humans against nature:

I crush your long bones sucking marrow,  
nose your severed head before me the trail,  
tear strips of flesh the ribbons weave a net,  
chew hair and fingernails into mash  
I slap upon my festered stump your human glue,  
hah!  
Now you are dancing,  
brother  
Now you are dancing.

Ultimately, we see the chance for opening human minds to *other* ways of life, such as those of the wolf, through a final violent and gory act of weaving, in which humans will be made to dance with Creation—physically woven into the destruction they have caused.

In “Hump-Back Flute Player,” Blue Cloud reflects more directly on the act of writing (Blue Cloud, *Elderberry Flute Song* 100-104). Here, his connection to oral literature with its “patterns of repetition” emphasizes this activity through a

connection of the world and the imagination (Bruchach 32). Based on various indigenous myths of the hump-backed flute player and on Blue Cloud's experiences in the sweat lodge, this poem becomes a meditative space for poetic consciousness in which *mind-weaving* is both dynamic and playful. Here, Coyote functions as both one manifestation of the flute player whose song pierces and activates the mind, and as interlocutor, who questions the limits of the human imagination. The poem itself interrogates the ability of "us" and "we," humans, to think and imagine, itself demonstrating an instance *mind-weaving* our way back to Creation.

At an early point in time, the poem's "us" desires a creative force "us: / All thought and eyes and wanting fingers / were given the flute / and fascination" and, therefore, Blue Cloud intertwines various descriptions of the hump-backed flute player into this poetic demonstration of what human beings long have been *mind-weaving* and dreaming. As the lines below state, these imaginings have been "found by us and placed / in dreaming" — throughout time:

the antennae  
                  quivering  
so like a trembling question  
                  and the eyes  
                          O, those eyes  
a gentle deer  
                  wary  
graceful,  
                  and to others  
                          a bug

beetle upright walker  
loner  
rock to rock  
lost to us in space/time  
found by us and placed  
in dreaming.

Behind the flute “still vibrating / jade-tipped antennae / obsidian eyes / reflecting / our own eyes . . .” a sound, “a note / a sharp crystal ringing” penetrates the inner “mind drum.” The narrator more than once, describes the “we” to be “resting easily / relaxed / hump to rock to ground / note to sky / flute.”

As he writes the poem, the narrator reflects on the resting us/we. Suddenly, he experiences a burst of imagination. Like a sudden rainstorm, the dramatic act of reflection, an act of *mind-weaving*, appears on the page:

(Stop!  
for just now above clouds  
beneath feet feeling  
thunder  
sky darkens  
crouch to paper pencil  
hunch-shouldered  
await rain  
darker still  
and thunder directly overhead  
and now the huge  
spatters of rain  
into heavy falling early afternoon  
darkness ...

This sudden burst of imagination evaporates “into dry earth,” bringing the poem “back to) / we: / Resting easily / . . .” In this pause within the drama of

imagining, the narrator acknowledges that human imagination is often a trite expression that merely feeds the ego, concerns similar to those of Levinas's regarding aesthetics, in which: "us, we, all the they's / that we are / making cute obstacles / we prefer to call / art / dazzled / by our own / talent." The narrator, however, seeks something deeper and searches for the *sinew* that will weave or return his thoughts back into the fertile mystery of Creation's spirit-mind (Blue Cloud, *Elderberry Flute Song* 102):

Pause here.  
Reconsider  
                  the hump,  
and think myself back  
to a sweat lodge.  
          Goodbye, we, us,  
                                  for now.  
Hump is emptiness blackness  
  
voidness spaceness  
          overflowing  
                                  pouring outness  
blackness,  
it is rattle and waterdrum  
                                  hump  
          is bottom of well  
          is earth core  
womb of creation

What comes from the hump, this "womb of creation," is creative human imagining, *mind-weaving*. As Robley Evans in his review of Blue Cloud's *Elderberry Flute Song: Contemporary Coyote Tales*, the collection including this poem notes, "Blue Cloud . . . has turned Coyote's tales toward the lyrical . . .

toward, in other words, reflections of the artist upon his art and upon mankind's woes . . ." (Evans 30). There in the void of the womb of creation "is skin / is membrane . . . ":

is pulse container volcano  
nova black hole in space  
space is  
space is  
vacuum sucker tidal pull  
is hump of flute player  
in skidrow merica street  
five gallon tin tied to back  
filled with nothing,  
collector of dreams unwanted,  
little packets of nightmares

This journey from "black hole in space," to "skidrow merica street," first draws Blue Cloud's mind into the void of space in a Levinasian-type interruption of consciousness.<sup>49</sup> Entering this creative, womb-space of nothingness, subsequently pulls Blue Cloud's imagination into a *mind-weaving* ritual with a seemingly defunct incarnation of Coyote as receptacle of useless or disturbing thoughts, rather than as the progenitor of Creation. Along with all the nothing, unwanted dreams, and nightmares, packets "of fear / of hate/ of wanting" pierce the flute player's skin. The narrator realizes that: "[t]he hump is the gourd / is the vessel / is the awakesness / to awake and rub hump to rock / feel feet on ground root / tendrils / wanting permanence / and find instead / a doubt / again / of self." In answer to this doubt, perhaps a creative or spiritual doubt, Coyote

“standing there looking down / at himself” sees that he is staked to the ground.

As trickster, and the namesake of Creation’s cry,

Coyote is of magic, thought Coyote,  
And further thought to pity  
This writer of fantasy,  
Well, Coyote thought again,  
If he can’t think beyond words,  
    That’s too bad,  
                                I guess,  
Though I don’t really give a shit.)

we:  
Taking note of sound  
    with pencil,  
    I end this particular  
  piece  
and strip naked to enter river  
    river endless  
    river constant  
    river forever  
                                part  
    of the cycle  
I dive into  
    your current.  
                                Onen

Coyote’s response to his dire situation on merica street inspires Blue Cloud to move “beyond words” in, what I would argue, is an enactment of a Levinasian *saying* in the last lines of the poem. Moving beyond the written through his act of writing, Blue Cloud opens up, becomes humble and vulnerable to the “endless,” “constant,” “forever” cycle of the river’s current, by “stripping naked

to enter river” in a final act of *mind-weaving*, which ultimately engages his whole being.

As Ruppert writes, “Blue Cloud feels that spirit is song is word, while it is his penetration and merging with this equation that creates his song, his poetry” (Ruppert 95). His poems, in returning to Creation, reflecting on the round dance of life, engage his mind in creating a deeply nuanced and ethically unique understanding of the world, in which he *mind-weaves* the rhythms and expressions of *others* together with his own human voice, knowing full well that they encompass mystery.

Always forthright about the devastation that humans bring to the world, he still retains hope in their ability to return to the spirit-mind of Creation and play a harmonious role in the world. Written for the *Alcatraz Is Not an Island* anthology, widely known for confronting colonial power, “Tomorrow” brings the beauty of the old ways, the darkness of the world’s evil, and the survival of hope full circle:

We have wept the bloods of countless ages  
as each of us raised high the lance of hate,  
ours is the beauty of foreverness, if we but  
accept that which our Creator freely gives.  
Now let us dry our tears and learn the dance  
And chant of the life cycle . . .

(Blue Cloud, *Clans* 46)

His poems, in weaving us back into Creation's dance, attempt to teach us just this—how to move forward.



## Notes, Chapter One

<sup>1</sup> In *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, in answer to Nemo's question about how Levinas's title, *Totality and Infinity*, poses an important philosophical question in itself, Levinas states: "In the critique of totality borne of these two words [totality and infinity], there is a reference to the history of philosophy. This history can be interpreted as an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside of itself, and thus becomes absolute thought" (Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 75).

<sup>2</sup> Discourse for Levinas is an "irreducible" event that he considers as "an original relation with exterior being" (Levinas *Totality and Infinity*, 66). Discourse opens up the subject to "a presence more direct than visible manifestation, and at the same time a remote presence—that of the other" (Levinas *Totality and Infinity*, 66).

<sup>3</sup> In his description of proximity, Levinas states that "What concretely corresponds to this description is my relationship with my neighbor, a signifyingness which is different from the much-discussed 'meaning-endowment,' since signification is this very relationship with the other, the-one-for-the-other. This incommensurability of consciousness, which becomes a trace . . . is not the inoffensive relationship of knowing in which everything is equalized, nor the indifference of spatial contiguity; it is an assignation of me by another, a responsibility with regard to men we do not even know. The relationship of proximity cannot be reduced to any modality of distance . . . nor to the simple 'representation' of a neighbor; it is already an assignation . . . an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment" (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* 100-101).

<sup>4</sup> Levinas develops the *saying/said* distinction at length in his late seminal work, *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence* (Levinas *Otherwise Than Being*). Most scholarly discussions of Levinas's work mention, and often elucidate and apply the concepts of *saying/said*. See Jill Robbins enlightening text, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*; Bernhard Waldenfels's "Levinas on the Saying and the Said," pp. 86-97 in *Addressing Levinas* (Nelson et. al. 2005); Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference* (Derrida 97-192); Gabriel Riera "'The Possibility of the Poetic Said' in *Otherwise than Being* (Allusion, or Blanchot in Lévinas)" in *Diacritics*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer, 2004), pp. 13-36 Published by: The Johns Hopkins UP, [www.jstor.org/stable/3805815](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3805815); and others.

<sup>5</sup> Levinas states that responsibility occurs in "breaking up the limits of identity" of the subjective self (Levinas *Otherwise Than Being*, 114). The diachrony of language in *saying/said* "provokes this responsibility against my will, that is, by substituting me for the other . . . Despite-me, for-another, is signification par excellence" (Levinas *Otherwise Than Being*, 11).

<sup>6</sup> Valenzuela-Mendoza has utilized the terms archive and repertoire (as based on Diana Taylor's book on cultural memory) similarly in relation to history and memory in her work on Joy Harjo. Taylor distinguishes and applies repertoire to the performative, uncontainable elements of cultural memory experienced in embodied or live performance, and archive to the concrete and power laden production of documentation (Valenzuela-Mendoza 114). Valenzuela-Mendoza's footnote on Taylor from page 114 reads as follows: "Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, xvi. According to Taylor, to record a live performance – visually or through audio – means the recording is part of the archive, because the experience of a live performance (the mood, emotion, participation of the audience) cannot be contained within a DVD, CD, or text. Therefore, while Harjo's performance remains part of the repertoire, my discussion of it is, inevitably, part of an archive."

<sup>7</sup> Poets who discuss Levinas's work directly include: Cynthia Hogue in the essay "The Speaking Subject In/Me: Gender and Ethical Subjectivity in the Poetry of Jorie Graham," pp. 238-256 in *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry* (Ed. Thomas Gardner); Steve McCaffery in "The Scandal of Sincerity: Towards a Levinasian Poetics," pp. 167-190 in *Pretexts: Studies in Writing and Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1997. Scholars, more broadly speaking, in the discussion include: philosopher Richard Kearney in the essay, "Levinas and the Ethics of Imagining," pp. 85-96 in *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries* (2002); Levinas scholar Jill Robbins in her book *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (1999); Eloisa Valenzuela-Mendoza in "'Tending to the past': the historical poetics of Joy Harjo and Natasha Trethewey." PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) thesis, University of Iowa, 2014. <http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/1412>; and David-Antoine Williams in "Tête-à-Tête, Face-à-Face: Brodsky, Levinas, and the Ethics of Poetry," pp. 207-235 in *Poetics Today* 30:2 (Summer 2009) DOI10.1215/03335372-2008-008.

<sup>8</sup> In Jim Cocola's essay, "Peter (Aroniawenrate) Blue Cloud" he writes that "To Indians of all tribes, Alcatraz Island stood as a symbol of native rights in opposition to European colonization, a Turtle Island or Coyote's Mountain in microcosm. In their 'Proclamation to the Great White Father and All His People,' they called for a reassertion of self-determination to begin at Alcatraz . . . While these calls went unheeded, the rebuke of corrupted power by the reclamation did not go unheard, and it continues to ripple through the culture to this day," including through several works by Blue Cloud (Cocola 32).

<sup>9</sup> Kearney often cites the French *Noms Propres* by Levinas, as well as its English translation, *Proper Names*.

<sup>10</sup> Amanda Boetzkes references French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's texts on the ungraspable qualities of alterity including such ephemera as light and air (what Irigaray calls *elementals*). Texts cited include: *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984 and 1993 ed.), *Luce Irigaray Key Writings*, ed. Luce Irigaray (New York: Continuum, 2004), 30, and *The Way of Love*, 163-164.

<sup>11</sup> Poet Ann Fisher-Wirth in "Every Time I See the Ocean Robert Hass, Loss, and Haiku" articulates a more productive view of poetic "image" that might harmonize in its interruption of self with Levinas's project. She quotes from Hass's *Twentieth Century Pleasures* (275-276) where he states: "Only the moment is eternal. . . . The stillness of the instant exists by virtue of its velocity. It is eternal because it is gone in a second . . . in the arrest of the image . . . what perishes and what lasts forever have been brought into conjunction, and accompanying that sensation is a feeling of release from the self" (Fisher-Wirth 14).

## Notes, Chapter Two

<sup>12</sup> In his discussion of the distinction between Levinas's work and Western philosophy's traditional emphasis on *being* and individual identity in "Violence and Metaphysics," philosopher Jacques Derrida states that "[s]olipsism is neither observation nor sophism; it is the very structure of reason' Therefore, there is a soliloquy of reason and a solitude of light" (Derrida 113).

<sup>13</sup> Derrida explains in "Violence and Metaphysics" that logical reductionism of Western ontology and phenomenology prevent them from "thinking the other" in a discursive or ethical way (Derrida 113).

<sup>14</sup> Irigaray's elementals include things such as "light, water, wind, and so forth," which have an "unyielding" or resistant quality (Boetzkes 15-16). They can be experienced, but not possessed. See several articulations of Irigaray and elementals in Amanda Boetzkes', *The Ethics of Earth Art*.

<sup>15</sup> In "Jorie Graham Listening," Spiegelman goes on to state that he thinks that the most important element of Graham's way of expanding our minds through language comes from "Graham's not entirely new but nevertheless pronounced and increasing attention to sound" (Spiegelman 221). Spiegelman has also written "Jorie Graham Talking" and "Jorie Graham's 'New Way of Looking.'"

<sup>16</sup> See pp. 196-199 of Thomas J. Otten's discussion in "Jorie Graham's \_\_\_\_\_s." There, he investigates the sense of incompleteness in Graham's use of the word "like" in relation to her treatment of the Holocaust in "From the New World" in her *Regions of Unlikeness* collection. Also, Cynthia Hogue's "The Speaking Subject In/Me: Gender and Ethical Subjectivity in the Poetry of Jorie Graham," discussing "From the New World" (Hogue 247-249).

<sup>17</sup> Garth Greenwell in "Beauty's Canker: On Jorie Graham," states that "For all of her investment in sight and the other physical senses, it is feeling—not just sensation—that Graham sees as crucial to description, 'seeing, which wants to feel more than it sees'" (Greenwell 123).

<sup>18</sup> In "Violence and Metaphysics" on ways of knowing related to the Western philosophical tradition as exposed by Levinas's work: "Therefore, there is a soliloquy of reason and a solitude of light. Incapable of respecting the Being and meaning of the other, phenomenology and ontology would be philosophies of violence. Through them, the entire philosophical tradition, in its meaning and at bottom, would make common cause with oppression and with the totalitarianism of the same. The ancient clandestine friendship between light and power, the ancient complicity between theoretical objectivity and technico-political possession. 'If the other could be possessed, seized, and known, it would not be the other. To possess, to know, to grasp are all synonyms of power' (TA)" (Derrida 113).

## Notes, Chapter Three

<sup>19</sup> Ann Fisher-Wirth brings into focus what I see as a nuance of Hass's view of mastery in relation to Haiku. In "Every Time I See the Ocean Robert Hass, Loss, and Haiku" she states, "Hass comments at one point, in *Twentieth Century Pleasures* [a book of his essays], that haiku anthologies, 'organized seasonally,' remind us how 'we live in the grain of nature.' When, however, 'the spirit becomes anguished or sickened by this cycle, by the irreversibility of time and the mutilation of choice [which you might call, loss], another impulse appears: the monotheist rage for unity, for a different order of understanding' (297)" (Fisher-Wirth 16).

<sup>20</sup> In his essay, "An Abundance of Lack: the Fullness of Desire in the Poetry of Robert Hass," Bruce Bond states: "Since the numinous world is by definition contradistinguished from the physical, to call the body 'numinous as words' is to blur the very concept of numinosity, to confuse so-called inner and outer domains" (Bond 48).

<sup>21</sup> Arguably, what Hass calls "image" in the following quotation, corresponds to "face" in Levinas's work. Both implicate the infinite nature of the world and the role of human aesthetic endeavor in opening consciousness to it while *preserving* its ungraspable quality. Bond quotes Hass's *Twentieth-Century Pleasures* as saying "that confusion of art and life, inner and outer, is the very territory of the image; it is what an image is. *And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us* (TCP 304)" (Bond 48).

<sup>22</sup> Contrarily, Alan Shapiro in "'And There Are Always Melons,' Some Thoughts on Robert Hass," considers Hass's style and focus on the tension between desire and investment in the world as ineffective, stating, "If he truly desires to bring his art closer to the center of life where 'the good flesh continues,' he will have to develop a method of composition that is not so inextricably bound up with the intensity of the marginal and momentary, a method that is not, in other words, a kind of formalization of longing itself" (Shapiro 90).

<sup>23</sup> Fisher-Wirth's exploration of haiku, loss, and emptiness leads to her comparison of Hass and Issa (the well-known Japanese Haiku writer), stating: "But like Issa, the most human of poets, Robert Hass is very much given over to the time of history, the fluid, imperfect world of the ten thousand shining phenomena. This world of 'desire' and 'the object... it doesn't have' calls forth images, blessings—and nightmares. And the poet finds his home there. For, as he affirms throughout his writings, 'Everything real [is] nourished in the space between these things' (Sun Under Wood 50)" (Fisher-Wirth 23-24).

<sup>24</sup> In Angela Hume's "Imagining Eco-poetics: An Interview with Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Evelyn Reilly, and Jonathan Skinner," she discusses the possibilities of poetry in relation to ecology and the environment that were considered at the "'Geography of Hope,' a three-day event that explored relationships between people, land, and community through the voices of authors, artists, farmers, and environmentalists" (Hume 751-752). She states that "the poets and I set to work discussing the term eco-poetics, one that has emerged and gained attention only in the past decade," including its scope, its content, and its form (Hume 753). Hass has long been interested in environmental issues and one of the questions raised was whether his poetry about nature—particularly that which does not directly discuss its devastation by humans—is part of eco-poetics. It was considered to exist on that spectrum. In terms of more subtle ways of discussing the environment, Evelyn Reilly, one of those interviewed states: "But I often detect the eco-poetic in work that has no such intention, but which is colored by an ambient ethos of reframing the human within the ecological. This can even be more interesting than writing that tries to 'go straight at it'" (Hume 755).

## Notes, Chapter Four

<sup>25</sup> The quote comes from Harjo's "Skeleton of Winter," pp. 40-41, in *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems: 1975-2001*. It was originally published in *She Had Some Horses* (Harjo 1983).

<sup>26</sup> According to Susmita Paul, "memories of myths and narratives of histories do not exist as separate entities in Harjo's consciousness. Each is true simultaneously. This multiple layering of consciousness that accommodates the divergent elements is the crux of the practice of healing that Harjo participates in through her poetry" (Paul 334).

<sup>27</sup> Lang states that "that undying arabesque" is Native writer Paula Gunn Allen's phrase (Lang 48).

<sup>28</sup> Harjo's complex understanding and enactment of memory arguably counters "historical revision," therefore "hold[ing] real-world consequences," according to Eloisa Valenzuela-Mendoza (Valenzuela-Mendoza 63).

<sup>29</sup> Valenzuela-Mendoza discusses a performance by Harjo at the University of Iowa in October 2013 in which her own experience as participant in Harjo's "embodied" performance powerfully underscored the connection beyond language that occurred through Harjo's oeuvre. Valenzuela-Mendoza continues: "Therefore, while language itself fails the power of the performance remains. . . having experienced the performance of this song ["The Trail of Tears Song"], by a descendant of this history, I feel connected as though I am 'part of the poem,' and in effect, part of the story." Valenzuela-Mendoza follows with the query: "So then, how does one use language to extrapolate on the power of that which is beyond words?" Discussing Diana Taylor's conception in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (xvi) of "repertoire" as including the power of the performance, its non-written elements, its energy and its emotion, versus "archive," as the Western historical site of historical documentation, she writes: "Professor Harjo's work demonstrates that we have not exhausted everything there is to know about the past. There are other archival objects yet to surface, and other perspectives and counter-memories yet to be acknowledged. Emmanuel Levinas affirms '... reality constitutes more than what captures our gaze. Reality has weight.'" She further suggests that participating in Harjo's performance creates witnesses who open up to memory (Valenzuela-Mendoza 112-117).

<sup>30</sup> Harjo's grandmother also played the saxophone (Harjo and Winder xi).

<sup>31</sup> For a first-hand account of this experience, see Valenzuela-Mendoza, pp. 112-118.

<sup>32</sup> See Robert Warrior's brief discussion of "forgetting" and "sleepwalking" in "Your Skin is the Map: The Theoretical Challenge of Joy Harjo's Erotic Poetics," p. 346.

<sup>33</sup> I have cited the page numbers for "Skeleton of Winter" and "Remember" from the 2002 compilation, *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems: 1975-2001*.

<sup>34</sup> See Valenzuela-Mendoza's discussion of Diana Taylor and the presence of individuals as the "DNA of performance" that serve as "the conduit of memory" (Valenzuela-Mendoza 54).

<sup>35</sup> In Valenzuela-Mendoza's discussion of Harjo's "She Had Some Horses," she quotes Harjo as saying: "It's not the poet's work to reduce the poem from poetry to logical sense," a sentiment that appears to resonate with Jorie Graham's conception of her role as poet (Valenzuela-Mendoza 49).

<sup>36</sup> "Both are reinscribing the traditional bear image to make it represent the transcendence of the artistic human being who, once in the person of the bear, sublimely rises above others in the community and possesses a healing bear-power. This power can resist the death of their people, which occurs when there is assimilation into white society, or the 'forgetfulness,' as Harjo calls it, 'forgetfulness' of the native values and culture" (Haseltine 100).

<sup>37</sup> On p. 50, Valenzuela-Mendoza discusses Harjo's seminal work implicating identity, "She Had Some Horses," from the book of the same name.

<sup>38</sup> See Susmita Paul regarding the difference between going "back" and "going backward" in Harjo. "Memory thus becomes an active agent for progress. It is not considered as a regression to the past. Bryson identifies the distinction between going 'back' and 'going backward' in Harjo's poetry. '...[G]oing back means recuperating and maintaining an awareness of the past while allowing it to translate itself into present and future wisdom and insight' (177)" (Paul 333).

<sup>39</sup> "To return to the jazz expression of Harjo and place it in the context of Momaday's theme of least resistance, jazz is a form of music long associated with cultural resistance in African-American culture. It also allows Harjo to go further than Momaday by combining her own native identity with the identity of other minorities. . . Through the transformation-to-bear of the Creek jazz saxophonist, Harjo as witness and fellow Creek saxophonist brings the tribe and a whole generation of saxophonists of other ethnicities together into a community: this group includes John Coltrane and Charlie (Bird) Parker" (Haseltine 97).

## Notes, Chapter Five

<sup>40</sup> This phrase comes from "Autumn by the River," a poem from *Sketches in Winter, With Crows* as published by Strawberry Press and unpaginated. In what follows, if possible, I will cite Blue Cloud's poems in *Clans of Many Nations: Selected Poems 1969-1994*.

<sup>41</sup> In Blue Cloud's work, the breadth of *otherness* again expands beyond the human. As Jim Cocola remarks in his biographical essay titled simply, "Peter (Aroniawenrate) Blue Cloud": "Blue Cloud's nature poetry is indeed more

populated than the nature poetry of many other American writers: in writing of the earth, he looks consistently beyond the flora to the fauna, describing the creatures he sees and trying to conjure up those creatures that have disappeared" (Cocola 34).

<sup>42</sup> In fact, Jim Cocola calls "Autumn by the River," an example of "haiku sequences" in *Blue Cloud* (Cocola 33). And see Ann Fisher-Wirth's, "Every Time I See the Ocean Robert Hass, Loss, and Haiku,"

<sup>43</sup> Ortiz says that stories must "convey the connection to all creation that is the universe and all its wonders: the earth and its creatures and plants--everything and stories have to provide the means to appreciate and revere the quality and depth of human endeavor with relation to all creation" (Ortiz 599). Although he is not directly discussing *Blue Cloud's* poems, many of these considerations of Creation hold true for the poetry, as well.

<sup>44</sup> In a statement that I see as relating to Levinas's *saying*, Ortiz states that "It's this spontaneity--or invention and discovery--that is the difference between mere repetition of stories and real creativity and insight-vision in Indian stories. It's also Coyote 'letting you know how stories are born, that's all,' as he says in *Blue Cloud's* story" ["Water Bugs"] (Ortiz 599-600).

<sup>45</sup> This phrase is from "Within The Seasons," in *Clans of Many Nations: Selected Poems 1969-94* (*Blue Cloud* 147-148).

<sup>46</sup> This reads "breath" rather than "breathe" in the text.

<sup>47</sup> Again I cite Ortiz, who writes, "stories have to provide the means to appreciate and revere the quality and depth of human endeavor with relation to all creation" (Ortiz 599).

<sup>48</sup> In Cocola's essay, he discusses the way *Blue Cloud's* elegiac poem, "Death Chant," "correlates the attack against native America with the attack against American nature, writing of the two-tiered genocide that 'slaughtered / we die the buffalo / slaughtered / we die'" (Cocola 34). Cocola continues to draw out *Blue Cloud's* focus on these attacks as he writes: "The extermination of the buffalo, largely accomplished, has its modern-day analogue in state-sponsored extermination projects against the wolf, whose agents are critiqued by *Blue Cloud* in 'Wolf' as 'predators / of greed / whose minds creates vast lies'" (Cocola 34).

<sup>49</sup> Could "merica" be an abbreviation for America?

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