



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

<http://muse.jhu.edu>

The Wreading Experiment: Performative Strategies for Teaching Women's Innovative Poetries

EMILY CARR

the dream of an uncommon
reader: I

I recently designed an upper-level, special topics English course as a “workshop” in wreading contemporary women’s innovative poetries.¹ I was inspired to “wreading” by Charles Bernstein’s essay “Creative Wreading: A Primer,” in which he offers interactive and reactive responses to assigned texts as the grounds for subsequent critical interpretations and argues that “you can’t interpret what you don’t experience” (276). “Wreading” thus implies not only a merging of the acts of reading and writing but also, and more importantly, an investment in experiential learning. I teach at a large Canadian research institution that privileges “practical” pursuits like business and medicine and that continually asks humanities instructors to justify class size and student-teacher ratios. I therefore find myself reiterating the argument that, because of their small class size and their purported “impracticality,” literature and writing courses are ideal spaces for creating engaged learning opportunities in which students can experiment with self-expression; here they can rehearse strategies for learning to find and hold on to a

voice; they can develop a point of view and argue that point of view elegantly, persuasively, and effectively; and they can practice modes of communication that are not market- or consumer-oriented.

My primary pedagogical goals for this course were twofold. First, I wanted to unsettle students’ reading habits and offer them strategies for approaching the poem as a process rather than a product, asking, “How is it made?” rather than “What does it mean?” By choosing texts by living writers with revisionist but not necessarily overtly feminist projects whose work has been variously labeled as experimental, innovative, oppositional, or avant-garde, I hoped to teach students not only to be aware of sexuality as a discursive construct but to intervene in sexuality’s discursive construction. Innovative female poets are doubly displaced; although, for example, women poets—like Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Laura Riding-Jackson, Susan Howe, Carla Harryman, and Lyn Hejinian—have been radical innovators throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they continue to struggle for recognition by

their male colleagues. Only two decades ago, American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Ron Silliman wrote:

[. . .] women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the marginal—have a manifest political need to have their stories told. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to who is the subject of these conventions, illuminates the relation between form and audience. (63)²

An innovative woman poet is thus relegated to writing about *her* subject, in *her* voice, which, because it has not traditionally been the subject of history, must be “conventional.” It is assumed that *her* audience consists of members of groups who, like her, have been objects of history and who are not yet ready, as their white masculine heterosexual counterparts, to challenge narrative conventions. Within the broader context of Culture-at-Large, she continues to be at a disadvantage, her writing quickly glossed and discarded even by colleagues whose ethical and political commitments she shares.

My second pedagogical goal was thus to illustrate to students their responsibility as university students and as, specifically, students in an English classroom, to intervene in the discursive practices that make such assumptions about women’s writing possible, to, in effect, talk back to the white male heterosexual discourse that continues to dominate Culture-at-Large. Poetry is a particularly apt medium for this lesson because students are so unfamiliar with it and, for the most part, have very little notion of the wide range in contemporary poetic praxis. Students expect, when talking about poetry, to read outside their comfort zone; they know and

fear they won’t “get” it. Half of the battle is thus already over. My task is to teach them to take pleasure in not “getting” it and in creating individual points of entry and strategies for interacting with poetic texts that push language, subjectivity, gender, and sexuality to their expressive limits. The course thus became a temporary social space in which we would collaborate together in the feminist project of cultivating potential refigurations of identity, coalition, and action. As we read on, around, over, through, and beside the texts, we would think through what it means to be a man or a woman in the twenty-first century, how there might be better ways to be men and women in the twenty-first century, if a third term is possible (not man, not woman, but what?), how in the social space of the classroom we might rehearse more ethical and inclusive ways of being men and women, and how we might apply our changed sense of our masculinity or femininity beyond the classroom. Through innovative, active, and reactive acts of wreading, we would learn how we might sound back to the discourses that supersaturate our lives, our sexes, and our selves.

Because I believe it is our political and ethical commitment as literary scholars and university instructors to intervene in standardized, institutional discourse and to cultivate savvy readers and skeptical thinkers, I paired course texts with reading responses and in-class exercises that encouraged students to approach reading as a process of intensified collaborative sharing (between reader and text, reader and writer, reader and reader, student and instructor). I feel that, given thought-provoking material and directed writing exercises, students can learn to put their critical and creative reading and writing skills

into everyday practice beyond the English classroom and into their primary academic pursuits, as well as their lives outside the university. Both in-class and homework assignments were thus performative interventions designed to prompt students to make their own way through the labyrinth of the text, to come up against the constructed wall of close reading and argumentative analysis and “decide to break through the power, safety, and authority of its limits,” following language’s “peculiar, often ‘irrational’ moves” (Fraser 202). Many of my students expected to act as receptacles into which I would pour my expert knowledge; through choreographed writing exercises, I hoped to teach them to participate in the production of knowledge and to take responsibility for both what and how they were learning. I wanted to teach them the power and the pleasure of the activity of opposing fact-making and self-fashioning with inquiry, opinion, wonder, and doubt: wandering through texts while in dialogue with the world.

These—admittedly utopian—pedagogical goals proved to be risky and dangerous negotiations in students’ pre-conceptions and in and out of their comfort zones: they made their ways through the texts as “academic” readers as well as young men and women with grade point averages, part-time jobs, scholarship requirements, and parental expectations. All my students’ “daily inclination” was to be “idle tourists, to be comfortable believers” (McHugh 22), and all their ambition to tame course texts by comprehending them. Throughout the term, I thus continually asked myself: What do you do when students turn away from a “difficult” poem, when students should be enjoying the text and aren’t, when students insist on meaning and refuse to acknowledge the significance of

process, when students are in what Ann Lauterbach calls the “thrall of the new,” ignoring the “ordeal/of the making” and “the powerful ambiguity of ‘it’” (44)?

Recent “radical” work by female poets is, I believe, well positioned to implicate student readers in the production of signification and to teach students to be co-complicit in the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of gender. I use “radical” as an inclusive term to refer to work that has been variously labeled innovative, oppositional, or avant-garde and that experiments in “unconventional” techniques “such as non-linearity, juxtaposition, rupture, fragmentation, immanence, multiple perspective, open form, and resistance to closure” (Swenson, “Introduction” xxi). Radical work enacts the challenges raised by contemporary critical thought. It aims to undermine conventional cultural assumptions about gender/sex, myth/history, self/other, I (writer) & you (reader) in order to demonstrate how culture shapes self and how the self might, in a different, better world, shape itself and in turn its culture. Radical work honors “the avant-garde mandate to renew the forms and expand the boundaries of poetry—thereby increasing the expressive potential of language itself” (Swenson, “Introduction” xxi).

Revisionist work by female poets, moreover, challenges the sanctity of the received (male-dominated) literary canon and encourages students to ask who has the social sanction to determine which texts enter our cultural bloodstream and how these texts come to dictate proper behavior and codes of sexual conduct.³ Using a variety of methods—some of which I will outline later in this essay—revisionist work appropriates, adapts, translates, or otherwise alters pre-existing

texts in order to excavate possible meanings lurking beneath the surface. Revision seeks to read past what the text is ostensibly trying to say in order to perform the production of alternative—accidental, even—meanings. Reading becomes, literally, an act of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. Revisionist work teaches students to reject the prescription of authorship (of text, of self, of sex, of canon) as “an exclusively unitary [male] proposition” (Fraser 176) and invites—no, more than that, dares—students to treat the text as an action in the world (repeated/revised/spoken/scrawled/unwound/rewound) rather than a commodity (bought/sold/explicated/owned). Texts like Jen Bervin’s *Nets*, Mary Ruefle’s *A Little White Shadow*, Sina Queyras’s “*The Waves, an unmaking*,” and Rosmarie Waldrop’s *The Reproduction of Profiles* flaunt the routine, disciplined readings proscribed by genre and illustrate the danger of embracing anything—genre, sex, self—by definition. As E. M. Cioran writes, “To embrace a thing by definition . . . is to reject that thing, to render it insipid and superfluous, to annihilate it” (7).

By resisting our instinct for definition, categorization, and classification, revision incites a subjective crisis and incubates a schizophrenic point of view. When, for example, a twentieth-century female writer erases the moral subjectivity from an eighteenth-century conduct manual, she not only interrogates the relationship between language and the sexed, gendered body. She also challenges *who* has the social sanction to define the larger reality into which one’s everyday experiences must fit in order that one’s sexuality and gender be reckoned “proper.” Likewise, when a twenty-first century poet palimpsests

the autobiography and erotic love from Shakespeare’s sonnets, she undermines popularly held assumptions about the Bard’s sexuality and about who has the cultural authority to dictate what the sonnets “mean” and how they determine the identity of their author.⁴ Revision raises a number of useful and necessary questions, including: Who am I, and how do I relate to the world around me? Do I create myself, or am I a social construct? And, in turn, how does language create the world? How is language created by the world? What is the relationship between who I think I am and the language I use to express myself? Is it possible to separate self from language?

The ambition of these questions shapes my approach to the subsequent sections of this essay, in which I offer specific strategies for teaching *Nets*, *A Little White Shadow*, “*The Waves, an unmaking*,” and *The Reproduction of Profiles* as revisionist texts that have been informed by feminism and its cultural critique. Through a performative approach to pedagogy, I hope to show that these texts have relevance beyond the specific milieu of the English course and might be taught in other disciplines (such as women’s studies, history, culture studies, and other interdisciplinary courses). My sometimes successful and sometimes unsuccessful attempts to teach students to approach reading as a form of cultural resistance are open-ended: they are a part of the process by which I teach myself to create a classroom that is an “imaginative site” where, rather than dallying in “speculative intellectual discourse,” students, instructors, and texts collaborate in finding maximum freedom within existing constraints of language, genre, gender, sexuality, and self (Altieri 56, 57).

directions for reading: 1

Ideally, my emphasis on reading as an “event of the making” will encourage students to treat the poem as “a hammock for swinging and a game for playing, the way that the cats play. Claw it, chew it, rearrange it and at bedtime it’s still a ball of string full of knots” (Head 91). We would approach the text with “the attitude toward learning of a child acquiring language: a powerful and pleasurable combination of work and play” (Mullen 284). I thus devote the first half of the course to erasure poetics, focusing on Bervin’s *Nets* and Ruefle’s *A Little White Shadow*. I pair these two erasures specifically because, with one foot in a pre-existing masculine text and one foot in feminine expression, they perform the production of self “while simultaneously refusing the necessary average clarity of a singular, gendered self” (Carr n.pag.). These texts, moreover, move in opposite directions; Ruefle—a well-known and respected American poet—resurrects a forgotten text, moving it from the margins back into the fringes of canonical discourse. Bervin, in contrast, intervenes in Shakespeare’s sonnets, moving a canonical text into the more marginal realm of “women’s” expression.

Erasure is a form of “reductive poetics” that concerns itself with “the deliberate removal (or covering over) of words on the page” (MacDonald n.pag.). Erasure poetics physically transforms (through various methods, including but not limited to “White Out,” strike out, and cutting and pasting) received texts. It is an illicit, deviant imitation of the dueling processes of decay and renewal that take place constantly, all around us. As Travis MacDonald writes in “A Brief History of Erasure Poetics,” “[u]nderneath the pavement,

behind newspaper headlines, on paste-layered billboards and graffiti-laden walls, our communal landscape is continuously peeling away and papering over itself” (n.pag.). Erasure poetics mimics the ways in which our linguistic residue is replaced, renewed, and reimagined by the forces of nature and culture. By intervening in these processes and by artificially turning the canon into compost, erasure texts underscore the ways in which literature has been appropriated for commercial and political purposes, as a means of dictating communal discourse. Erasure poetics by female writers, moreover, underscores the ways in which literature has been embezzled, misappropriated, and hijacked to serve the purposes of the masculinist discourses that have dictated so much of our Western culture.

In discussions of Bervin’s and Ruefle’s erasures, I emphasize the poet’s process of writing over the product of the finished poem, asking students to engage with the physical and mental activity involved in the making. I want them to consider that a political or ethical commitment (however un- or sub-consciously) shapes any reading. I want them to think through the ways in which the political and ethical commitments of contemporary female poets shape their decision to reinterpret a particular source text. Not only the eye and the ear and the intellect—but also imagination, memory, and desire—combine in the making of the text. Real writers and real readers are, in other words, subjects in history rather than mere subjects of a single text (de Lauretis 7).

I start the course with *Nets*, because it is the most “accessible” text and because Bervin leaves a particularly useful trace of her writing process in the working note at the end of her text:

I stripped Shakespeare's sonnets bare to the "nets" to make the space of the poems open, porous, possible—a divergent else-where. When we write poems, the history of poetry is with us, pre-inscribed in the white of the page; when we read or write poems, we do it with or against this palimpsest. (n.pag.)

The resulting poems are, indeed, palimpsests; Shakespeare's words hover in their entirety in a light grey type around Bervin's poems, cradling the emboldened words within a ghost-like embrace. The visual presentation of these short lyrics thus echoes the questions implicit in Bervin's working note: What "power" does the individual reader wield when confronted by the influence of other readers and of the cultural production and reproduction of the text (the text, in other words, as public commodity: pre-inscribed)? Does the text contain something, some inadvertent, inadmissible meaning "sealed off from the claims" of culture (Naylor 106)? And, by extension, does the self?

By writing, literally, within the social space of a canonical literary text, Bervin renders literal the ways in which readers always participate in the production of signification to some degree: selecting certain parts of the text while ignoring others, activating particular codes of meaning making at the expense of other strategies, and adhering to given protocols of interpretation. Bervin's palimpsests derail the given text that the English speaking and reading world ostensibly "knows." They model a strategy of productive, generous mis-reading with undeniable feminist implications. The Shakespearean sonnets are infamous for their subversions of the conventional homosocial lyric triangle: "a male 'I' who speaks to a postulated, loosely male 'us' about a beloved 'she'"

(DuPlessis 71). To change, confuse, complicate or otherwise alter the assumed relationships among these pronouns is, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis has argued, "to jostle, if only slightly," assumptions about sex, self, and the sonnet (71). While reading *Nets*, we are—figuratively—jostled. Our reading bounces back and forth between Bervin's emboldened words and Shakespeare's ghostly nets. As we choose which words to read and which to leave out, we, in turn, re-create our own sonnets.

Recent scholarship has questioned the assumptions history has made about Shakespeare's sonnets. Although, for example, the Dark Lady/Fair Youth division settled upon by Edmund Malone in 1780 artificially highlights the significance of gender, Shakespeare's sonnets in fact markedly *lack* gendered pronouns. Bervin's erasures further underscore gender as a process proceeding through experience. In "Sonnet 20," for example (the sonnet most often cited in debates about Shakespeare's homoeroticism), the painted false woman and controlling man fade, while "master-mistress of my/ shifting/ by /adding /nothing" (Bervin n.pag.) is emboldened. The first person possessive literally shifts in the hyphen between "master" and "mistress." The distinction between the two, Bervin's erasure insists, must be constantly re-negotiated. Gender, self, sex, and genre become, in Bervin's revisions, "a weed of small worth /asked / to be new made" (n.pag.).

Bervin's nets also challenge what a sonnet is and how it should be read. The sonnet is often taught within the rubric of the rationalizing structure of argument, as a tidy closed form. As Bervin's erasures of Shakespeare's sonnet illustrate, however, the sonnet can also be a "volatile, sometimes violent instrument . . . immediately

a figure for the conflicted mind” (Volkman 55). The turn in Shakespeare’s sonnets often subverts the “resolute character of [their] syntax and the fixed rigor of [their] rhyme scheme,” embodying a conflicted stance towards the relationships between emotion and expression (Volkman 55). Bervin’s text strips away the sonnets’ rational skeleton to expose these internal contradictions, to lay bare the individual anguish inhabiting the form.

I want to underscore how commodification leads to misreadings of Shakespeare’s sonnets as well as his sexuality. I therefore pair Bervin’s palimpsests with Jolene Edgar’s article from the December 2006 issue of *Real Simple*, advertising “classic,” “elegant,” and “versatile” red lipstick “everyone can wear” (“yes you”) (119). The article, titled “The Right Red,” quotes the tomb-side lamentations that preface Romeo’s suicide—“Beauty’s ensign yet/ Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks”—to sell what Edgar claims is the “little black dress of makeup” and the “fastest way to appear sophisticated and pulled together” (119). I pass out photocopies of Shakespeare’s version of Romeo’s speech and ask students to consider the relationship between the original Shakespearean context and the article’s claim that “you’ll be singing its [red lipstick’s] praises in no time” (120). Finally, I ask students to consider what political or ethical commitments might be shaping these appropriations; are, for example, Bervin’s or Edgar’s appropriations “better”? I ask these questions because I want students to consider that every reading is partial, a kind of betrayal, an incomplete rendering, only one of any number of potential interventions. I want them to consider the mistaken ways in which so many of us “know” the Bard, in which the

(lower case) man has become the (upper case) Homo- (or Bi-) sexual Poet. I want them to understand the ways in which authority is transferred from the text and its author to the often-misguided interests of Culture-at-Large.

I end our discussion of *Nets* by dividing students into groups and assigning each one of the original sonnets erased by Bervin. I ask students to imagine that they are a marketing team for a major cosmetic company. Their task is to create an advertisement campaign that uses the given sonnet to launch a new make-up. Their ultimate task is to “sell” the campaign to me, the head of marketing. We end this class with a discussion of how students’ readings of the poem changed when they had a specific goal—for example, selling a cosmetic—in mind. The objective of this collaborative exercise is threefold. First, it asks students to create their own misreading and thereby actively experience the thought processes by which a literary text is “successfully” or “appropriately” commodified. Secondly, I wanted students to perform the role of the re-creator who adapts the text for “non-literary” ends, who transfers the text from one discourse (poetry) to another (marketing). Finally, I wanted to encourage students to begin to see Susan Geritz and Mary Margaret Sloan’s characterization of “truth” and “meaning” as folded over, one onto the other, so that some of the words get stuck, “as if they were wet . . . or more alive and would come free,” as if “a fluid surface full of juxtapositions and collisions and swirls . . . like an ocean, in the sense that they don’t lend themselves to a linear, determined kind of construction” (qtd. in Fraser 174). Students were also put in the position of manipulating the source text with a particular goal in mind.

In most instances, they chose to “mis-read” the text in order to appropriate it for their very practical purposes.

Students found this exercise remarkably “easy.” That is to say, they were surprised that they were able to translate Shakespeare’s sonnets so quickly into ad-speak. We were therefore able to talk, in preparation for more “difficult” texts, about the significance of process: which words does the writer choose to use, and which, in turn, does the reader choose to use? We were also able to discuss the differences between Bervin’s and Edgar’s appropriations: Bervin (though subversively) pays homage while Edgar assaults, contributing to our cultural misperceptions of Shakespeare’s texts. Bervin’s citation of Shakespeare complicates the notion of authority while Edgar’s removes its authority (without actually *changing* Shakespeare’s text). Bervin’s palimpsests rupture the value-systems and hierarchies of the original in order to assist readers in thinking more originally, more playfully, and more subjunctively. Edgar’s advertisement, in contrast, closes down our reading of the original. It encourages a false reading that merely imitates without the pleasure of creativity.

This discussion transitions into an introduction to Ruefle’s Wite-Out in *A Little White Shadow*, which are slap-happy, helter-skelter, “wild reading[s]” that revel in the mis-constructed, de-constructed, and un-instructed (Andrews 54). Over tea-stained and age-burnt pages, Ruefle’s use of Wite-Out is merciless and appears haphazardly applied, at times completely obfuscating the original prose, at others allowing white-smearred ghosts to surface and re-submerge. The Wite-Out literally obliterates certain parts of the source text, while leaving others intact. The Wite-Outs

are sloppy and merciless—almost, one might say, childish. As I have argued in a recent *HOW2* article, “with its competing visual contexts (completely obliterated, partially obliterated, and unobliterated), *A Little White Shadow* is true to its title, operating on the level of shadow: the text is self-consciously partial, shifting beneath the writer’s hand and the reader’s gaze, simultaneously uncovering and recovering, restless, transient, and transitive” (Carr n.pag.). *A Little White Shadow* foregrounds the processes of intervention and interpretation involved in any reading—of text, of self, of sex, of history. The tension between what can be read and what can’t, between what remains and what has been erased, encourages a bifocal, investigative reading. *A Little White Shadow* has literally disappeared from the literary canon and is un-traceable, so we can only—based on Ruefle’s revision—speculate as to its content. Ruefle’s erasure thus exemplifies what I mean by a “powerful combination of work and play”; with a child’s exuberance, Ruefle defiantly resurrects a text that was originally intended to limit women’s behavior in the public sphere.

According to the copyright pages, Ruefle’s source text is a nineteenth-century etiquette novel, written for the benefit of a summer home for working girls. Before students read the text, I set aside some time for historical contextualization because the source text itself is unavailable, because the conduct novel is such a peculiar, hybrid—bastardized, even—genre, and because the Victorian era has, in the wake of so much recent revisionist work, become a Myth of itself. From the Victorian era and the form of the conduct manual, we receive the myth of “the domestic angel in the house.” Always on

display, the angel is conscious of social standards, ever striving to appear “natural,” serene, efficient, and empathetic despite the pressures of the everyday (cf. Vickers and Eden ix; Foster 9; Carr n. pag.). In 1839, for example, Sarah Stickney Ellis published *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*, which defines the “domestic ideology” as a widely accepted theory of social roles and separate spheres of activity and influence for Victorian middle-class men and women. Women are clothed in moral beauty, protected against the world’s corrupting influence; they are selfless, disinterested, and spiritually pure. Women’s poetry, as a consequence, is generally associated with conventional piety, didactic feeling, emotions, and sentiment. By the turn of the twentieth century and the end of the Victorian era, however, liberal feminism is emerging and women writers and thinkers are arguing for women’s liberation from the domestic sphere.

I thus pair *A Little White Shadow* with two essays on poetics and gender: Rae Armantrout’s “Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity” and the first six pages of Adrienne Rich’s “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.” In class, I ask students to use the Rich essay to create a list of what feminist revision “does.” I use Rich’s essay because it generates a long list of questions, such as the following: What is the sacredness of the canon and why is it overwhelmingly masculine? What are the connections between our sexual lives and political institutions? How has language trapped us, and why is naming a male prerogative? Who speaks for whom, and who, more importantly, is being spoken to? How, finally, has the male gaze framed women’s texts? Rich

defines revision as “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (18). Revision is, for Rich, “more than a chapter of cultural history: it is an act of survival” (19). We must, Rich writes, “know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on tradition but to break its hold over us” (19). Rich’s vision of revision is activist and interventionist, a strategy for, through derailment, deviation, dislocation, and omission, reconstructing male-dominated discourses. According to Rich, this is not a *choice*; it is an *imperative*. Here I introduce students to Ron Silliman’s arguments about conventional techniques and the distinction between groups that have been the subject of history and groups that have been the objects of history. I want to remind them that, while Rich’s arguments might seem worlds away, they remain pertinent. I use Silliman’s statements to illustrate the continued divide between men’s and women’s writing and between the audiences who are assumed to read “men’s” and “women’s” texts.

In our discussions of the Armantrout essay, in contrast, we focus on “metonymic connections” (292) and the question of clarity as an essential aspect of the feminist text. We use American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Lyn Hejinian’s definition of metonymy, which “preserves context, foregrounds relationship” (147). The metonymic world is, as Hejinian writes, “unstable”: “[metonymy] moves attention from thing to thing; its principle is combination rather than selection” (147). As a playful transposition of the original text, Ruefle’s “White Outs” embody the unpredictability of the metonym, the vast associative networks through which the text might echo, once

released from pre-established and inflexible reading protocols.

In “Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity,” Armantrout challenges the “still . . . widely held opinion that formal experimentation is the province (privilege?) of a ruling [masculine] elite” (287). She responds to American Language poet Ron Silliman’s argument that poets who do not “identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history . . . —women, people of color, sexual minorities . . . —have a manifest political need to have their stories told” and therefore their writing appears “much more conventional” (63). Armantrout asks: is the conventional “univocal, more or less plain-spoken, short narrative often culminating in a sort of epiphany . . . best equipped to raise feminist issues?” (288, 289). Do “immediately accessible” poems tell our (female) story better? Through close readings of Sharon Olds’s “The One Girl at the Boy’s Party,” chapters 120 and 171 from Hejinian’s *Oxata: A Short Russian Novel*, and two of Lorine Niedecker’s untitled short poems, Armantrout illustrates the difference between “conventional” or “mainstream” poetries and “experimental,” “oppositional,” or “innovative” poetries, arguing that, as outsiders, women are, in fact, “well positioned to appreciate the constructedness of the identity that is based on identification and, therefore, to challenge the contemporary poetic convention of the unified Voice” (288).⁵ To end our discussion of this essay, we compare the list of questions she offers in lieu of a conclusion to the list culled from Rich’s earlier essay:

What is the meaning of clarity? Is something clear when you understand it or when it looms up, startling you? Is

readability equivalent to clarity? What is the relation of readability to convention? How might conventions of legibility enforce social codes? Does so-called experimental writing seek a new view of the self? Would such a view be liberating? Might experimental writing and feminism be natural allies [. . .] One might value a poem that could present the conditions of women’s lives, but whose life is a single narrative or an extended metaphor? Metaphorically speaking, such poems are fenced yards. Is this the kind of control we should aspire to? What’s on the other side of that fence? (296)

Because Ruefle’s source text is a conduct manual, this is a particularly appropriate time for thinking through the ways that we have unwittingly been performing our genders. So we move from the specific text under consideration to a more general conversation about sexuality, gender, and standards of conduct. We spend five minutes of free association listing all the rules that govern how we act at home. We spend another five minutes generating rules for how we act at the university. Finally, we spend five minutes listing standards of conduct for a job we currently have or have had. As students share their lists, I create six columns on the board: under the rubric “woman,” home, school, and work and, under the rubric “man,” home, school, and work. We talk about clarity, not only in relation to the textual body but also in relation to our own bodies. We ask ourselves if our bodies—and by extension our selves—are “clear” or “readable” and how, through the rules listed on the board, they come to be “clear” and “readable” in problematic and pre-determined ways. We discuss how these rules help us to recognize ourselves as gendered. I ask: how is

that different from the ways in which we are biologically sexed? This question is nothing “new” to feminist thinkers; however, for many of my students, this is the first time they have thought through the differences between sex and gender and the ways that their bodies are never, in fact—even in the twenty-first century—their own. Based on each list on the board, we attempt to create an extended metaphor or single narrative for “woman” and another for “man.” We pay particular attention to where the metaphor or narrative breaks down. What in each list isn’t like the others? Students spend ten minutes writing in response to the metaphor or narrative we have created. Often, students suggest metaphors that refer to animals: for example, men are beasts of prey and women are herbivores (a problematic distinction that helps them see the flaws in their own assumptions about what it means to be a man or a woman).

There are so many feminisms and I—like feminist science historian Donna Haraway—am concerned that “[i]t has become difficult to name one’s feminism by a single adjective—or even to insist in every circumstance upon the noun. Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute” (155). I believe it is necessary to introduce students to multiple—conflicting, even—feminisms so that they understand there is not just one feminism but many. The problem, indeed, is choice. I therefore end this unit by introducing students to Hélène Cixous’s and Julia Kristeva’s theories of the feminine and of female writing. I choose French feminist thinkers because their work has been so influential on contemporary innovative women writers and because their theories of gender and of the woman’s text are so radically different. We speculate how Cixous’s definition of femininity as

“lack, negativity, absence of meaning, irrationality, chaos, darkness—in short, as non-Being” (Moi 165)—might translate into creative practices like Ruefle’s use of Wite-Out. In contrast, we consider Kristeva’s theories of marginality, subversion, and dissidence. Working from Kristeva’s arguments that “nothing in women’s past or present publications seems to allow us to affirm that there is a feminine writing” (qtd. in Moi 162–63), we discuss whether it is in fact possible to identify recurrent stylistic and thematic characteristics of women’s writing and whether Ruefle’s text bears these characteristics.

Specifically, we apply Kristeva’s attitudes of feminism to our reading of *A Little White Shadow*:

1. Women demand equal access to the symbolic order. Liberal feminism. Equality.
2. Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference. Radical feminism. Femininity extolled.
3. Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical. Sexual identity challenged. (Moi 162)

This discussion raises several questions that we add to our list: if the third attitude is the current (as Kristeva argues it ought to be) feminism, how is or isn’t Ruefle writing out of a metaphysical protest? Does her text reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine? What is the current, twenty-first century state of the dichotomy between masculine and feminine? What of Stickney’s “domestic ideology” remains? How does or doesn’t Ruefle perform a subversive feminism in the act of Witing Out a Victorian conduct novel? We learn, in answering these questions, to appreciate the differences among, as Jed

Rasula has usefully outlined, the politics *as*, the politics *of*, and the politics *in* the poem. We learn to question the relationships between feminist politics and texts by women and to avoid the dangers of prescribing Ruefle's text as feminist simply because it was written by a woman and happens to destroy a text conducting feminine behavior.

I begin our subsequent debates on the politics in/as/of *A Little White Shadow* with an exercise inspired by Jena Osman's "Gumshoe Poetry" exercise. The exercise engages students in the material stuff of the text, re-defining writing as an act of finding (rather than an act of inspiration) and encouraging students to treat texts as "objects of possibility" (rather than as the consequence of authorial intent) and to consider how words achieve significance through discovery (Osman 249, 239, 245). I give each student a bottle of Wite-Out and (looking forward to Queryras's "*The Waves*, an unmaking") a page torn from Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, with the instructions: "find a poem inside the page" (Osman 249). I repeat the exercise with pages torn from *The Rules*. This exercise is, arguably, the most "successful." Even those students who have, up to this point, maintained a skeptical attitude towards erasure begin to appreciate the difficult task of creating something new from something found. Students overwhelmingly feel that erasing *The Rules* results in "better" poems and that finding a poem within its pages is "easier." The exercise thus challenges their notions of what makes a text poetic and shows them one of the ways in which "the writing process is inseparable from the act of reading, of attending to how words gesture and point (Osman 249). Reading thus, as Osman argues, extends beyond the

classroom into a form of protest—in which the seemingly seamless, unceasing flow of language on louvered billboards, in television commercials, from loudspeakers, through cellphones, unfurling in a flag, on the sides of city buses, from the tail of an aeroplane, is disrupted and refigured in a celebration of the "interpretative ambiguities" which are "the only possible/ negotiation with reality/ and the ways in which language pictures or captures it" (Lauterbach 42). Why? Because to embrace anything by definition is to reject it.

directions for reading: 2

"All reading, of course," Craig Dworkin argues, "involves the reader's production of signification to some degree; the point is that such production is too often routine and disciplined by pre-established and inflexible protocols" (11). In the first half of the course, I am focusing on undermining those protocols and positing an alternative kind of signification, which focuses on process rather than product. I choose texts that physically foreground reading as a transformative process and that call attention to the tension between the "original" and the "revised" texts. I teach students by example to read in, round, and on (and on). In the second half of the course, I choose texts that, like Queryras's "*The Waves*, an unmaking" and Waldrop's *The Reproduction of Profiles*, are more "difficult." In these texts, the borders between original and revised dissolve; the informing movement of the writer's mind is less visible and, as a result, the intertextual relationship less explicit. Queryras and Waldrop do not erase (leaving the source text, if only partially, present); rather, they appropriate and reassemble textual fragments so as to form a whole that sub-

sumes its artifice. These texts thus ask students to do more work to untangle the competing discourses at play and to excavate the political and ethical commitments at stake in the act of revision.

In contrast to Bervin and Ruefle, Queyras and Waldrop are, moreover, much more overtly feminist writers, who hope to dissolve the constraints of inherited gender categories and expectations. Waldrop writes from the liberal feminism of the 1960s into twenty-first century metaphysical feminism. Queyras writes out of a contemporary feminism informed by the cultural critique initiated by Waldrop and peers such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Kathleen Fraser, and Nicole Brossard (to name only a few). Both deliberately craft “feminine” forms that challenge the constructed limits of intelligibility. Waldrop and Queyras literally write over and through canonical texts from the Western literary tradition. They write with the belief that language, and by extension self, and by extension sex, is not something one can possess and make one’s own. Language, self, and sex are always already and must be embraced as such. What we can hope for then is not originality but permutation, a liberating transformation of preexisting discursive constraints.

In “*The Waves*, an unmaking,” for example, Queyras undertakes the project of untangling the six narrative voices in Woolf’s experimental, enigmatic novel *The Waves*. I pair the prose poems that result from this ambitious project with Woolf’s original text; I want students to be hyper-conscious of Queyras’ poems as readings, as a potential intervention in the source text, a performance of the “kinds of emotions and lines of connection that might follow if we identify fully with the speaking presence of the text” (Altieri 56).

We read Woolf’s text first, discussing how, through stream of consciousness, multiple viewpoints, and soliloquy, Woolf explores concepts of individuality, self, sex, and community. In small groups, students attempt to untangle the six characters who speak in the novel. Students’ task is to create a table that organizes the colors, symbols, events, and relationships associated with each speaker chronologically, charting the development of the character across the narrative arc of the novel: childhood, school, university, dinner, death, love, middle age, Hampton Court, and summation. We classify the characters loosely: Bernard is a storyteller, who seeks summation; Louis is an outsider, who seeks acceptance; Neville is a loner, who seeks fulfilling sexual relationships; Jinny is a socialite, who relies on her physical beauty for self definition and social connections; Susan is a mother, who seeks refuge from the urban clamor of the city; Rhoda is a loner, suspicious of compromise; and Percival is the silent symbol of Britain’s imperialist hopes.

Finally, with Woolf’s text in mind, we consider the ways in which these characters are not in fact separate but rather, as Woolf herself wrote in her diary, facets of a single consciousness. If Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda, and Percival are in fact facets of a single consciousness, then that consciousness can be labeled neither feminine nor masculine. It exists in some middle ground between the two, which we will call what? We have no answer for this question but, by considering Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda, and Percival as a composite character, we appreciate the need to ask it and, in turn, to query our own assumptions about a binary world. We think through the ways in which we might apply the resulting composite char-

acter to our exploration of sexual textual-ity, asking ourselves, for example: how does the conflation of male and female characters reject the dichotomy of masculine and feminine? In what ways do the male characters perform femininity? And vice versa: in what ways do the female characters perform masculinity? What does the destabilization of a fixed and singular identity mean for our notions of sex and gender? What are the differences between “male” (natural) and “masculine” (cultural) and “female” (natural) and “feminine” (cultural)? We begin to think through the distinction between biological and social constructions of who we assume we are when we use words like “girl” and “boy” and “man” and “woman” and to play with Woolf’s notion of the “restless searcher” that exists within each individual.

Because the generic difficulties of this novel—or, in Woolf’s terms, “playpoem”—are so infamous, we end our study of *The Waves* with a debate in which we extend our conversations about gender to a discussion of genre. Just as it breaks down the boundaries between individuals, Woolf’s innovative text blurs traditional distinctions between prose and poetry. I divide the class in half and give them the following instructions for our Oxford-style debate:

You have 15 minutes to prepare.

Step One: The Opening Proposition/ Opposition

Start by identifying your major points about *The Waves*. Why, specifically, is it poetry or prose? (Proposition: poetry. Opposition: prose.) Imagine that you are outlining the body paragraphs of an essay defending your argument. Organize the strongest of these points into a few sentences. (Save a few for later!)

Step Two: The Second Proposition/ Opposition

Discuss what you think poetry and prose are. (Proposition: poetry. Opposition: prose.) Create a definition of poetry/prose that everyone in the group feels comfortable with. This will, inevitably, involve conflict and compromise—be patient.

Step Three: Choose a speaker for the opening proposition. Choose a different speaker for the second proposition.

I will serve as moderator for our Oxford-Style Debate:

- 1) Opening Proposition—2–3 minutes
- 2) Opening Opposition—2–3 minutes
- 3) Speakers from the floor—each speaker is allowed 30 sec.

At this point, you may raise your hand if you would like to speak. Wait until I have called on you. I will try to alternate between proposition and opposition as evenly as possible.

- 4) Second Proposition—2–3 minutes
- 5) Second Opposition—2–3 minutes
- 6) Speakers from the floor—each speaker is allowed 30 sec.

At this point, you may raise your hand if you would like to speak. Wait until I have called on you. I will try to alternate between proposition and opposition as evenly as possible.

We end our debate by discussing genre (like gender) as a label, a social construct: both the product and process of its representations. Genre is a way of selling a text to readers. Are we, we ask ourselves, more likely to purchase *The Waves* under the label “poetry” or under the label “prose”?

Which label does the text fulfill most satisfactorily? How do our expectations of the text change based on the label?

As we turn to Queyras's poem "*The Waves*, an unmaking," we think first about Queyras's decision to translate Woolf's text into poetry and, more specifically, into prose poetry. "*The Waves*, an unmaking," is, for many of my students, their first experience reading prose poetry. Therefore, we spend some time thinking through what this young hybrid genre might mean and how we can relate it back to our conversations about gender and sex. We consider the following definitions by contemporary practitioners of the genre:

1. "Writing a prose poem is a bit like trying to catch a fly in a dark room. The fly probably isn't even there, the fly is inside your head, still, you keep tripping over and bumping into things in hot pursuit. The prose poem is a burst of language following a collision with a large piece of furniture" (Simic, "Poetry of Village Idiots" 7).
2. "Think of the prose poem as a box, perhaps the lunch box dad brought home from work at night. What's inside? Some waxed paper, a banana peel, half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Not so much a hint of how the day has gone, perhaps, but the magic for having made a mysterious journey and returned. The dried out pb&j tastier than anything made fresh" (Jenkins 1).
3. The prose poem is a "cast-iron aeroplane that can actually fly, mainly because its pilot does not care if it does or not. [. . .] It's all done from the cockpit. The joy stick is made of flesh. The pilot sits on an old kitchen chair before a table covered with an oilcloth. The coffee cups and spoons seem to be the controls . . . But the pilot is asleep. You

are right, this aeroplane seems to fly because the pilot dreams" (Edson 38).

4. The prose poem is a literary hybrid: "an impossible amalgamation of lyric poetry, anecdote, fairy tale, allegory, joke, journal entry, and many other kinds of prose. Prose poems are the culinary equivalent of peasant dishes, like paella and gumbo, which bring together a great variety of ingredients and flavors, and which in the end, thanks to the art of the cook, somehow blend. Except, the parallel is not exact. Prose poetry does not follow a recipe. The dishes it concocts are unpredictable and often vary from poem to poem" (Simic, "A Long Course" 15).

We then discuss why a self-identified feminist poet might choose to invest in the prose poem. Finally, in small groups, students imagine that they are Sina Queyras and write a short paragraph (five to seven sentences) exploring a metaphor for the prose poem. After sharing our definitions, we turn from form to content.

What we first notice about Queyras's unmaking, of course, is a marked lack of labels; though Queyras identifies her sequence of prose poems as a revision of *The Waves*, she does not use gendered pronouns or identify the speakers. This technique further complicates the question of communal subjectivity raised by Woolf's source text. It is therefore our task as readers to decide *who* is speaking and *why* and whether we think the speaker is masculine or feminine and why. We approach this task as both writers and readers. We start by reading a short excerpt from Woolf's *Jacob's Room* that shows character through setting. In a single paragraph Woolf draws a portrait of Jacob through the objects he owns: cars from societies with little raised crescents, coats of arms, and initials; lives of the Duke of Wellington; a Greek dic-

tionary; *A Manual of the Diseases of the Horse*; shabby slippers; a photograph of his mother. I then ask students to pick one of Queyras's poems and to decide which of Woolf's characters is named by the poem. Starting with Queyras's poem, students describe the character by imagining a place inhabited or regularly frequented by that character, keeping in mind a brief set of "rules":

1. Do not say anything directly about the person, or the event, which is in fact the subject of the place. This place is a stage without the actors on it, the camera panning before the action in a movie starts. In other words, no names and no pronouns!
2. Use any "props" you like: furniture, clothes, belongings, weather, climate, pants, rocks, smells, sounds, anything. Focus on any item or detail that reveals the character or that suggests what has happened or will happen to that character.
3. Bring all the senses into play. Consider senses other than sight.
4. Remember, this is a narrative piece, part of a story. Everything you describe is there in order to further that story. A mere inventory of articles won't do and will bore the reader. Every detail must tell (le Guin 132–33).

This exercise is one of the most successful; students' work is imaginative, engaged, and sensitive to the originals. This exercise also gives us a chance to return to questions of sexuality and gender, considering how students, taking their cue from Queyras, choose to convey maleness or femaleness without obvious markers like names and pronouns.

In *The Reproduction of Profiles* Waldrop writes "[l]ike old idols, which we no longer adore and throw into the current to drift

where they still" (*Curves* 7). The goal is not to disinfect or to purify the pronoun but to free ourselves to read for the leap/turn, to move directly from Queyras's unmaking into the strange grammar of Waldrop's prose poems, as language gap-gardens in, over, around, and through many possible meanings. Because I want to pay particular attention to grammar as a form of cultural resistance, and because Waldrop's sentence is even stranger than Queyras's, I begin our discussions of *The Reproduction of Profiles* by introducing students to paragrammatics as a strategy for reading texts that put words in the "wrong" grammatical places. I define paragrammatics in post-structuralist terms: "the cleaving of the material signifier (the spatial and temporal distribution of letters on the page, or vibrations in the air) and signified meaning" (Dworkin 92). In less technical terms, paragrammatics involves a syntactic flexibility that pushes punctuation and the parts of speech it regulates to increasingly expressive ends. Paragrammatics elides articles and contractions. Or it transforms nouns into verbs and vice versa, verbs into nouns. It treats the run-on sentence as a labyrinth of paths rather than, simply, incorrect. Paragrammatics, in short, asks us to re-create our own grammatic and syntactic rules for reading.

I start with Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," which puts the wrong words in the right grammatical places. As we discuss the meaning of "Jabberwocky" I remind students that we can make sense of Carroll's nonsense words through the grammar of the sentence. Because it adheres to conventional grammatical rules, "Jabberwocky" is, in fact, despite the strangeness of its language, "readable." Waldrop's text, in contrast, is more dis-ordered and, presumably, less "readable."

Deformance is thus a particularly useful reading strategy for *The Reproduction of Profiles*. As Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels have argued, deformance deliberately accepts the failure of interpretive accuracy, opens reading to the poem's variable self, and accepts that meaning in a poem dwells in the possible (style) rather than the intelligible (ideas) (154). Deformance allows readers to move past conceptual analysis to performative operations that treat the poem as an action rather than an object. These performative operations include:

1. reordering (e.g., reading backwards)
2. isolating (e.g., reading only verbs or other parts of speech)
3. altering (e.g., altering spatial organization, typography or punctuation or adding or subtracting line breaks)
4. adding (e.g., double-spacing the text and writing between the lines, or, as Tom Philips' *The Humument*, drawing over the source text)

McGann and Samuels argue that, by putting the reader into an idiosyncratic relation to the work and emphasizing the reader's position as a reactive writer, deformance opens "difficult" texts to interpretive possibilities and liberates readers to celebrate the possible (style) rather than the intelligible (ideas).

In class we use deformative techniques to read Waldrop's third poem in "Part Two: Inserting the Mirror" from *The Reproduction of Profiles* ("Androgynous instinct is one kind of complexity"; *Curves* 30). Half of the students isolate nouns and the other half isolate verbs. I ask students who are reading nouns to think about their sensory experience of the poem: what the poem looks like, what it smells/sounds like, how it tastes/feels. Is the

poem abstract or concrete? Is it, in other words, thing heavy or idea heavy? I ask the students who are reading verbs to think about the kinetic experience of the poem and how it moves: What propels it from one sentence to the next, one line to the next? Is the poem energetic or dormant? I tell students that they should consider their deformances as passages: in the sense of ambulation, of a journey, of traversing in the sense of scaffolding, a spine, what the poem looks like under black light. I ask them, therefore, to use Wite-Out to keep the words in the same relative positions, so that they can get a visual (as well as sonic and semantic) sense of the poem. Students' erasures enhance the significance of white space and expose the importance of individual words. Our goal is not to "get" the poem but to consider the effectiveness of the experiment and to explore the possibility of meaning as residue.

It is not until we have finished our discussions of deformance that I introduce Waldrop's source texts: Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and Franz Kafka's "Description of a Struggle." I explain that Waldrop relied on Wittgenstein's propositions as a source of content, happily quoting and misquoting, exploring the "lawn of the fertile middle" as she grafted excerpts from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to her own material (*Curves* xi). Kafka's story, in contrast, provides the narrative frame: a story in which one male character bonds with another by talking about his necessarily absent girlfriend. Waldrop, however, inverts the narrative so "the man [is] telling a woman about another woman" ("Conversation" n.pag.). As a culminating creative exercise, I assign students to write a poem taken from two textual sources they are

reading or have read for other—non-English, non-Creative Writing—courses. I instruct students to read one source text for content and the other for form. I borrow my goals for this exercise from Jena Osman to encourage “students to actively understand the relation of form to content,” to consider how “texts communicate differently” when placed in new formal contexts, and to experience how self-expression happens from reading as well as experience (239). I end with a wholly creative project because I believe, as Charles Bernstein so eloquently argues, “you can’t interpret what you don’t experience” (276).

This exercise also encourages students to apply the skills they have practiced throughout our wreading experiment to texts from other disciplines. It asks them to choose which wreading strategies to apply to non-literary texts. It allows them not only to experience the kinds of dialogue that can happen between academic disciplines but also to initiate that dialogue themselves. It teaches students to take their intuitive thinking and writing skills beyond the English classroom, to allow their new understanding of reading textual bodies to contaminate their endeavors in other disciplines.

the dream of an uncommon reader: 2

When I conceived of this course, I wanted to unsettle students’ habits of reading as well as their conceptions of gender. While teaching this course, I learned that many of my students assume that, as university-educated citizens of the twenty-first century, they have liberal and liberating notions of gender. So I had to rewind and illustrate to them the latent conservative

bias in their constructions of masculinity and femininity. I had to show them that feminism is still relevant, that gender equality has not in fact, as so many of them assume, been achieved. I also had to combat students’ reluctance to be writers, to participate actively in the process of creation. Not surprisingly, my students are comfortable in their role as consumers; their initial responses to the task of participating in the production of signification thus involved anxiety and frustration. They did not, in short, feel liberated. They felt betrayed.

So a shift happened midway through the course: we rearranged the desks in a rectangle and faced each other, as equals. We shared all of our in-class exercises. We did not, as in creative writing workshops, criticize or praise each other’s responses. Rather, we talked about our experience of the exercise. Did it open up the text? How? What did the process of writing teach us about our understanding of the text? What happens when, in the physical act of writing, we decide to commit particular ideas to paper? I completed all in-class exercises along with the students. I was honest in my responses; some exercises worked for me and some didn’t. That was irrelevant. What was relevant was *why* they worked or didn’t, and the process of trial and error through which an individual reader might become co-complicit with the text.

An attitude shift accompanied this power shift, as students realized that it wasn’t necessarily superior knowledge or higher education that allowed me to “get” difficult texts. It was simply a willingness to be active, to do work, to take risks. What they learned by the end of the course was the significance of taking risks together, of throwing off for a moment the framework of grade point averages and

scholarships and dabbling in intellectual play. They learned to celebrate temporary and transitory moments of *communitas* rather than anxiously digesting segments of knowledge into memorizable chunks that could later be retrieved for final examinations and papers.

Or, more accurately, this is what they began to learn. I taught this course over a thirteen-week term at a Canadian institution. As a result, just as we were beginning to think together, the course was over. Did I, nonetheless, succeed in unsettling students? Certainly. Students glimpsed an alternative to the universal coercive “he” and “she.” They started to think not as men and women but as “we,” as human beings whose ethical and political responsibility it is to be active participants in the discourses that shape their lives. As American poet Susan Stewart argues, “[s]cholarship can take a wrong direction or be blighted by errors of fact, but to create new knowledge scholars also have to be willing to go beyond the usual frames for thinking. While most of life presses finite requirements upon us, creative and critical work has the luxury of being an incomplete project” (215). Creative and critical work in humanities classrooms has the luxury of going beyond the obvious, beyond sense, of throwing into question what daily living forces us to accept as given. This project is inherently incomplete; it is enough, particularly for undergraduate students, simply to begin.

And what, American poet Cole Swenson asks, “[i]s the point of pursuing beyond sense?” (“Artist’s” 230). In other words, are these reading and writing strategies relevant beyond the literature classroom? Certainly. If students are to survive the onslaught of pop-up ads, cable info-tainment, reality television, and music videos,

they must learn to be flexible readers. They must be capable of shifting gears mid-reading. They must have strategies for excavating the political and ethical commitments behind *any* text they read. They must learn to renegotiate the language that is even now shaping them, that will turn them into social constructs. They need to intervene in their own processes of consumption, to rupture the value-systems that dictate how they are read by the world and, in turn, read themselves *in* and *of* the world. They must make the choice to be uncommon. After all, as Swenson argues, “sense simply does break down; we do find ourselves beyond it, and it’s often dangerous and frightening. We need to know how to negotiate this zone, and how to transform it in cases of war and fear and grief into something that won’t simply overwhelm and destroy us” (“Artist’s” 230). The wreading strategies offered in this essay do just that; they open new pathways of perception and expression and make possible the luxury—and pleasure—of the incomplete, the nonsensical, the misplaced, and the unwieldy.

NOTES

1. Special topics at the institution where I teach refer to courses that are upper level, but are not requirements for majors and that require only a basic English prerequisite. As a result, many non-English majors *choose* these courses to fulfill humanities, writing, or elective requirements.

2. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E refers to an American avant-garde group that emerged in the 1960s in opposition to what was perceived to be “conventional” or “mainstream” institutionalized poetry. It is almost impossible to make generalizations about the variety of writers who have been affiliated with this group. Writers in this group, however, tend to actively challenge the presence of a singular, autonomous, authoritative speaker behind the text and to explore the disjunction between signifier

(word) and signified (thing). Through a variety of techniques, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry downplays expressivity and emphasizes the reader's role in creating meaning.

3. Despite the struggles of those marginalized groups who have been relegated to the position of "objects of history," the widely accepted canon remains white and male. See, for example, American poet and novelist Julianna Baggott's December 2009 article in *The Washington Post*: "The Key to Literary Success? Be a Man—or Write Like One." <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/29/AR2009122902292.html>>

4. I have written extensively on these questions and on the texts that raise them in an article in *HOW2* 3:3, available at <http://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_3/performance/carr-reading-ruefle-bervin.html>.

5. Both Hejinian and Niedecker are typically regarded as "experimental" poets. *Oxota* is a novel in the form of poems that narrate Hejinian's experience of traveling in the old Soviet Union. There is, at least in the traditional sense, no plot, though there are a number of characters. Niedecker was loosely associated with the Objectivist poets, who emphasized sincerity, precision, and clarity. Niedecker's poems are, as a result, spare and imagistic.

REFERENCES

Altieri, Charles. "Intimacy and Experiment in Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge's *Empathy*." *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*. Ed. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001. 54–70.

Andrews, Bruce. *Paradise and Method: Poetry and Praxis*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996.

Armantrout, Rae. "Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity." *Artifice and Indeterminacy: An Anthology of the New Poetics*. Ed. Christopher Beach. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007. 287–96.

Bernstein, Charles. "Creative Wreading: A Primer." *Retallack and Spahr* 275–81.

Bervin, Jen. *Nets*. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2006.

Carr, Emily. "Writing out of the (never) Was and into the May (never) be . . . A Reading of Mary Ruefle's *A Little White Shadow* and Jen Bervin's *Nets*." *HOW2* 3:3 (2010): n.pag. Virginia Piper Creative Writing Center. <<http://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal>>.

Cioran, E. M. *A Short History of Decay*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: The Viking Press, 1975.

Cixous, Hélène. "Castration or Decapitation?" Trans. Annette Kuhn. *Signs* 7.1 (1981): 41–55.

———. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *New French Feminisms*. Ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron. Brighton, UK: Harvester, 1980. 245–64.

D'Agata, John. *The Next American Essay*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2002.

de Lauretis, Teresa. *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. "'Corpses of Poesy': Some Modern Poets and Some Gender Ideologies of the Lyric." *Feminist Measures*. Ed. Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Dworkin, Craig. *Reading the Illegible*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2003.

Edgar, Jolene. "The Right Red." *Real Simple* December 2006: 119–20.

Edson, Russell. "Portrait of the Writer as a Fat Man." *A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*. Ed. Stuart Frieberg, David Walker, and David Young. Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Press, 1997. 35–43.

Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey. *Troping the Body: Gender, Etiquette, Performance*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000.

Fraser, Kathleen. *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999.

Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Head, Dominic. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Hejinian, Lyn. "Strangeness." *Artifice and Indeterminacy: An Anthology of New Poetics*. Ed. Christopher Beach. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998. 140–54.

- Jenkins, Louis. *Nice Fish*. Duluth, Minn.: Holy Cow! Press, 1995.
- Kafka, Franz. *Description of a Struggle and Other Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, Malcolm Pasley, and Tania and James Stern. London: Penguin, 1982.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Lauterbach, Anne. *The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience*. New York: Penguin, 2005.
- le Guin, Ursula K. *Steering the Craft*. Portland, Ore.: The Eighth Mountain Press, 1998.
- MacDonald, Travis. "A Brief History of Erasure Poetics." *Jacket* 38 (2009): n.pag. <<http://jacketmagazine.com/38/macdonald-erasure.shtml>>.
- MacKlin, Susan. "It's a Woman's Prerogative to Change Her Mind." *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry*. Ed. Molly McQuade. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2000. 9–30.
- McGann, Jerome, and Lisa Samuels. "Deformation and Interpretation." *Retallack and Spahr* 151–80.
- McHugh, Heather. *Broken English: Poetry and Partiality*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1993.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Mullen, Harryette. "Between Jihad and McWorld: A Place for Poetry." *Retallack and Spahr* 282–92.
- Naylor, Paul. *Poetic Investigations: Singing the Holes in History*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999.
- Osman, Jena. "Gumshoe Poetry." *Retallack and Spahr* 239–50.
- Queyras, Sina. "The Waves, an unmaking." *Lemonhound*. Toronto: Coach House, 2006. 89–105.
- Rasula, Jed. *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives In American Poetry*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002.
- Retallack, Joan, and Juliana Spahr. *Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary*. New York: Palgrave, 2006.
- Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *College English* 34.1 (1972): 18–30.
- Ruefle, Mary. *A Little White Shadow*. Seattle: Wave Books, 2006.
- Shepherd, Reginald, ed. *Lyric Postmodernisms: An Anthology of Contemporary Innovative Poetries*. Denver: Counterpath, 2008.
- Simic, Charles. "The Poetry of Village Idiots." *Verse* 13.1 (1996): 7–8.
- . "A Long Course in Miracles." *Pretty Happy!* Ed. Peter Johnson. Fredonia, N.Y.: White Pine Press, 1997. 15–17.
- Silliman, Ron. "Poetry and the Politics of the Subject: A Bay Area Sampler." *Socialist Review* 18:3 (1988): 63.
- Stickney Ellis, Sarah. *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*. Gloucester, UK: Dodo Press, 2008.
- Stewart, Susan. "How I Write My Poems." *Shepherd* 214–16.
- Swenson, Cole. "Artist's Statement." *Shepherd* 229–32.
- . "Introduction." *American Hybrid*. Ed. Cole Swenson and David St. John. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009. xvii–xxvi.
- Vickers, Roy, and Jacky Eden, eds. *Conduct Literature for Women 1830–1900; Volume One: Childhood and Adolescence*. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006.
- Volkman, Karen. "Poetics Statement." *American Poets in the 21st Century: The New Poetics*. Ed. Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2007. 54.
- Waldrop, Rosmarie. "Conversation with Carole Maso and C.D. Wright." *Tripwire* 4 (2000): n.pag.
- . *Curves to the Apple: The Reproduction of Profiles, Lawn of Excluded Middle, and Reluctant Gravities*. New York: New Directions, 2006.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Jacob's Room and The Waves*. Fort Washington, Penn.: Harvest Books, 1959.