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COLD WAR NEW YORK:  
POSTMODERNISM, LYRICISM, AND QUEER AESTHETICS IN 1970S NEW YORK  
POETRY

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for a degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

JARED J. O'CONNOR

May 2017

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the poetry of Joe Brainard and Anne Waldman, two poets of the critically neglected Second-Generation New York School. I argue that Brainard and Waldman help define the emerging discourse of postmodern poetry through their attention to Cold War culture of the 1970s, countercultural ideologies, and poetic form. Both Brainard and Waldman enact a poetics of vulnerability in their work, situating themselves as wholly unique from their late-modernist predecessors. In doing so, they help engender a poetics concerned not only with the intellectual stakes but with the cultural environment they are forced to navigate. Chapter 1 explores Brainard's *I Remember* and *The Bolinas Journal*, arguing that his queer phenomenological approach to writing defines the early forms of postmodernism. Chapter 2 investigates the feminist poetics of Waldman and her engagement with performance and politics as a way to offer a new kind of poetics intent on plurality. The conclusion of this thesis looks at the notion of democracy and the postmodern poet, questioning the necessity for a political poetics and its utility in literary, cultural, and American history.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my most dear and wonderful friend, Rosalind Kichler. Your endless support and constructive insight was my momentum for completing this project. I can't ever thank you enough.

I also want to thank my committee, Dr. Jaime Harker, Dr. Daniel Stout, and Dr. Ann Fisher-Wirth for your helpful commentary throughout the development of this project. Your criticism and edits were invaluable, to say the least.

To my friends in Oxford: my roommate and confidante Allison Serraes for being there for me when I thought Mississippi would win; to Scott Obernesser, Temple Gowan, and Warren Bishop for the fun nights, the great talks, and blunt advice; and to my queer family, who I was lucky enough to find just in time.

Last but not least, this thesis is dedicated to all the queer artists, writers, and scholars trying to get their voices heard. Keep talking; because I'm here and I'm listening.

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## INTRODUCTION:

I write this thesis at a politically, socially, and culturally precarious time in the American imaginary. My focus on Cold War American life during the 1970s seems to be replicating itself in our contemporary moment. Many fear, including myself, that with the presidency of Donald Trump, we are either entering or reiterating the very cultural and political climate characteristic to the 1970s, one that has long haunted our sense of national identity. Recent political scandals involving alleged email hacking by Russian intelligence to control the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, the presence of Russian ships off the American Atlantic coast, and the general distrust of stealthy revitalized political relationships with long-time foreign adversaries has made this past year both fascinating as a developing scholar and frightening as a queer U.S. citizen. Oppressed groups, such as LGBTQIA+ people, women, and persons of color, seem to be fighting the same fights we were 40-50 years ago. What is particularly interesting then is this revitalization of Cold War politics that we, as a nation, have spent years trying to recover from.

While this thesis does not attend to all the problems plaguing the second half of the Cold War—I draw the division around 1969-1970 following events like Stonewall, the rise of feminist and black civil rights movements, and the height of the Vietnam War—it does, I think, make the two writers considered here, Joe Brainard and Anne Waldman, speak to not only their cultural climate but also to our own contemporary moment, one that is currently riddled with political and sociocultural strife. Joe Brainard and Anne Waldman offer insights into the experiences of those forced to navigate (or circumnavigate) a world without direct access to power. While both

Brainard and Waldman were certainly afforded privileges (both are white and middle class with access to multiple tiers of education), they nonetheless worked tirelessly to make their voices heard from their marginalized positions. For example, Brainard rarely hid his queerness in his writing and art. In *I Remember* and *The Bolinas Journal*, his queerness and the experience of being queer in a particularly volatile moment for LGBTQIA+ persons is on display, unapologetically, for public consumption. On the other hand, Waldman's feminism and her critique of second-wave feminist ideologies manifest both in her writing and her administrative work as the director of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church. Especially important is that during her tenure at the Project, Waldman opened the space to significantly more women artists, creating long lasting dialogues about women's access and place in contemporary art.

Both Brainard and Waldman's work deserves significantly more critical attention in contemporary scholarship for their cultural significance, their timeliness, their aesthetic achievements. In this introduction, I will discuss the four major components to this thesis: 1) the New York School of poetry and other schools of poetry that informed both Brainard and Waldman and, more broadly, the atmosphere of modernist and postmodernist poetics; 2) the Cold War as a contextualizing framework; 3) the transition from high-modernism to postmodernism especially in poetics; 4) and queer theories. Using these four points of inquiry, I hope to map a complex-yet-accessible overview of my theoretical preoccupations. I will also use this introduction to connect the dots between these fields of study. Each of these topics has been the scrutiny of study for many different scholars across a variety of disciplines. Here, I hope to situate Brainard, Waldman, and poetics more broadly, into the scrutiny of these fields.

In this thesis I argue that Brainard and Waldman, in their own ways, contend with the cultural atmosphere of the Cold War all the while helping create a new poetic discourse in



American letters. Their reimagining of the potential power of the lyric 'I' alongside their authentic and candid representations of self in their writing has, arguably, influenced contemporary poetry writ large. Through queered, vulnerable, and multiple representations of and expectations for their poetic 'I', Brainard and Waldman craft a poetics intent on opening space for marginalized voices. In doing so, they call attention to the often forgotten Second Generation New York School coterie.

### **Situating the Site: Mid-Twentieth Century Schools of Poetry**

The mid-twentieth century saw the rise of several groups of poets, or "schools," all across the U.S. We can attribute the rise of these schools of poetry to Donald Allen's landmark anthology, *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*. Allen's anthology is geographically structured, with five sections he names the New York School of poets, the Black Mountain College, the San Francisco Renaissance, beat poets of California, and one section that gathers young poets influenced by these disparate schools. In his preface, Allen explains his reasoning behind the anthology's structure: "in order to give the reader some sense of the history of the period and the primary alignment of the writers, I have adopted the unusual device of dividing the poets into five large groups, though these divisions are somewhat arbitrary and cannot be taken as rigid categories" (Allen xii). The 'arbitrary' nature of the categories is of special importance here. While many of these poets belonging to their respective schools shared similar aesthetic qualities, all were major contributors to the developing discourse of late modernist poetry. There was also a communal effort at work; they would invite one another to readings, cite each other in poems, and work together on collaborations. Returning again to Allen: "these poets have already created their own tradition, their own press, and their public. They are our avant-garde, the true

continuers of the modern movement in American poetry" (Allen xi). In essence, Allen's anthology positions these schools of poetry as the pinnacle of modernism since they each represent the landscape of poetry across the United States.

Especially important to this thesis is the New York School of poetry. In his cultural history of the New York School, David Lehman situates Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler as the four central members of the school. Lehman explains that while the friendship between these four poets is reason enough to place them at the center of the New York School, their aesthetic overlap most appropriately captures the school's essence. Lehman explains: "something of New York's metropolitan energy and sass made its way into their writing. It is there in the wit, humor, and irony that they favored: no group or movement of poets was ever so intent on appropriating comic devices for purposes serious and sometimes sublime" (Lehman 20). Their poetics are incredibly social: they often attend to their everyday surroundings, name-drop friends and other artists in New York, project an intimate tone and voice, all the while balancing a keen understanding of modernist poetics with the "energy and sass" of 1950s and 1960s New York.

The overarching style of New York School poetry is laid out—albeit somewhat abstractly—by Frank O'Hara in his essay "Personism: A Manifesto." Terence Diggory explains that, "at the core of New York school poetry is a 'quietness,' as O'Hara called it, reflecting a human angle even on experience that many contemporaries found alienating" (Diggory 940). While this quietness seems antithetical to the energy and sass described by Lehman, both are fitting descriptions for this group. Many scholars, including Lehman, Diggory, and Marjorie Perloff, place extra emphasis on O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" style of writing as exemplary of these almost contradictory descriptions, such as is seen in his poem "The Day Lady Died":

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday  
three days after Bastille Day, yes  
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine  
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton  
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner  
and I don't know the people who will feed me (264)

Here, O'Hara's poem balances the energy of city living with the quotidian quietness of everyday life. We move through the city streets alongside O'Hara, who, while giving us his schedule for his exciting night of having dinner with people he doesn't know, stays acutely aware of the daily minutiae such getting his shoes shined and train schedules. The balance of energy and movement with daily minutiae we see in O'Hara's poem exemplifies the dueling characteristics of the New York School.

The New York School poets are often considered expressionists given their attention to detail that makes for a prosody in which "words could assume their own expressive quality independent of representational meaning" (Diggory 940). The 'urban pastoral' mode of the New York School especially emphasizes this: the poet is usually walking around the city streets, observing and finding meaning in the minutiae of everyday life, and ultimately espousing "radically open, organic forms more attuned to quotidian temporality and flux" (Epstein 6). In his recent book, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture*, Andrew Epstein explains that this insistence on the everyday offered poets, such as those in the New York School, an avenue "to write about raw, personal experience and daily life in shockingly colloquial language," and in doing so, "reache[s] 'across the great divide' to popular culture and the 'low' in all its forms, including vulgarity, drugs, sex, and the messy

realities and pleasures of the body" (Epstein 7). The peak of the New York School came around 1965, and, I would argue, dissipated following O'Hara's death in 1968. I agree as well with Diggory's cultural interpretation of the School's dismantling: "during the 1960s, when protest against the Vietnam War put pressure on poets to assume a public voice, the apparent privacy and self-absorption of New York School poetry threatened to render it irrelevant" (Diggory 940). This crisis of how to represent a private, lyrical 'I' under political auspices in many ways represents the 'end' of late modernity and the New York School. The title of Lehman's book, *The Last Avant-Garde*, even seems to suggest such an end of an era.

Alongside the New York School, their contemporary counterparts of the Black Mountain College had similar yet discordant aesthetic preoccupations. Alan Golding explains that while the Black Mountain College (which was a tiny experimental college in North Carolina) shared the New York School's resistance to "established conventions in the arts," poets like Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan were much more interested in gnosticism, mysticism, and spirituality: "Black Mountain poetics reflect the principles of Olson's essay 'Projective Verse,' the movement's unofficial *ars poetica*: composition by field (the poem as a process of exploration or discovery, historical, spiritual, or emotional); a breath-and speech-based line shaped by the poem's developing content and the poet's physiology...the value-laden distinction between experimental 'open' forms and 'closed' forms' offer a broad characterization of their work" (Golding 145). While the New York School and the Black Mountain College had divergent attentions, such as the urban, campy, sociality of the NYS compared to the rural, isolated lyricism of the BMC, they worked contemporaneously to retool the poetics of high modernism (Pound, H.D., Eliot, to name a few).

The Second Generation of the New York School, which is the focus of this thesis, could be considered the 'spawn' of the NYS and BMC. The Second Generation New York School worked collaboratively with both schools, mostly centered on readings and collaborations at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in the Lower East Side. In *The Bolinas Journal*, for example, Brainard spends a significant amount of time with Robert and Bobbie Creeley and Robert Duncan and his partner Jess (who were central in the BMC). However, it is important to note that the Second Generation New York School was not merely a transitional moment in modernist poetics but rather the origins of postmodern poetics. In both chapter 1 and 2, I discuss the characteristics of the Second-Generation more conclusively. However, here, I want to briefly point to the divisions between the first and second generations.

This Second-Generation can be credited for being "foundational to our current poetry environment" (Kane xi). According to Daniel Kane, who is perhaps the foremost scholar on the Second-Generation coterie, "the establishment of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church allowed an otherwise marginal poetry a means of dissemination by way of readings, lectures, performances, workshops," wherein writers affiliated with the Black Arts Movement, feminist writers, queer writers, and experimental artists were, perhaps for the first time formally, exposed to one another's work (Kane xi). This constant contact between marginalized artists is one significant departure from the overtly white, upper middle class coterie of the NYS. Partly, politics played a significant role as Diggory observes: "within the politics of poetry, personism has been regarded with suspicion by the Language poets, who reject the 'I' of traditional lyric and emphasize instead the social forces that construct the subject position in and through language" (Diggory 941). While this thesis does not concern itself with Language poets, who were most prolific in the mid-70s through the 1990s, it is important to note that Language poetry serves as

the radical endpoint from the late modern poetics of the first generation NYS to the proto-postmodern poetics of second generation NYS and, more broadly, the coalescing of the schools Allen categorizes in his anthology. Instead, this thesis will explore works on the border between the two generations to highlight the turning point towards postmodernism, specifically between 1968-1973, when members from the first and second generation were continuously collaborating, creating, working, and listening together.

### **Modernism to Postmodernism**

It is difficult to discuss the move from modernist to the postmodernist poetics in such a short space since it remains a highly contentious moment in literary and cultural history. Indeed, this topic is the subject of many studies such as Jennifer Ashton's *From Modernism to Postmodernism*. In Ashton's account of poetry's move from modernism to postmodernism, she argues that while some of modernism's most experimental writers such as Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky have been reinterpreted under postmodern critical parameters, they nonetheless don't fulfill the conditions of postmodernity. These conditions include: commitment to the open text and the values of indeterminacy, that is, works that do not seek to convey universal, prophetic truths (i.e. the key tenant of modernist poetics). Whereas modernist poetry rests in the "absolute autonomy" of the text, postmodernity instead relies on "a literature committed instead to the irrelevance of the reader and to the absolute autonomy of what Stein calls the work that 'exists in and for itself'" (Ashton 2). Ashton identifies literalism, intentionality, and authorial inattention (all three signaling an acute awareness of the author's relationship to the reader) as key features dividing the two theoretical camps. She writes at the end of her book: "my point has been to expose the transformation—of logic into phenomenology, of intention into attention, of

meaning into effect—that has defined the movement from modernism to postmodernism and in the process redefined modernism itself" (Ashton 176). Phenomenology, purposeful attention, and effect/affect are significant preoccupations for both Brainard and Waldman. Brainard, for example, employs a queer phenomenology in *The Bolinas Journal* to disorient the lyric process of reading and in doing so achieves a dialectical relationship with the reader. Waldman, too, uses displacement via the imagination to upset formal logical proceedings of her poems.

This move from modernism to postmodernism is also very much tied to its 1960s cultural moment. Marianne DeKoven's *Utopia Limited* explores how the 1960s signaled the end of modernity—late modernity—through a variety of cultural utterances. She argues, "that the sixties weren't postmodern but that they represented the final, full flowering of modernism/modernity particularly of its utopian master narratives," wherein, "the sixties political and countercultural movements were transformed into something in continuity with, but radically different from, those modern master narratives" (DeKoven 8-9). Such a reading positions the New York School as a coterie in "crisis," caught betwixt the prophetic closure of lyric poetry and poetry that refuses such closure, from master narratives to narratives of interaction and meaningful connection with readers. Returning to DeKoven: "modernity's cultures are characterized by metanarratives or master narratives of large synthesis, unity, and coherence...They are characterized by truth-quests—believing in the knowability and determinacy of truth—for depth, reality, and knowledge beneath deceptive, illusory surface" (DeKoven 14). By contrast, in postmodernity, narratives and representations of the self are "manifestations of embodiment, belief, affect, and open-ended, egalitarian, popular, multidirectional change" (DeKoven 17). The postmodern subject can no longer be clearly demarcated or even unified, but instead becomes "fluid, permeable, fragmented, shifting, nomadic, nonessential, non-self-identical, hybrid"

(DeKoven 17). In this way, postmodern works aren't bound by their own epistemology. They are open-ended, characterized by their free play of language and form.

DeKoven's work is especially important to the theoretical framework of this thesis as both Brainard and Waldman begin their career amidst this crisis of modernity in their early works (*I Remember* and "Crack In The World" respectively). Because of their early allegiances to late modernism, their work in the early 1970s allows us to trace their movement into postmodern preoccupations. DeKoven argues this movement from late modern to postmodern, such as I observe in Brainard and Waldman, is signaled by a move from "the epistemological dominant and the ontological dominant," or what Ashton calls 'intentionality':

The sincerity, originality, authenticity, aura, depth, reality, and directionality of modernity, in tension with irony and commodification in modernism, are supplanted in postmodernism by a pervasive irony, a pervasive culture of the commodity, the image, and the simulacrum; by flatness, and by limitless, open-ended free play, themselves in antinomous conjunction with various modes of intensified affect, fundamentalist belief, and free-floating passionate enthusiasm.

(DeKoven 17)

Thus the transition from late modern to postmodern is marked by a return to the personable, the approachable, and the tangible subject, rather than the prophetic poet figure that characterizes modernism. Both Brainard and Waldman possess a "free-floating passionate enthusiasm" in their work, which is seen in their self-referentiality such as when they cite their childhoods or specific memories, their use of an unconstrained voice in their poetry, and their open poetic forms not bound by traditional poetic conventions.



Andrew Epstein, too, echoes these determinants of postmodernity. In tracing the 'crisis of attention' in contemporary poetry—a crisis I see both Brainard and Waldman working out in their poetry—Epstein finds that postwar poetry emphasizes the *everyday* as a way to contend with growing discontent within the structures of Cold War American culture. He writes: "one could argue that this development is merely a deepening of the already extant modernist interest in the everyday. But it also signals a distinctive new aesthetic with different practices and goals. Despite their fascination with the everyday, the modernist still retained a greater emphasis on epic ambitions, on mythic dimensions of the daily, on epiphany and the special moment, and the need to disrupt rather than explore habit" (Epstein 7). The need to explore habit rather than disrupt it is a procedural process for both Brainard and Waldman. Brainard's *Journal* is literally a book exploring everyday habits; Waldman's *Life Notes* attends to the quotidian minutiae of her childhood to bring forth micro-politics underlining our lives. Thus their need to explore habit is a process that highlights their intense affect and free-play in language, tone, and form.

Andy Fitch's *Pop Poetics: Reframing Joe Brainard* is also helpful to align Brainard in the tension between modern/postmodern. Fitch's close and exhaustive study of Brainard very much informs my discussion of Brainard in Chapter 1. Here, I bring in Fitch's reading of Brainard's seminal book *I Remember*. For Fitch, Brainard's *I Remember* is emblematic of his ambidextrous modernist/postmodern attentions, especially in his representations of his lyric 'I.' Focusing on the anaphoric structure of *I Remember* (each line beginning with the phrase "I remember"), Fitch concludes: "Brainard's ensuing example consolidates this collective enterprise. For within the postwar era, the 'repeated subject' gets progressively foregrounded: first by Cage's anecdotal entries, then by Brainard's anaphoric text. Anticipating poststructuralist calls to deauthor poetic production, Brainard elects not to explode or erase the 'I,' but to repeat it—confounding, rather

than parodying, the lyric subject's authentic coordinates at a particular time and place" (Fitch 178-9). I expound on this reading in the longer chapter, but important here is Brainard's anticipation of poststructural, postmodern interpretations of the lyric 'I' that Fitch observes. This problem of the lyric 'I' is essential to the modern/postmodern tension, and both Brainard and Waldman's poetic 'I' (or the voice their poetry enacts) is one of the ways they most distinctly set themselves apart from the New York School and modernism more broadly. Their works are candid in subject matter and voice and they find inspiration not in prophetic truths but in everyday life, objects, and friends.

But, again, I am also concerned with how the cultural atmosphere of 1960s and 1970s Cold War America informs this literary transmogrification. This next section will discuss how these literary and cultural theories are mediated by the sociocultural politics rampant in the second half of the Cold War.

### **Reimagining Cold War Culture**

The cultural moment of the second half of the Cold War is, in itself, caught between two paradigms: one of containment and the constrictions demanded by politics of normality and one fueled by underground, countercultural sympathies. In this section I will focus on the cultural, political, and social atmosphere that defined this period of American history and how Brainard and Waldman's poetry enacts these sympathies.

Some scholars argue that while the 1970s were trying times for those belonging to marginalized groups—women, the LGBTQIA+ community, African Americans—they nonetheless fostered a culture of experimentation. Beth Bailey and David Farber write: "a sense of cultural crisis permeated the 1970s. International shocks...domestic political debacles...and the

travails of stagflation undermined the confidence of the American people. The resulting anxieties and uncertainties combined with the growing freedom from social constraints and the new visibility of marginalized groups, such as gay men and women, to yield a cultural of experimentation" (Bailey and Farber 6). On the other hand, while marginalized persons became more visible in the public eye, those opposing these groups became increasingly more critical. Bailey and Farber suggest that the 1970s in America were divided by a sense of existential despair (for those who were forced to confront their morally contrived ideas of normalcy) and collective creativity (communities growing and fostering difference, i.e. the counterculture). But while scholars have criticized the cultural climate of the 1970s, claiming it was an era of "rejecting social and familial obligations to embrace a selfish pursuit of individual fulfillment," as it was literally dubbed the 'Me Decade,' it nonetheless opened avenues for more real, authentic representations of lives of everyday Americans (Bailey and Farber 7). Unlike the first half of the Cold War, which is most broadly characterized by fears of cultural annihilation, the second half is much more invested in the ways the individual belongs to the larger social world, even if their identities weren't considered legitimate.

While experiencing this rise in two distinctive American imaginaries, the conservative cultural hegemony took over the American political landscape. The presidency of Richard Nixon, for example, captures this rising tension permeating the 1970s. While Nixon was responsible for ending American involvement in Vietnam, creating Affirmative Action programs, 'winning' the space race, and desegregating schools in the South, his role in the Watergate Scandal continues to define his legacy, primarily because Americans viewed Watergate as a betrayal of the trust his presidency promised. For many, including those belonging to the countercultural movements, this betrayal of trust engendered a widespread

disillusionment with American politics once and for all. This came at an especially crucial time since many Americans were recapitulating their sense of national identity: in a post-Vietnam world, where does America stand? During this time, "in the backwash of political and economic crisis," Americans had to deal with "a productive uncertainty about the meanings of happiness, success, patriotism, and national identity" (Bailey and Farber 2). Following the rise of countercultural sentiments in the late 1960s, which championed freedom and experimentation, the 1970s had to renegotiate their sense of *culture*. Not only was it about achieving equal legal rights but understanding what it *means* to be marginalized. Thus, instead of putting faith in revising larger cultural and political institutions, their very function and purpose was questioned. This became fundamental in the rise of postmodern, poststructural analysis of art and culture. And we continue to question this today.

It is important to note that the problems plaguing 1970s American life were the results of two decades of post-war, Cold War detente cultural and political logic. Andrew Epstein writes that the drastic changes in cultural logic had its roots in a variety of factors, including,

the shattering effects and aftermath of World War II; the influence of a Cold War culture marked by conformity, material prosperity, and hyper-consumerism, McCarthyism and fears of nuclear annihilation; the pervasive influence of Buddhism and eastern religions, with their call for mindfulness and attention to immediate experience and the tumultuous political and social changes of the 1960s (including the rally cry that 'the personal is political'). (Epstein 7)

While Epstein gives us a laundry list of social and cultural quandaries during this period, Epstein's observations nonetheless demonstrate that the 1970s was a period of renegotiating the ideal national identity. However, as countercultural sympathies make clear, there remained an

inescapable cultural logic of same/other, us/them. As Alan Nadel remarks at the end of his book *Containment Culture*—which explores Cold War narratives dealing with conformity and normalcy—while narratives of non-normative subjects were proliferating, they were continuously "marked by [their] own Otherness, by [their] internalized sense of aberrance and contradiction" (Nadel 298). Nadel continues: "out of these contradictions, postmodern narratives arose, but, like all discourse and all performances, those with postmodern conventions are necessarily marked by their unarticulated Other" (Nadel 298). What Nadel suggests here is that despite the rise of postmodern narratives, such as Brainard and Waldman create, they are continuously marked for their non-normativity, their Otherness, rather than being taken as true articulations of an American identity and experience, or how they maintain countercultural resistance and self-identification all at once. While renegotiating its identity, 1970s America remained divisive as to who had access to this "new" American identity.

Indeed, the 1970s saw drastic, emancipatory legislations and activism for marginalized groups. Abortions became legal, gay men and women were more likely to come out publically as gay, and traditional gender roles were challenged at home and in the workforce. While reeling from years internal social, cultural, and political strife among Americans, the 1970s offered a glimpse at the possibilities of an egalitarian national imaginary on the ground floor, where every person had the chance to fulfill the ideal American identity. But, for many activists groups, assimilating into the normative imaginary that refused to recognize them for decades was not a top priority. By the end of the decade, following years of liberation and revolt, an inevitable backlash emerged, "and public discourse about social mores, and in particular, about the family came to be dominated by nostalgia and laments about narcissism and moral decay" (Slocum-Schaffer 211). Morality and conservative ethics became the norm in the political landscape.

After decades of tireless work, dreams of egalitarianism were destroyed. Neo-liberal, republican, and radical groups couldn't (and still can't) find common ground on a number of issues, leaving behind those without access to the normative ideal of the American identity. Arguably, this lack of access helped engender countercultural works responding to these Cold War social problems. Brainard and Waldman became products of these problems and also helped bring them to the forefront on the artistic stage.

Arguably, we are still negotiating the very problems that arose out of the 1970s, domestically and internationally. In 1980, 9 years before the demolition of the Berlin Wall signaling the 'end' of the Cold War, the presidential election of Ronald Reagan ushered in a 'new politics of old values,' ultimately subverting years of advocacy, activism, and legislative reform. "A profound sense of cultural despair set in as the country's economic and foreign problems worsened," writes Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer. "Notions about the decline of the American family became entangled with notions about the decline of the American character, which in turn became entangled with notions of the decline of the economy and of the American empire. Underneath it all was a profound collective yearning for enduring emotional bonds and a fear that the social fabric had become dangerously frayed" (Slocum-Schaffer 212). That the 1970s ended in such disarray is arguably one reason to revisit the artifacts from the decade: they can clue us in and show us how to foster egalitarian notions of identity, freedom, and nationalism. The environment of the 1970s, defined by the constant interplay between the dominant normative cultures against the rising countercultures, was a period of reimagining the potential that our orientations could take. What new paths could we draw? How can we truly express ourselves? This shift—from the epistemological dominant to an ontological dominant that DeKoven observes—captures the move into the postmodern age. But more than that, for the first

time we could see the pervasive power of revolt and activism in modern American discourse. It is not far-fetched to claim that many of our contemporary activist sympathies derive from and build on the work done in this period. And writers like Brainard and Waldman show us what this can look like when expressed in their unassuming, approachable, and vulnerable way.

### **Queering the Cold War**

Briefly, I want to touch on the queer theoretical framework used in this thesis. The ideas of a queered phenomenology and vulnerability are especially important since they both offer reinterpretations of normative modes of discourse and logic. In his book, *Queering Cold War Poetry*, Eric Keenaghan argues that the problems of identity engendered by Cold War culture should be viewed through Foucault's notion of the biopolitical regime of power. For Foucault, this means that the majority of individuals are not being disciplined into a normative majority but that such a normative collective already exists. Keenaghan writes: "in this regime, the population is the object of power, more specifically of an administrative government's conservative management that aims to preserve and secure the collective's stability. Rather than a power over life, a right to life determines politics and social power" (Keenaghan 11). Much like Nadel contends in *Containment Culture*, a biopolitical regime of power reinforces the ideas of normalcy and normativity. Keenaghan, who writes about both American and Cuban poets during the Cold War, argues that these poets opt to live and write their lives metaphorically, creating resemblances not reflections, which ultimately prompts the question: "what if we were to imagine identification as not occurring according to individualized aspiration for equality?" (Keenaghan 10). In doing so, as Keenaghan suggests, we can create alternative notions of a self,

identities not determined by a normalized, biopolitical standard. "To opt for a metaphorical existence," he writes,

is to inhabit a life of resemblance, not a life of identification or authenticity...Conceptualizing citizenship as a condition of living metaphorically moves us toward an ethical paradigm that remembers all bodies' vulnerable condition, a foundation of being that reinforces their similarity to one another. By thinking through this logic of resemblance, we can deconstruct predominant political fictions about identity, individualism, and security. Instead of living a completely individuated life, individuals are always multiple because they continuously open themselves to fellow citizens, with whom they share some likeness. (Keenaghan 10).

Keenaghan's Whitmanian ideals about individuality recognize that we share in living. The works of Brainard and Waldman suggests such an idea: Brainard and Waldman are endlessly aware of their audience, creating dialogues with their reader through various rhetorical, aesthetic, and cultural iterations such as the countercultural groups of the 1970s sought to do in protests and activism. This pluralistic view does not suggest the end of individual autonomy. Instead, it argues that individuality is more of a cultural script wherein we should allow ourselves to be vulnerable and find the commonalities between us and other. Poetry is the ultimate avenue for this: without the other (the reader) poetry would revel in its own hegemonic and containing principles. While Keenaghan's book focuses on late modernist poets, his theoretical frame is nonetheless helpful for understanding the scope of postmodern poetry, especially the potential power of a newly reconfigured lyric "I."



In this thesis, queer refers primarily to "non-normative" or "disoriented." I borrow from Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* where she writes: "to make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things...the effects of such a disturbance are uneven, precisely given that the world is already organized around certain forms of living" (Ahmed 161). In their forms, aesthetics, and cultural materials utilized in their works, Brainard and Waldman are certainly disturbing the contained, normative order of Cold War culture. Most importantly, they queer expectations for the lyric self. And in doing so, their work remains foundational for tracing the development of American poetic discourse. But also they offer a glimpse into a world of feeling displaced, disoriented, using art and writing as a means of orientation and to find others to share in such a metaphorical existence.

This thesis is divided into two chapters. Chapter 1 explores the work of Joe Brainard, an artist and writer that got his start during the height of the New York School. I look at two of Brainard's works, *I Remember* (1968-1973) and *The Bolinas Journal* (1971). Both works are emblematic of Brainard's artistic legacy: *I Remember* is certainly his most canonical work while *The Bolinas Journal* remains one of his most experimental. I argue that Brainard's writing (and some of his artwork) employs a politics of vulnerability insofar as Brainard uses a lowbrow, quasi-autobiographical aesthetic to achieve a dialectical synchronicity with his reader. Moreover, I argue that Brainard's vulnerable works are much more philosophically complicated than it appears on the surface. In *The Bolinas Journal*, Brainard works through several problems of postmodern culture, art, and theory, creating a postmodern text while challenging the structure it assumes.

The second chapter investigates the feminist politics and pluralistic imaginary of Anne Waldman's poetry. Focusing on a sampling of her early writing, her work as the Poetry Project

Director, and selections from her 1973 book *Life Notes*, I argue that Waldman's poetry affronts the notion of a singular, subjective lyric "I" by concerning herself with the political potential of plurality. I look specifically at how Waldman engages her subjects harmoniously and productively, without affirming the culturally derived frictions created through ontological hierarchies. Her work is one of energy and motion, constantly making life-affirming connections with others as it avoids being constricted by cultural and aesthetic expectations. Very much informed by the rise of feminism and second-wave women's right movement, Waldman's work is wholly unique in its exploration of American identity, critiques of countercultural movements, and radical sensibilities.

While there are many other poets of this generation who could have been included in this thesis, I opted to explore Brainard and Waldman's work because they seem to suggest *and* engender the epoch of postmodern poetry and culture. Important, too, is the intersectional friendship between Brainard and Waldman, which I explore in chapter 2 in tandem with their collaboratively produced book *Self Portrait*. My hope is that this thesis captures the tone, sentiments, and creative energies of the second half of the Cold War, which, I think, is one of the most fascinating and important periods in modern American literary history. And I do believe that Brainard and Waldman can help make sense of not only the 1970s, but our current socio-cultural landscape.

## CHAPTER 1:

### "DO YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN?": THE COUNTERCULTURAL COLD WAR, VULNERABILITY, AND QUEER SUBJECTIVITY IN JOE BRAINARD'S *THE BOLINAS JOURNAL*

Writer and artist Joe Brainard's first taste of the avant-garde art world was during high school in Tulsa, Oklahoma when classmates Ron Padgett and Dick Gallup asked Brainard to join the editorial board of the *White Dove Review*, a little magazine of contemporary poetry and art. While Padgett and Gallup edited the magazine's poetry, Brainard handled the art submissions and together they published the first edition of the *White Dove Review* on February 21, 1959 with a cover designed by Brainard himself which, as Padgett recalls, was a "black-and-white-geometric grid inspired by Mondrian" (Padgett 10). The *White Dove Review* ran for five issues, with its final issue featuring works by some of America's up-and-coming poets and writers such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, and LeRoi Jones. Brainard's work on the *White Dove Review* would set in motion his extensive, collaborative career with some of the most radical and experimental poets in post-war letters. But it was the friendships with Gallup and Padgett (and eventually Ted Berrigan, who the three met while Berrigan was a graduate student at the University of Tulsa) that would ultimately engender Brainard's own experimental and critically acclaimed career in the arts.

This chapter will explore two of Brainard's texts. The first is *I Remember*, which was published in three iterations between 1969 through 1973 in small magazines and is perhaps the

most canonical of Brainard's writings. A long form experimental piece, *I Remember* unfolds through the repeating anaphoric phrase "I remember," and each utterance of the phrase triggers a memory from Brainard's life. *I Remember* is often lauded for its accessibility; however, the work is scarcely critically assessed for its formal achievements and intellectual merit, particularly its use of interchanging consonance and dissonance that portrays the fragmentary nature of the self. *I Remember* uses nostalgia and memory to highlight the endless ways in which subjects change, evolve, and proliferate over a course of a lifetime (or in Brainard's case, 30-odd years).

The second, and the larger concern for this chapter, is *The Bolinas Journal* published in 1971 under Ted Berrigan's Big Sky Press. Writing the journal during his time in the artist/hippie community of Bolinas, California, *The Bolinas Journal* stresses the dramatic shifts in both culture and art of the 1970s. I will argue that *The Bolinas Journal* further complicates what *I Remember* sets out to do: refuses the notion of a static, modernist subject through both the journal's formal preoccupations and its intellectual curiosities. Thus I set out to show that Brainard's *The Bolinas Journal* is a project of fragmentation and discontinuity, both key features of postmodernist aesthetic theory and both emblematic of the 1970s American Cold War culture that Brainard's life is situated within. Indeed, Brainard would go on to enjoy a long, successful career in art and (less so) in literature until his death from AIDS-induced pneumonia in 1994. But it is these early texts in his career that, I think, highlight Brainard's sophisticated and highly attuned understanding of and contribution to how we understand postmodern art forms. And, perhaps more than that, Brainard's writing and art can and should be considered acts of defiance against the solipsism celebrated in the containment culture of Cold War America. I argue that Brainard's work is inherently queer and that his work sets out to make this queerness accessible

to the culture and art of the second-half of the Cold War while, at the same time, challenging its very foundations.

### **Brainard in the 60s**

Brainard was (and is still considered) foremost a visual artist. During his time in Tulsa, Brainard gained a reputation as a skilled poster maker, collagist, and in fashion design, making clothes for his mother and friends. It didn't take long for Brainard to gain notoriety; during high school, he received both local and national acclaim for his work and started receiving requests for commissioned pieces. When Brainard graduated high school in Tulsa, his acumen for a variety of visual arts landed him a scholarship at the Dayton, Ohio Art Institute. For Brainard, Dayton wasn't his ideal place, but he "just wanted to get East," presumably to New York, and used the scholarship as a way to get there. However, having just returned from New York after seeing Padgett off to start school at Columbia, Brainard knew that being in Dayton fulltime wasn't an option—instead, as he recalls in a 1977 interview with Tim Dlugos, "I just knew what I wanted was in New York" (*CW* 491). After only a month at the Art Institute, Brainard, in unapologetically bold stunt characteristic of the ways we remember him today, "told [the Art Institute that] my father was dying of cancer so [he] could leave" (*CW* 491). Indeed, his father didn't have cancer. But, as Brainard remembers, "I just didn't want to quit; I felt bad about quitting because I had a scholarship. And also they were all very nice, I didn't want to hurt their feelings, so I just said that..." (*CW* 492).

Once he dropped out of the Art Institute, Brainard headed straight for New York to join his fellow "Tulsa School" compatriots: Padgett, Gallup, and later Berrigan in 1960 with the

hopes of continuing the *White Dove Review* on a larger, more national scale. But what Brainard found in New York was a whole community of poets and artists in the Lower East Side in the Bowery who were running the now (in)famous Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church. At the Poetry Project, Brainard became acquainted with the New York School poets like Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Anne Waldman and visual artists like Jane Freilicher and Robert Rauschenberg. Many of these important figures in literary and art history would become close friends of Brainard and oftentimes these artists would collaborate with one another by editing journals, making books and art pieces, and organizing Lower East Side events.

Brainard spent most of the 1960s working on his visual art with works ranging from assemblages to collages and more traditional mediums like oil and enamel on canvas. At the same time in the avant-garde New York art scene, Pop Art was taking over galleries and pieces by Pop icons Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg's were becoming the cause of national controversy. But according to Constance M. Lewallen, Brainard was already producing Pop-inflected works that predated both Warhol and Oldenburg. By 1961, "Brainard was appropriating commercial logos in collages and paintings" (Lewallen 7). In one of his earliest pieces titled *7-Up*, Brainard displays his admiration for commercial logos and pop-cultural referents by recreating the 7-Up logo that was drippy, bold, and unapologetic. Brainard's anticipation of Pop Arts emergence is demonstrative of his experimental imaginary; he was very much on the ground floor helping invent postmodern art forms. But perhaps this wasn't the most important thing for Brainard as he seems to suggest in a 1977 interview with poet Tim Dlugos. After being asked if he felt part of the Pop Art legacy, Brainard replied:

I felt it a little bit, although in retrospect, it was totally different. 'Cause before I was doing the altars I was doing a series of paintings of 7-Up bottle labels, just

the labels, with the big 7 and the little bubbles. I'd never really seen any Pop Art, then I looked in *Time* magazine and there was Oldenburg 7-Up—sort of drippy and wet, you know—and a Warhol soup can, and I was kind of shocked. (*CW* 497)

Throughout the 1960s, Brainard's visual art would take several, often extravagant, turns. In the middle of the 1960s, Brainard produced a series of altarpieces mixing materials of the sacred with the profane, like conglomerating catholic iconography with cheap, everyday objects such as plastic flowers and beads. Other times, he would incorporate found objects from the streets of New York, like cigarette butts, into his assemblages. Returning to Lewallen, "[t]he New York School poets, with whom Brainard was associated, shared his methodology of the no-comment juxtaposing of ordinary things" (12). Because he shared a similar aesthetic sensibility to his New York School counterparts, it wasn't long before Brainard began collaborating with poets, from creating the covers for their books to physical collaborations on paper where Brainard would paint and poets would write. During the 1960s, Brainard established himself as a preeminent artist in the highly exclusive, avant-garde scene of New York art. But the pretensions surrounding this world rarely occluded Brainard's diligence as an artist as we can see by the incredibly large body of work he produced.

Brainard's ascent to artistic notoriety in the 1960s was well documented through diaries and journals, some he would publish in his lifetime and others that would be published posthumously. Often in his diaries, in his characteristically zany and comical tone, he would talk about his friends, New York, current projects, critiques of other artists and poets, and his own personal trials and tribulations he experienced as a gay man living in the culturally volatile period of Cold War America. In many ways, these diaries show Brainard's development as a

confident creative writer and art critic. In his memoir *Joe*, Padgett recalls that some of the early diaries show "a lot of the later Joe" already on display, writing: "his sweetness, his consideration for other people and their feelings, his focus on defining himself, and, what was new for him, his willingness to be frank with his close friends when it was called for" (34). While this description doesn't exactly attribute a particular 'literariness' to the diaries, Padgett is careful to qualify that the diaries portend the intellectual stakes Brainard's writing would eventually convey: "at the very center of the inscription is the notion of our being restricted by the static image people have of us. From a literary point of view, there is also his tendency, in the middle of a piece, to step back and comment on it" (34). Padgett hints at what this chapter will attend to: Brainard's refusal to accept stasis, his concern with a very Whitmanian notion of plurality as essential to the human spirit and the individual subject, a sensibility and celebration of fragmentation as a condition of subjectivity amidst the so-called culture wars permeating in Cold War American life, and ultimately signaling the emergence of postmodernity by observing the contradictions of modernity in American art and life. Observing and engaging with the avant-garde scene of the 1960s allowed Brainard to hone his creative and critical abilities—essentially, he knew what was missing, and in *I Remember*, he began the groundwork for a wholly new kind of poetry.

### **Framing Brainard**

There is very little contemporary scholarship or critical treatments of Brainard's writing. The only book-length exploration of Brainard to my knowledge is Andy Fitch's *Pop Poetics: Reframing Joe Brainard*. Fitch's study of Brainard's writing over his entire career is a lofty undertaking; situating Brainard at the vanguard of the Pop Art movement, Fitch argues that attending Brainard's use of the quasi-autobiographical form mixed with his interest in low-brow



cultural iconography is a way to reframe Brainard as an epoch of postmodern writing. Fitch argues that Brainard never quite fit into the groups he was most affiliated with, that being the New York School of late modernists, academic poetics, and the almost illogical pursuits of Language poets (many of whom, consequently, were early members of the second generation New York School coterie). Fitch is the most helpful in assessing Brainard's work for its aesthetic preoccupations; he is consistent in describing Brainard through both poetic and artistic vocabularies in order to attend to Brainard's unflinching, ambidextrous grip on the two mediums. Perhaps what is most helpful in Fitch's book is the endless iteration that low-brow art forms are worth considering in postmodern literary discourse. Fitch writes: "I want to reposition Joe Brainard as an avatar of interdisciplinary Pop aesthetics, as an experimentally inclined producer of a covert (perhaps closeted) abstract poetics—a project more concerned with the modular, mosaic-like deployment of prosaic fact and commercial figure than with literary defamiliarization in its most conventional (syntactical) sense" (Fitch 3). Ultimately Fitch's project casts a new light on Brainard beyond the minimal, almost inconsequential critical pieces that have treated Brainard primarily as a "minor" artist.

Fitch is the most helpful for my understanding of Brainard's aesthetic achievements such as when he proposes that Brainard's use of a "mosaic-like" aesthetic rather than a more modernist defamiliarized representation of his speaker. As a result, reading Brainard's work this way challenges the ways in which modernist poetics had been representing lyric subjectivity. Thus Fitch's reading Brainard as "abstract" is certainly right; Brainard refuses a cohesive, representational version of the "I"— which Fitch describes as a kaleidoscopic aesthetic— throughout all of his writing and especially so in *I Remember* and *The Bolinas Journal*. However, while Fitch does attend to Brainard's postmodern aesthetics, the small body of critical

work on Brainard does problematize such a reading. For example, Jenni Quilter's essay on minor art and the Second-Generation New York School rightly observes that Brainard's sort of low-brow minorness as an artist very much illuminates the communal, personable quality of his art. Jenni Quilter's essay, "Life without Malice: The Minor Arts of Collaboration" focuses on Brainard, Burckhart, and Schneeman as 'minor artists' who,

did not go in for the grand, self-conscious gesture. They could be sentimental. A lot of their art domestic, meant for an intimate scale of consumption: portraits of family and friends, assemblages that resembled small altars, films of friends goofing around. Their art had a great deal of relaxation in it. They shared a love for the art of the gift, for the diminutive, for simplicity, for clarity and sociability, a mild insistence on the here and now." (Quilter 143)

The lack of pretention surrounding Brainard's visual art is easily translatable into his writing; Brainard values simplicity and clarity in his prose, the text is never too strenuous and Brainard himself doesn't take himself too seriously. Taking Quilter and Fitch together as a critical foundation in which to reevaluate Brainard amidst the rise of highly complex, postmodern aesthetics reaffirms the importance of sociability in his work.

Moreover, Daniel Kane argues that the second-generation New York School (which in many ways Brainard helped continue after O'Hara's death in 1968) practices a poetics of sociability. For Kane, this means commitments to 1) the collaboratively produced poem; 2) the collaborative book; 3) the intersocial text (poems drenched with the proper names of those writers in the "scene" and/or serving as initiative rites welcoming new poets into the community); and (4) the foregrounding of the public poetry reading as primary mode of literary reception (Kane 92). While Brainard falls into all four of Kane's criteria, the notion of the

intersocial text is most appropriate for my assessment. Brainard's texts are riddled with nods to other writers and artists, many of them friends, creating work rooted in the social. Arguably, without the social, Brainard's work would dwell in confessional, merely emoting without significance to the cultural world Brainard very much revels in.

While there is little work attending directly to either the second-generation New York School and Brainard more specifically, I borrow from several theorists of modernist and postmodernism poetics and culture. Foremost, because I find Brainard at the vanguard postmodernism—especially regarding his treatment of the lyric subject—I borrow my assessment of lyric modernism from Charles Bernstein and John Vincent. In *A Poetics*, Bernstein offers an incredibly useful and cogent reading of late modernist poetics: "by 'modernist' I am referring to a break from various ideas about narrative and description to a focus on the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the medium that implicitly challenges any ideas of language as having one particular 'natural mode of discourse'" (Bernstein 94). Bernstein's rendering of 'modernist' very much suits the late modernist preoccupations of the First-Generation New York School such as writers like O'Hara and Ashbery who revel in autonomy and self-sufficiency in their lyric subjects, and who Brainard would draw inspiration from.

Along the same lines, John Vincent's *Queer Lyrics* argues for a queered lyric modernism, where the poem becomes "the impulse to challenge sense-making apparatus," wherein "lyric movement strains categorical definitions of feeling and identity" (Vincent xiv). Vincent borrows extensively from Altieri's assessment of the lyric poem where, "the lyric poem...momentarily transcends the limits of lucid self-consciousness" (Altieri 656). Bernstein, Vincent, and Altieri each attest that the lyricism is achieved when a break, either in consciousness, subjectivity, and/or identity, is achieved. Brainard certainly breaks from traditional forms of language and

poetic subjectivity; however, Brainard's lyricism is not one to transcend the self-conscious subject but instead be aware of multiple subjectivities simultaneously. This is an important delineation that demarcates Brainard from his late modernist predecessors.

Finally, critics of Cold War modernism/postmodern are useful to position Brainard in his cultural climate. In his book *Containment Culture*, Alan Nadel argues that postwar Cold War culture is responsible for normalizing hetero-capitalist narratives. Indeed, such restrictive access to creating narratives ultimately constrained advantageous pursuits of social freedom, especially those rooted in countercultural ideologies. For Nadel, "it was a period, when 'conformity' became a positive value in and of itself," wherein shirking traditional notions of subjective freedom—disclosure— for promises of safety—enclosure—became an internalization and enforcement of particular normative values (Nadel 4). While Nadel's book looks most specifically at the 1950s, his work nonetheless situates the rise of containment ideology in tandem with the socio-cultural transition to a postmodern world, making the tensions in this transition undeniably poignant.

Conversely, Marianne DeKoven's *Utopia Limited* explores the emergence of "the postmodern" in several cultural texts—both literary and non-literary—of the 1960s. DeKoven is useful to tease out the overlap between modernism and postmodernism, tracing the rise of the postmodern alongside the rise of 1960s countercultural movements as they intersect with race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and geography. DeKoven pays careful attention to the rise of popular culture and consumer culture as a way to situate the transition from the modern to the postmodern. She writes: "popular culture, vehicle and expression of postmodern egalitarianism, is no longer meaningfully distinct either from high culture or from consumer culture" (17). Using popular culture and consumer culture as a way to approximate its effect on the political *subject*, she continues: "the political has come to be lodged primarily in questions of subjectivity. The

subject is no longer clearly demarcated or even putatively or potentially unified, but rather is fluid, permeable, fragmented, shifting, monadic, nonessential, non-self-identical, hybrid, and no longer clearly separable from any 'other'" (17). Ultimately, DeKoven uses this idea of the self to underline the crises inherent in this transitional moment in American life.

Along these same lines, Eric Keenaghan queers the notion of the postmodern and the subject but more broadly, arguing that the subject under containment is not "a[n] atomistic, bounded being" but rather argues that, "the individual is a cluster effect, a multiple or a haecceity," and, "we should imagine our selves as *living multitudinously*" (23). Keenaghan's book on vulnerability and queerness in Cold War America and Cuba critiques politics of liberalism and containment by queering the ways we understand subjectivity in Cold War climate of containment. Taken together, these scholars and critics provide a broad, complicated picture of the rise of postmodernism, aesthetics, and lyric subjectivity mediated by containment culture. I will use these scholars to attend to Brainard's stance between the late modern/postmodern divide, arguing his texts help shape and define this transition.

### **Expressing Queerness in *I Remember***

Following Brainard's death in 1994, celebrations of Brainard's life were centered on the brief snippets provided in *I Remember*. Remembering Brainard through all of his disclosures in *I Remember* does make sense—the book literally details Brainard's life up to 1970 and captures the characteristics of Brainard's work and personality. But while celebratory, Brainard is often reduced to being simply "honest," "kind," and "nice" that, despite being seemingly well-intentioned adjectives, merely proscribes Brainard as possessing only stereotypically "queer" attributes. Such prescriptive inclinations are seen in Brainard's interview Dlugos. During the

interview, Dlugos continuously questions Brainard about the "gay sensibility" in his work. Their exchange is as follows:

TD: Do you consider yourself a 'gay artist'? Is there such a thing as 'gay art' outside subject matter? Is there a 'gay sensibility' that infuses your work?

JB: Does a gay sensibility exist?

TD: Does it exist in your work, and does it exist at all?

Responding to Dlugos question, Brainard maintains a sense of ambivalence to this question, answering the question with a vague, indeterminate response:

JB: I think it does in mine, but I think it's sort of closing out [...] I mean it's not that much of an issue, while at one point, in my life, it was an issue.

Later in the interview, Dlugos continues pressing Brainard about his 'gay sensibility' by reframing it as a "ludic" and "playful" quality, to which Brainard replies: "Yes. I'm not really sure that has anything to do with being gay, though, 'cause I think my work is very sensual, very lush and all that, but I'm not sure that has to do with being gay" (100). Brainard emphasizes a similar sentiment in his 1981 "Nothing to Write Home About": "actually—I can't see that being a gay [artist] makes any difference whatsoever, except that every now and then my work seems shockingly 'sissy' to me" (*CW* 471). Indeed, Brainard's campy aesthetic—marked by his unpretentiousness about his own work, which he clearly conveys as he tells Dlugos, "people want to buy a Warhol or a person instead of a work. My work's never become 'a Brainard'" (*CW* 498)—is very part of his works' charm and accessibility. But these minor prescriptive adjectives—nice, honest, generous, and kind—do little to attest to his literary and artistic talents.

It is then peculiar then that some of these descriptions come from his closest confidants and collaborators—several of who are renowned in postwar poetics. One description comes

from poet John Ashbery, who writes: "Joe Brainard was one of the *niciest* artists I have ever known. *Nice* as a person and *nice* as an artist" (Ashbery, 257 emphasis mine). In his dissection of Ashbery's recollection, Brain Glavey rightly notes, "niceness is a strangely underwhelming rubric under which to memorialize an artist's career" (143). Glavey continues: "as that which proverbially finishes last, niceness would seem to be antipodes away from the front-lines of the avant-garde" (143). Andy Finch too takes contestation with such posthumous accolades, finding that these adjectives don't quite add up to a cogent description of Brainard's achievements: "[the] frequent emphasis upon a benignant personality points towards interpretive conundrums common among responses to Brainard's quasi-autobiographical texts...Brainard's unflagging 'kindness' proves difficult to reconcile with his emphatic 'honesty'" (Finch 10-11). While the majority of Brainard's works are autobiographical and concern themselves with his intimate thoughts and desires, such as *I Remember* demonstrates, Brainard's reconceptualization of poetic forms with blatant disregard to artistic discourse (especially at the "end" of modernity) along with his lack of "seriousness" compared to his avant-garde predecessors, markedly situates him as an late modernist bridging art into a new postmodern age. By fixating solely on his persona, critics lose site of Brainard's contributions to literary world, despite he himself thinking, "I already know it's not going to make a damn bit of difference" (100).

But, it does. Brainard is able to capture not only his own vulnerabilities, but also feelings and sentiments that express human experience for many. At one point in *I Remember*, Brainard writes:

I remember when I got drafted and had to go way downtown to take my physical. It was early in the morning. I had an egg for breakfast and I could feel it sitting there in my stomach. After roll call a man looked at me and ordered me to

a different line than most of the boys were lined up at. (I had very long hair which was more unusual then than it is now.) The line I was sent to turned out to be the line to see the head doctor. (I was going to ask to see him anyway.) The doctor asked me if I was queer and I said yes. Then he asked me what homosexual experiences I had had and I said none. (It was the truth.) And he believed me. I didn't even have to take my clothes off. (*CW* 15)

Brainard taps into two crucial cultural problems here: the dread of being drafted that was shared by many men during the Cold War and the otherness of his sexuality. But what makes the vignette captivating is its ability to render two seemingly dissonant ideas—war and queerness—into one cohesive tone. The moment resonances with vulnerability, which he uses to trigger the next two memories:

I remember a boy who told me a dirty pickle joke. It was the first clue I had as to what sex was all about.

I remember when my father would say "Keep your hands out from under the covers" as he said goodnight. But he said it in a nice way. (*CW* 15)

Unlike the vignette beforehand, these memories are much briefer but continue the theme of sexuality. However, these memories seem mundane compared to the vulnerability he shows when drafted *and* outed. But these aren't incredibly significant moments, and because of their insignificance they establish a reciprocity with readers, as if the memories trigger our own memories about when we got our 'first clue' about "what sex was all about." We see Brainard developing what Finch calls the mosaic-like prose: moving from the deeply intimate into the



"universal," almost comical narratives that come with growing up (which is, in this case, learning about sex and sexuality).

It is difficult to position Brainard as an important figure in the literary canon without first understanding his poetic lineage. However, his importance also stems from engagement with the countercultural environment of the 1970s. Brainard's openness and candidness about his queer sexuality is partly my concern here as he was unflinchingly willing to explore his homosexuality in both his art and writing. But Brainard was also writing amidst the turmoil of Vietnam countercultural resistance, knowing firsthand the trepidations of being a queer man in the 1970s, and as a result should be considered an essential figure in rejecting containment ideology that was definitive of United States culture during the second half of the Cold War. Because of this, what I will call Brainard's "queer" subjectivity becomes much more pressing than his bodily sexuality—his works speak to the larger phenomenologies and countercultural notions to understand and represent the self as multiplicit, as interconnected yet individuated, and changing alongside our ever-evolving notions of subjectivity.

To understand Brainard's significance to postmodernism, I argue that we "queer" the modernism of the New York School— such as *I Remember* attempts to do with its simultaneity of consonance and dissonance — to reimagine what exactly the lyric subject is and, more broadly, the possibilities of the lyric self in experimental poetry. While nearly every Brainard text could fit into this framework given his penchant for the fragmented and autobiographical, I focus on his *The Bolinas Journal*, published in 1971. The immediate follow-up to *I Remember*, *The Bolinas Journal* pushes aesthetic boundaries even further, incorporating moments of lyric poetics, prosaic daily jottings, and sketches of his surroundings and friends as he documents his travels from New York City to the unincorporated site of Bolinas, California. I find that *The*

*Bolinas Journal* is Brainard's most successful reimagining of the lyric subject, balancing the candidness of his own life with philosophical musing to craft a multi-genre journal helping define what we now conceive of as 'postmodern.' *The Bolinas Journal* is a 'queer' text in that it defies what we expect of a lyric subject by adapting to what Finch calls "a convoluted relationship between incremental assertion and all-over composition, between *kaleidoscopic* juxtaposition and cumulative affect" (Finch 71, emphasis mine). Thus, the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate that Brainard offers readers a poetics of vulnerability that provide his second-generation coterie, and American poetry at large, a roadmap toward reconceptualizing what it means to be a subject—a human—in the postmodern U.S.

### **Brainard in Bolinas**

On the coast of California located roughly 30 miles north of San Francisco, the unincorporated site of Bolinas is an famous site in poetry history. Bolinas, known for its picturesque ecology and a community so keen on maintaining reclusivity that it has an official ordinance forbidding road signs, became a destination for writers trying to escape the turbulence of the Cold War sociocultural politics permeating in cities such as San Francisco and New York in the 1960s and 70s. Bolinas became a writers' destination when in 1965 writer Bill Brown purchased a parcel of land and built a modest home from materials from the local environment. Shortly thereafter, San Francisco beat poets invaded Bolinas, establishing semi-permanent residency, subsequently telling their artist friends about the new 'utopia' they've discovered amidst the turbulence dominating American life. It was not long until New York based writers, like Lewis Warsh and Anne Waldman, contemporaries of Joe Brainard, would visit for extended periods of time. Kevin Opstedal's sociocultural history of Bolinas documents how Bolinas

became a destination for artists who had tired of metropolitan life and sought refuge to create art and build countercultural communities they dreamed up back in the city: "as the sixties wound down many within the counterculture dropped out and left the cities for the countryside to experiment with utopian lifestyles. Away from urban problems and suburban sameness, they built new lives structured around shared political goals, organic farming, community service, and the longing to live simply with one's peers" (Opstedal, chapter 2).

Not only was the migration to Bolinas fueled by dissatisfaction with the chaos of urban life but also many writers, including Robert and Bobbie Creeley, Joanne Kyger, Bill Berkson, Tom Clark, and Lewis Warsh, sought out Bolinas to practice pseudo-versions of non-western religious ideologies. Lytle Shaw explains, "poetry of [the 1960s and 70s] charges the word 'Bolinas' with a broad array of meanings: escape from the 'unlivable' cities; connection with non-Western knowledge and daily life; establishment of local political autonomy; total involvement in nondeferred pleasure—in an infinitely absorbing 'now' that offers itself as a kind of hippie phenomenology" (Shaw 118). Shaw's essay on the Bolinas community during America's Vietnam-era explains that the aesthetics and poetics of Bolinas insists upon a certain phenomenological mindset, the "attempt to be fully *inside* Bolinas, both geographically and socially" that "produces a crisis in representation wherein deictic reference to 'here' and 'now' create a kind of incantatory mantra that, paradoxically, only signals presence as a greater and ultimately unmasterable concern" (Shaw 119). What Shaw means here is that Bolinas served as the site of countercultural "Flower Power" ideology, which many poets of the generation, both East and West Coast, adopted and practiced starting in the late 1960s. Taking Shaw's assessment at face value offers keen insight into the cultural function of Bolinas: an escapist utopia for artists to be in the "here and now," existing in an "expansive present" where they could challenge

traditional structures of American socio-cultural life and simultaneously the aesthetics of American poetics. Writers considered Bolinas a place "saturated with countercultural soundbites or purged of all but deictics to highlight the problems coming to be known as the metaphysics of presence and the sociology of literature" (Shaw 139).

Joe Brainard arrived in Bolinas in May of 1971. Given the description of the Bolinas community above, it seems to be an unfitting environment for a New York-based artist who was increasingly situated aesthetically alongside Andy Warhol and the "Pop Art" camp. Nonetheless, Brainard trekked to Bolinas to visit Lewis Warsh and Bill Berkson, both affiliated with the Second Generation New York School and both eventual long-term inhabitants of the Bolinas community. Brainard, continuing his tradition of autobiographical works such as "Diary 1969," kept a journal documenting his journey from the initial cab ride to the airport to his last night in Bolinas in early July. In its original printing, *The Bolinas Journal* is 48 pages of quotidian vignettes, drawings of friends, doodles of minutiae, sketches of flowers, and makeshift cartoons that detail his trip and his interactions with the Bolinas artist community that was in full swing by the summer of 1971. What Brainard finds in Bolinas was "a gathering of poets and writers and artists living in or around the mesa in Bolinas. Not so much a school of poets as a meeting of those who happen to be at this geographical location at this point in wobbly time, several divergent movements in American poetry of the past 20 years (Black Mountain, San Francisco Beat, 'New York School' of poets) have come together with new Western and mystic elements at the unpaved crossroads of Bolinas" (Opstedal, chapter 2). But Brainard's deep ties and long-standing affiliations with the first generation New York School did not quite match the Bolinas mélange of aesthetics; interestingly enough, as the journal captures, the scene is almost *too* countercultural and phenomenologically oriented for an avant-gardist like Brainard, who in the

early 1970s was steeped in the cosmopolitan Village life of New York City, "snugly situated among the overlapping circles of a buoyant gay urban culture" (Finch 12). Fittingly, *The Bolinas Journal* captures the dialectical tension bound up in Brainard's ties to both the first and second generations of the New York Schools, his allegiance to the now institutionalized aesthetics of New York's art scene that gave him his start while simultaneously rejecting such institutionalization through his transparent confessionalism and autobiographically driven journal.

But despite this dialectical tension I see in *The Bolinas Journal*, many critics, including Marjorie Perloff in her review of the 2013 release of Library of America's *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard*, merely dismiss *The Bolinas Journal* as "little more than a set of diary jottings" that is missing "the larger world beyond the little in-group where *feeling* is all" (Perloff). On the surface, Perloff perhaps has a point: the journal does read like a diary, a series of Brainard's daily meanderings and his interactions with poets, artists, local townsfolk, and the environment of Bolinas. The journal also offers candid and often campy depictions of Brainard's love interest, Gordon, and Brainard's unsuccessful attempts to seduce him ("Visions of falling madly in love with Gordon continue to grow in my head. Unrealistically, I know, but what can I do?" (CW 291)). However, the journal does much more than narrate Brainard's trip. As Andy Finch explains, *The Bolinas Journal* captures the sincere and affective honesty characteristic in its "aphoristic ambivalence toward the hospitable artistic community and impressive physical landscape he discovers" (13). But more than that, Brainard's *Journal* defies any generic categorization; inherently, *The Bolinas Journal* is interdisciplinary, combining art, ethnographic insight, and poetic vignettes demonstrating Brainard's complex aesthetic preoccupations. "However 'real' Brainard's testimonies and travelogues might seem," writes Finch, "biographical

homage—often strident, or sluggish—proves antithetical to the deft dialectical syntheses and telescopic leaps in place and time, that Brainard substitutes for conventional, character-driven narrative" (18). Much like *I Remember*, *The Bolinas Journal* never settles on a cogent, cohesive representation of the "I" and instead shows a speaker steeped in their own vulnerability. In doing so, *The Bolinas Journal* captures, aesthetically and in its own material ontology, which I will discuss next, the transitioning styles, philosophies, and themes of 1970's poetics amidst the rise of postmodern cultural and critical discourse.

Brainard's *Journal* documents his trip from his flight itinerary out of JFK airport to his final goodbyes in Bolinas. The first two pages display Brainard's handwritten notes and doodles of his "[n]ew suitcase (pig skin) 12 1/2 " x 20 " and 5" deep" with the mantra "TRAVEL LIGHT!" (Figure 1). On the opposite page, Brainard pastes a photo of "Gandhi's worldly possession at the time of his death" with "PACKING INSPIRATION // (and living inspiration)" inscribed beneath. Brainard's embrace of a minimalistic travel (and living) philosophy demonstrates the transition from the cosmopolitan lifestyle of New York to the utopian, countercultural, anti-materialistic, localized autonomy of Bolinas. Moreover, given Brainard's liminal position between the New York School generations and couched within the sociocultural and aesthetics complications engendered by postmodern discourse in Vietnam-era Cold War America, *The Bolinas Journal* represents a sense of the anti-capitalist mentalities permeating throughout the countercultural imaginary in the Cold War. Thus, we can think of *The Bolinas Journal* as a text concerned with its own transitions both physically and philosophically as Brainard attempts to embrace Bolinas while maintaining his New York affiliations.

Containment culture signaled the rise of postindustrial American society and the move toward a materially obsessed consumer culture. Arguably this material obsession became

definitive of American life and values rather than individual lives and realities. United States consumer culture guised itself as "promot[ing] freedom of choice and individuality" where the consumer has agency and free will in their consumption (Dunne 179). According to Matthew Dunne, with the rise of countercultural ideologies, "institutions that were central to consumer identity and the capitalist system came under scrutiny for their apparent ability to intrude upon the American psyche" (Dunne 179). In *I Remember*, Brainard relies on readers' recognition of the ordinary materials of everyday American life to make his text accessible and immediately relatable. While other postmodern works dealt similarly with a material obsessed culture, such as Warhol's famous soup cans, these works "[are] frequently faulted for a false erasure of the distinction between art and life, the infiltration of the commodity logic into the structure of the artwork rather than the sublation of art into new ways of living," and thus instead of being postmodern critiques become "prime example[s] of modernist autonomy" (Glavey 144).

However, Brainard's use of everyday materials goes beyond such logic. For Glavey, Brainard uses materials to "slyly invit[e] life to come closer," by aestheticizing everyday life not through provocation or shock but instead by making relevant the *minorness* of mundane materials. Glavey explains:

...these minor categories, more so than more ambitious stalwarts like the beautiful and the sublime, provide the keenest insights into the role of art and literature in our culture of hypercommodification. The victory of the commodity logic in the concluding decades of the twentieth century results in a sort of total aestheticization of everyday life. The omnipresence of aesthetic experience—through advertising, design, forms of affective labor, and so on—has had the effect of displacing art as the cynosure of aesthetic experience, calling into

question the critical power of novelty, and blurring the line between art and theory. Self-consciously trivial forms of aesthetic experience do not trigger rarified, intense responses but instead stitch together ordinary quotidian affects. Within this context, art's very identity is plausibly linked to its triviality. (144-145)

Much like he uses materials in *I Remember*, throughout *The Bolinas Journal*, Brainard aestheticizes his everyday life to bring us closer to his experience in Bolinas. His portrait of Gordon's kitchen (Figure 2) incorporates minor materials of an ordinary kitchen but does so with an affective intimacy, sketching the space to make both the kitchen and the image itself performative as it is always coming into being. In doing so, he reaches viewers by not disrupting our experience of looking through shock or provocation but by asking us to join in the experience of being and doing, a process that queers the image as we consume it since it is always-already becoming.

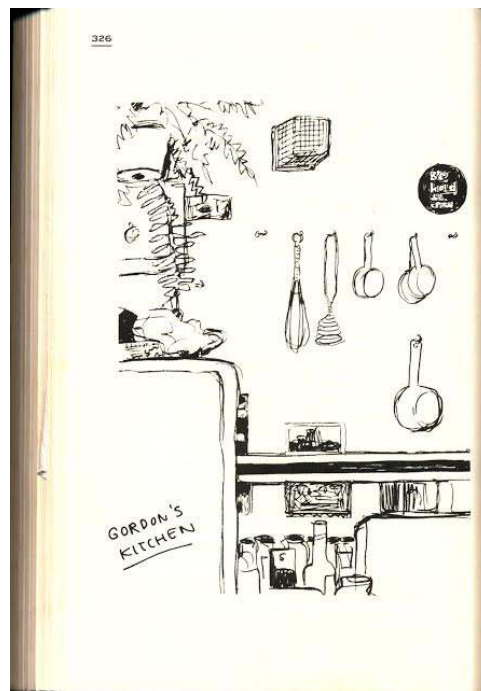


Figure 1: "Gordon's Kitchen." From *The Collected Works of Joe Brainard*



Nadel's assessment of Cold War containment culture convincingly argues that late-capitalist American life became synonymous with a culture of consumption, where material goods are definitive of a proper American-ness, actualizing the Marxian episteme that the rise of capitalism will turn away from the materiality of labor and toward the abstraction of capital, where consumption becomes a process of self and cultural alienation. In Cold War culture, consumption is synonymous with conforming to a constructed and constraining American ideal given that commodities become the means to define our social status. But like we've see with Brainard's sketch, his use of minor materials that we consume when looking at an image—or reading his poetry—don't alienate us but invite us to look closer together. This departure from the dominant ideology, Nadel argues, is demonstrative of the tensions structuring Cold War culture, pop culture and counterculture: "the story of containment had derived its logic from the rigid major premise that the world was divided into two monolithic camp, one dedicated to promoting the inextricable combination of capitalism, democracy, and (Judeo-Christian) religion, and one seeking to destroy that ideological amalgamation by any means" (Nadel 3). For Brainard and others in Bolinas, their allegiance obviously lies with the latter: to disengage from the rise of consumptive capitalist, normative codes definitive of American values to instead embrace a minimalism antithetical to the containment culture ideology of the Cold War. The sketch of Gordon's kitchen, with all its seemingly mundane materials, reimagines materials without containment. By using negative space and non-descript objects in his image, which resists commodification, the sketch remains open, fluid, and always-already coming into existence.

### **Transmaterial Transfigurations**

Brainard's "packing inspiration" points to what Daniel Worden calls Brainard's pop sensibility since it "dwells on valuelessness and materiality, the ephemeral matter that can be thought of as art but that eludes value," an antithetical stance to Cold War late-capitalism (Worden, nonsite.org). Indeed, the New York City art scene where Brainard hails was immersed in a culture rapidly monetizing art and literary culture. However, Brainard's "packing inspiration" and elsewhere in the *Journal* bypasses "the economic structures that facilitate and mediate the subject in late capitalism" by attending to the minimalist ideologies structuring the pseudo-utopia of Bolinas (Worden). For Shaw, Bolinas signifies the disassociation from rampant consumerism, where residences embraced "the hippie phenomenologist negated symptomatic history in order to *live* consciousness as a present (and also at times anticipatory) refuge" (141). Brainard takes note of this almost immediately: "A lot of being inside your own head here. A Lot of talk about it. And a lot of talk about inside other people's heads too. // It seems to me that there is a lot to be said for 'finding' yourself in your head, as opposed to 'being' there" (CW 291). Noticing its prevalence, Brainard takes pains to engage the hippie phenomenologist minimalism to simultaneously disengage from the consumerist, fast pace life of New York culture and adapt to the site-specific countercultural realities of Bolinas. For example, early on he observes, "A lot of talk about things I don't know much about. Like eastern religions. Ecology. And local problems. Sewer systems problems in particular," (290) and later, "Bolinas is such a basic place. *The land* being so important. Survival seems to be the main issue" (306). This becomes further evident in the visual art Brainard offers (or talks about working on) in the journal—flowers, sketches of friends, collages of foliage:

I've been painting dried (fallen) eucalyptus leaves collected off my terrace.

I'm getting the colors very well (lavenders, purples, brick reds, and browns) but,

painting them in a solid mass as I am, I'm having trouble giving each leaf it's own 'weight.' I think maybe I'll try to do a cut-out one and see if that works (308).

Other times, Brainard's pieces attempt to merge his New York cultural sensibilities with the ecology of Bolinas:

I've been working on a series of small collages with stuff from the beach. Set into little wooden boxes you get in China-town. Fortune toothpick boxes. (Each toothpick has a dumb fortune wrapped around it.)

It's fun. And relaxing. As the materials used dominate the work. (The results.) I mean—what I choose to pick up off the beach is where I am 'in' the works most. Otherwise they just more or less fit themselves together. Like a puzzle. (314).

Here, Brainard reconciles his New York cultural ties—the little wooden boxes from China-town—with the material ecology of the site, adapting to the hippie phenomenology dominating Bolinas (Figure 2). Where Brainard is "in" the work, he explains, is only in the materials he chooses whereas the literal "here" and "now" of the materials themselves dominates the ontology of the work. Thus, these collages serve as representations of Bolinas itself, marking Brainard's move away from the cosmopolitanism of New York, letting the ecology of Bolinas become art on its own. In doing so, Brainard's art shows its transmaterial preoccupations—the literal interaction between East and West Coast simultaneously—by imagining a means of production wholly based on the materials and not the composition's attempt at being meaningful. Brainard's resolution to the dueling and contradictory aesthetics is to simply gather materials from the

Bolinas beach and place them in the little boxes from China-town, blending the two often-contradictory aesthetics.

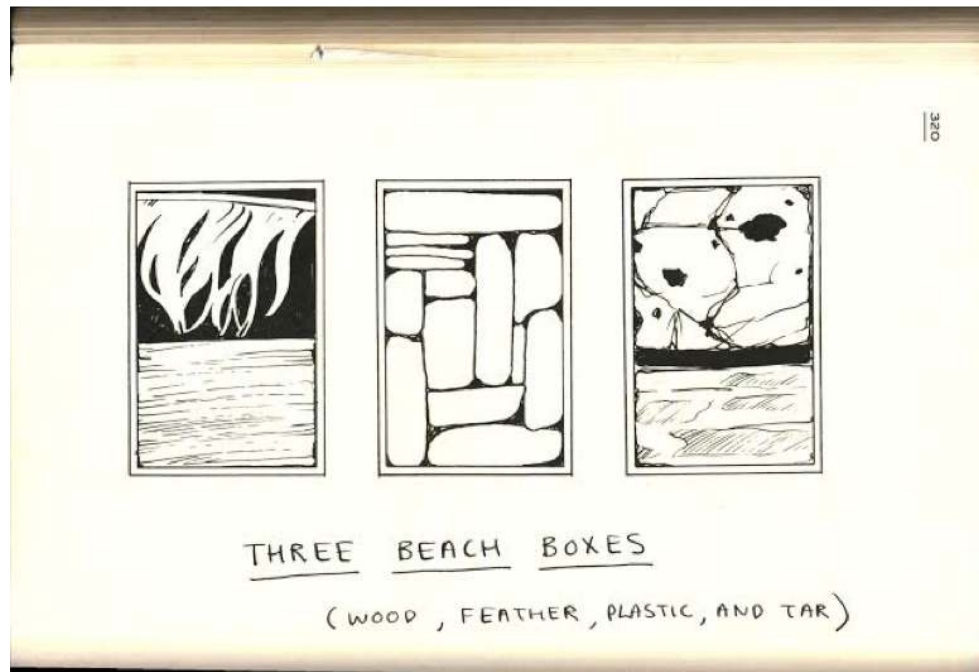


Figure 2: "Three Beach Boxes." From *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard*

In an interview with Anne Waldman, Brainard explains his process for making collages, wherein he gathers random materials that strike him for their colors, shapes, and sizes. But for Brainard, it isn't about his ability to compose collages that convey a particular *meaning* but instead "the material does it all": "You have a figure and a flower and you add a cityscape and it makes the story. You have control if you want to take it but that's something I never wanted to do much. I mean if a story came out I'd sort of follow it, but I never want to read or make a story deliberately" (CW 511). Using the materials of the landscape, Brainard is able to reconcile his New York sensibilities with a Bolinas one. His collages in Bolinas tell a story of the merging of two epistemologies that haunt Brainard throughout his trip to Bolinas. However, this bridging of the two worlds is solely based in materiality. For Finch, the *Journal* "most pointedly probes the

dialectical tension between kindness and honesty [and] much of [*The Bolinas Journal*] charm stems, in fact, from its author's aphoristic ambivalence toward the hospitable artistic community and impressive physical landscape" (Finch 13). The most challenging aspect of Bolinas is allowing the mentality to sink in. But Brainard is critical, cynical, ambivalent, and almost *too* honest.

Early on in his trip, this tension becomes palpable one night at a bar: "Last night in the bar a girl Bill and I were talking to especially stands out in my head. A 'hippie' type. (Sorry, but that's what words are for.) Very sincere in what she believed in. But what she believed in was totally fucked up. But like I said, very sincere about it all" (290). Brainard not only disagrees with what this 'hippie' was saying, what is perhaps more striking and unsettling for him is the combination of sincerity and being wrong: "It always bothers me, this combination. Of sincere *and* wrong. It doesn't seem fair. Sincere should always be right" (290). Obviously, we have no way of knowing what the 'hippie' was 'wrong' about, but given Brainard's insistence on using the colloquial and almost derogatory adjective "hippie" it most likely reflects the Bolinas countercultural mentality. For Brainard, being 'bothered' by the contrarian realities he sees in Bolinas becomes one of the major philosophical problems he tries to resolve. And much like the ways in which he composes his collages, letting the materials create meaning, Brainard tries to grapple with the contrarian nature of *people*, letting their actions speak for themselves as he struggles to answer why here, why now, why Bolinas.

### **"Here and now"**

The basicness of Bolinas bores Brainard, who, being used to the splendor of New York cosmopolitan life, worries that the slow cultural pace of Bolinas might deter his intense fervor.

Several times throughout the *Journal*, Brainard expresses his frustrations being in Bolinas ("If I lived in Bolinas I would soon become the jerk-off champion of the world. Enough said about that" (CW 313)). But what seems most irksome is how limiting it is for him creatively: "Sitting here only a few feet away from the ocean it's hard to think of anything to say (except 'ocean') so I guess I'll stop" (CW 302). Other times, his frustrations are pointed toward the pace of Bolinas, a world wholly different from New York:

This is a great place, Bolinas, but it isn't for me now.

Everything I fear will someday catch up with me would catch up with me too fast here. Like the 'why' of art. And that 'I give up' of finding love and happiness (CW 303).

The 'here and now' Bolinas phenomenology serves as a source of anxiety for Brainard. While it drives him to create works, such as the collages, it also introduces a certain pressure to understand the 'why' of it all; instead of being able to escape, he is forced to reconcile with "everything" he fears. Even hearing that his friend Ted Berrigan is coming to town triggers anxieties: "News that Ted Berrigan is coming totally zaps my mind. (Help.) One of the nicest things about being here is not having a past to live up to. Or down to. I love Ted, but—" (CW 302). Brainard leaves his "but" unanswered, evoking a sense of anxiety about having to reconcile a sense of himself in Bolinas (his present) against the sense of his New York self (his past). The concern for having to reconcile a full self, to confront the self with a past to live up and down to, remains a point of contention that Brainard works through throughout the *Journal*, and, the longer he stays, the more interesting and philosophical his contemplations become. For example, two successive vignettes read:

How I can be so shy and insecure, and such a conceited ass at the same time, is beyond me.

One Joanne contradiction occurred to me this morning. That of being so down-to-earth, and so romantic too.

I wonder if contradictions eventually work themselves out.

Or if contradictions are what we are made of. (?)

It *does* seem to me that old people have fewer.

---

Joanne really hit me over the head last night when she handed Bob and already lit cigarette 'Joe's style.'

It's not being put in someone's pocket I mind so much. It's just that it doesn't *mean* anything to hand someone a personally lit cigarette if it's *expected* of you. (CW 303).

In the first vignette, Brainard observes a self-effacing contradiction about himself: how can he be so shy and insecure while being conceited at the same time? It is "beyond him" how these two opposing characteristics dominate his personality so invasively that he's forced to reconcile the tension within himself—or at least recognize it for its contradictory logic. From there, Brainard moves outwards, from an subjective reflection of himself to observing the patterns of others, in his kaleidoscopic style, noticing a contradiction about Joanne Kryger and

being both "down-to-earth" and "romantic," characteristics much like Brainard's, not wholly decidedly in tension. Being 'down-to-earth,' especially in a place like Bolinas, suggests that Joanne embodies the "here and now" mentality that dominates cultural ideology whereas 'romantic' suggests dissociation from the immediacy of reality, of being 'up in the clouds' so to speak. Thus, moving even further outwards from understanding himself or his friends, Brainard wonders whether "contradictions are what we are made of," something we embody as true to our human nature, or if they are fleeting and "eventually work themselves out." In an ironic move, Brainard contradicts his own understanding of contradictions to find an answer.

Brainard's stream of consciousness, spiraling kaleidoscopic thoughts that start with an subjective observation of himself, to observing Joanne's characteristics, and finally towards a theory of contradictions themselves, allows Brainard to contemplate the nature of 'contradictions' as both an aesthetic problem and a theoretical, subjective, *human* problem. We can't catch Brainard's rapidly contradictory thoughts as he tries to work them out on paper. We only move further away from an answer alongside Brainard who merely offers a throwaway conclusion to the problem (that old people do seem to have *fewer*) that ultimately leaves us unsatisfied. And instead of feeling like we solved the problem, our minds keep spiraling in the same kaleidoscopic way; we think of our own contradictions and the contradictions of those around us. Brainard doesn't want to offer us a solution but instead to bring us into his headspace riddled with inconclusively, of multiple points of view, variations, and contradictions. This is a particularly postmodern moment for Brainard who, in trying to understand whether contradictions are a part of human nature, deconstructs them by using contradictory answers and leaves readers adrift in a self-reflective introspection. By utilizing contradictions (his use of and/or logic) to understand the meaning of contradictions as a phenomena of human nature,



Brainard enacts a Derridean episteme: making present the problem to understand whether it is logical or not, constructing and deconstructing simultaneously, and using language itself to bear its own critique. Ultimately, this linguistic paradox becomes a problem of *subjectivity*; like language, by bringing these problems to the forefront, Brainard questions whether people are predictable and logical or inherently contradictory. And perhaps even further, this problematizes the idea of the lyric subject since the literal act of writing can't contain Brainard's own logic. It seems the only way to understand contradictions is to use them against themselves.

In a similar vein, the second vignette theorizes what happens when we expect a *person* to be consistent in their subjectivity. He recounts a moment where Joanne hands Bob Creeley an already lit cigarette 'Joe's style.' The moment having "hit me over the head last night" spawns Brainard to meditate on exactly why it bothers him. He finds that it isn't the act itself that bothers him but that the labeling of a particular aspect of his character, a 'style,' creates expectations that come with being 'Joe.' For Brainard, "it's not being put in someone's pocket I mind so much," but that to label such a gesture as a 'style' makes the very gesture lose its meaning. If he were to hand Bob Creeley a unlit cigarette, it wouldn't be in his 'style.' If something is expected of you, Brainard seems to suggest, then that expectation becomes fixed on your subjectivity. Thus any deviation from such expectations would mean that 'Joe' isn't 'Joe' anymore. Much like the notion that contradictions are part of human nature, having expectations for a person makes their actions lack meaning and significance, and paradoxically, not performing such actions is incredibly meaningful and significant because we are expecting it.

For Brainard, being a subject in a postmodern world means being polyphonic, multiple, containing multitudes in the Whitmanian sense; contradictions and multiplicities are amalgamations of the subject. This is what I mean by Brainard's vulnerability: fixing identity—

casting expectations of the subject, becoming and enforcing a 'style'—is to neglect the mutability and contingency that being a subject entails. Especially situated against the cultural climate of Bolinas and Cold War America more broadly, for Brainard, like himself as a queer man living in post-Stonewall 1970s, the idea of a subject is constantly evolving, recapitulating circumstantially, "reinforc[ing] singularities without egoistic inflation because it raises private beings' consciousness of their extrinsic connection others" (Keenaghan 25). In a particularly personal and lyrical vignette, Brainard shows us how being vulnerable can engender sincere moments of intimacy through 'extrinsic connection' with others:

Went over the hill today to do some shopping with Bob and Bobbie.

Driving home, feeling abstractly sad, alone in the back seat (to great radio music up front). Bobbie gave me her hand for the rest of the way home. (Thank you.)

Nice to know that you can still be a bit embarrassed.

(Thank you for that too.) (*CW* 305).

In the back seat of a car coming back from shopping with the Creeley's, Brainard tells us he's "abstractly sad," experiencing feelings he can't quite name and seems unable to shake off.

Brainard uses a similar kaleidoscopic rendering of the scene, moving from the past tense, to the present action of driving, to his mood, to his physical situation "alone in the back seat," to his sensorial sensations listening to "great radio music," and finally, and most importantly, to his connection with Bobbie, who "gave me her hand for the rest of the way home." Brainard displays his vulnerability by moving from the external to the internal and relating those two worlds through the simple gesture of handholding. He too uses his asides to address Bobbie all the while connecting the external and the internal; his simple "(Thank you.)" brings us back into his

mindset while simultaneously acknowledging the physical connection with Bobbie. We are privy to Brainard's "consciousness of [his] extrinsic connection" with Bobbie as they hold hands. Through this connection we know that it's ok to feel "a bit embarrassed," a bit vulnerable, because connections with others reaffirms our own sense of self, which Brainard demonstrates by moving in and out of his interior thoughts ("(Thank you for that too)"). Keenaghan attests that such vulnerability like Brainard employs is a way to queer his own subjectivity, "embod[ing] vulnerability that resignifies liberalism by rediscovering its agonistic connections with the other side of democratic paradox: *commonality*" (20). Without others, Brainard explains, we wouldn't understand ourselves.

But moments of extrinsic connection are, like the myth of subjective consistency, fleeting. They do indeed reaffirm our sense of self and sense of belonging in a cultural atmosphere insistent on privacy and containment. However, amidst the culture of commonality and community that Bolinas insists on, self-individuation remains paramount for the success of the collective. Returning to the fallen eucalyptus leaves Brainard paints in a "solid mass," the struggle with the painting isn't the leaves as a mass but rather the lack of "weight" each leaf has within the mass. I read this metaphorically for Brainard's views on the individual/collective dichotomy that haunts him throughout *The Bolinas Journal*: without the weight of the individual, the collective becomes nearly meaningless.

In another vignette, during "a nice trip to Marshall" with the Creeley's and Bill Berkson, Brainard makes explicit the problems of amalgamating the individual with the collective:

Lots of serious talk about life. Mostly about solutions tho, and I had trouble understanding what the problems were. So it got pretty abstract for me.

Funny that we four should all be so lucky and yet—well—the same ol' problems.

I suppose that *the* problem of life is how to be happy.

But then—something hits you over the head every now and then, just out of the blue, no matter how happy you *should* be.

Maybe that's the *real* problem. (CW 309).

While all four of them have "the same ol' problems," and attempt to find "solutions" to such problems, Brainard ultimately considers that perhaps "*the* problem of life is how to be happy," and that the "serious talk" is an effort to understand happiness itself. But, using similarly contradictory logic as before, Brainard finds that when you "*should*" be happy, "something hits you over the head," which "maybe" is "the *real* problem" of life. Nonetheless, it is this "something" that "hits you over the head" that truly defines the individual amidst the collective, the same kind of "something"—like the defining of 'Joe's style'—that sets one apart from others. While we share commonalities, it is what makes us reflect on our own self that individuates us. And, like Brainard's kaleidoscopic aesthetics, this means we can consistently insist on the potentiality that comes with living metaphorically—we are neither definable nor a self-contained whole but instead share likeness where our "freedom, our very lives depend on the degree to which we respect others' differences not as absolute categories but as in-forming our sense of self" (Kenneghan 22). What "hits us over the head" brings us closer to our own truths.

Several of these 'problems' that Brainard engages with throughout the *Journal* coalesce during a particularly 70s moment: when Brainard "and a lot of us" take acid on the longest day of

the year. In a string of vignettes, Brainard describes his acid trip through interactions with other Bolinas folk and, more abstractly, his thoughts about the complexities of the world. At first, almost entirely contradictory to what he initially thinks about Bolinas, Brainard confesses how amazing the 'here and now' mentality can be: "So amazing to be in 'in' everything so much. So very way back deep in there, 'being' with it all. Breathing with it all. So busy, the bugs, and each blade of grass. And those chills that run up and down your spine with the wind" (*CW* 310). Brainard begins to let himself be in the 'here and now,' a mentality he's resisted since arriving in Bolinas. With vivid and sensorial description, Brainard describes feeling a part of the world around him, 'breathing with it all.' Like a postmodern Whitman, he sees 'each blade of grass' for its own individual life and autonomy, how 'busy' each blade seems as he lets himself acclimate to the expansive-present phenomenology.

But while Brainard seems to enjoy the meditative state of existing in pure consciousness his remains acutely aware of this state being a *high*, that this feeling isn't dependent on a true reality since it ultimately remains devoid of external social reality. Lytle Shaw explains that Brainard has a tendency to literalize "the terms of the Bolinas experiment by attending to its letter more than its spirit," and during the acid trip Brainard continues to resist being fully invested in such phenomenological orientations: "as open as Brainard is to this kind of experience that embodies what many in Bolinas were after, in the end he reacts negatively to the Bolinas poets' insistence on presenting such a state as a life goal, a continuous and absolute present" (Shaw 138). Shaw is most likely referring to another vignette describing his acid trip where Brainard declares, "So amazing not to be able to step aside and relax (turn the world off) as we are so good at doing in 'real life'" (*CW* 312). For Brainard, acid is a way to entertain the idea of an "expansive present" emblematic of the hippie phenomenology of Bolinas. But this

expansive present, existing always in the now, isn't dwelling in the 'real life,' such as the one he knows in New York. While Brainard continues to meditate on his trip, he succumbs to his own skepticism: "(I'm *trying* to say something conclusive and constructive about acid.) / Well, it's fun. It's visually exciting. And, hopefully, realistic. / And it's nice to think you understand things, if only for a moment" (*CW* 312). His skepticism toward the expansive present ideology rejects a holistic rendering of the self because he knows that to 'understand' 'things' is a fleeting sensation that will only last "for a moment." What Brainard suggests here is that the self cannot be contained within a meditative, purely conscious present. To be a part of the world is to celebrate our commonalities and those moments that "hit on the head" and individualizes us. Eventually, it seems, we can reconcile that our pursuits for absolute truths about the self and the world, like knowing to only exist in an expansive present, only renders us further from what that truth actually is.

### **Brainard's Public Private**

Brainard is often lumped into the camp of confessional poetry since his work, both rhetorically and thematically, insists on making the private self public. According to Deborah Nelson, confessional poetry offers, "a conceptual double bind, claiming the value of the private self while simultaneously destroying the privacy that made it possible" (Nelson 19). In Padgett's memoir of Brainard, he explains that Brainard kept his journal in Bolinas with the intent to publish the final version, ultimately making the private act of journaling extremely public. As such, Brainard does live in this "conceptual double bind," knowing how valuable his voice is and his experiences are as a queer man in the 1970s living in the pseudo-utopia of Bolinas with poets who would eventually be celebrated in the literary canon. But for Nelson,

at the time of their emergence, the confessional poets were taken to be an extreme instance of romantic lyric self-absorption. However, their significance in literary history and to the changing culture of privacy lies in their exposure of limitation on lyric autonomy and constitutional sovereignty that we had not perceived the lyric subject or the constitutional citizen to suffer. In other words, the crisis of privacy unmasked the universal, abstract categories that founded both citizenship and lyric subjectivity. (Nelson xvi)

For Nelson, confessional poets emerge from a culture of privacy and containment championed by Cold War socio-cultural politics. Brainard does observe the limits of 'lyric autonomy' in an effort to 'unmask the universal, abstract categories' that do characterize the ways in which we understand subjectivity. Such as his poetics of vulnerability create, the subject is multiplicit, vulnerable, and tries to invite us into a world through relatable situations and materials. But Brainard insists that this kind of poetics cannot perform the all-telling prophetic responsibilities of lyricism—that is, to find and convey universal truths. In an off-handed vignette, Brainard explains the frustration that comes with "this kind of writing":

You know, it's really funny this kind of writing. This 'trying to be honest' kind of writing. For several years now I've been doing it, and getting better and better at it. Getting closer and closer to a point (a place) in my head I call the truth.

But now I'm beginning to doubt that very point. (That very place.)

I mean, what I've been working towards just isn't there anymore. (Zap.)

Do you know what I mean?

I mean, the closer I get to the truth the less I know what the truth *is*.

Wish I could make myself more clear, but——right now I can't. (*CW* 313)

Brainard outwardly confesses that this "trying to be honest" kind of writing is a process of trying to amalgamate the human experience with truth, a truth that is both individuated and prophetic. But the more he works on trying to get to that point (that place) the more he begins to doubt its very existence—that truth which was getting closer and closer "just isn't there anymore." In a crucial aesthetic move, Brainard switches modes by addressing the reader straight on and attempts to come to terms with his own writerly limitations: "Do you know what I mean?" The "you" could be anyone, any reader, who has grappled with the idea of an all-encompassing notion of truth and reason. But like looking into a kaleidoscope, the closer we look the more fragmented and disorienting the world gets. For Brainard, this is "truth"—the more we try to find and reason with truth, the less we actually know what "truth *is*." And, in finality, Brainard shows us the frustration in trying to articulate such a concept, wishing he could "make myself more clear" but, like truth itself, the more we try to concretize one notion of it, the more complex it seems to become.

Brainard's *The Bolinas Journal* is a project of fragmentation and discontinuity, both key features of postmodernism aesthetic theory and both emblematic of the 1970s American Cold War culture that Brainard challenges and redefine. While the *Journal* indeed *confesses* it also understands the limitations of confessing by accepting that we can't always "know what [we're] talking about" (*CW* 333). But through the process of *telling* and writing with such vulnerability we can find others to join in our shared paradoxes and inconsistencies and ultimately accept that,



especially in a culture experiencing discontinuities within its very structure, that we are not autonomous, singular, nor alone. Brainard makes it clear that we can choose what to disclose and share but also we can choose to revel in our own private lives, because somewhere someone is experiencing and sharing the same actions, thoughts, and feelings, and without even knowing it we are constantly folding in and out of one another's lives. "My idea of how to leave a place gracefully," Brainard tells us in the final line of *The Bolinas Journal*, "is to 'disappear'" (*CW* 333), and, I might add, knowing you left your mark.

## CHAPTER 2:

### "THIS POEM IS MEANT TO BE SUNG & / GIVE IT EVERYTHING": THE POETRY PROJECT, PERFORMATIVITY, AND THE PLURALIST MATERIALS OF ANNE WALDMAN

Anne Waldman's contributions to the 1960s and 70s New York poetry scene are one of the most impactful of her Second Generation New York School coterie—and also perhaps the most overlooked. Waldman became the director of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery in 1968, where she held the position for ten years. And during her tenure, she transformed the shape and scope of the Poetry Project, working tirelessly to open the space to an array of artists— not just poets— to perform and socialize. Not atypical was seeing feminist rock icon Patti Smith, the avant-garde darlings The Velvet Underground, and pop-art icon Andy Warhol attending readings and shows in the Lower East Side. It was during her tenure that the Poetry Project became what it is famous for today—a community space open to aspiring, established, and interested persons in the arts seeking a space to explore their mediums while supporting one another in a critically engaging but hospitable space.

Waldman was not only important to the institutional shape and structure of the Poetry Project— and the up-and-coming, obsessively postmodern New York poetry scene more broadly— but her own highly experimental, inventive poetic imagination arguably helped shape the direction of poetic discourse burgeoning in the avant-garde space of St. Mark's Church. She too can be cited as contributing to and shaping the revolution of American poetics as it began to transmogrify from late-modernist sensibilities to the early postmodernism characteristic to the 1970s. Accordingly, Waldman was one of the first major American poets to embrace the shift

away from a high lyric modernism; her experimental works endlessly explores the limits of poetry through poetry's performative potential.

This chapter explores Waldman's contributions to New York—and American—poetics from her start as the director of the Poetry Project in 1968 to the remarkable achievements in her book-length *Life Notes* published in 1973. I opt to focus on Waldman's work during this period because not only does it display her development as a writer but also her work, much like Brainard's discussed in the chapter prior, helped define poetic postmodernism. Waldman's work, (again like Brainard's), affronts the notion of a singular, subjective lyric "I" instead concerning herself with the political potential of plurality, or how those identities deemed non-normative during Cold War America could engage harmoniously and productively, without affirming the culturally derived frictions created through ontological hierarchies. Her work is one of energy and motion, constantly making life-affirming connections with others as it avoids being constricted by cultural and aesthetic expectations.

Waldman's focus on and participation in the Women's Right Movement burgeoning in the late 1960s and her complicated relationship to such feminist ideologies demarcate her work from the predominantly male coterie of the New York School. Combining her feminist activism with her postmodern poetic imaginary, Waldman's work is indicative of countercultural sympathizes within Cold War culture. But unlike other ideologues of the flower-power movement who were commonly bogged down by difference-based radicalism (such as second-wave feminism, the white-washed gay rights advocacy, for example) Waldman tries to create an open field where, borrowing from Rimbaud (and she does too), "I is another." As she explains in her essay, "I is another: Dissipative Structures": "poetry is not a closed system for me experientially. The elements of old language patterns come into a new one to make new connections. Individuals

and societies have great mental and physical potential for transformation as well. *Life eats entropy*" (128). Poetry captures flux; for Waldman, this instability is the key to transformation.

### **The Poetry Project**

In her introduction to the *Angel Hair Anthology*, a collection of the small magazine *Angel Hair* that ran for six issues from 1966-1969 edited by Waldman and then-husband poet Lewis Warsh, Waldman explains the countercultural atmosphere surrounding the Poetry Project at St. Mark's: "although confirmedly inspired by our generation's music, fashion, drugs, attitudes, politics and being caught up and shaken by the devastating events of our times—the war in Viet Nam, assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King—we didn't think of ourselves as hippies. Too occupied being writers and publishers, and in my case, an infra-structure (arts administrator) poet" (xxii). Reveling in the counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s was the driving force of Waldman's administrative mentality, able to balance the experimental with the "schmoozing" necessary for an arts administrator. By establishing the Poetry Project as an artistic-yet-countercultural space amidst the cultural strife permeating in American culture and politics, the project showcased new, up and coming poets helping rewrite the nature of American poetic discourse, many of whom were and are still often left out of the dominant narrative in American letters.

Waldman was hired by Reverend Michael Allen to assist the project's first director, poet Joel Oppenheimer. Under Oppenheimer, who was most closely affiliated with the Black Mountain school of poetry, the project was a space to showcase "new experiments and discoveries" in the poetry community (Waldman 4). Many of the young poets enticed by the noncommercial and countercultural ideologies of the project were initially captivated by the

work of the New York School. Waldman explains that the New York School first-generation (Ashbery, Guest, O'Hara, Koch to name a few) "shaped the 'local environment' through literary and art magazines, readings, openings, and parties and provided, in a sense, the matrix for The Poetry Project" (Waldman 4). She continues: "a new generation, picking up on the work of these 'elders,' began to experiment further, extending the *modernist line*. Such collective energy resulted in a new downtown scene, an especially welcome face of which was its inclusion of young women writers" (Waldman 4, my emphasis). Here, Waldman explains the shifting attentions of the New York art scene during the late 1960s: a group of young poets trying to 'extend the modernist line' by reconfiguring what it means to write experimentally. But while these young poets and artists admired the accomplishments of the New York School, they wanted to reimagine the possibilities available to them in late modernist art while configuring the potential directions that their art could take. Foremost for Waldman, this means the inclusion of more women in the scene who would challenge the masculinist world of high-modernist poetry.<sup>1</sup>

In his Foreword to the anthology of the Poetry Project *Out Of This World*, Allen Ginsberg attests to not only the Project's artistic achievements under Waldman but also its social accomplishments: "[l]iberation of the word. Liberation of minority groups, questions of race. The famous 'sexual revolution.' The celebrated women's liberation—women writing and reading brilliantly, led by poets Anne Waldman and Diane di Prima...At least in my circle these were among the stars who gave expression to new independence" (Ginsberg xxvii). Ginsberg champions the Project's inclusion and showcasing of gay artists, such as Joe Brainard who read

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<sup>1</sup> Especially important was Waldman's friendship with beat poet Diane di Prima, another often overlooked writer of the 60s and 70s. Waldman and di Prima shared a long friendship and would frequently interview one another about the state of women's writing, feminism, and motherhood throughout their respective careers.

<sup>2</sup> I think it is necessary to cite, in full, a passage from DuPlessis's essay on Waldman in which she discusses the

sections from *I Remember* and other queer works that were dismissed in more conventional settings, and woman poets who rarely received the same sort of attention as their male counterparts. When Oppenheimer retired and Waldman took over, the space continued to flourish with more artists who've experienced difficulties getting their work heard and noticed. Back to Ginsberg: "[the Project] served and still serves to formulate local public opinion. Barriers were removed between inner and outer, between subjective worlds and objective social worlds. Here was space where people could proclaim to society what they wanted—and in a church, which lent their address proper dignity" (xxvii). For Ginsberg and other regulars at the Project, St. Mark's Church became a social world in itself, determined to remove barriers that prohibit minority voices—gay, women, persons of color—from contributing to the conversations about the future direction of art and society plagued by the socio-cultural constrictions within a Cold War America.

The Project was funded initially by the Office of Economic Opportunity, an agency created as part of President Johnson's Great Society legislation during the sixties. While hotly contested from both liberal and conservative pundits, the OEO, much like the WPA during the 1930s, provided funding for small, often minority-driven community projects. Ginsberg explains: "[s]uddenly, small, decentralized, individual community projects could be subsidized by the government. There was a big push for minority and multicultural arts, poetry in the schools, little magazines with their Coordinating Councils, and a number of strong provincial centers of poetics activity" (Ginsberg xxviii). The OEO was responsible for getting the Project off the ground; however, when President Nixon took office in 1969, shortly after Waldman took over the Project, funding from the OEO became significantly less available as Nixon took to cutting federal arts projects. However, Waldman and other administrators of the Project considered the

separation from the federal government a positive move as many of the poets and artists affiliated with the Project became increasingly disenchanted with the federal government, primarily for their involvement in and perpetuation of the Vietnam War and resistance to social progress for disenfranchised groups. Daniel Kane, who writes an in-depth history of Waldman's role at the Project, explains that "from around 1969 to 1970, the Poetry Project became even more radical in spirit as it weaned itself from the federal government fund...Money no longer came from a benevolent if despised federal government" (Kane 182). Severing from the OEO meant that the Project did not have to operate under certain auspices and regulations. As a result, the Project, due to Waldman's radical directorial vision, became more concentrated, more political, and significantly more radical.

### **Waldman's Early Poetry**

Under Waldman's direction, not only was the poetry project a means to highlight new American poetics but also a place and space to develop one's poetic voice in an atmosphere of acceptance and constructive criticism. Waldman makes this abundantly clear when she recounts her development as writer during her tenure at the project:

“my own writing was undergoing shifts of attention and intention. Many writers of my generation were hybrids feeding off the branches of the New American Poetry. My earliest poems are confessional, soulful, question of American values. They move around the page...I was also reading the work of all my new poetry friends who were regularly walking into the living room any hour of the day or night. Also giving readings, organizing and running countless poetry events which hosted many elders, being drawn more and more into oral-aural performative possibilities for myself, inventing 'modal structure,' experimenting with tape cup-

ups, using music and film with readings, and had begun some tentative musical collaboration" (xxiv-xxv).

Here, Waldman claims two important stakes for the Project: first, the Poetry Project and the New York poetry scene (that Waldman and Warsh hosted in their Lower East Side apartment afterhours) fostered a sense of community and collaboration. Second, Waldman emphasizes the importance of experimental styles burgeoning in the poetry scene at the time such as the collaborative, multi-genre readings that use film and music to challenge traditional styles of poetry readings. The infusion of music inspired many of the young poet's styles, including Waldman's who found inspiration in the music of Patti Smith. Using this inspiration Waldman began composing works emphasizing vocality and orality in a somewhat similar vein as Beat Poets but rooted much more in the performative aspects of reading.

For example, one of Waldman's early works performed at the Project, "Crack in the World," is a homonym poem that when performed is meant to slowly increase in vocal and emotional intensity. In a 1988 article celebrating the 20th anniversary of the poem, Waldman explains, "the poem was inspired by a narrow comment in the *New York Times* that women poets were really, after all, only writing about their menstrual periods. Aha!" (Whole Earth Review 1988). The poem itself is a feminist response to such misogynist criticism, appropriating the *Time's* narrow view of women's writing (that they only write about their periods) by writing about a "Crack in the world" (vagina) and employing the female body as resistant to masculinist understandings of female experience. Beginning at the second iteration of the repetitive "crack in the world":

I see the crack in the world  
Thoughts intersect in the body



He must not keep me down  
Let me go my way alone tonight  
No man to touch me  
A slash in me, I see the slash in the world tonight  
It keeps me whole, but divides me now (381-2)

In her short essay on the poem, Waldman explains: "the poem [is] a ritual enactment of the state of mind only that time of the month can evoke, the words sing of 'endometrium collapse.' (Imagine the vowels elongated, and an [sic] hysteria in the vocal presentation)" (Whole Earth). By reappropriating the *Time's* reviewer's expectations, Waldman's poem is at once a powerful, bodily feminist "rant" (to borrow Waldman's own term for the work) and a somewhat satirical take on expectations for female writers. There are several recordings of Waldman performing the poem (in later versions, Waldman performs it more like a song) where we can hear the elongated vowels and the "hysterical" voice of the poem's speaker. I find that this hysterical speaker furthers the poem dueling attentions: its message of female empowerment (the speaker becoming procedurally louder is a method to captivate listeners) while satirizing the caricature of the "hysterical female," a previously diagnosable illness that was (and during Waldman's time, is) a common trope in misogynist ideology.

Waldman charges the poem with vaginal imagery and metaphors, "crack," "intersect," "slash," "divides," to locate the poem entirely in the feminine. The homonymic construct of the poem creates a sort of echo chamber that reverberates the female-centric nature of the work; we see the words "crack," "blood," "legs," and "endometrium" repeated throughout the work in slightly different ways to resignify its feminine preoccupations. This is achieved by constructing the poem using short, terse lines that build oral/aural tension to physicalize the poem's bodily

concerns. This is to say that throughout the work the speaker performs the song of ‘endometrium collapse.’” In her essay, "I Is Another," Waldman further asserts this vocal tension:

'CR -A -A -A -CK in the world" so that the 'crack' is actually felt and activated, or taking on the phrase 'endometrium shedding' in a visceral way. I play with all five vowel sounds in the word 'endometrium.' The syllables also carry their own semantic message—'end' 'o' 'me' 'trium' (which sounds like 'triumph') paralleling the composite world (endometrium) which sounds like its literal meaning 'the mucus membrane lining the uterus.' As I intone the words 'endometrium shedding,' I am reenacting that process. It is an 'end' 'of' 'me' and yet a 'triumph.' I have been told by people in the audience that the enactment of this poem completely evokes the condition and the power of that condition. (144)

That the poem evokes the condition further attends to the feminine body Waldman draws attentions to throughout the poem. Further, Waldman also puns on “period” (“This is periodic / It comes at the full moon / Let me go howling in the night”) and appropriates misogynistic ideas of the period being a ‘curse’ when she exclaims: “The curse, glorious curse is upon me.” In doing so, the ‘collapse’ or the ‘curse’ performed in the poem isn’t meant to be something negative despite the connotations; for Waldman, this experience, one that is wholly female, should be celebrated for its pure femininity and as a way to reclaim female agency and autonomy, telling men of the world: “Don’t come to my house / Don’t expect me at your door.”

These feminine images and metaphors insist on a chasm between the genders— wherein women can relate bodily and psychologically to the poem while men, on the other hand, if they choose to involve themselves in the poem’s purpose, could perhaps gain insight into the female experience. Such binarized gendered thinking is very much indicative of the second-wave

feminist movement's ideologies in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which Waldman, somewhat inconsistently, participated in. But while the poem does reaffirm a view of gender as binary, and thus could deter readers for its near-essentialist understanding of gender, the poem nonetheless offers substantial insight into Waldman's early feminist sympathies. For instance, the poem reveals that such gender divisions are necessary because such experiences, like menstruation, are trivialized as tropes, stigmatized, or simply ignored in society. Thus when Waldman's speaker resists masculine domination and seeks to repossess her own autonomy by using the repetitive refrains "He must not keep me down" and "No man to touch me," she rejects the physical and psychological domination of men over women, which, during the late 1960s, was the norm engendered by post-WWII societal expectations. In doing so, the poem embraces female independence, "Let me go my way alone tonight," while joyfully celebrating the stigmatized bodily experience of menstruation, "The curse, glorious curse is upon me."

The final lines of the poem reaffirm such a feminist message. But Waldman opts to change her speaker, where instead of speaking from the pseudo-confessional "I" used throughout the piece, Waldman switches to a chorus of female voices, achieved through the chantatory anaphora "You" and "Body." This pluralist chorus speaks to all "men who came out of me," telling them to "back off", carving a space for themselves beyond the "peripher[ies] of the world":

You who came through the crack in my world

You men who came out of me, back off

Words come out of the belly

Groaning as the world is pulled apart

Body enchanted to this

Body elaborated on this

Body took the measure of the woman  
to explain the fierceness of this time  
walking on the periphery of the world

At once, the final lines read both like a “collapse” and a birth. The anaphoric “You” beginning lines 1-2 above unites the chorus of female voices, telling men “who came out of me” to “back off,” choosing to give birth to words instead, “Words come out of the belly.” Waldman equates the power of words with the power of giving life; however here, words can literally pull the world apart. Ending line 4 on “pulled apart” is a metaphoric move. The poem pulls itself into two sections signaled by the action of “pull[ing] apart,” and the beginning of a new anaphoric series, lines 5-7 beginning with “Body.” The repetitive use of “Body” draws attention to itself, the bodies of the chorus, wherein the body becomes the force that enchants, elaborates, and takes on the measures of creation. Waldman ends the poem on a political gesture—collapsing the final lines together (rather than separating with a space) emphasizing the vocal collapse of the speakers who having only walked on the “periphery” of the world are now the subject of the “fierceness of this time,” making space for themselves in a predominantly masculine, misogynist world.

As I discussed above, Waldman’s feminist poem is at once a satirical jab at the *Times* writer—and critical interpretations of women's poetry more broadly— and a meditation on female experience. Indeed, the poem seeks “to explain the fierceness of this time,” meaning the rise of feminist ideologies and countercultural movements attempting to challenge the patriarchal norms that cloud society writ large but also, importantly, the art world itself. During Waldman’s time as the director of the Poetry Project, she fought these norms tooth and nail to create a space for women writers and artists that undermined the expectations from male art critics and artist counterparts. And that the poem is so invested in orality and its need to be performed as a chant

challenges expectations of what a poetry reading should be. Rarely had the Project and the poetry community more broadly witnessed performances like Waldman's. The 'hysterical female,' Waldman seems to be saying, is now in charge.

However progressive the countercultural ideologies of Waldman's administrative mentality and the community at the Project was, they were nonetheless forced to reconcile with rising cultural tensions between countercultural groups themselves. Divisions between the interests of liberals and radicals, feminists/LGBTQ/persons of colors, environmentalist and urbanists began to take its toll not only on St. Mark's but the Lower East Side neighborhood entirely. One of the ways we can observe these rifts is tracing the career trajectories and publication histories of some of the so-called second-generation's poets. Kane notes that several members were steadily gaining national notoriety, building reputable stature as they became more and more critically legitimated in the highbrow New York art world. By garnering reputations as "legitimate" or "career" writers, members began to stop producing mimeographs (a key method to ensure distribution of their work) and instead sought out corporate publishers to publish their works on a national scale, becoming, as if it were a bad thing, legitimate professional writers. Many understood the desire and need (especially fiscally) of publishing on a national scale, but others saw corporate publications as just another way of "selling-out" and disregarding the radical ideologies that surrounded and structured the Project.

However, many within the Project's in-group needed the financial security and legitimacy that comes with corporate publication, and the growing stature of the group's contribution to the art scene was, arguably, a necessary move to attract more people to their postmodern movement. But, as Kane notes, this comes at a cost: "while the Poetry Project itself continued to feature mass political readings and to encourage new writers to participate in its

programs, the social scene surrounding the Poetry Project was altered” (Kane 182). The Project’s pseudo-anarchistic ideology soon dissolved despite the fact that “in many ways [the Project] used poetry to reflect and comment on new personal and political commitments and events” (Kane 183). With the dispersal of the Project’s central social group came the crisis of the Project’s identity. Waldman, however, would work tirelessly to maintain the politically charged, socially conscious atmosphere of the Project, using the trying times as a source of inspiration for her own work and her administrative mentality. Waldman was especially equipped to bridge these tensions given her radical social activism was always balanced by an understanding of bureaucracy that comes with being an art administrator.

Where this becomes especially relevant is in Waldman’s complicated relationship to feminism. And while “Crack in the World” evokes the sympathies of a second-wave feminist ideologies rooted in institutional reform, throughout her early career Waldman would distance herself from a gender-centric politic characteristic to many of the second-wave goals, ultimately affirming her radical sensibilities (more on this later). What we see in “Crack in the world” is an early poststructural feminist critique akin to what Hélène Cixous coins “*Écriture Féminine*,” feminine writing attempting to “write the body” into the work itself. As we saw, Waldman does not shy away from overt representations of the female body, utilizing a gynocriticism that disrupts the masculine economy of the text, which can be “liberating for women whose ‘bodies’ have been so trashed or iconized in ideology as to be unrecognizable, and whose corporeal/intellectual bearing needs to be reseen” (DuPlessis 175). The poem is entirely rooted in the feminine—it does not attempt to transcend gender boundaries but instead reify them to make their difference obvious, blunt, and undeniable. But, again, this is part of Waldman’s early

feminist concerns, and many of these early sympathies she will rework in her poetry, criticism, and social activism even today.<sup>2</sup>

As she progressed—as a writer and Poetry Project administrator—Waldman would develop her own mode of feminist critique, one not necessarily rooted in gender constructs and interpretations of gendered experience but instead taking up “the task” that, according to Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “involves standing corporeally within gender structures and other structures of oppression to break down these enormous pillars of patriarchal culture so that something new can be built as one is leveraging critique” (179). This pseudo-intersectional approach to writing moves away from “Crack’s” difference-based feminism embracing instead a queered phenomenological temporality, writing that tries to exist between structural oppressions.

I want to explore this concept in two of Waldman’s early-70s texts. First, in her co-authored book *Self Portrait* with Joe Brainard and secondly in the full-length book *Life Notes*. Important to note here is Waldman’s friendship with Brainard. Brainard and Waldman’s co-authored book is practice in capturing “ordinary” or mundane thoughts (very much in the style explored in the previous chapter). In *Life Notes*, not only did Brainard supply the cover art (a bright, pop-inflected illustration of a flower), but also Waldman borrowed the style of Brainard’s “I Remember” in her poem “100 Memories.” Brainard and Waldman’s friendship continued a legacy of collaborative creation that was on its way out when the Project encountered the ideological problems within its own in-group. Capturing their intersectional friendship—a self-

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<sup>2</sup> I think it is necessary to cite, in full, a passage from DuPlessis’s essay on Waldman in which she discusses the problems of second-wave feminist criticism and ideology: “Waldman, like Alice Notley and other women loosely in the avant-garde and not in the women’s poetry movement (as it centered its canon of interests in the mid-70s and through mid-late-80s), was very resistant to any victimization theorizing and against any sense that women have little or no agency. For them, early feminist critiques had a hard time not sounding like self-pity...Feminist thinking seemed, to these listeners, like an affirmation of disabilities, when it was, instead, trying to encounter and name the gender assumptions, the taboos buried in culture and internalized/externalized values that blocked female striving...any ‘victim status’ thinking was viewed, in early second-wave feminism, as a naming of a thankfully temporary female condition, a condition soon to be rendered obsolete by the intensities and gains of feminist politics” (176).

proclaimed feminist and an openly queer man— and influence on one another is one of the ways Waldman can be considered postmodern. More intriguing is perhaps how notions of queerness influence Waldman. Much like Brainard, Waldman “has some proto-queer ideas about how one’s subjectivity is performative, how (to a certain degree), subjectivity does not necessarily go with the body” (DuPlessis 179). In her work, especially *Life Notes*, Waldman interrogates subjectivity as an ontological problem, moving beyond binaries and hierarchies of gender and sexuality. And as *Self Portrait* displays, the task of postmodern and queer literature becomes the “pluri-decentering of binarism and hierarchy,” finding common ground between traditionally oppressed groups with different social standings, access, and privileges and allowing them to speak together simultaneously (DuPlessis 179).

### ***Self Portrait***

The small press Siamese Banana published *Self Portrait* in 1972. Siamese Banana published exclusively New York based writers in the early-70s, publishing roughly 25 books in a three-year span.<sup>3</sup> In a time where the second-generation was gaining notoriety and thus publishing in larger, corporate presses, Brainard and Waldman's opting to publish their collaboration in a small press points to the almost rogue, experimental style of the book. *Self Portrait* opens with two crude, childlike “self portraits” by Waldman and Brainard. Waldman’s is a simple stick-figure head smiling at the reader while Brainard’s (who is an accomplished visual artist) is a profile sketched in a similar style. It does not seem farfetched to claim that Brainard offered such as “simple” sketch to unify the two authors immediately—in collaboration

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<sup>3</sup> This is a figure I have gathered from the very little online data. It seems the press was only operational from 1970-1973 in New York City and only published New York writers. If there was more time allotted, New York University has an archive of their books and journals that could verify such data. The number of journals published by Siamese Banana remains unknown at this time.



one should not usurp the talent of the other, which serves as a driving philosophy throughout the work. The portraits are followed by their dedications. Brainard's takes the top half of the page, writing: "my half of *Self Portrait* is dedicated to Anne," while Waldman's takes the bottom part of the page, "my half of *Self Portrait* is dedicated to Joe," further reinforcing their collaborative efforts and the interpersonal structure of the text. The book is composed as a conversation between the authors—each page begins with a prompt, such as "age," "queer," "old," and Brainard and Waldman, in their own handwriting, respond with a short answer to each topic. The categories are entirely mundane, an effort that avoids representations of identity politics that would demarcate one author from the other. In fact, without knowing the handwriting of the authors, it would be almost impossible to tell Waldman apart from Brainard. Even when prompted with "queer," both Brainard (an openly queer man) and Waldman's responses maintain a particularly autonomous universality (Waldman writes: "I have a big queer streak!"). That Waldman and Brainard can both contribute to the prompts with ease is at once a gesture in pluralist nature of the text and a means to invite readers to join in on the conversation by using the prompt structure throughout the book.

What I mean by this is that the book, by its very compositional nature, refuses single artistic attribution by having two authors contribute equally to the project. This collaborative method merges two selfhoods into one art object, creating a multidimensional text resistant to static representation. Such collaborative efforts also suggest an intimacy between those composing together. Jenni Quilter's essay on collaboration is helpful here where she writes: "one's affection for the other acts as a creative catalyst, and this means that collaborative work frequently contain a particular intimacy, a sense of direct and specific address...This intimacy can shut us out or let us in; there are often in-jokes to get these collaborations, reference that

quite clearly refer to events beyond the text" (Quilter 146). What Quilter suggests is that collaboration can indeed isolate readers who do not have access to the social world from where the text stems. And oftentimes the collaborative text itself revels in own minoriness, knowing "it isn't very good—that is, rich in interpretative detail" (Quilter 160). What matters in collaboration is that it "forces us to reevaluate the criteria with which we might assess the value of an artwork," and instead allows us to better understand the relationship between "an artwork and a life lived" (Quilter 160). *Self Portrait* does just that: while the book isn't a "major" work by either author it nonetheless shows us the importance of their intersectional friendship, the desire to continue producing New York-centric works through independent presses, and represents their lack of pretentiousness in a community becoming coopted by corporate ideologies. And *Self Portrait's* broad, meandering attentions do invite readers to join in on the fun.

*Self Portrait* is one of the many collaborative pieces (especially on Brainard's end) to come out of the second-generation New York School. Collaboration, as Bill Berkson claims, was "a spontaneous extension of social life" in New York, and often used as a way to create an audience for their work when the larger publishing industry maintained its indifference. However, that *Self Portrait* comes after the collaborative boom of the late 1960s suggests Waldman and Brainard's continual commitment to maintaining the social life of poetry in the Lower East Side. For instance, there are several passages titled "Art" and "Writing," in which Waldman and Brainard attest to the importance of the social in art. For Brainard, "Art to me is a way of keeping busy. A way of showing my appreciation of things I especially like. A way of pleasing other people. (Which pleases me) and a way of impressing other people. (which, unfortunately [sic], does not impress me)." Conversely, Waldman's reads: "Art: Nothing like it / Ho hum." Whereas Brainard explains the social merit of creating art, "a way of pleasing other

people," Waldman simply claims that there is "nothing like [art]," evoking a particular vagueness that draws in readers to want to know more. In another section titled "Art," Waldman writes, more directly this time, "Art is a way of talking to yourself, & hopefully to someone else out there." Here, Waldman explains the personal and interpersonal role of art, its ability to express the self while at the same time reaching other people and serves as a mode of conversation. For Waldman, art *is* social; it speaks to "someone else out there." It is a means to replicate life, insisting, as Kane writes, "that poetry, like [Waldman's] life at the time, was being lived, not organized" (Kane 97).

But while Waldman confesses that art is an act of sociability, to critically engage with her work remains an incredibly difficult task since she is unapologetically anti-academic, especially exploring a text like *Self Portrait* that celebrates its minoriness. In her introduction to *Angel Hair Anthology*, Waldman notes the anti-academic agenda of the New York poetry scene that was instead "stumbling along improvisationally," creating works never meant to be "organized" or categorizable: "The early years were magical. Unself-conscious about who we were and what we were doing, we were our own distraction culture. We weren't thinking about career moves or artistic agendas. We weren't in the business of creating a literary mafia or codifying a poetics. There were no interesting models for that kind of life" (Waldman xxvi-xxvii). This "model" for a communal artistic mentality emphasizes the organic nature of the coterie's writing where they could produce works like *Self Portrait* without an "agenda." There is also an insistence on a pluralistic view of art—art meant to converse with other people—an "anything goes" ideology that couldn't fit into a particular "model" or even "school" of artists. Responding to Waldman's introductory notes above, Kane suggests that "the way Waldman appears to want to position herself within a plural 'we,' these poets were living and writing in the here-and-now, and were

certainly *not* scheming towards a future life in the archives and syllabi of the academy" (Kane 97). That works like *Self Portrait* use a simple format to bring multiple perspectives together simultaneously is a testament to the sociable ideology surrounding the Poetry Project Waldman fostered and affirms her autonomous vision of poetic discourse in a time of social distress.

Waldman would use this radical vision for poetry and art when she and Allen Ginsberg founded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University in 1974. Although still serving as the Poetry Project director at the time, the Project was becoming significantly less radical as many of the poets central to the Project began moving away from New York or aligning themselves exclusively with mainstream publishers. While the Project continued to serve as a social site for New York poetry, Waldman's own work at the Project became strained when an influx of Language Poets began to take over the poetry scene. I see this tension at work in her 1973 book *Life Notes*, her second publication under a major press, The Bobbs-Merrill Company. In the early 1970s, the Project was losing its radical, anti-establishment sentiments, especially under the auspices of Rev. Michael Allen. But while Waldman's *Life Notes* does suggest corporate allegiance to mainstream publishers, it nonetheless echoes with the communal and countercultural aesthetics she championed during her tenure at the Project. It, too, introduces a particular vision of postmodern poetry in its use of orality, textuality, and visuality.

### ***Life Notes***

Waldman had edited anthologies of the Poetry Project (titled *The World* that compiled issues of the small-magazine of the same name) that were published by Bobbs-Merrill during her tenure as Project Director. And *Life Notes* wasn't her first book printed with Bobbs-Merrill; she published *Baby Breakdown* in 1970 with the company who, at the time, was known more for

publishing *The Joy of Cooking* than radical, experimental poetry. But *Life Notes* remains a drastic turning point for both Bobbs-Merrill company and Waldman. As a textual object, *Life Notes* is a highly experimental book that combines poems and typeset emoticons with illustrations and drawings by Brainard and George Schneeman, an artist who frequently collaborated with New York poets. It is perhaps one of the first books by a major publisher featuring a cover design by an openly gay artist (Brainard). While Waldman maintained her small-press affiliations as demonstrated with *Self Portrait* and her immediate follow-up to *Life Notes*, *Contemplative Life* in 1974, *Life Notes* was an important step in Waldman's career as it was her first major selected works. And despite the corporate allegiance that comes with such publication, I find that the works' incredibly radical ideologies and divergent attentions are a means to disseminate experimental, anti-establishment ideals, subverting the very corporate structures that the book as an object is predicated on.

Put another way, using a major press to publish radical ideology can seem hypocritical; but Waldman's knowledge of how the bureaucratic art world operates cannot be forgotten. That she dedicates the book "to all the lively ladies" is one suggestion of her desire to disseminate radical (read: feminist) ideas on a larger, national scale. And many of the poems unapologetically confront the social and political climate of early 70s America. One of the first poems in the book, "Color Photo," depicts a romantic vision of Chinese communist propaganda evoking laden "red scare" sentiments in the U.S.:

The sky was azure

& Peking basked in the golden sunshine:

Chairman Mao, the never-setting red sun, was taking a nap

All The Wisdom Of China, a big white dog, lay sleep at his feet. (2)

Throughout *Life Notes*, Waldman confronts underlying fears and structures of everyday life in the early 70s, making visible the problems—in a particularly post-structural move—in order to critique them. In fact, the book revels in its post-structural/postmodern imaginary with its unrelenting critiques of everyday American life and culture in that Waldman evokes images of soldiers, missiles, apocalyptic industrialization, gender problems, all to critique the rapidly changing world stuck in a modernist mindset. Waldman makes this particularly clear in a short poem titled "The Contemplative Life." Interestingly, at the end of *Self Portrait*, Waldman is prompted with "Now" to which she replies, "Now I enjoy the contemplative life" (*Self Portrait*). The idea of "the contemplative life" is something Waldman returns to frequently throughout her career; here, however, is the first time she attempts to qualify this imaginary:

It starts in early childhood  
at the edge of the metropolitan region  
It skirts a small town & winds through farmland  
lacing & interlacing & avoiding the highways  
that perpetuate the centerless sprawl  
characterizing Thought since the end of World War I. (14)

The contemplative life that the poem traces, the poem's "It," derives from Waldman's own life growing up in New Jersey. "[A]t the edge of the metropolitan region," Waldman's speaker moves almost erratically through a picturesque American landscape, avoiding "a small town" and moving "through farmland" to avoid the industrialized highway system. This pastoral

vision of America is synonymous with a vagabond beat-style mentality a la Kerouac's *On The Road*. But here, movement is inevitable and not necessarily a mode of liberation like Kerouac depicts in his novel. Life, for Waldman's speaker, is about avoiding certain American realities, such as the "centerless sprawl" perpetuated by highways, and instead embraces a way of life outside the spectacle of modern America.

The poem's composition also stresses the inevitability of movement; as it proceeds, the poem is relentless in its oral, aural, and visual movements. After the second "It" in line 3, the poem cannot contain its own motion, which Waldman punctuates with the repetitive use of "&" that forces the poem to continue moving in lines 3-4. This is also achieved stylistically by employing sibilance in line 3 ("it skirts a small town"), line 4 ("lacing & interlacing), and line 5 ("centerless sprawl"). Such rapid succession between phrases and clauses metaphorically conflates movement with life itself; the contemplative life Waldman's speaker presents can't escape the world around her; it can, however, critique its very structure as it moves through it. The "centerless sprawl" that has "characteriz[ed] Thought since the end of World War I" is, most prominently, a critique of modernism; the freedoms guaranteed by highways can't erase the industrial "sprawl" that clouds this very freedom. And this "sprawl" is not just physical: it is characteristic of American "Thought," or the disjointed, conflicting visions of modern America. This contemplative life, then, is one that rejects "Thought" lacking focus or a "center." It is a life critical of a mobility that leads nowhere.

*Life Notes* frequently brings up Waldman's childhood in New Jersey and New York with vignettes of memories sprinkled, both coherently and incoherently, throughout the book. We can see this in her long list poem "100 Memories." The poem is very much in the vein of Brainard's *I Remember*. But without the guiding force of the anaphoric "I Remember," Waldman's poem

moves rapidly (and erratically) through 100 incredibly terse memories of personal and cultural minutia frequently unrecognizable to the reader. Alongside the list poem is an array of sketches by Schneeman that capture the inattentive nature of the work. Schneeman's sketches detail some of the various images Waldman evokes in the poem, and much like the poem, Schneeman's sketches are scattered across the page without a particular logic or coherency. But while the poem refutes a singular logic or narrative, each utterance resonates with a particular integrity where no memory matters more than the one prior. This endless stream of images becomes, in itself, a life note for Waldman. And, again, reaffirms the importance and inevitability of movement—stasis, Waldman seems to be suggesting, refutes the life affirming purpose of art. To remember is to move, transforming the poem into a performance in its own right.

That poetry is a way to perform life is at the very core of Waldman's book. In this way, *Life Notes* continuously challenges the modernist traditions critiqued in "The Contemplative Life," opting for a poetics full of energy and instability, changing with each voice that reads it. Such rebuttal of modernism fixates on poetry as public and communal wherein the poem becomes "an open system involved in a continual exchange of energy with the environment," an entropic phenomena constantly in flux with its own orientations (Waldman 129). At its very core, Waldman's poetry celebrates the flux and permeability of its own performative spontaneity. In a review of the book by Kirkus Review in 1973 suggests just that:

the newest book by the female doyenne of the ailing New York poetry scene, whose poems of institutionalized nonsense almost unfailingly present an "'up'" image (both of the writer and the world) -- a poetry whose morality is energy and self-honesty, hence self-referential. This is the basis of a persistent charge of "'slightness'" from the Establishment that stems from the mistaken transposition



of older values onto a more radical aesthetic. Rather than attesting to inner states whose accuracy and sincerity must be taken on faith. Waldman recreates them (via objective correlative) for the reader...

The Kirkus Review points out the "mistaken transposition" of placing old poetic "values," what should be taken to mean poetry with an underlining "universal" truth (or "Thought" as she observes in "The Contemplative Life), onto a "radical aesthetic" that is conditionally unconcerned with being oriented or definitive. While the Kirkus Review is critical of the "superficiality" of Waldman's work, which the reviewer claims is a way to overcompensate for anti-academic sympathies, it nonetheless celebrates Waldman's commitment to poetic spontaneity. But the Kirkus Review misses a key element to Waldman's poetry—namely its insistence on performativity. In the remainder of the essay, I want to look at the long poem "Life Notes (The Lake Owassa Poem)" from which the book gets its name. Waldman provides a short and important introductory note to "Life Notes": "This poem is meant to be sung & / give it everything" (35). She also dedicates the poem to her "pals Nick (Dorsky) / & Jerry (Hiler)," better known as experimental film artists Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler.

Like Waldman, spontaneous reorientation of the senses inspired Dorsky and Hiler in their filmmaking, creating experimental films that capture "the emptiness of the view," emphasizing the here-and-now that doesn't attempt to qualify a particular meaning or orientation. In a *Times* review of Dorsky and Hiler's 2015 retrospective at the New York Film Festival, Manohla Dargis observes, "there are moments...where you may not be sure what you're looking at (a flower, a light, a person?) and you find yourself leaning toward the image. To a degree, this searching encapsulates the very experience of movie-watching itself and how we piece together cinematic

images to create meaning" (*New York Times*). It is not surprising that Waldman dedicates "Life Notes" to Dorsky and Hiler, as the poem moves between vignettes of childhood memories, nearly incoherent passages, onomatopoeic chants, and discordant visual and textual syntax. As Waldman tells us, the poem is "meant to be sung," and with our voices we can try to make sense of the radical configurations Waldman presents.

### **Hearing the Wood Thrush of "Life Notes"**

The poem is divided into three parts, each filled with images of her social world riddled with various family members and different men, depictions of Lake Owassa, and several iterations of Buddhist and transcendentalist spiritualities. The divergent attentions throughout the poem are partly a way for Waldman to evoke her energetic spontaneity achieved through orated poetics. As she writes in "I Is Another": "For me, reading aloud brings the words off the page. My voice is the key instrument in this act. The voice is the character or characters—all the personae and deities. But I'm interested particularly in exploring the nuances of sound that manifest different states of being" (144). Not only does the "Life Notes" capture different states of Waldman's life but also it brings life to the landscape and the history of place. Much like what Brainard achieves in *The Bolinas Journal* or even Charles Olson's *Maximus Poem* (Waldman cites Olson as one her biggest influences), "Life Notes" captures the landscape of Lake Owassa in New Jersey and the histories of the social worlds that have occupied the space. But instead of using descriptive language to describe (that is, show) the place, Waldman relies instead on orality and vocal performance to create the world she describes:

The Indian name Owassa  
means

The Lake Beyond the Hill

and refers

and refers to

Kittatinny Mountain

which rises

which rises

from the northwest

from the northwest

shore of the lake

which rises from the northwest shore of the lake (36)

The constant repetition throughout the opening of the poem at once situates readers in the poem's geographic locale while also evoking different states of being, as if different voices were iterating the landscape to the reader. Creating the polyphonic situating of place, Waldman's speaker(s) charts an exploration of place well knowing the histories that construct the world she inhabits. We see this immediately following the first section of part 1, where, following a succession of voices repeating "means / means / means," we begin to see narrative action, unsure exactly who is viewing the scene:

Wood thrush at ear, left  
loud flutelike phrases

Ear at ear, right  
loud indoor TV

Above, your mother standing over you  
with concerned & baffled look

good looks

1945 or so photo

1956 or so photo

a real movie creature can withstand endless close-ups!

Below, the horrible stinking swimming pool  
of world bureaucracy

who me?

Not me (37)

This first moment of the poem's narrative action introduces many of the poem's larger concerns. Foremost, the speaker finds themselves caught betwixt nature and the loudness of modern life, with a "wood thrush" in one ear singing a "flutelike phrase" while in the other "a loud indoor TV" blares. The cacophony Waldman creates juxtaposes, like in "The Contemplative Life," a pastoral idealism with the unavailability of modernity. Waldman is careful to frame this image of everyday life in Lake Owassa, using the sounds to orient left and right, and, as though looking in on the scene itself, finds a mother "above" and a swimming pool "below." As the section progresses, we get a character of a "mother" looking "concerned" and "baffled" at a "you," who occupies themselves with looking at pictures from 1945 and 1956. The pictures, as materials in the poem, capture the tensions of history and movement seen throughout the book. Perhaps they suggest maturation, the "good looks" Waldman had as she grew up since she was born in 1945 and the photos could easily refer to images of her growing up, visual life notes as it were. But that Waldman follows up with what is "below," the "horrible stinking swimming pool / of world bureaucracy," suggests that these years signify something much more politically significant. In 1945, Harry Truman became president following the death of F.D.R. and Truman is often cited for engendering tense Cold War relationships through his policies of NATO and the Marshall Plan. In 1956, Eisenhower became president with Richard Nixon as his vice president (whose impact on Cold War culture i've observed previously in this essay).

Eisenhower's aggressive politics and policies against communist states made, according to some historians, the detente tensions between Cold War rivals significantly more severe (it is interesting, too, that Waldman's aversion to highways comes up in this book since Eisenhower created the interstate highway system that causes the "centerless sprawl" Waldman so very much deploras).

While this domestic scene plays out and appears to be an ordinary picture of American life, there is an underlining sense of political turmoil. The "stinking swimming pool / of world bureaucracy" causes Waldman's speaker to deny her involvement here, claiming, "who me? // Not me." The scene becomes increasingly foggy at this point; we don't know whom we are looking in on as the cacophony of modern life relentlessly takes over the scene, causing the materials in the poem, such as the pictures, to possess deeper, significant value to the cultural commentary Waldman seems to be making. Through the poem, these clashes between idyllic pastoral imagery/loudness of modernity, innocence/forced maturation, set up a building tension Waldman confronts using sexuality, technologies, and the contemporary political fears. For example, in a subsection titled "THE MOTORS," Waldman plays our own pastoral fantasies: "Listen, there's an incredible roar coming from that / shore // do you suppose? // THE MOTORS // motor of lawnmower / motor of lawnmower / motor of car / motor of car" (43). When we think we're moving into a depiction of the ocean's waves crashing into the rocky shore instead we hear motors of various engines, a lawnmower, a car, a camper, a saw, electric bike. Instead of assimilating into the sounds of the natural world, we are accosted with the artificiality of motors. Waldman, too, conflates these motors with a gender politic:

O, the motorboats, o groan the motorboats, o sigh,  
the motorboats, o shit, the motorboats, o fuck  
the motorboats, o the noisy obnoxious motorboats

pulling along those hotshit guys going  
 water-skiing

I've done it myself ya know & I know it's  
 EASY  
 !

.....  
 yeah, *big big* deal!  
 \*  
 "Horsepower"  
 ha (44)

The "noisy obnoxious motorboats" occlude the serenity of the pastoral environment. Instead of hearing the natural "roar" of the water, we hear the motorboats driving all around. Waldman makes their presence especially palpable by repeating "motorboats" twice in each of the first three lines, only interrupted by the increasingly agitated listener that groans and sighs and eventually vocalizes these frustrations by muttering "o shit," "o fuck." But the motorboats are actually pulling "hotshit guys" who are "water-skiing," causing the boats to be not the only source of agitation. Here, the loud, disruptive, mechanized sounds become extensions of the "hotshit guys" themselves. While Waldman confesses that "I've done it myself ya know," there is a sense of masculine posturing happening in this scene because while Waldman knows "it's / EASY / !" and nothing to brag about, the insistence on the motorboat's sound showing off its "Horsepower" takes on incredibly phallic meaning. Waldman even puns on the fact that its not a very "*big big* deal" (obviously suggestive of their penis size), and in a coy aside allows herself to laugh at her own joke within the frame of the poem. She even follows this with childish taunt, "I'm sitting in my hotshit rowboat / painted International Orange, / so howdoyoulike that? // let me take you for a ride" (45). In reversing the gendered expectations here, Waldman is able to reorient the poem's attentions away from this representation of modern masculinity by

reconfiguring the poem back onto her and her "hotshit rowboat / painted International Orange," a color used literally as a way to set objects apart from their surroundings.

And throughout "Life Notes," we see this desire to reconfigure what is going on around us rather than revel in objects— like motorized technologies— that further separate us from our humanity. Waldman critiques this modernist mindset both literally and figuratively throughout the work such as when she pleas with civilization to "spare us / this moon":

please please spare us  
this moon civilization

we're a doomed civilization  
the way things are going . . .  
why carry your marbles up there?

\*

I used to think UP  
& now I'm seeing DOWN

pick up the pieces of a storm-wracked nation . . . . (66)

Here, Waldman evokes the space race phenomena during the Cold War. But for Waldman, America's achievement of landing on the moon first in 1969 isn't anything to celebrate. "We're a doomed civilization," she writes, and then asks, "so why carry your marbles up there?" Instead of being fascinated by the unknown, "think[ing] UP," she explains the reality of what is going on around us, that when we start "seeing DOWN," we could begin to see the problems permeating in everyday Cold War American life. Calling for a reorientation back to humanity, she demands: "pick up the pieces of a storm-wracked nation," to deal with reality instead of exploring beyond our own imaginations.

In Karen Barad's powerful piece of queer theory, "Transmaterialities: Trans\*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings," she explains that the best political

investments we can make is to understand how the materials of our everyday life shape not only who we are but who came before us and who will come after. To return to a mindset like the one Barad outlines—one we could perhaps configure as a phenomenological orientation insistent on engaging with the immediacy of one's reality—would suggest a return to the very social conditions of our selfhood. Barad writes:

imaginaries that are attuned to the condensations of past and future condensed into each moment; imaginaries that entail superpositions of many being and times, multiple im/possibilities that coexist and are iteratively intra-actively reconfigured; imaginaries that are material explorations of the mutual indeterminacies of being and time. (388)

I bring Barad into this conversation because Waldman's incredibly social poetics engages both a world within the poem and outside of it, imagining the possibilities for those without access to positions of cultural capital. It is, like Brainard's, a poetics of vulnerability, one that attempts to queer the ways we understand the self in relation to others who attempt to reconfigure the terms of art for non-normative subjects in a culturally volatile America. Waldman's feminist imaginary is one attempt at this—but, as we've seen in "Life Notes," the stakes are much higher, less difference-based concerned instead with the power that constant exchange between voices can have. With this I argue that Waldman sets out to explode the conditions of modernity that have lead her generation into spheres of interiority and confession while fighting for their own agential capacities. Waldman urges us to keep imagining something better.

The confluences of past and present times outlined by Barad can be seen in a quiet moment halfway through "Life Notes":



*Hylocichla mustelina* is the  
Wood Thrush at my ear

loud flutelike phrases  
followed by softer guttural trill

my favorite-sounding bird so  
far  
I'm being very still

the bright daylight  
sparkling  
on the green-blue lake  
turns to  
soft dusk-light with breeze  
on the grey-blue lake (64)

In this quiet, lyrically meditative moment, Waldman hears the wood thrush at her ear, singing its phrases and trills. The tranquility of the wood thrush's song causes her to be "very still," observing the changing colors on the lake from daylight to dusk. Importantly, the wood thrush makes another appearance in "Life Notes," serving as a time marker ("my favorite-sounding bird so / far") and an iteration of the poem's insistence on orality and song. Henry David Thoreau once wrote that when man hears the wood thrush, "it is a new world and a free country, and the gates of heaven are not shut against him. Most other birds sing from the level of my ordinary cheerful hours a carol; but this bird never fails to speak to me out of an ether purer than that I breathe, of immortal beauty and vigor. He deepens the significance of all things seen in the light of his strain. He sings to make men take higher and truer views of things. He sings to amend their institutions; to relieve the slave on the plantation and the prisoner in his dungeon, the slave in the house of luxury and the prisoner of his own low thoughts" (*On Birds* 429). Waldman seems to find similar inspiration in the wood thrush's song, as after becoming "very still" watching the colors change on the lake, she moves into a state of imagination:

I'm thinking  
ocean  
    &  
        lake  
  
bodies of water  
  
larger & smaller  
  
salty  
    &  
        fresh  
  
Owassa  
  
    &  
        Bolinas  
  
Anne  
    &  
        Angelica  
  
East & West (64)

Moving from a traditionally lyric passage to one focused on imagining oppositional people, place, and things simultaneously, Waldman brings together the different materials of the world harmoniously, where each matters as much as their counterparts. This pluralist moment that compiles different places, times, and people finds the life-giving energies that Waldman believes to be the pure purpose of poetry. Towards the end of "I Is Another," Waldman explains: "It's all happening right here, right now. The experience of ecstasy is a timeless phenomenon, and is available to all of us through our work. The possibility for exchanges of energy through our 'open systems' is a real and exciting one" (157). What she achieves in "Life Notes," in her administrative work as Project director, and her poetry overall is a sense of motion, always-becoming, always finding someone or something to connect with. And despite cultural hostilities

towards the radical ideologies and countercultural sentiments she embraced, Waldman's poetry forges its own path beyond anyone's control.

## CONCLUSION:

### DEMOCRACY AND THE POSTMODERN POET

The goal of this thesis was twofold. First, I wanted to extend the critical conversation regarding Joe Brainard and Anne Waldman since both are incredibly underserved in literary discourse. Second, using a new historical approach, I sought to situate Brainard and Waldman's works in their cultural moment to explore how they are responding to the second half of the Cold War. But, like any project, this one was certainly limited in its scope. Extending this project, which I hope to do for a dissertation, would incorporate a broader array of poets from the Second Generation New York School, a deeper investigation into the cultural climate of the 1970s (especially in New York City as the 70s were a notoriously traumatic time), and a broader discussion of the role of politics in poetry. Nonetheless, this thesis has (hopefully) been successful at situating the aesthetic and cultural importance of Brainard and Waldman's works and has reimagined the climate of 1970s poetry as one incredibly significant for the genealogy of postmodern literature.

My goal was to locate a particular moment in American literary history and try to unravel the endless complexities wrapped up in two theoretical camps: late modernity and postmodernism. The early 1970s is, arguably, the epoch of the postmodern age: we see the rise of radical social movements, experimental literatures, the growing apparatus of technoculture, the disenchantment with academic discourse, and periods of incredibly volatile political engagement. What this era can show us, I think, is a historical period caught in a curious

liminality. Looking at the rise of academic discourse in the early 1970s, for example, discourses such as poststructuralism, deconstruction, and new historicism were all making their way into the academy, turning it on its own head, so to speak. Without knowing, scholars were setting up what the 1990s academy would call "the culture wars." Works by radical authors like Brainard and Waldman would come under fire during this time for their blatant political messages, such as their feminisms and queer theories. It is interesting then that the Second Generation New York School was notoriously against the academy and the academization of their works. Waldman in particular was especially against the rising discourse of the literary academy, which at the time was rooted in New Critical discourse. Instead of trying to become "academic poets," those in the Second Generation, Brainard and Waldman especially, were more concerned with creating communal scene for poetry. This is exemplified by the extensive archive of readings at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church and the mimeograph culture created and fostered by the Lower East Side poetry scene.

But by the end of the 1970s, poetry was taking some dramatic and drastic turns. Language Poetry became the dominant aesthetic principle guiding many of the Second Generation coterie, many of whom were moving all across the country. With the dispersal of poets from the Lower East Side alongside the rise of a radically experimental poetic style caused a rupture in the fabric of the Poetry Project's foundation. This may be one of the reasons why Waldman and Ginsberg founded the Jack Kerouac School for Disembodied Poetics in 1974—to create a poetry community and culture without the pressures from the newfound academic literary culture. But I also think, and what I will explore in these final pages of this thesis, that the crisis of language brought on by language poets caused many writers who had roots in high-modernity, including Waldman and Brainard, to reconsider the possibilities of their poetry and

the poetic "I" they speak from. This is to say that with the rise of a new academic poetics, the place for the poetic "I" became increasingly more unavailable.

I titled this conclusion "Democracy and the Postmodern Poet" because both Brainard and Waldman were so attuned to the cultural and political climate of their time that their work often questions the role of the self in relation to the larger public sphere. This is not a new phenomenon by any means: Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* questions this very relationship throughout his long poem. But what makes this period so fascinating and important is the increasing visibility of a growing discontent within the very fabric of social life. While radical social movements procured certain rights for marginalized persons during the late 1960s and early 1970s, popular American culture did not provide such comfort. Indeed, feminist and LGBTQIA+ groups, for example, were gaining traction but the widespread narrative of normalcy, such as Alan Nadel outlines in his book, renders the experiences of those groups basically invisible. It wasn't until 2013 that the Library of America published Joe Brainard's collected works. Up until then, most of his work was out of print. And the same with Waldman—many of her books remain difficult to nearly impossible to find.

But why democracy? Throughout this thesis, I discussed the idea of a politics of vulnerability, a queered reading of the private self, the poetic "I," making itself exceptionally public. Like Whitman does in *Song of Myself*, this is a way to create a dialectical (and epistemological) relation with the reader. But the epistemological problems of Whitman's day do not account for the same cultural paradigms Brainard and Waldman were forced to negotiate. Indeed, for both Brainard and Waldman, there is a recurring problem of *engagement* with politics: whether or not the poet should employ a political efficacy in their work. For Waldman, and her 1970 poem "Giant Night," this is an unavoidable paradox:

This season's cruelty hurts me  
and others, I'm sure, who'd rather be elsewhere but can't  
because of their jobs, families, friends, money  
It's rough anyway you look at it

But what can you do?

It's worse elsewhere, I'm sure

Take Vietnam

No thanks

I think about Vietnam a lot, however  
and wonder if I'll ever "see" it

Waldman's poem shows the unavoidability of politics, comparing the hard winter in New York City to the ongoing war in Vietnam as a way to rationalize the maudlin narrative of "cruelty." Waldman's speaker even shows how difficult it is to conceptualize politics in the poem: "It's worse elsewhere, I'm sure // Take Vietnam // No thanks." But what this moment does is suggest the unavoidability of politics— even in the frame of a lyric poem. This begs the question: can poetry that is so attentive to everyday life avoid the larger, permeating conflicts dominating the American imaginary? To this I would say no. But it is the way that these poets engage with politics that becomes incredibly fascinating—and problematic. There is the risk of cultural appropriation (Waldman's Vietnam-centric poems fall into this) or misunderstanding of the seriousness of the issue (Brainard often disregards politics as merely frivolous).

The role of the poet during the 1970s becomes the question often unasked in scholarly treatments of this period. While some scholars, such as Andrew Epstein, are engaging with this critical problem, there remains a whole host of unanswered and problematic questions regarding the poet's need to engage with the political process. For example, correspondences between

Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan (two poets of the Black Mountain School) reveal a falling out between the two poets over how best to engage politics in poetry during the 1970s. For Duncan, the role of the poet was to represent the problems using words and symbols knowing that conflict was indeed unavoidable. This is to say that Duncan did not believe poetry should try and solve problems. For Levertov, she insists poetry should represent the "real," whether it is cultural sentiments, experiences, and social discontent. The role of politics, and the idea of the poet as representative of a democratic ideal, has long haunted the legacy of the 1970s, especially as the division between lyric and language poetry became increasingly more divisive.

These concluding thoughts are not meant to "solve" any problems but instead offer some complications to the argument I presented throughout this thesis and set up some critical problems to engage with when I revisit this coterie later on. However, I hope to have shown how remarkable both Brainard and Waldman are for their contributions to not only the postmodern poetry scene but also their lasting effects on contemporary prosody. Brainard and Waldman's ability to create works that engage and resonate with readers with such vulnerability and *realness* is, in itself, a lasting tribute to their achievements and importance. But it also their ever-expanding, ever-changing perceptual scope and willingness to experiment makes their legacy on postmodern poetry undeniable.

At the end of her poem "Giant Night," Waldman's speaker tells us, "It is a different thing to be behind the sound / then leave it forever / and it goes on without them, needing only you and me." This final refrain, "needing only you and me," is indicative of the kind of work that Brainard and Waldman both profess. Their work somehow seems to encapsulate the whole world while making it extremely intimate. It makes the "real world" digestible and honest. It resonates with readers. And, what is perhaps most at stake for art during this time, is that it always finds



whoever is looking. Even if we leave "the sound," the poem, it continues to be with us. No matter our critical or cultural allegiances we each belong to, this seems to be the very point of it all.

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