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Casting Dispersions

Revising Lyric Privacy in Simone White's *Of Being Dispersed*

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ABSTRACT: This chapter examines the refusal of privacy in Simone White's 2016 collection *Of Being Dispersed*. Writing within the lyric mode, White's defiantly public subject draws attention to the lyric's generic proximity to liberalism, in which individuation is a precondition of recognition and race is thus read as an identity rather than the effect of a social process. By comparing White's book with George Oppen's 1968 poem 'Of Being Numerous', I argue that 'dispersal' names the condition of a racialized subject whose individuation is not in the first place given, whereas 'numerousness' names an aspiration to move toward assembly from an original interiority.

KEYWORDS: liberalism; individuation; race; conceptualism; personhood; privacy; social difference

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Romanticism is nothing
but liberalism in literature.¹
Victor Hugo, *Hernani*

[Lyric's] general cogency depends
on the intensity of its individuation.²
Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*

We are cast about or away and must use
a sense of qualities as belonging to our-
selves and others to make an assay.³
Simone White, *Dear Angel of Death*

LYRIC AND LIBERAL SUBJECTS

Simone White's 2016 book *Of Being Dispersed* replaces the constitu-
tive privacy of the traditional lyric speaker with a public in which the

1 Victor Hugo, *Hernani* (Paris: Larousse, 1971), p. 30.

2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 60.

3 Simone White, *Dear Angel of Death* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018), p. 71.

subject is dispersed. The poetry's ambivalent orientation toward lyric — within yet against the form — enjoins the reader to consider the genre's risk of complicity with liberalism through its naturalization of personhood and privacy. I will begin by outlining the influence of classical liberal principles on definitions of personhood and property in US case law, and then read White's poetry for scenes of refusal. Such a refusal of privacy and individuation, I argue, exposes how the lyric subject's conventional exclusion of a public effectively forces race to be read as a property of the individual — i.e. as an identity — rather than as the effect of a social process called 'racialization'. In their constitutive secession from the public, both lyric and liberal subjects receive recognition on the condition of individuation. In White's poems, the post-Romantic lyric is first chosen for its structural homology and historical imbrication with classical liberal subjectivity; it is then exposed as a limit to theorizing the social life of race. My readings of White will focus on her 2016 book *Of Being Dispersed* and compare it with George Oppen's 1968 'Of Being Numerous'.

The Canadian sociologist C. B. MacPherson described the civic ideal of personhood elaborated by John Locke as 'possessive-individualism' — a model that not only protects individual freedom and property rights above 'the common good' but established a dialectical relationship between personhood and property.⁴ Property, according to Locke, exists only insofar as it is owned by an individual proprietor or person; likewise, personhood is defined as a 'Forensick [*sic*] Term appropriating Actions and their Merits', denoting a proprietary relation to one's own actions or labor. This definition would eventually determine the outcome of a landmark US case concerning the law's ability to recognize a right to land outside the logic of property. In *Johnson v. M'Intosh* (1823) it is precisely the Piankeshaw Indians' 'common occupancy' of the land to which they seek title that invalidates their right to ownership. Because their ownership was not private, it was not strictly property. What begins as an epistemological difference thus becomes a cause for material dispossession. Not only does the case nullify the Piankeshaws' title;

4 C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

it also places them outside of a legal framework in which recognition is conferred on individual persons and not groups. The case, which set a lasting precedent, repeatedly makes recourse to Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, containing his famous essay 'Of Property'. And yet, rather than citing any author with the specific concept of property mobilized by the court's opinion, the court dissimulates the provenance, stating that 'the measure of property acquired by occupancy is determined according to the law of nature.'⁵ US property law is thus built upon a classical liberal ideal of ownership that is speciously credited as the 'law of nature'.

MacPherson diagnoses in Locke's vision of an unlimited right to property an attempt to universalize in non-class terms a right that necessarily possessed class content. In this sense, personhood — as a form of property — failed to become the equalizing, natural right that Locke imagined, and was instead differentially distributed across classes. But individuation and legal personhood are not only operative in property cases. In what has now become the most widely cited statute in US decisions concerning social difference, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the right to recognition and redress is explicitly predicated upon the individuation of the claimant. Discrimination, like property, is private. The law, as many of its administrators have affirmed, is not designed to recognize groups. It recognizes, rather, the individual, defined as 'a particular being as distinguished from a class.'⁶ Privacy, then, is a precondition of recognition. I argue that the subject of White's poems, in refusing this precondition, demands a form of recognition that is denied by the law: recognition of the racialized subject and its dispersion within a public.

Lyric privacy was consolidated by the Romantic redefinition of the genre, which historically and regionally coincides with the circulation of classical liberal political values.⁷ John Stuart Mill is widely considered a key architect of classical liberal philosophy and wrote

5 *Johnson v. M'Intosh* (21 US (8 Wheat.) 543 (1823)).

6 See *Bostock v. Clayton Cty.* (140 S. Ct. 1731 (2020)).

7 Both Hegel's definition of lyric poetry in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* and Locke's definition of the Western liberal constitutional state in his *Second Treatise of Government* take for granted the existence of an individual whose separation from the group is formally reflected in poetry and law.

enthusiastically of William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. In his 1833 essay 'What is Poetry', Mill famously answered that it is an 'utterance of feeling' that 'supposes [no] audience'.⁸ The former premise establishes the poem as an emission from the poet's interiority.⁹ The latter qualification contains the implicit dismissal of a public, who may only incidentally enter the sphere of lyric. Where Ancient Greek lyrics were performed chorally and for the enjoyment of an audience, post-Romantic lyrics are not only all monodic, but private. Northrop Frye went so far as to say that the lyric is characterized by 'the individual communing with himself'.¹⁰ The modernist attention to impossible speech further consecrates the ontology of the individual by imagining a coherent subject that precedes its alienation by industrial capitalist social relations. But individuation is not prior to or independent from those relations; rather, it is a by-product of proprietary notions of personhood on which liberal political subjectivity relies.¹¹ Lyric privacy inherits liberal values and synthesizes their premise; the speaker in post-Romantic lyric poetry has *turned away* from the public.¹² White's poetry refuses to reproduce the generic conventions of personhood, moving instead toward a scene that is (a) primarily social and (b) ineligible as property. Where the reader might expect to find a person, they instead encounter a public. In other words, the subject of White's poems is inextricable from the scene of socialization. White's poetry thus recovers an unruly mass that precedes its compulsory translation into the idiom of liberalism.¹³ This chapter looks specifically at White's

8 John Stuart Mill, 'Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties', in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. by John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1963–91), 1: *Autobiography and Literary Essays* (1981), pp. 343–65 (p. 348).

9 I am interested in evoking Denise Ferreira da Silva's writing on 'interiority' as a racialized unit of apperception whose excluded remainder is rendered into objects rather than subjects of knowledge. See e.g. her *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), chaps 1–4.

10 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 32.

11 See MacPherson, *Possessive Individualism*.

12 Frye wrote in *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 249–50, that the lyric poet 'turns his back on his listeners', drawing upon the etymology of what some claim to be lyric's minimum condition: apostrophe, or 'turning away' in Greek.

13 Here I have in mind Hortense J. Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics*, 17.2 (1987), pp. 64–81, at the end of which she argues

2016 book *Of Being Dispersed* and compares it with George Oppen's 1968 'Of Being Numerous'.¹⁴ I argue that the structural viability of the 'many' presupposes the ontology of the 'one'. Oppen's elective ambition — immersion in the social — is White's inescapable condition. In this sense, intimacy is not only the negation of privacy but also the refusal to capitulate to a Romantic ideal of community that presupposes the integrity of an original individuation.

White's first-person speaker not only complicates its claim to speech but invites others into the event of language. A poem called 'Metaphor for the Changing Season' from the title section reads:

All I was thinking or would ever think was happening in a closet. I could never be joined there by anyone but you. You and you and I were all there was. The enfolding thing, to pulsate. Parts broke off and spun away. We were capsular or corpuscular in terms both of destiny and lack of destination. Parts broke off and I looked to you to see if thoughts had been had by anybody.¹⁵

This poem presents an uncanny combination of traditional lyric apostrophe. White writes 'I looked to you', but the exclusivity of that look is undercut by the ambient quality of thoughts, which are given ambiguous attribution. In the first instance, the speaker's thinking is a temporally unbounded event that is happening within a closet. In the second, thoughts are had by 'anybody', after 'parts broke off'. Dispersal, which is reinforced by the repetition of 'parts broke off', compels the subject to survey the space. Rather than looking to see if 'anybody had any thoughts', the subject 'looked [...] to see if thoughts had been had by anybody', complicating the Cartesian yield of an ego from the act of cogitation.

that it is time to make a place for a 'different social subject' (p. 80). While *Spillers* is speaking specifically about the Black maternal figure, whose position stands outside the symbolic order of both white capitalist patriarchy and psychoanalysis, the essay is also labouring to make room for a subject, like the Black maternal, who is primarily social, i.e. not individuated.

14 Simone White, *Of Being Dispersed* (New York: Futurepoem, 2016); George Oppen, 'Of Being Numerous', in *New Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2008), pp. 163–89.

15 White, *Being Dispersed*, p. 17.

Perhaps the most interesting moment is the failed attempt to posit privacy and exclusivity. 'I could never be joined there by anyone but you' is then immediately undermined by the duplication of 'you' in the following sentence. The speaker's thoughts happen within a closet, one that cannot welcome visitors, except for 'you'. 'You', an already overdetermined pronoun, then doubles.¹⁶ There are, at minimum, three in the closet, a space already associated with disclosure.¹⁷ More than just a metaphor for the changing seasons, this poem models an immanent poetics of intimacy without privacy. Where privacy relies on the exclusivity of material forms, intimacy is immune to its negation by the plural. The first page of White's collection reads:

[...] Los Angeles was on my face;
 it was hot and harmless.
 Before I burned up and rolled away,
 black-ass tumbleweed, as had happened so many times
 in dreams that year, it was important that I get there
 or get some information my papa was trying to get across¹⁸

The subject of this stanza is neither withheld nor fully in focus. She is there, but not localized. The city appears as a projection across her face, highlighting the exteriority of the speaker, who is then reduced to a feature of the landscape, itinerant, at the mercy of the wind, striving for conveyance, to and fro, in speech and in movement.¹⁹ Place not only grammatically precedes person but is prepositionally reversed. The subject is not *in* Los Angeles; rather, Los Angeles is *on* the subject. The reciprocity of subject and context is more explicitly named in the title section, where White writes:

waters roll off me
 they ride me or I ride them it is a complexity
 whether one is being
 done for or doing in your element²⁰

16 By overdetermination, I mean the use of 'you' for both singular and plural forms, following the loss of a T-V distinction in English during the sixteenth century.

17 Cf. 'coming out of the closet'.

18 White, *Being Dispersed*, p. 3.

19 Silva, *Race*, p. 29, calls this 'affectability' — the opposite of self-determination, a mode of being belong to exteriority rather than interiority.

20 White, *Being Dispersed*, p. 14.

The closing stanza of the section's first poem is agnostic on the possibility of individual will, disinterested in triumph over the environment, and dispossessed of control over the conditions that give or withhold agency. 'Done for' not only signifies a reduction to the status of direct object but also something more sinister — doom, finality, death. The most significant detail of the last two lines is the apparent coextension of 'done for' and 'doing', itself a feature of someone *else's* element. Existing in this space, which does not properly belong to the subject, brings with it the ambiguity of causality. Subject formation and subjectivation are not meaningfully distinct, and nor is decision a reliable mark of individual will. Rather than appear as a locus of being within a coherent chain of causality and action, the subject is instead dispersed, appearing as an inconstant strobe whose existence is always reciprocal: ridden and riding.

In the following sections, I argue that White exposes the genealogical and formal proximity of lyric and liberalism to interrupt the reproduction of a legibly individuated subject, writing against (a) recognition and representation as effective modes of redress for racial dispossession; (b) the specifically white, masculine aspiration to numerousness that romanticizes the multitude as a rescue for singularity; and (c) the movement away from subjectivity by institutionally and materially secure conceptual poets whose representation of lyric as a nostalgic and retrograde form inconspicuously sidelines the negotiation of racial difference within poetry.

REVISING NUMEROUSNESS

White's collection is in direct conversation with Objectivist poet George Oppen's 1968 collection *Of Being Numerous*. The simple substitution in White's title shifts attention to the difference between numerousness and dispersal, the latter evoking not only the massive distribution of Afrodiasporic populations but the thwarted individuation of the Black subject.

George Oppen was a communist, cabinetmaker, and, briefly, a publisher of friends, including William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. Oppen's first book, *Discrete Series*, was published with an introduction by Pound in 1934 by the Objectivist Press, which he

co-founded with his wife Mary Oppen and Louis Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Reznikoff. The Great Depression reorganized the Oppens' commitments and pushed them further to the political left. The two eventually moved to Mexico, where they escaped the growing attention of the House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee. During this period, Oppen wrote little. His second book, *The Materials*, was published by New Directions upon his return to the US, followed by *This in Which* (1965). His fourth book, *Of Being Numerous*, is firmly rooted in and inflected by the densely populated metropolis of New York City and arguably in dialogue with Whitman. It is also a work of 1968 — a poem for the era of collective action, solidarity, and civil unrest.

Like Oppen's, White's book is of a moment, nearly fifty years later, when mass social movements were gaining traction in response to a spate of racially motivated police violence.²¹ Not only direct actions attracting new actors but also contemporary poetry were beginning to locate their engagement with a reinvigorated attention to antiblackness. Claudia Rankine published *Citizen: An American Lyric* in 2014 to enormous success; the book used apostrophic instability to invite both startling revelations of complicity and identification with the subject of violence. White's book addresses itself not to the guilty or damaged reader but to the epistemological premises that conspire to produce a world in which racial violence finds its stage. White, who received a J.D. from Harvard before getting an M.F.A. in poetry and a Ph.D. in literature, published *Of Being Dispersed* in 2016, the same year as she finished her dissertation. White's unpublished dissertation critiqued not only the ostensibly reparative possibility of law but the epistemic limitations of its critique by lawyers, i.e. critical legal studies. *Of Being Dispersed* is White's second full-length collection after her debut, *House Envy of All the World* (2010), a volume whose title evokes recurring inflection points of desire, property, and the social. *Of Being Dispersed* responds not only to the American legacy of antiblackness and Oppen's book, but also to the centrality of the individual in Amer-

21 Black Lives Matter protests began in 2013, after the murder of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, and picked up in 2014 after the murder of Michael Brown by Darren Wilson. Both victims were unarmed Black men, and both murderers were white policemen. Zimmerman was acquitted, and Wilson was never charged.

ican discourse, including political and poetic critiques of antiblackness that locate the restoration of personhood as the horizon of repair.

Where Oppen replaces the individual with the multitude, White swaps both the individual and the multitude for the dispersed. As demonstrated in her poetry, the dispersed subject does not electively move from singularity to numerousness but is massively distributed, implacably amongst, and devoid of volition as rescue. The first stanza of Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous' reads:²²

There are things
We live among 'and to see them
Is to know ourselves.' (1)

Oppen's poem appears to be invested in levelling the subject with its environment — living *amongst* — and yet the scene of coextension is immediately interrupted by the recovery of the subject, lifted out by the rescue line of self-knowledge. While the poem appears to compel the subject's immersion within the numerousness of the city, the separation between self and context is always marked, whether by the reflexivity of a single consciousness or by the will of an individual who elects to disavow an already given singularity. Singularity is thus negotiated as an original condition of the subject — a condition that the poem finds dubious, potentially disastrous:

Obsessed, bewildered
By the shipwreck
Of the singular
We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous. (7)

For Oppen, numerousness is an elective state — a mode of rescue from the 'shipwreck | Of the singular'.

The poem continues to negotiate its relation to singularity — both a disaster and a 'bright light' (9). In section 10, he writes: 'The isolated man is dead, his world around him exhausted || And he fails! He fails, that meditative man!' Referencing the 'rescue' of Crusoe, Oppen positions numerousness as a salve for the 'shipwreck of the singular'. In

22 References to 'Of Being Numerous' are given as section numbers in parentheses in the text.

other words, he turns singularity into a precondition of assembly. The stanza

We say was
 'Rescued'.
 So we have chosen. (6)

indicates a moral evaluation of isolation as plight. We have chosen that a return to civilization is favourable to singularity, we have chosen the group. But Oppen's poem has also made a choice. While the poem appears to reject a lapsarian logic by disavowing the 'tale of our wickedness' which 'is not our wickedness' (1), Oppen replaces original sin with original singularity. There may be no garden of Eden, but there is a Crusoean island where the singular stands alone after shipwreck. The unconditioned position of the subject is one of non-relation. The meditative man may have found relief in the numerousness of the group, but the structural viability of the 'many' presupposes the ontology of the 'one'. This is the crux of White's intervention.

The original 'of' in Oppen's title is itself aspirational. The preposition does not so much name a poetics of immersion and perceptual integration as it does a direction toward which the alienated subject ambles, labouring to transform the often-abstract nouns and concepts into a localized experience of place. Relying minimally on the bold-faced details of Oppen's life, one can read the recessed portrait of New York as a scene of return, from Mexico to New York, and from communist organizing to poetry. Although Oppen is not a Romantic poet — he explicitly dissociated himself from Whitman and lived as a committed Marxist — the notion of 'being' in his title is not in the first place conditioned by numerousness. Being begins as a condition of the individual, while numerousness is an ambition toward which the subject wilfully moves. As such, numerousness remains a grail that is not internally complex because it is not primarily perceptual.²³

Oppen moves toward numerousness as rescue and urban absorption as exalted communion. As destinations, these positions remain positively coded, the antithesis to capitalist social relations, or

23 Despite the differences between my own approach and Perloff's, she makes a crucial distinction between the conceptual and perceptual in *Of Being Numerous* in Marjorie Perloff, 'The Rescue of the Singular', *Contemporary Literature*, 43.3 (2002), pp. 560–69.

‘talk[ing] | Distantly of “The People”’ (14). Oppen evokes the omitted first person plural of the constitutional clause — ‘we’ — as a rejoinder to the recurrence of ‘they’ in the previous section:

[...] They are shoppers,
 Choosers, judges; ... And here the brutal
 is without issue, a dead end.
They develop
 Argument in order to speak, they become
 unreal, unreal, life loses
 solidity, loses extent, baseball’s their game
 because baseball is not a game
 but an argument [...]
 [...]]. They are ghosts that endanger
 One’s soul. [...] (13)

Section 14 balances this feint of derision:

I cannot even now
 Altogether disengage myself
 From those men.

Where Oppen moves from the original condition of the singular toward an ambivalent but committed communion, White’s poem begins from the position of denied singularity and a non-elective — non-Romantic — immersion in the city. Oppen’s elective ambition is White’s inescapable condition. Where Oppen writes:

We are pressed, pressed on each other,
 We will be told at once
 Of anything that happens (6)

White’s subject is

pushed out the turnstile by a white man today
 being touched in so hostile a manner is better
 as against another demonstration of disgust funny
 eight thousand times since the age of eleven
 when you first got followed down the street
 by a stranger trying to grab your boob
 you have calculated the nearness
 of whosoever is not repelled by your ‘hostility’²⁴

24 White, *Being Dispersed*, p. 41.

Proximity and distance are dually coded as conditions of racial aggression. Both violations of touch and social avoidance operate according to an immanent premise of antiblackness that structures the experience of the street. These are not scenes of social life into which the previously singular, individuated subject electively enters, but scenes within which the racialized subject is dispersed, strewn without choice, touched without consent. White's collection performs a double refusal within the lyric: a refusal of both the liberal solution of individual recognition and the ostensibly leftist aspiration to numerosness, which is conditioned upon exclusive access to an original singularity. White's poetry both cites and disaffiliates with late-twentieth-century revisions of lyric that move the genre out of its obsession with 'the shipwreck of the singular', toward forms of collective action that, though often radical and anti-capitalist, fail to account for subjects that are not originally individuals.

THE SUBJECT OF CONCEPTUALISM

If the poetic reproduction of personhood has funnelled liberal principles into modern lyric subjectivity, those principles are not eliminated with the disappearance of a subject. In 2010 the poets Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin co-edited an anthology of conceptual writing under the title *Against Expression*. The dense tome exhaustively documents what critic and dedicatee Marjorie Perloff calls 'uncreative writing' and is positioned, as the title suggests, against legacies of confessionalism, expression, and lyric subjectivity. Goldsmith, whose poetic career intersects with the more culturally and financially solvent art world, explains the historical importance of conceptual poetry vis-à-vis visual art, issuing the almost perversely Adornian warning that after the Internet, poetry will never be the same. Goldsmith rehearses the crisis of photography for realist painting, which had no choice but to go blurry once the camera went sharp, and proposes that the Internet will be a similar breed of dark horse for poetry. His introduction seeks to inaugurate a shift toward mechanical forms of linguistic

production that beat the machine at its own game, making the person behind the poem irrelevant.²⁵

Goldsmith's formal account of conceptual poetry ignores the material and political implications of the lyric subject and its disappearance. Just as the ostensible universalism of the Western citizen-subject strategically silences coefficients of whiteness, property, and sex, the elimination of a lyric subject presupposes its universal availability. While a full account of this parallel cannot be provided here, I believe the disappearance of lyric in the late twentieth century is more accurately historicized as a reaction to discursive shifts within the arts and humanities that sought to incorporate 'other voices'. Denise Ferreira da Silva describes this historical turning point in the academy:

We had something to do with the crisis of science; we, the others of man, were upsetting history: our words and deeds unleashed the predicament of the 'modern order'. In seeking to comprehend this Global event, however, writers of post-modernity and globalization could only announce the death of the subject. Not surprisingly, social analysts described these circumstances as the onset of a new site of political struggle — the politics of representation, that is, the struggle for the recognition of cultural difference — that registered the demise of the metanarratives of reason and history that compose modern representation.²⁶

By setting up an incompatibility between the subject of reason and the recognition of ostensibly indissoluble cultural difference, these 'social analysts' — including literary critics — designed a paradigm wherein the representation of difference occasioned the death of the very figure that could manifest difference or the particular, i.e. the subject.²⁷ In short, the rising visibility of the racial particular resulted in its discursive annexation. I propose that a similar shift in humanistic discourse resulted in the split between person-focused lyric and

25 Kenneth Goldsmith, 'Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?', in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), pp. xvii–xxii.

26 Silva, *Race*, p. xxi.

27 For another account of this history, see Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

conceptual poetry. In the introduction to *Before Modernism*, Virginia Jackson corrects prevailing accounts of the American lyric tradition by bringing Black poets like Phyllis Wheatley and Laurence Dunbar out of the periphery.²⁸ Jackson writes:

Accounts of American lyric as an ethno-nationalist, triumphally modernist project that began with the Puritans and culminated in the achievement of T. S. Eliot, or as Emerson's twin Transcendental brainchildren Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, or as a transatlantic anglocentric rainbow bridge stretching from Shelley to Stevens, or as the self-involvement of Romantic and modern poets that gave way to a post-lyric avant-garde, or as a return to lyric in reaction to that avant-garde, can all be understood as the fictions of racial continuity they always were.²⁹

The fiction of racial continuity seeks to naturalize itself through the distribution of genre such that the universality of whiteness survives through its strategic flight to new forms. An account of lyric that fails to understand its investment in whiteness — and maleness — contributes to the fiction of racial continuity that reproduces Black poetry as an ethnically distinct addendum.

Goldsmith's anxiety around the emergence of diversity and its implications for his career can be inferred from the writing of his peers. In a 2012 essay for the *Boston Review* titled 'Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric', Marjorie Perloff laments the institution of 'poeticity' propagated by creative writing departments and the stultifying effect of their diversity initiatives. According to Perloff, anyone can write the kinds of poems anthologized in an increasingly inclusive era of representation whose diversity initiatives override standards of literary quality. After enumerating a list of easily mimicked tropes, Perloff reads a poem by Black poet and twice former US poet laureate Natasha Tretheway to illustrate her point. The poem, titled 'Hot Combs', describes a scene of hair-straightening activated by sense memory. Perloff

28 This includes Jackson's own definition of 'lyric' in the 2012 edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. As she puts it in *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023): 'My definition also inherited a racist idea of lyric from the nineteenth-century American poetics that definition said nothing about' (p. 18).

29 Jackson, *Before Modernism*, p. 2.

derisively catalogues the poem's facile attempt at poetic imagery, writing:

This is an all-but-classic reenactment of the paradigm I described at the beginning of this essay: 1) the present-time stimulus (the fortuitous find of old hot combs in a junk shop), 2) the memory of the painful hair straightening ritual the poet's African American mother evidently felt obliged to perform, and finally 3) the epiphany that her mother's face was 'made strangely beautiful | as only suffering can do'.³⁰

Perloff goes on to qualify what she calls the poem's 'emotional crescendo' as 'dubious in its easy conclusion that beauty is born of suffering'. What is striking about Perloff's dismissal is the contradiction of its fair-weather attention to race. Perloff's attention to Tretheway's poem is, in the first place, based upon its undeserved spot in Rita Dove's 2011 *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, which, Perloff argues, panders to racial inclusivity at the expense of quality. And yet, her charge against the poem's easy conclusion seems to wilfully ignore race difference in order to defang her dismissal of its aesthetic merit.

Perhaps the most dubious move that Perloff makes is to introduce the poem as a foil. Immediately after discussing the Tretheway poem, Perloff argues that if so-called 'creative writing' has become this formulaic, it is time to turn to 'uncreative writing'. She elaborates:

Tongue-in-cheek as that term is, increasingly poets of the digital age have chosen to avoid those slender wrists and wisps of hair, the light that is always 'blinding' and the hands that are 'fidgety' and 'damp', those 'fingers interlocked under my cheekbones' or 'my huge breasts oozing mucus', by turning to a practice adopted in the visual arts and in music as long ago as the 1960s — appropriation.

Apart from any question of quality, the poems that Perloff calls 'formulaic' are overwhelmingly marked by the specificity of a racialized subject position. Those whom she produces as evidence not only occupy and write through positions of racial difference; Perloff further

30 Marjorie Perloff, 'Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric', *Boston Review*, 18 May 2012 <<https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/poetry-brink/>> [accessed 19 November 2023].

reads them with an attention bias for their failure to transcend the facile representation of an ethnographic particular or complicate the structure of subjectivity.

Perloff closes her argument by citing the breakdown of Language poetry as a cautionary tale. The Language poets, she explains, provided a serious and necessary challenge to the preciousness of lyric and self-expression, favouring intellectual-political engagement and aligning themselves with French post-structuralism and the Frankfurt School. The death knell rang, however ‘by the late ’90s, when Language poetry felt compelled to be more inclusive with respect to gender, race, and ethnic diversity’, since, she argues, ‘it became difficult to tell what was or was not a “Language poem”’. Not only does Perloff assign ‘tepid tolerance’ to all editorial decisions that operate on a principle of inclusivity and eschew the accessibility of the genre, but she pronounces dead a movement whose refusal of self-expression is sullied by the appearance of race.³¹ In other words, Perloff falls for the trap set by liberalism in which difference is disingenuously read under the rubric of identity, which forces its expression to be articulated as a property of the individual rather than as a product of the social. The former formulation can only be authored by the singular first person; the latter can be signed by both the collective and the dispersed.³²

Many have argued that the total disappearance of the subject by practices of automation and repetition in art is undermined by the signature of the artist. Even if there is no subject, there is still the matter of intellectual property. Dworkin’s and Goldsmith’s introductions to *Against Expression* ignore this banal but irreducible remainder, skirting neatly around questions of recognition and capital. It is not surprising that the patron saints of conceptual poetry — including Goldsmith (University of Pennsylvania) and Marjorie Perloff (Stanford) — might

31 Ibid.

32 See Wendy Brown and Jannet Halley, ‘Introduction’, in *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, ed. by Wendy Brown and Jannet Halley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 1–37: ‘Whereas “liberals” treat identities as mechanisms for voicing injustice that the state must be made to recognize and repair, from this left perspective, identities are double-edged: they can be crucial sites of cultural belonging and political mobilization, but they can also be important vehicles of domination through regulation. Indeed, to the extent that liberalism bribes the left to frame its justice projects in terms of identity, cultural belonging and political mobilization become problematically regulatory’ (p. 7).

want to dissimulate the particulars of their subject positions through a critique of poetry that follows from such situated knowledges, which Dworkin calls 'narcissistic'. Referring to the poetry collected in the online archive *UbuWeb*, he describes how

the anthology privileged modes of writing in which the substitutions of metaphor and symbol were replaced by the recording of metonymic facts, or by the direct presentation of language itself, and where the self-regard of narcissistic confession was rejected in favor of laying bare the potential for linguistic self-reflexiveness. Instead of the rhetoric of natural expression, individual style, or voice, the anthology sought impersonal procedure. [...]

The present volume continues to explore the potential of writing that tries to be 'rid of lyrical interference of the individual ego' (as Charles Olson famously put it).³³

Dworkin goes on to distinguish the anthologized material as 'work that does not seek to express unique, coherent, or consistent individual psychologies' and that 'refuses familiar strategies of authorial control in favor of automatism'.³⁴ Not only does Dworkin set up a false equivalence between the human and the post-Enlightenment subject, but he proposes automation as the privileged horizon of the latter's elimination. Such a rejoinder is ironically given within the Olson essay from which Dworkin quotes. In 'Projective Verse', Olson writes:

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an *humilitas* sufficient to make him of use.³⁵

33 Craig Dworkin, 'The Fate of Echo', in *Against Expression*, ed. by Dworkin and Goldsmith, pp. xxiii–liv (p. xliii).

34 Ibid.

35 Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', in *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry, 1800–1950*, ed. by Melissa Kwasny (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), pp. 344–54 (p. 353).

The neologism that Olson introduces may indeed be a departure from subjectivism, but only insofar as the subject of such a movement is elevated above scenes of lesser life from which his own animation is exaggerated by contrast. Unlike Dworkin and Goldsmith, Olson is careful not to elide the subject and subjectivism in the service of a straw-man argument that would underwrite the dissolution of social difference. Perhaps the most important qualification in Olson's essay, which is conspicuously ignored in Dworkin's quotation, is 'western man'. It is specifically *western* man whose individual ego has historically run interference in the lyric.

In this way, Olson's misgiving is much closer to Denise Ferreira da Silva's work on the transparent 'T' of post-Enlightenment epistemology and Sylvia Wynter's writing on the overrepresentation of 'Man'. In her essay 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, its Overrepresentation — an Argument', Wynter proposes that 'Man', the hegemonic ethnoclass of Western epistemology, has been elided with the 'human'. The over-representation this specifically white, male, propertied subject as the universal subject of world history condemns those populations it remains — poor, Black, femme, differently abled, and other decentred 'genres of being human' — to be ethnographic objects of knowledge.³⁶ Epistemic and representational exclusion has, Wynter argues, licensed the expropriation of land inhabited by 'savages' and slavery. She tracks how, in the absence of Judaeo-Christian justifications, the New World forced the West to invent a secular category of 'Other' to rationalize its claim to sovereignty over foreign land. She writes that the West could therefore only see the new peoples it encountered in Africa and the New World as the 'lack of its own narrative ideal'.³⁷ Such a recognition was a direct consequence of the West's new narrative ideal of 'Man' as a political subject of the state and therefore of its own self-conception as supra-ethnic and rational; the apparently lawless indigenous peoples of colonial encounter thus provided a requisite foil for this newly secular self-understanding. Wynter writes:

36 Sylvia Wynter, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation — An Argument', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3.3 (2003), pp. 257–337 (pp. 271–72).

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 291–92.

This 'slandering' both of Indians and of Negroes can be seen in its precise role and function. That is, as a lawlike part of the systemic representational shift being made out of the order of discourse that had been elaborated on the basis of the Judeo-Christian Spirit/Flesh organizing principle (one in whose logic the premise of nonhomogeneity, articulating its master code of symbolic life and death, had been mapped onto the physical cosmos) to the new rational/irrational organizing principle and master code.³⁸

The West's master code and its principle of nonhomogeneity produce the Janus-face of modernity for which the recto of rational 'Man' is racial difference. This racialized remainder thus functions as the 'lack of the West's ontologically absolute self-description.'³⁹ What Olson identifies, but Dworkin misses, is that the 'individual ego' interfering with lyric poetry was that of 'western man'. The Conceptualists' supersession of the subject renders invisible the West's productive distinction between representations of universality and difference.

CASTING DISPERSIONS

White closes the first section of her poem 'Preliminary Notes on Street Attacks', which details the experience of dissimulating Blackness for safety in predominately white publics, with the line 'on sight I am a unified person'. The second section of the same poem reads:

You thought a poem like this would have a chorus and require its listeners to hold hands or touch each other in the face, gently. You thought you'd go for dyspeptic undoing of l'esprit de l'escalier with classical movement, undo the poem altogether,

but you don't want to be liked for cleverness. [...]

[...] You believe yourself to be above murder, you don't spit on people. Probably, you think you can learn anything and explain.

Publicly and for money, you are in service to explanation. One possible metaphor for microaggression is aphorism. You cannot come back from explanation to explain the poetry of the poetry.⁴⁰

38 Ibid., p. 300.

39 Ibid., p. 282.

40 White, *Being Dispersed*, p. 45.

White turns apostrophe around, turning toward rather than away from the public. Here, 'you' is the scene of encounter between the subject and the social. Crucially, 'you' does not refer to a coherent or stable subject. 'You' are the reader, then 'you' appear to be the poet, unsuccessfully attempting to undo the poem from within. Then 'you' are the complacent, complicit agent of ordinary racial violence, then you are presumably the poet, again, unable to abstract or explain the poetry of the poem. This carousel of subjects complicates traditional models of apostrophe, which are no less evoked. White's subject inhabits the lyric mode in order to expand its sphere of reference and recognition. While the poem may not be able to undo itself, or explain itself, it acts against the lyric genre's consolidation of the subject, which belies the racialized experience of dispersion, of being 'cast about or away', forced to 'use a sense of qualities as belonging to ourselves and others to make an assay.' White's poem is the assay. Its roving second-person pronoun casts about for qualities belonging to the self — or selves — and others to adequately examine the friction between liberal individuation and racial dispersion.

The line break between 'l'esprit' and 'de l'escalier' signals both the impossibility of undoing the Hegelian locus of phenomenological experience — 'l'esprit' — and the struggle to enunciate oneself in the scene of relation, always thinking too late of the right thing to say — the so-called 'wit of the staircase'. But the condition of belatedness is also structural. Gayatri Spivak's so-called first right of refusal — to refuse what one was originally refused — is a disavowal of liberal redress in the form of inclusion. In the third section, White writes:

The line to you grows longer, scaled down
by an English witness. You're upset. At a loss
for nettles that never undid the primary illness,
the sensuous thing is unstudied. Not Blake,
nobody.⁴¹

The line, the lifeline, extended down from the Romantics through Blake and into the present does not pull White's subject up but grows longer, creating slack, leaving her upset, at a loss, unstudied. The line break indicates that neither Blake nor anybody after has offered a

41 Ibid., p. 46.

model of lyric subjectivity that could access the experience of Black dispersal, at the same time as it offers 'Nobody' as an alternative to Blake.

White does not write herself into the legacy of lyric inheritance that would place her downstream from Blake, but nor does she depart from the trappings of lyric altogether.⁴² While the subject is often rendered in the second person or conspicuously omitted before verbs in the passive voice, the fifth section of the book, titled 'Lotion', is a prose account of her skin and hair routines with a stable and untroubled 'I'. White's simultaneous refusal to reproduce an inherited mode of subjective expression is not the same as conceptualism's disdain for all things tainted by lyricism. On the contrary, her inconsistent and intentional deployment of the 'I' offers the reader an occasion to think about the context in which the first person singular offers or withholds a lifeline from the specifically Black and dispersed subject of White's poetry.

The move from numerosness to dispersal is not a revision of the utopian imaginary that orients Oppen's multitude but a revision of the premise that licenses inclusivity and multiplicity as a logical response to social difference. To disambiguate these two operative terms, I rely on the work of Hentyle Yapp, who frames performances of racialized anger as an ungovernable remainder of liberalism. Using Ai Weiwei as a case study, Yapp examines how the Marxist topos of the 'multitude', popularized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's 2004 eponymous volume, fails to cognize affect or what Yapp called 'racialized anger'. This unruly corollary resurfaces in *Fairytales*, Ai's 2007 contribution to *documenta* in which 1001 Chinese tourists are brought to Kassel amongst a range of agglomerated non-Western objects. Not only does

42 This posture of disinheritance and critique can be observed in some of White's own assessments: 'When I am waiting for a poem to get started, I am waiting for an arrangement *on behalf of all of us* based upon my happening to be here, among all these practices today. No poet of the past can provide me access to this makeshift will, unless it were as a personal obsession with descending along a particular vector, as William Carlos Williams describes, with which I am fascinated and also positively want to be involved in criticizing' ('New American Poets: Simone White', sel. by Anna Moschovakis <<https://poetrysociety.org/poems-essays/new-american-poets/simone-white-selected-by-anna-moschovakis>> [accessed 3 November 2023]; emphasis in original).

Yapp position Ai's insistence on mass repetition as a refusal of liberal humanism's dubiously reparative instinct to recognize individuality; he also reworks the left political imaginary of writers like Jean-Luc Nancy, Roberto Esposito, Antonio Negri, and Michael Hardt, whose accounts of plurality, community, and multiplicity do not account for the original massification of the racialized other. For Yapp,

racialization arrests being as always (plural) before singularity can be granted to such subjects, reworking Nancy's being singular plural. [...] Ai revises the multitude and relational through two entangled notions: racial anger and the types of subjects imagined to produce relationality.⁴³

Yapp goes on to specify that the subject of relationality — massively distributed, comradely, rhizomatic, impersonal — is neutralized through the subordination of individual identity to social bonds. And yet, such a relational *turn* requires that there is an original individuality from which to turn *away*. What these frameworks miss is thus the affective condition of being originally subsumed by a racialized mass, thus making both the liberal solution of individual recognition *and* the leftist turn toward the relational insufficient and impossible. If racial anger is 'a structural affect, not an individual singular feeling', then what might its subject look like within the lyric form?⁴⁴

White's oscillation between localization and dispersal is demonstrative of the inability to inherit Oppen's modernism. Neither does the poetry turn toward the liberal ethos of individual recognition through the representation of a coherent subject position, nor does it counter this tradition by accepting Oppen's Marxism, which presents a romanticized vision of the communal as a turn away from 'the shipwreck of the singular'. Oppen's solution — or rescue — is itself revealed to depend upon a specifically white, occidental origin story.

'Dispersal' may name any number of operations by which a mass is redistributed. But White's use of the term is distinctly Foucauldian, as her 2016 dissertation at the CUNY Graduate Center, 'Descent: American Individualism, American Blackness and the Trouble with In-

43 Hentyle Yapp, *Minor China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), p. 94.

44 Ibid.

vention', suggests.⁴⁵ White, a former lawyer, examines the conditions under which the law enables and makes impossible its own critique. Looking specifically at the field now formalized as critical legal studies, White adapts Michel Foucault's approach to madness and medicine in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, wherein the premise of discursive unity is revealed to be logically invalid and 'systems of dispersion' are introduced as a hermeneutic frame that attends to the 'rules of formation' by which any object appears, including its 'coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance.'⁴⁶ In other words, rather than develop a narrative logic to license a particular grouping, dispersion recognizes that the discursive event is contingent, massively distributed, and impermanent. The logic of dispersion is ultimately anti-Oedipal, which is to say that it refuses the stability of origin and tradition, and thus asks us to read *Of Being Dispersed* not as an heir to 'Of Being Numerous' but as an act of disinheritance. This is not to say that the distinction between Oppen and White can be reduced to Marx and Foucault; neither work is so orthodoxically attached or ekphrastic. And yet, White's rejoinder is not only addressed to Oppen but to any social theory whose material conditions of existence trace back to a specifically white or European origin story.

POSTSCRIPT: TOWARD A LYRIC PUBLIC

In 1988, literary critic Paul Breslin identified a rift in contemporary poetry. There were those, he argued, who seamlessly inherited an early American transcendental vision of an already-given unity that could lift us beyond divisions of difference, such as Wendell Berry, and those who were sceptical of this ahistorical ideal and laboured, through poetry, to present ways of communing. Breslin's assessment of the field came by way of survey: his article 'The Simple, Separate Person and the Word En-Masse' reviewed four then-new titles for *Poetry*, the monthly magazine of the Poetry Foundation. Breslin's review begins by taking up Berry's 1975 essay 'The Specialization of Poetry', which laments

45 Simone White, 'Descent: American Individualism, American Blackness and the Trouble with Invention' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, City University of New York, 2016).

46 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 38.

the oversaturation of self-talk in post-1945 American poetry. Berry diagnoses an overinvestment in poetics of the self — a radically particular self whose singularity is antithetical to communal experience. As evidence, he looks to the eventual US poet laureate Mark Strand, whose nostalgic, highly lyrical poetry endorses his own conclusive and decontextualized take that ‘the self, in a sense, is all we have left.’⁴⁷

While Breslin co-signs Berry’s lamentation, he presents Berry himself as an outdated counterpoint whose desire to recover shared experience under the auspices of universal subjectivity presents more problems than it solves. He observes:

When contemporary poets seek a way out of specialization, they usually involve a version of community that comes out of Walt Whitman, in which the self is, by an act of its own consciousness (rather than by shared social effort) gathered into a non-coercive, perfectly democratic national unity.⁴⁸

And yet, according to Breslin, the emotional stirrings prompted by Whitman’s lyrical promise of a perfect democratic harmony between self and mass do not lead us closer to the realization of that ideal. He concludes that the true common desire is to ‘have something in common, while retaining full individualist privileges — which of course would be impossible if the collective identity were more than a shimmering abstraction.’⁴⁹ Breslin ends his essay with a kind of open call for an imagined poetry that, in 1988, was scarcely available.

The best American poetry, it seems to me, is increasingly distinguished by its distrust of Whitmanian wholeness, its resignation to more provisional kinds of unity. [...] But the poets who have come closest to a cure have done so by accepting the problem of *dispersal* as a challenge, by regarding common ground as something to be cleared by work, not as the Promised Land of some already-given totality such as ‘nature’ or ‘tradition.’⁵⁰

47 Mark Strand, quoted in Wendell Berry, ‘The Specialization of Poetry’, *Hudson Review*, 28.1 (1975), pp. 11–27 (p. 15).

48 Paul Breslin, ‘The Simple, Separate Person and the Word En-Masse’, *Poetry*, 153.1 (October 1988), pp. 30–47 (p. 31).

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*, p. 32; my emphasis.

According to Breslin, the best lyric poetry accepts the problem of dispersal and remains dubious of any community that emerges from an individual consciousness. If community, or the version that he imagines for lyric, were the result of a collective social effort, then its constituents would not be each of them whole. If Whitman's democratic harmony relies on preserving personhood and its attendant privileges, then Breslin's lyric community is marked by a dispossession of liberal individualism. I would argue that Simone White's poetry takes this one step further: not only does it refuse the privileges of a classically liberal individualism, but it is positioned on the fore side of individuation. The result is a kind of lyric mesh that lets the outside in. Where privacy is meant to reinforce the division between inside and out, property and public domain, intimacy is an absence of the division between interiority and socialization that structures both classical liberalism and the post-Romantic lyric.

Wendy Lotterman, 'Casting Dispersions: Revising Lyric Privacy in Simone White's *Of Being Dispersed*', in *Rethinking Lyric Communities*, ed. by Irene Fantappiè, Francesco Giusti, and Laura Scuriatti, *Cultural Inquiry*, 30 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2024), pp. 183–207 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-30_08>

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