

# 9/11 and the Socio-Politics of Poetry

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## Introduction

A little over a decade has passed since the terrorist organization al-Qaeda hijacked four passenger jets and flew two of them into the North and South towers of the World Trade Center in New York, another one into the Pentagon. The fourth plane crashed into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The attack inaugurated the 21<sup>st</sup> century with despair and violence, and led to further violence via the Bush administration's decision to invade Afghanistan and Iraq under the heading of a global "War on Terror". It is still too early to tell in what ways the terrorist attack and its political aftermath have affected (and will continue to affect) American culture, and how this in turn will shape America's national memory and identity. However, as I am writing, in 2013, a first wave of cultural reactions to 9/11 and its aftermath can be said to have arrived, and this wave is slowly starting to be inventorised and academically debated, thus allowing for an exploratory investigation of the field. In this thesis, I aim to retrace one particular cultural reaction to the terrorist attack on the WTC and its political aftermath, namely that of poetry.

In the days following September 11, 2001, poetry was everywhere. Poems were sent around via email, posted online, printed in newspapers and magazines and broadcasted on radio and television. In New York, poetry readings were as "frequent as the sound of police sirens" (Spiegelman 11) and bookstores were completely empty, save for the poetry section (Doty). Poetry even found its way into the New York city streetscape; poems were "scrawled (...) in the ash that covered everything" and were "stuck on light posts and phone stalls, plastered on the shelters at bus stops and the walls of subway stations". One New York fire chief even felt compelled to issue the following statement: "Thank you for the food and the blankets and the flowers but please - no more poetry" (Johnson & Merians ix).

Initial responses to the terrorist attack of September 11 were largely elegiac in nature; people turned to poetry to grieve. However, as the events of 9/11 became tied up within a larger political rhetoric of retaliation, more antagonistic poetic voices started to be heard. By the time the first anthologies of 9/11 poetry appeared (i.e. a year after the attack), many poets had already taken on a decidedly critical stance, responding as much to the actual attacks on the WTC as to the Bush administration's subsequent "War on Terror". Politically engaged poetry started to proliferate, and found its culmination in the weeks leading up to the war in Iraq when poet Sam Hamill started the social movement "Poets Against the War"; gathering over 13000 anti-war poems and organizing more than 200 "poetry readings against the war" (Hamill xix; xviii).

Studying the ways in which the medium of poetry has been used to articulate a response to 9/11 has a threefold value. First of all, given the limited amount of time past since 9/11, not all types of (artistic) commemoration have yet had enough

time to fully emerge. Different forms of response need different time to develop; the first 9/11 novel was published in 2004, but it wasn't until 2011 that the official 9/11 memorial opened. Poetry, as is shown, was the first commemorative medium to appear after 9/11 (Keniston & Quinn 3) and as such has had more time to evolve than other types of mnemonic responses. In effect, it is a more decisive object of study than, say, "the 9/11 novel", which cannot yet be said to exist as a definite category. What is more, due to its immediacy - the first 9/11 poems appeared within hours after the attack - poetry has a particularly great role to play in the initial stages of commemoration. At a moment in time when (post) 9/11 novels had not yet come into being, poetry was already shaping the public imagination. The value of studying poetry in relation to 9/11, however, is not only a matter of its immediacy. Underlying this study are two main hypotheses about the value of poetry as a tool for commemoration: (1) poetry today is as much a *social* force as it is an artistic genre, and it can thus play an active role in shaping people's visions of national memory and identity and (2) poetry is strongly critically, *politically* engaged and it thus has the potential to help counter the simplistic ideological discourse surrounding the events of 9/11. In the upcoming sections of this introduction, I will expand on my main hypotheses, and will outline how I aim to study (what I shall be calling) the socio-politics of 9/11 poetry.

### **Poetry as a Social Force**

"Poetry makes nothing happen", wrote W.H. Auden in his "In Memory of W.B. Yeats". This view expressed by Auden is one that seems to be broadly shared; for the last century, belief in the cultural significance of poetry and its ability to have an effect on society has been embarrassingly low. Among the fields of study in which this belief seems to be implicitly expressed is that of 9/11 literature. In recent years, critical work has started to appear which investigates the role of the novel in shaping the memory and discourse of 9/11. Works such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and DonDeLillo's *Falling Man* have formed the central focus of scholarly debate. In contrast, relatively few researchers have focused on the way in which the medium of poetry has been used to articulate a response to 9/11 and its political aftermath (Kotonen 42). Studies focusing on "the literature of 9/11" have sometimes devoted a subsection of their work to poetry<sup>1</sup>, but no full-length studies seem to be available. This lack of scholarly attention to 9/11 poetry does not stand in isolation, but is indicative of a larger trend within the field of cultural memory studies in general. For a large part, this trend can be accounted for by the strong mnemonic possibilities of the novel. Of all the literary genres, the novel seems to be the most popular and well-read. As such, it has a high amount of cultural visibility

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<sup>1</sup> See Martin Randall. *9/11 and the literature of Terror*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011, and Richard Gray. *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*. Chichester: Wiley- Blackwell, 2011.

and thus a great potential to influence widely people's memory of an event. Besides its cultural visibility, the novel's genre-specific qualities also make it particularly well-suited for influencing visions of the past. According to Hayden White, people's tendency to narrativize is central to their understanding of history; in order to make sense of the past, we mold the happenings of the past in such a way as to make them fit a certain story structure.<sup>2</sup> History, understood like this, has a similar relation to reality as fiction; in both cases, stories told about the past (re)create this past in order to relay it to future generations. The novel, then, which more than any other literary genre is applauded for its storytelling abilities, is as capable as "official" history of transmitting the past. It might even be more capable, since the novel not only mediates history; it mediates history in such a way as to make it "stick" (Rigney, "Portable" 381). A good novelist has the ability to create characters that the reader will identify and 'live along' with, thus making the story told memorable (Rigney "Fiction" 86).

However, the lack of scholarly attention paid to 9/11 poetry cannot fully be explained away via the negative argument of the relevance of the novel. Inherent in the field of cultural memory studies (and in the broader field of literary research) is a contemporary bias concerning the cultural significance of poetry. In cultural memory studies, this bias is particularly constituted via the field's treatment of narrative as the "master code through which nation, politics, identity, and race are formed", in effect pushing poetry (which is – often erroneously – considered to be non-narrative) to the back burner (Davidson 600). More broadly speaking, however, this bias in cultural memory studies seems to stem from a larger view of poetry as it has come into being in the last century. Many scholars (and readers) still adhere to a very narrow conceptualization of poetry as inspired by the Romantic period (Dowdy 14; Levertov 116). Following the Wordsworthian ideal, poetry is often thought of as showing a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", experienced by the poet in complete isolation from society, serving no other purpose than a personal one (Wordsworth & Coleridge 10). As Alan Golding remarks: "Much new Americanist work implicitly perpetuates the historical essentializing of poetry as the least 'social', most 'transcendent' of genres, treating it by default as a private aesthetic space untouched by the material and historical determinants shaping literary production in other genres" (qtd. in Harrington 160). It doesn't help much that poets themselves also publicly express this transcendental view of poetry. Following the attacks on September 11, US poet laureate Billy Collins stated in *USA Today* that poets would "have a hard time" if they tried to respond to the events of 9/11 directly. Poetry, Collins claimed, "by its nature moves us inward, not outward to the public and the collective". Poetry "creates its own space" apart from the atrocities of reality where it

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<sup>2</sup> See White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality". *Critical Inquiry* 7:1 (1980): 5-27. Print.

“speak[s] for life” by the very nature of being itself. Collin concludes: “A poem about mushrooms or about a walk with the dog is a more eloquent response to Sept. 11 than a poem that announces that wholesale murder is a bad thing”. The great irony here is that two of the most famous poems ever written on the topic of mushrooms - Derek Mahon’s “A Disused Shed in County Wexford”, and Paul Muldoon’s “Gathering Mushrooms” - were written in response to the Troubles in Ireland, thus definitely turning us “outwards”. Poetry’s significance as a commemorative medium is often overlooked, because what is thought of as being the “appropriate” content matter for poetry is very limiting. However, as I will make clear later on, poetry does anything but stand apart from society, and has a long history of social and political engagement.

The dominant view of poetry as distanced from society does not stem solely from a narrow conceptualization of the genre. Regardless of how poetry is conceptualized, it is widely thought of as being too culturally marginal to have any real effect on society. Though poetry used to be perceived as being a major literary genre, from the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, its reputation has slowly started to falter. The first signs of poetry’s erosion became visible in 1934, when Edmund Wilson argued that poetry has been engaged in the slow process of dying from the moment of its origination. Though the literary technique of verse was used in ancient times for the writing of a wide array of texts (epics, plays, political writings etc.), what came to constitute poetry by the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was merely the (marginal) subgenre of lyric poetry. This shrinking of the scope of poetry caused Wilson to conclude that poetry was on its way out: “In art the same things are not done again or not done again except as copies” (38-39). What writers used to do in poetry, using the technique of verse, they can now do just as well in prose. Wilson argues: “The point is that literary techniques are tools which masters of the craft have to alter in adapting them to fresh uses” (39).

If Wilson had not already critically killed off poetry in the 1930s, Joseph Epstein and Dana Gioia finished the job in the late 1980s and early 1990s. “Contemporary poetry in the United States flourishes in a vacuum”, stated Epstein in his article “Who killed Poetry?”. According to Epstein, though a lot of poetry is still being produced, no one reads this poetry outside of a very small circle. Poets are writing for poets; they create “their own, largely inbred audience” (Epstein 16). Gioia, likewise, remarked that “poetry has vanished as a cultural force”. Though Gioia does believe that poetry has a particular role to play in the public debate, he also thinks that it has “lost the confidence that it speaks to and for the general culture” (“Can Poetry Matter?”).

Wilson, Epstein and Gioia were right up to a point. In our contemporary culture, poetry is indeed overshadowed by prose, and is not that widely read anymore. To compare: an acclaimed novel can count on selling between 200,000 and

300,000 copies, whereas an acclaimed poetry collection can only hope to sell one-hundredth of this sum (Hensher). In this sense, poetry is indeed, culturally speaking, extremely marginal. I would like to argue, however, that many scholars have failed to take into account an important shift in the poetic practices of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, Gioia has retracted his initial stance towards poetry in a subsequent 2003 article called “Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture”. In this article, Gioia claims that poetry has in fact experienced a “vastly popular revival” in the last decades (“Ink” 25). According to Gioia:

Without a doubt the most surprising and significant development in recent American poetry has been the wide-scale and unexpected reemergence of popular poetry – namely rap, cowboy poetry, poetry slams and certain overtly accessible types of what was once a defiantly avant-garde genre, performance poetry. (“Ink” 25)

Poetry might be dying on paper; it is flourishing on the stage. Following the “performative turn” of the 1960’s (Fischer-Lichte 18), poetry has been increasingly moving away from print culture. Poets are more and more often invited to read their work on stage, and wholly new poetic practices such as poetry slams (i.e. poetry competitions) have started to emerge. What is interesting about this shift in poetry is that it is moving poetry closer towards mainstream culture; poetry slams, for example, have been featured in films (e.g. *Slam* 1998), documentaries (*SlamNation* 1998; *Louder than a Bomb* 2010), on cable television (via HBO’s *Def Poetry*) and on Broadway (Somers-Willett 5). Poetry’s cultural visibility is thus starting to increase. What is more, the performative turn in poetry has transformed it from being a private practice to (again) becoming more and more a communal one. Whereas poetry used to be read by a small minority of people within the confines of domestic space, it now has the ability to “work [its] magic on thousands of people at once” (Moyers xvi). At a time when print culture is declining as our society’s “primary means of codifying, presenting and preserving information” (Gioia “Ink” 23), poetry is getting by relatively unscathed. Whereas novelists are losing their reading audiences to other media, poets might actually use these media to their advantage. The rise of the internet, for example, has made it possible for poetry to be easily distributed. Moreover, the internet has diminished the threshold for publishing poetry; many amateur poets post their poetry online on websites made specifically for this purpose, asking for responses and giving responses to the work of other people as well. Both in the “real-world” and online, poetry is creating new (mnemonic) communities. Not all of the poetry produced is artistically strong, but the mere scope of the poetry produced imbues the medium of poetry with a large social relevance. Poetry is moving into the public sphere, and as such, it might have a commemorative potential that has been largely overlooked until now. According to Ann Rigney, the “repertoire of [commemorative] cultural practices changes over time together with technological and aesthetic innovations” (“Dynamics of

Remembrance"345). Poetry may have been too marginal for cultural commemoration during some part of history; it does not seem to be marginal now. In the aftermath of 9/11, more than 55,000 poems were posted in the "September 11<sup>th</sup> Dedication Poems" section of the popular site poetry.com, slam poets brought their post-9/11 poems to a national public via the HBO series Def Poetry, and Sam Hamill reached the news with his "Poets Against the War". When looking at the initial stage of 9/11 commemoration, the medium of poetry cannot be overlooked.

### **Poetry as a Political Force**

Memory is never neutral. As White indicates, it is impossible to narrativize without moralizing or politicizing (27). This notion seems to ring especially true in relation to the narrativizing of 9/11; an event whose strong symbolic significance makes it particularly vulnerable to ideological manipulation. 9/11 is popularly remarked on as forming a caesura in history; it has been "widely presented as an interruption of the deep rhythms of cultural time, a cataclysm simply erasing what was there rather than evolving from anything already in place (...)" (Simpson 4). As many scholars have pointed out, this view of 9/11 as forming a definite break with history does not so much spring from the actual nature of the attack as from the impact that this attack has had on the American consciousness. According to Derrida, what dictates the fact that 9/11 is thought of as a "major event" is not any inherent quality of the event itself<sup>3</sup>, but the way in which the event has been framed from the start within a network that was "political, technical, economic" (in Borradori 89). Due to the spectacular nature of the September 11 attack, and due to the iconic status of its object, 9/11's existence as a material, real-life event has almost immediately become overshadowed by its simultaneous existence as a symbolic event. What is foregrounded in the dominant commemoration of 9/11 is not so much the atrocity of its material happening as the threat that it posed to American visions of power and security. Part of the reason for this is of course the motive for the attack; al-Qaeda meant to give a symbolic blow to the whole of America and chose its targets accordingly. However, the media are also to a very large extent responsible. As Žižek claims, when al-Qaeda flew its hijacked passenger jets into the WTC and the Pentagon, the atrocious nature of these events caused them to be experienced as hyper-real. The public's "passion for the real", in effect, demanded an extensive reporting of the attack. However, the overindulgence in 9/11 reporting which ensued paradoxically caused 9/11 to become a mere "*effect of the real*" (10, my italics). The strong representation of 9/11 in visual culture somehow de-materialized the event itself, stripping the event of any concrete suffering. While the images of the planes flying into the WTC and of the towers collapsing have been repeated over

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<sup>3</sup>In his interview with Borradori, Derrida remarks that, in terms of scope (number of death, geographical location, duration) 9/11 cannot be denoted as being a "major" event.



and over, images of actual death have been strangely absent (Campbell; Edkins; Simpson; Žižek). As Žižek writes: “while the number of victims - 3,000- is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see - no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people” (13). The extensive but selective reporting on 9/11 in the media has largely instituted the event as a virtual abstraction; more than the atrocity itself, what seems to characterize 9/11 is the “hidden wound” that it afflicted to the American self-image of “impregnability and invincibility” (Radstone 467; 468). The deaths resulting from the September 11 attacks were immediately claimed as American deaths, as deaths “belonging to the state” (Edkins). Furthermore, the attack itself, though very geographically specific, was reported in newspapers under the synecdochal heading “*America Under Attack*” (my italics).

I do not wish to deny that 9/11 had genuine implications for the whole of the US; US citizens felt rightly implicated in an event that was directed at the American *nation* and that violated their sense of security. What I am trying to argue for, however, is that the commemoration of 9/11 cannot be understood outside of the political shape that this commemoration immediately acquired. In America, the “time of memory and commemoration evolved from the start alongside the time of revenge” (Simpson 4). Given the fact that 9/11 had shattered the American fantasy of infinite power and indestructability, there was an immediate urge to restore what had been broken. However, this urge for restoration took precedence over grief and mourning, and in effect, commemoration of the 9/11 dead was rushed. Jenny Edkins describes what occurred:

It was amazing how quickly, and indeed prematurely, there was a move to practices of remembrance. George W. Bush talked of help for victims and called for a moment’s silence even before the third plane had struck. A world-wide three minute silence was called for 11 am on the Friday following the Tuesday’s events. At this point, rescue efforts in New York were still at full stretch.

Instead of giving in to the vulnerability that the attack of September 11 produced, the Bush administration responded with an “assertion of US ‘leadership’ ”; starting a war in an effort to re-build the world order and re-install sovereignty (Butler 7; Edkins). Already on September 21, the call for mourning was largely replaced by a call for war. In his address to congress, President Bush remarked: “our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution”. Within 10 days of the attack, 9/11 became subsumed by the global “War on Terror”, taking on a meaning largely existing outside of itself. The Bush administration and the mainstream media unquestioningly moved from the September 11 attack to the US invasion of Afghanistan, making it seem as if war was the logical, *natural* next step. According to Rancièrè, “politics proper” was replaced by “consensus” in the aftermath of 9/11 (100). Due to a “growing acceptance of censorship within the media” (Butler 1), the

government's decision to start a War on Terror was kept free of political debate. Even when anti-war sentiment was covered in the media, it was made to fit the dominant view of consensus. As poet Eliot Katz writes about a protest in New York: "CBS-TV covered the event as another cute show of / the city's spirit of togetherness / sandwiched between two dozen stories of a flag-waving public / meat-hungry to support Bush Jr's rush to war" (in Johnson & Merians 24-25). The American moral-political stance was artificially made consistent via the designating of anti-war sentiment as "anti-US" (Butler 15); a vision receiving symbolic support via the use of the American flag as a sign of both mourning and war support (Butler 3). Mourning, then, seemed to logically flow over into retaliation; 9/11 into its political aftermath. No longer an isolated traumatic event, 9/11 became the excuse for the implementation of an aggressive foreign policy. Simpson speaks of a "propagandist compression" in this respect (4); the Bush administration inextricably tied 9/11, the war in Afghanistan and the War in Iraq together, even though these links were – especially in the case of the Iraq war – debatable to say the least.

In this thesis, I start from the premise that we cannot understand 9/11 without understanding the politics of its memory. The commemoration of the attack has from the start been caught up in a network of extraneous political motivations which draw attention away from the concrete horror and trauma of 9/11 as a material event. Both during the September 11 attack and during its aftermath, human life has been appropriated as "bare life" (Agamben 8): both al-Qaeda and the Bush administration have not treated their "casualties" as true human beings but as mere pawns in a battle that (for them!) played itself out in the symbolic realm. As such, I would argue, any cultural response to 9/11 inevitably becomes tied up with the entirety of the event; that is, with both its material *and* its political existence. It is impossible *not* to relate to 9/11 in a political way, since the event cannot be untangled from its ideological framing. What is more, given the simplicity of this ideological framing, a very particular demand is placed on those responding. According to Hartman, literature and other arts have the potential to function as a counterforce to the dominant views of the past as they exist in society (80). In the case of 9/11 commemoration, this subversive potential of art becomes a strong *ethical imperative*; since the national discourse surrounding 9/11 is so reductive, a critical counter-voice *needs* to be heard. As I will assert in the chapters to come, many poets writing in the post-9/11 period felt prompted to offer this counter-voice, and as a whole, the medium of poetry proved itself to be particularly strongly politico-critically engaged.

"The relationship between poetry and politics has always been a problematic one", states Richard Gray in *After the Fall*. Indeed, as I have demonstrated earlier, poetry is commonly thought of as "transcending" society, and thus as being utterly disengaged from social and political issues. Intriguingly, even many of the scholars

who allow for a political dimension of poetry do not stray far from this argument. Adorno, for example, argues that the medium's subversive potential lies in its self-sufficiency; poetry enters into a negative dialectical relationship with society, negating what's "false and bad" in this society by expressing the "dream of a world in which things would be different" (*On Lyric Poetry and Society* 40). Poetry, then, is most politically effective when it is strongly non-political/non-engaged; it can only counter the deficiencies of society by constituting a transcendental aesthetic realm which bears none of society's traces. Though this view of poetry can account for some politically engaged works, it is ultimately limiting. Whereas it is commonly accepted that fiction is influenced by a whole range of factors (e.g. social, political, economic), poetry is still conceived of in narrow aesthetic terms (Harrington 3). As such, many scholars (like Adorno) fail to do justice to the versatility of poetry; that is, they fail to account for the fact that the transformative potential of poetry does not reside solely in its (pure) aesthetic abilities, but in the entirety of aesthetic, social and political aspects which make up the work.

Poets of many generations have preoccupied themselves directly with societal issues. Poetry has a long tradition of political engagement, and this can be seen particularly well in the literary canon of the US. As Kotonen remarks, one of the "main characteristics" of American poetry throughout its history has been its "tendency towards national self-reflection" (27). Walt Whitman, who is often considered to be *the* greatest American poet, wrote extensively on national issues, and many poets after him have continued to examine critically their country and its politics. Moreover, following the performative turn of the 1960's, poetry even became an integral part of public protest. Poets such as Allan Ginsberg, Robert Bly, Diane di Prima and Denise Levertov wrote and performed protest poems against the Vietnam War; Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed and Gwendolyn Brooks used their poetry to fight for black emancipation during the civil rights movement.

Contrary to dominant academic views, then, poetry seems to be a preferred medium for the expression of societal dissatisfaction. In the aftermath of 9/11, it was poetry which manifested itself as "*the* medium for the expression and distribution of opinions which remained unsayable in other media" (Plate 53). From the onset of 9/11 commemoration, poets responded critically to the dominant narrative surrounding the attack as expressed by the Bush administration and by the institutional media. As such, they offered (or at least *tried* to offer) an alternative to the hegemonic story of 9/11 at a moment when not many other writers did. Since other forms of literature could not be produced so quickly, nor as easily distributed, poets took on a monopoly position with respect to the undermining of official 9/11 memory. What is more, poets maintained this position long after the first novels dealing with the attack started to be produced. In the medium of poetry, ideas could be expressed which "in other forms of literature continued to be a taboo" (van der

Bent 147). To write a novel about 9/11 was considered by many to be “exploitative” and “tasteless” (Cleave), and in the first decade of 9/11 commemoration this seems to have scared many novelists away from dealing with the topic in a critical manner. Many of the early 9/11 novels (e.g. Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, DeLillo’s *Falling Man*) largely resonated with the hegemonic memory of the terrorist attack as an “isolated, irrational act aimed at an ‘innocent’ nation”, instead of as one that was politically motivated (Randall 143; Mishra). In effect, these novels did nothing to produce a more nuanced cultural view of 9/11, though they may have helped people to grieve.

In contrast to the early novelists of 9/11, most poets writing on 9/11 did not shy away from contextualizing the attack within a broader historical and political framework, nor from critiquing the US government’s post-9/11 politics. As such, they performed a social and cultural role which was wholly their own. In this thesis, I will advance the idea that poetry took on a unique position with regards to the framing of 9/11, as it not only questioned the official memory of the attack, but also the way in which this official memory was subsequently appropriated by the Bush administration in order to sell its aggressive foreign policy. According to Peter Verovšek, political figures often “seek to gain political advantage by monumentalizing group-specific understandings of the past in order to legitimize their actions in the present” (1). In the post-9/11 period, this phenomenon was clearly visible: firmly establishing 9/11 as an unmotivated attack directed at an essentially innocent and just nation, both politicians and the press supporting them were able to sell the US’s subsequent “War on Terror” as beyond moral contestation. Within this reductive discursive climate, poetry took on the role of memory and policy “contester”. Though sometimes focussing on the traumatic aspects of the event, most poetry dealing with 9/11 concerned itself with the cultural and political implications of the attack’s mnemonic discourse; that is, with the simplistic national self-image arising from it (i.e. of America as righteous victim), and with the international violence enacted because of it. In poetry, then, 9/11 was predominantly engaged with as a discursive concept, not necessarily as a past event. As such, to speak of poetry as a tool for commemoration, as I have hitherto done, might be a bit misleading. With its connotations of absence, mourning and loss, the term “commemoration” cannot capture the true mnemonic value of poetry in the wake of the attack, which resided in the fact that it was able to critically engage with the continuing, *living* memory of 9/11; that is, with the way in which the event, and the dominant cultural beliefs associated with it, were misused for ideological purposes. Of course, not all 9/11-related poetry was politically and mnemonically subversive, nor was the subversive poetry produced always effective. Some of the supposedly critical poetry produced after the attack wasn’t so subversive at all, for example being too artistically and/or ideologically weak to undermine the political status

quo. Other politico-critical poems, in turn, though being successful on paper, didn't have the cultural visibility to truly make a difference. Still others, who did have large cultural visibility, were misunderstood or actively undermined when travelling into society. Poetry, in short, was not a panacea against the reductive political thinking growing out of the September 11 attack. However, it was the literary medium most often used to question the attack's ideological misappropriations. As such, studying the poetic response to (the aftermath of) 9/11 can help us gain insight into the nature of, and possibilities for, (literary) dissent in the first decade after the attack, and into the value that poetry, understood as a medium uniquely engaged with the memory-misuses of 9/11, had to offer during that period.

### **Poetry as a Socio-Political Force**

Underlying this thesis is one main assumption: poetry is not an autonomous, transcendental art form hovering over and above society, but a medium which is strongly anchored in society, being shaped by this society and re-shaping it in return. In line with this assumption, I will approach the poetry written in response to 9/11 from a *socio-political* perspective. As I will come to argue, poetry had the potential to counter hegemonic views of 9/11 in the first decade after the attack, but did not do so from a purely aesthetico-ethical plane. First of all, it is not the poetic (aesthetic) text in itself which either affirms or undermines certain political ideas, but the way in which this text is *socially* used; that is, the way in which it is distributed, shared and inter-personally experienced etc. Poetry is a medium created by and read/performed within specific communities, and this is an aspect of poetry which cannot be overlooked. Building on Michael Warner, I argue that poetry, like all forms of discourse, is able to organize a *public*; that is, is able to create a community out of previously unconnected people on the basis of the fact that it (1) addresses these people *as* group and (2) circulates amongst them.<sup>4</sup> Drawing further from Warner, I contend that the publics forged via poetry have an ideological foundation; publics, and the texts circulated within them, hold particular cultural and political beliefs, beliefs which can either be supporting of the societal status quo or rejecting of it (in which case the public becomes a *counter-public*). To the extent that poetry had a political function in the post-9/11 period, then, as I will come to show, this function resided in the fact that poetry created certain social effects and established certain political communities, not in the text-confined, aesthetic qualities of the medium. Second of all, in further divergence from the aesthetico-ethical vision underlying most discussions of poetry and its politics, I wish to advance the idea that poetry doesn't have to be "politically dead" in order to *be* political, as Adorno

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<sup>4</sup> Warner, Michael. "Publics and Counterpublics." *Public Culture* 14:1 (2002): 49-90. Print. Warner himself doesn't discuss poetry, but as poetry can be typified as a form of discourse, Warner's general theory about the creation of publics via discourse can be applied to the specific medium of poetry as well.

would have it (*On Commitment* 258). The “transcendental view” of poetry advanced by Adorno and likeminded scholars, with its treatment of poetry as a sort of “pure” medium hovering over and above society, is a non-informed one. Being produced within society, poetry cannot wholly separate itself from it, nor from its politics; poetry participates in the same world, using the same system of language. As I will come to show, the poems written in response to 9/11 often engage directly with political issues, and use a wide range of rhetorical strategies which are often as ideologically charged as those used by politicians. To completely separate poetry from politics, then - with the first being understood as naturally virtuous/pure and the other as commonly vile/reductive (a point to which I will return) - seems naïve at best.

In the sections above, I have largely severed poetry’s existence as a social force from its existence as a political force. However, as I will make clear in the chapters to come, these two aspects of 9/11 poetry are highly intertwined. In this thesis, I will discuss the political potential of poetry as something that resides both in poetry itself - that is, within the textual structure of poetry as a cultural artefact - and within the extra-textual qualities of poetry as distributed and performed - that is, within poetry’s existence as a public and social event (hence the *socio-politics* of poetry). Though poetry has always been politically engaged, its move towards the public and the communal has enhanced its politically subversive potential. Not only have poetry’s move towards performance and the fast distribution of poetry enabled by the internet given the medium a larger cultural visibility; they have also provided poetry with the opportunity to actively engage with the social world around it, re-constituting identities and creating (political and mnemonic) communities via its interaction with (virtual) audiences.

In order to capture the socio-politics of 9/11 poetry as accurately as possible, I will explore a wide array of poetic practices as came about in the wake of the September 11 attack, differing in terms of both the pathways of their distribution and their political engagement. Each of the chapters of this thesis can be read separately, offering insight into one particular subgroup of poetic responses to 9/11 and/or its cultural and political ramifications. Together, however, the chapters also aim to provide some overarching insight into the general socio-political workings of poetry in the aftermath of 9/11 and, even more broadly speaking, into the mnemonic possibilities and limitations of poetry as a socially shared, (predominantly) politically critical medium.

In chapter one, I will discuss the most immediate poetic response to 9/11: the circulation of Auden’s poem “September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939” and the massive posting of amateur poems on the website poetry.com. Characteristic of this initial response is that it was democratic; people from all over the US used the medium of poetry to

articulate a response to the September 11 attack.<sup>5</sup> However, in contrast to the poetry later produced and/or distributed by professional poets, this initial democratic response was largely politically affirmative; both the circulation of Auden and the massive posting on poetry.com ultimately supported the dominant mnemonic discourse of American righteousness and innocence. In order to make this clear, I will discuss how (1) the politically critical message of Auden's poem was overlooked and misappropriated after 9/11 as a result of people's selective reading of the poem and (2) how most of the poems on poetry.com reiterated the dominant view of 9/11 as expressed by the Bush administration and the mainstream media.

From chapter two onwards, I will focus on some of the later, more politically subversive poems written in response to 9/11. To start with, I will look at the way in which print-based, academic poetry was used to question and undermine the rhetoric employed by the Bush administration in the post-9/11 period. My approach in chapter two is textual, and explores the verbal possibilities that the medium of poetry provided for undercutting the dominant narrative of 9/11. Arguing against the notion of poetry as rhetorically "purifying", I will discuss three poems which politicize/make visible the language of the Bush administration and which question the vision it put in place of *the* American community (understood as just, innocent, homogenous etc.). I end my chapter with some short remarks about the socio-political shortcomings of academically produced and circulated poetry.

In chapter 3 and chapter 4, I will look at some instances in which critical post-9/11 poetry took on a more active role in society, becoming more than mere words on a page. In chapter three I will analyse some of the responses to 9/11 and the war on terror as they appeared within the poetry slam scene. Largely drawing examples from the HBO series *Def Poetry*, I will show that slam poets dealing with 9/11 often presented themselves as "speaking from the margins"; these poets foregrounded their own peripheral cultural position in order to question dominant conceptualizations of what it meant to be an American in the aftermath of 9/11. Via the performance and celebration of marginal identities, slam poets and audiences together constituted an alternative cultural space where subversive political ideas could be expressed and where counterpublics could be formed, thus offering refuge from America's dominant culture.

In chapter four, I will pay attention to two situations in which poetry actively clashed with America's dominant culture, thereby gaining national visibility and attaining the possibility for truly voicing protest. In 2002, Amiri Baraka caused controversy with his polemical, perceived-to-be anti-Semitic poem "Somebody Blew Up America"; in 2003, the socio-poetic movement Poets Against the War reached the

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<sup>5</sup> Professional poets also started producing work in the hours and days after 9/11. However, since their poetry remained largely unpublished until a year after the attack, I don't count their work among the initial phase of poetic response.

national news when aiming to disrupt a literary event at the White House about “Poetry and the American voice”. Mapping both the content and reception of these poetries, I will argue that, though Baraka and Poets Against the War opened up the national debate about 9/11 and its political aftermath, the protest that they offer was ultimately limited, as the only type of poetic protest allowed for in the post-9/11 period was one of safe marginality.

I end this thesis with a general discussion on the socio-politics of poetry in the wake of the September 11 attack, expanding on the possibilities and limitations of poetry for voicing (mnemonic and political) critique, and reflecting on the implications that poetry’s assumed socio-political role had for its position in relation to the cultural memory of 9/11.



## 9/11 and the Poetry of Nationalism

Undoubtedly, the greatest surge of poetic responses to 9/11 occurred in its immediate aftermath. Following the attack, US citizens turned to poetry “in an almost unprecedented way” (Smith). First of all, within hours after impact, well-known poems from the past started to circulate broadly on the internet and within the public sphere. A diverse array of poems was communally distributed, among them being Yeats’ “The Second Coming”, Zagajewski’s “Try to Praise the Mutilated World” and Ferlinghetti’s “Are There Not Still Fireflies” (Alkalay-Gut 260; Swift). By far the most widely shared poem, however, was Auden’s “September 1, 1939”. “If you could invest in literary capital”, writes Daniel Swift, “I would have put all my money in W.H. Auden stocks”. Quickly after the attack, Auden’s poem began to appear both online and offline. In an article on Slate.com, Eric McHenry reflects on the speed with which the poem was spread:

[On 9/12/01], I e-mailed [it] to members of my family. Two days later a friend e-mailed it to me, having received it from another friend who was circulating it. On Sunday my mother told me that Scott Simon had read portions of it on NPR [*National Public Radio*]. And on Monday my wife, a prep school teacher, saw it lying on the faculty photocopy machine.

“September 1, 1939” popped up in “hundreds of chatrooms” as diverse as the “classical-guitar newsgroup”, the “crossword-puzzle solvers” and the “anarchist chatroom” (Swift). Off the screen, Auden’s poem was featured in many of the poetry readings that were held around the country (“I must have heard W.H. Auden’s ‘September 1, 1939’ a dozen times”, writes Spiegelman, 11) and it appeared in the improvised memorials that were set up all over New York city (Jordan). What is more, newspapers picked up on the poem’s popularity as well; “September 1, 1939” was reprinted in its entirety in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Baltimore Sun* and the *New York Post*.

Besides sharing poems from the past to make sense of 9/11, people also started to produce and consume new poetry in the days and weeks following the attack. In the face of national grief, poetry shook off its image as elitist art form, and became a “voice for the people”. Though many professional poets also responded to the attack, the largest outpour of poetry in the wake of 9/11 came from non-poets/amateur poets, who used the medium of poetry to achieve “immediate therapeutic release” (Allen). “In public places and forums”, claims Karen Alkalay-Gut, “there began to surface poems in which aesthetics were apparently subordinated to communicative function and ‘direct’ expression”. In the New York cityscape, people connected via poetry, taping self-written poems on windows, wheat pasting them on posts, and handing them out on the street (Metres). By far the largest sharing of poetry, however, was enabled by the internet, which became the “primary venue” for emotional expression (Alkalay-Gut). Thousands of amateur

poems dealing with grief and anger were published on a wide range of (interactive) internet sites. The most well-known site among them, poetry.com, received over 13,000 poems on 9/11 during the first month after the attack, a number which would quadruple in the years to come.

“Often invisible in American culture, poetry suddenly became relevant . . .”, writes Philip Metres. Indeed, the cultural visibility and perceived pertinence of poetry increased greatly in the first few weeks after 9/11. Journalists writing about poetry tried to “cash in” on this sudden success, using the post-9/11 popularity of poetry to argue for its value in the popular press. Many critics rejoiced in poetry’s ability to strengthen interpersonal ties and to build loving communities. Sven Bikert from the *New York Observer* remarked that poetry “springs directly from our primal need and capacity for communication”. Likewise, in a *New York Times* article entitled “Negotiating the Darkness, Fortified by Poets’ Strength”, Mary Karr claimed: “poetry is about . . . instantaneous connection – one person groping from a dark place to meet with another in an instant that strikes fire”. Implicit in these views of poetry-as-connection is the belief that poetic exchange is by definition virtuous. In support of the “transcendental view” of poetry, these critics conceive of poetry as a superior form of communication, one that brings people together in a way that is fundamentally good. As Joseph Harrington remarks, the generic designation “poetry” stereotypically signifies “a complex of aesthetic-ethical values.” (163). Where other forms of literature are recognized as being politically and historically embedded (and thus as being capable of including corruptive content or producing corrupting effects) poetry is still predominantly perceived as a purely aesthetic and, due the common association of the aesthetic with such spiritually uplifting notions as beauty and truth, also a purely moral medium. Poetry is always placed on the side of the righteous; it is, to use Mary Karr’s ethically flavored imagery, the “fire” that draws people out of the “dark”. The definition of poetry that poet laureate Billy Collins gave in the aftermath of 9/11 is telling in this respect. Collins was quoted by *New York Times* reporter Dinitia Smith as calling poetry a “human voice speaking directly in our ear”. What is here implied is that poetry, being a “human voice”, makes an immediate claim upon our *humanity*. Underlying Collins’ definition is the premise that poetry is a form of “pure” communication safe from ideological pollution. Poetry speaks to us from a transcendental, non-political plane, surpassing normal interactions via its ability to connect people on an essentially human(e) level.

In the wake of 9/11, the great surge in poetic communication was too easily interpreted as being an indication of (American) righteousness. Following the September 11 attack, both the Bush administration and the mainstream media rhetorically installed a strong opposition between “civilized” America and the “barbarous” countries harboring terrorism. Within this discursive context, the widespread sharing of poetry quickly became subsumed under the general heading

of American virtuousness. In the post-9/11 media, the community-building potential of poetry was put forward as opposing the inhumanity of the Al-Qaeda attack. Collins referred to poetry as forming a “small counterweight to put on the other side of the dreadfully lopsided scale” (qtd. in Smith). Bikert, likewise, simplistically spoke of poetry in terms of it being the “reverse of the terrorist act, its antithesis, just as the terrorist act is the complete negation of the spirit of poetry”. Reported in the media in such Manichean terms, alongside stories of heroic New York firefighters and kind US citizens donating blood, the sharing of poetry became yet another token of civilized America “responding with the best of America” to the barbarism of the al-Qaeda terrorists; to the “very worst of human nature” (Bush “Address to Congress”). As such, the media’s depiction of the virtuousness of poetic exchange unwittingly supported the dominant rhetoric of the American nation as being (essentially) morally superior, something which encouraged the unquestioning support for retaliation.

To conceive of poetry as being inherently virtuous hides both the strengths and weaknesses of the medium. As I will make clear in the sections to come, poetry is just as susceptible to simplistic ideological expression or misappropriation as any other medium. Poetry *can* counter violent ideologies, but does not necessarily do so in a way that is purely morally good and/or non-rhetoric. My perspective on the community-building strength of poetry in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 is a critical one. It is my contention in this chapter (and in the rest of this thesis) that the process of forging interpersonal ties is not neutral, but is imbued with (implicit) political or ideological aims and/or effects. Taking the circulation of Auden and the massive posting on poetry.com as case studies, I will argue that the type of public envisioned and created through poetry in the wake of 9/11, though providing comfort, only in a limited way enabled its members to adopt a complex political stance.

### **The circulation of W.H. Auden’s “September 1, 1939”**

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Auden’s “September 1, 1939” was circulated widely in the US because it appeared to be uncannily pertinent. Being set in the city of New York (“I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-Second Street”) and eerily echoing horrific details of the September 11 attack (“The Unmentionable odour of death / Offends the September night”), Auden’s poem immediately struck a chord with its post-9/11 audience. As a poem which foregrounds the fragility of the individual in the overwhelming face of history, “September 1, 1939” gave voice to the feelings of insecurity that US citizens experienced following the al-Qaeda attack. Hiding below street level (“I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-Second Street”), the speaker of Auden’s poem feels “uncertain and afraid” as he is listening to a radio report on Hitler’s invasion of Poland, picking up on global “waves of anger and fear”. It is this

theme of catastrophic helplessness which seems to have resonated with US citizens in the days and weeks after 9/11. As American writer David Weiss confesses: “Who among us didn’t feel, on September 11<sup>th</sup>, stunned, fragile, dwarfed, overshadowed by an eruption of History (...)” (400). “September 1, 1939” proved itself to be particularly relevant for an audience whose sense of security had been shattered after being attacked on the American mainland for what was perceived to be the first time, having history (from which they had largely felt exempt<sup>6</sup>) suddenly thrust upon them.

However, not just emotionally, but also politically, “September 1, 1939” can be said to have been relevant in the wake of 9/11. When transposed to the context of post-9/11 America, the poem calls into question the discursive practices with which the US government and mainstream media came to constitute the American nation as one of perennial innocence, something which encouraged post- 9/11 support for retaliation. Somewhat crudely stated, “September 1, 1939” can be said to be a manifesto against rhetorical dishonesty. According to Auden, “there is one field in which the poet is a man of action, the field of language (...)” (“The Public” 7). Though Auden was skeptical about poetry’s ability to change social policies (“poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / in the valley of its making where executives would never want to tamper”; “In Memory”), he nevertheless envisioned an important social role for poetry. Poetry might not be able to effect any direct change in the public sphere, but it can use language to poignantly depict society, thereby indirectly changing it. Poetry, states Auden, “cannot lie” (“Nature, History, Poetry” 418), and herein lies its true subversive strength. In contrast to politicians, who use language as a tool for public persuasion, poets employ language for no “ulterior purpose” other than to “disenchant” and “disintoxicate” (Auden “Writing” 27). Poetry clears the public sphere of deceiving (political) discourse, thus awakening it to the need for societal change.

In “September 1, 1939”, Auden places the invasion of Poland within the broader perspective of collective human wrongdoing, drawing attention to the fact that the sanctions placed on Germany by the Allies of WWI may have partly prompted the attack<sup>7</sup> (“I and the public know /What all schoolchildren learn /Those to whom evil is done /Do evil in return”). Auden’s political critique in “September 1, 1939” is directed at the fact that the West, in the run-up to the Second World War, used empty rhetoric to cover up its own complicity. As Stan Smith summarizes Auden’s view: “In the public world it is the rubbish of rhetoric that rules, and because we did not act but merely talked, we must now suffer” (“W.H. Auden” 27). People generally fail to acknowledge the “Error bred in the bone /Of each woman

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<sup>6</sup> As one amateur poet on poetry.com remarks: “No one thought that this could happen, / at least never to us”.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Auden took this stance at the *onset* of WWII, when the atrocities which came to characterize the war were not yet known.

and each man", washing their hands in innocence while they point to the wrongs of others. The world which Auden depicts is one in which we are forced to listen to "The windiest militant trash / Important persons shout", in which "blind skyscrapers" superficially claim the "strength of Collective Man" and in which discourse is reduced to the "vain / Competitive excuse" poured out by different languages. Societies all live in a "euphoric dream", failing to see "imperialism's face/And the international wrong" staring back at them from their "mirror". In "September 1, 1939", ideology is, as Stan Smith suggests, a "collective conspiracy" in which people wallow so that they don't have to face themselves ("W.H. Auden" 27). "All the conventions conspire", writes Auden, "To make this fort assume /The furniture of home". In the world of "September 1, 1939", societies and people do not dare to take responsibility, but instead create comfortable lives for themselves, clothing their hostility with innocence.

When read in the context of post-9/11 America, Auden's poem calls into question the American rhetoric of historical exceptionalism. According to Marita Sturken, dominant American culture encourages a "'tourist' relationship to history"; that is, it stimulates its citizens to relate to the past as detached, unimplicated onlookers (4). After 9/11, argues Sturken, this deeply ingrained cultural pull towards historical detachment prevented the American nation from taking responsibility for its own past transgressions. Instead of acknowledging the negative role that the country itself had played in pre-9/11 politics, the US government and mainstream media took on a stance of complete innocence. The US failed to account for the historical embeddedness of the attack, skipping over the fact that the nation's foreign policies in the Middle East had partly fostered the emergence of terrorist groups with anti-American sentiments. Tellingly, in answer to the rhetorical question "Why do they hate us?", George W. Bush stated that "they hate our freedoms", thus immediately shutting down the possibility of critical self-reflection ("A Nation Challenged"). As Judith Butler puts it, in the wake of the attack, there was "no relevant prehistory to the events of September 11, since to tell the story in a different way (...) [was] already to complicate the question of agency . . ." Auden's poem, read post-9/11, poses a critique of this dominant view of historical innocence. Stating that evil acts do not take place in isolation ("those to whom evil is done/ Do evil in return"), and suggesting that people use false rhetoric to cover up their own complicity in the violence of the world ("out of the mirror they stare/ imperialism's face/ and the international wrong), "September 1, 1939" forms a biting critique of post-9/11 American culture.

According to Liedeke Plate, the sharing of Auden's poem made it possible for people to "think and say what was left out of the story of 9/11 by the media, thus opening up a critical perspective in the consensus-focused media landscape" (49). Though I support the idea that some people spread "September 1, 1939" in order to

problematize the vision of American innocence, I am less positive about the poem's general effectiveness in "opening up a critical perspective". Though many newspapers devoted space to "September 1, 1939" in the aftermath of 9/11, almost none of them paid attention to the political aspects of the poem. According to Gary Kamiya, to examine the lines "those to whom evil is done / do evil in return" was "not permitted" in the wake of 9/11, and also Stan Smith contends that the "moral at the poem's heart" was not acknowledged ("Cambridge Companion" 1). Were the poem entitled "September 11, 2001", argues Peter Steinfels, it would probably have earned "sharp rebukes". However, given the different historical context of the poem, people were able to read it selectively, applying some aspects of the poem to their present situation, while leaving others aside. Only one reader, in an open letter to *Times Literary Supplement*, reflected on the poem's political content, somewhat simplistically claiming that it contained "snide remarks about America". However, by far the greatest interest in the poem went out to the poem's positive, apolitical ending. In the last two stanzas of "September 1, 1939", Auden turns his attention away from the dreadfulness of his political existence towards the redemptive powers of poetry. Within the unfriendly environment sketched by Auden, poetry proves itself to be the only form of salvation. "Who can release them now, / Who can reach the deaf, / Who can speak for the dumb?" asks Auden in the seventh stanza of his poem. The answer, of course, is the poet. From within a crowd made numb by rhetoric, the poet - being the only one able to *truly* hear and speak - stands up:

All I have is a voice  
To undo the folded lie,  
The romantic lie in the brain  
Of the sensual man-in-the-street  
And the lie of Authority  
Whose buildings grope the sky:  
There is no such thing as the State  
And no one exists alone;  
Hunger allows no choice  
To the citizen or the police;  
We must love one another or die.

It is this last line ("we must love one another or die") which was quoted most often in the days and weeks following 9/11, since it "spoke to the urgent longing many Americans felt" (Carroll). As Lucia Perillo writes, "In the wake of disaster, our yearning for connection with other human beings was corroborated by the urgency of Auden's command" (28). Though Auden's political views did not chime in with those of the general public, the emotions he expressed in "September 1, 1939" did

(Gopnik). What seems to have made Auden's poem so powerful for a post-9/11 audience is that it gave voice to US citizens' feelings of frailty, while simultaneously also offering a more comfortable alternative to this frailty by providing visions of communal benevolence ("we must love one another or die" 88) and hope ("Our world in stupor lies; / Yet, dotted everywhere, / Ironic points of light / Flash out wherever the Just / Exchange their messages" 90-94). What appears to have ultimately caused "September 1, 1939" to be, not just read (to the extent to which that was even done), but nationally *shared*, is that it helped its readers to envision themselves as being part of a strong and loving American community; one resilient to tragedy. Auden's poem, being strongly anchored in the literary history of America, and taking up a central position in what Diane Taylor would call the US's literary "archive", was in itself already a national symbol; one that, regardless of its content, interconnected all US citizens on the basis of their shared literary history<sup>8</sup>. This "nationalist" aura of "September 1, 1939", together with the community-oriented, emotive aspects of the poem, were ultimately what seem to have made Auden's poem popular and perceivably relevant in the aftermath of 9/11, not so much its critical content. As Carter Ratcliff writes in his ode to Auden's poem, "September 1, 1939" enabled US citizens to "truly breathe"; it helped them to go on, "sunk but still swimming / in the air that [held them] all in common" (in Johnson & Merians, 22).

Interestingly, Auden's line "we must love one another or die", which received the most widespread attention in the wake of 9/11, is one that Auden came to regard as "hateful and false" later in his life, eventually causing him to refute the whole poem (Auden "Selected Poems" xvii). Initially, Auden tried to salvage his poem by changing the line to "we must love one another *and* die" (my italics). When he became discontented with this solution as well, he decided to cut the entire stanza which framed the line, only to end up disowning the poem in its entirety. In the eyes of the later Auden, "September 1, 1939" was "infected by an incurable dishonesty", and he came to think of it as "trash which he [was] ashamed to have written" (qtd. in Perillo 28 and Auden "Selected Poems" xx). What was the reason for Auden's discrediting of the poem? Ironically, Auden came to realize that "September 1, 1939" fell prey to exactly that type of deceptive politics which it had aimed to unmask. As becomes clear from the poem's history of reception, though Auden had wished to "disenchant and disintoxicate", "September 1, 1939" ended up doing exactly the opposite. In the past, Auden's poem has proved to lend itself well for propagandistic appropriation, being, according to Edward Mendelson, "probably the most politically used poem in recent American history" (qtd. in Devitt 10). Two

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that Auden is a English-born poet. However, he moved to the US in 1939, and took on American citizenship in 1946. As such, I find it valid to group "September 1, 1939", which Auden wrote while residing in the US, under the heading of American literary history.

appropriations of Auden's poem by politicians stand out particularly. In 1964, Lyndon Johnson misused (and misquoted) Auden's line "we must love one another or die" in a nuclear-scare campaign ad meant to vilify his opponent Barry Goldwater. Subsequently, in 1988, George W. Bush senior used the phrase "a thousand points of light" (drawing on Auden's "ironic points of light") in a speech positing America as the "dominant force of good in the world" ("Address Presidential Nomination").

The use made by both Johnson and Bush of Auden's poem brings to the fore exactly that feature of "September 1, 1939" which Auden came to hate later in his career, namely its "rhetorical quality of self-congratulation" (qtd. in Swift). Unintended by Auden himself, the last two stanzas of the poem ended up rhetorically convincing his audience of their moral superiority; a sentiment which the poem had meant to counter. According to Mendelson, Auden dropped "September 1, 1939" because he distrusted [its] power to convince his readers that he and they were on the right side of the great struggles of the age, that they were 'the just' who exchanged messages through 'ironic points of light'" (105). Overselling the redemptive power of (reading) poetry, Auden unwillingly turned his audience's attention away from critical reflection and action towards moral self-indulgence. The unintended message of "September 1, 1939" seems to be that if we just love each other in the abstract communicative space opened up by poetry, all the violence in the material space of history will dissolve (i.e. we will not die). Auden's poem creates a community of readers who can distance themselves from the wrongs of the actual world by basking in the virtuousness of poetry, one that rubs off on them as readers. As Stephen Burt argues, "'September 1, 1939' seeks, and obtains, a civic 'voice': it addresses and brings together with Auden all the people who might say with him 'all I have is a voice'" (538). In effect, Auden's readers can exempt themselves from the generally "deaf" and "dumb" crowd which Auden critiques and pities.

Given the problematic production and reception history of "September 1, 1939", critics may have rejoiced too easily in the community-building strengths of Auden's poem. Though the sharing of "September 1, 1939" in the aftermath of 9/11 brought the American people together, it did not necessarily do so in a politically neutral way. As a poem which critiques societies and people for using simplistic rhetorical language to cover up their own complicity, "September 1, 1939" offered US citizens an alternative view of the political context of the al-Qaeda attack, one that problematized the US government and mainstream media's insistence on American exceptionalism and (complete) innocence. However, the subversive aspects of the poem were largely overlooked, and by far the greatest attention went out to the morally uplifting last part of the poem. As such, "September 1, 1939"



ended up negating its intended political effect; constituting the American community in depoliticized, morally simplistic, terms.

The American “we” that was established by the sharing of Auden’s poem was an essentially good “we”; one that did not allow for critical self-examination. In response to the circulation of “September 1, 1939”, Lucia Perillo has remarked: “in times of crisis, people gravitate to the high rhetoric of poetry, because it seems to ennoble us” (28). Reading Auden’s poem unintentionally enabled Americans to think of themselves as the “Just” exchanging messages through “ironic points of light”; answering Auden’s call for love, US citizens could foreground their existence as an essentially good, *loving* people. I would like to argue that it was self-affirmations like these which enabled the US government to sell the war in Afghanistan (and later in Iraq) as paradoxically fought in the name of “justice”, “progress”, “tolerance” and “freedom” (Bush “A Nation Challenged”). Focusing solely on the positive aspects of American-ness, the circulation of Auden’s poem supported the political status quo. The “we” constituted by “September 1, 1939” reinforced the dominant view of American innocence; it made it possible for people to maintain a positive view of their country and its actions at a time when aggressive (foreign) policies were enacted.

Building on Marita Sturken’s theorization of the American cultural response to 9/11, I would like to argue that the widespread sharing of “September 1, 1939” in the wake of the attack was indicative of the nations’ general turn to comfort. According to Sturken, following the September 11 attack, US citizens en masse turned to “kitsch objects of emotional reassurance” (6). Though engagement with these objects helped US citizens to deal with their feelings of loss, grief and fear, it also made them politically uncritical. As Sturken argues, “an American public can acquiesce to its government’s aggressive political and military policies . . . when that public is constantly reassured by the comfort offered by the consumption of patriotic objects, comfort commodities, and security consumerism” (6). Though Sturken herself doesn’t include poetry in her argumentation, I argue that Auden’s “September 1, 1939”, and in particular its most popular line “we must love one another or die”, provided the same depoliticizing comfort that Sturken has ascribed to other cultural objects. In accordance with Sturken’s theory, the line “we must love one another or die” is decidedly kitschy, luring its reader into a reductive, easy emotionalism. Urgently demanding universal love, Auden’s line evokes positive feelings of pathos and sympathy, while suppressing negative feelings of anger and fear. Reading the line (and knowing that other people read it too) made people feel safe and communally supported. However, it also prevented them from questioning the context out of which the poem’s demand for love arose in the first place, foreclosing on political engagement and complex moral (self-) understanding. “In the post-9/11 context”, writes Sturken, “the selling of national comfort takes on

certain implications; in particular, it is a means of erasing subsequent US aggression . . ." (38). The circulation of Auden's "September 1, 1939" definitely supports this view. Despite the poem's multivocal content, the way it was read after 9/11 selectively reinforced the dominant self-image of the US as blameless victim, thus not having the unequivocally positive effect that the media ascribed to it.

### The Massive Postings on Poetry.com

We've come together now  
Every race, creed, and age  
We all stand united  
Most filled with rage  
We are all Americans

The lines quoted above are part of an amateur poem that was posted on the website poetry.com in the wake of 9/11. Following the terrorist attack, poetry.com created a special page for "September 11<sup>th</sup> dedication poems", where members of the site could post their writings on the attack, and could respond to the poems uploaded by others.<sup>9</sup> By October 2001, thousands of people had already responded, and a large virtual community had started to form on the 9/11 subsection of poetry.com. What immediately attracts attention when looking at the poems posted on the site is that they (like Auden's "September 1, 1939") are strongly focused on the communal. Of the 85 poems that I was able to access, 63.5 % make use of the word "we", versus 39% that make use of the word "I". For a collection of amateur poetry, this is atypical, since this type of poetry is often disproportionately focused on personal experiences and emotions. What is more, though the community which constitutes the "we" in the poems is usually not specified, in 91% of the cases, it implicitly refers to the American community. At first glance, this might seem to be of minor significance. However, the extensive and unspecified use of the national "we" has far reaching implications. In accordance with Michael Billig's theory of "banal nationalism", I would like to argue that the community created on poetry.com in the aftermath of 9/11 is one in which nationalism was continually 'flagged'. Via the unquestioning use of such words as "we" and "our" or such phrases as "the country", "the nation", the poems on poetry.com (re-)produced the American nation

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<sup>9</sup> The page stayed open for more than ten years, but was closed when poetry.com changed owners. For this study, I could not access the original site, but I have been able to retrieve the first 85 poems posted on the "September 11<sup>th</sup> dedication poems" page via the *Way Back Machine*, which I use as my data. It should be noted that the closing of the "September 11<sup>th</sup> dedication poems" page, a decade after its launch, points to the fact that the amateur poetry produced after 9/11 had an ephemeral character. As such, however, this type of poetry does not stand alone, as the poetry produced in the wake of the attack was generally more intent on achieving an immediate social, political or cultural effect than on gaining canonical status (a point on which I will elaborate in the conclusion of this thesis).

in uniformly patriotic terms. As such, the poetic exchange on poetry.com, like the circulation of Auden's "September 1, 1939", did not just offer "relief" and "salvation" (Karr), but also reinforced dominant ideological visions of what it meant to be an American (or to act as an American) in the wake of 9/11.

In his book *Banal Nationalism*, Billig critically examines the ideological practices with which established nations are continually reproduced as such. According to Billig, in present-day societies there is a continual reminding - or "flagging" - of nationhood. This flagging, he argues, is performed largely within the realm of everyday practices. Feelings of national solidarity are not installed via grand gestures, but by banal, normalized routines. Examples of these normalized routines are the pledging of allegiance to a national flag (something which is done daily in American schools; Billig 50), the singing of national anthems, and the organizing of inter-national sporting events. However, by far the most powerful solidarity-producing habits take place within the realm of language. According to Billig, "banal nationalism operates within prosaic, routine words, which take nations for granted, and which, in so doing, inhabit them" (93 sic). It's such seemingly mundane words as "we", "our", "here" and "this" which are most crucial in forging intra-national ties. Being daily used by politicians and the mainstream media, these words of linguistic deixis foreground the nation as natural. The confident way in which words such as "we" "the nation" "the government" are constantly used, regardless of the actual unspecificity of the references, signifies to citizens that nationhood and national solidarity are so matter-of-fact as to need no further clarification. However, *the* nation which is constituted by these seemingly unimportant words is anything but natural. The rhetoric of banal nationalism, precisely by being so commonly and unquestioningly used, creates the impression of referring to something that is already there; to a nation that exists independent of being named. However, as Billig argues, the routine words of nationalism are actually responsible for constituting the nation in a very particular way. "If the homeland is being rhetorically represented", writes Billig, "then, as such, it is literally being presented again [. . .]. Flagging, in this respect, is always a reminding, a re-presenting and, thus, a constricting of the imagination" (103). Though the rhetoric of banal nationalism presents itself as being neutral, it actually depicts nationhood and citizenship in a very specific, confined manner.

According to Billig, "the battle for nationhood is a battle for hegemony, by which parts claim to speak for the whole nation and to represent the national essence" (142). In the amateur postings on poetry.com, this bias of *totum pro parte* can clearly be seen. In line with the general outburst of patriotic sentiment in the wake of 9/11, the "September 11 dedication poems" are largely focused on giving voice to (oversimplified) notions of American unity. By far the most widely used words in the postings are such words as "we", "our", "America", "nation", "country",

“unity”, “togetherness” etc. Most of the poems on the site follow the same, sentimentally patriotic, narrative; one that moves from personal (and/or national) expressions of pain and grief towards more positive visions of American strength and solidarity. The following short poem is exemplary in this respect:

**Sept. 11th**

I see the destruction on tv.  
I see the chaos, and the smoke overtake new york.  
i see the flames in the pentagon.  
i hear about acts of war, and terrorism  
it's a lot for a person of my age to understand.  
it saddens me, and it frightens me to think:  
has the US been made vulnerable, easily struck upon by enemies?

no.

you can never break freedom or spirit.  
all the losses will be mourned  
but america is still whole  
we've overcome it before, and will overcome it again.  
as a whole, as a patriotic nation.

Like the circulation of Auden’s “September 1, 1939”, the poetic exchange on poetry.com was largely meant to serve an emotive, comforting purpose. However, as such, it was not ideologically innocent. Drawing on Mary Louise Kete’s theory of “sentimental collaboration”, I would like to argue that the community which originated on poetry.com is one in which interpersonal bonds were forged on the basis of a “gift” exchange of patriotic sentiment; an exchange which problematically lead to the (re-)creating of the American nation in (deceptive) utopian terms. As is also shown by the post-9/11 popularity of Auden’s “we must love one another or die”, sentiment is a strong unifying force, and particularly in the face of loss and grief, the exchange of sentiment can form a means of “reconstructing the foundations of society” (Kete 100). In times of mourning, people seek to connect with one another through a shared set of emotions, drawing strength from the fact that they are not alone in experiencing pain (as one amateur poet tellingly remarks: “I feel just the same / As millions of others”). However, by *symbolically* coming together in this way, the *real* ties between people are elided. According to Kete, the “relationships formed and maintained in such an ostentatiously voluntaristic way (through the exchange of gifts) are triumphs of the imagination over the forces operating against the formation of such relationships. . .” (54). Indeed, the sentimental visions of American unity as voiced in the poems on poetry.com are somewhat deceitful. Most amateur poets express feeling connected to one another on the basis of an abstract (almost empty) notion of American-ness. One amateur poet somewhat naively states: “we are all one people / no matter what our beliefs / Race,

creed and color have no relevance". Another similarly writes: "So we stand here as a family. One heart, one soul, one voice". By envisioning the American community as one without internal difference, the amateur poems on poetry.com end up ignoring the *reality* of post-9/11 America. In accordance with Kete, I would like to argue that the amateur poets' stressing of the sentimental bond between Americans facilitated the "constitution and perpetuation of that seemingly boundless and affirming category of 'ordinary' common Americans who are neither rich, poor, black, white, male, female." (xviii). Though seemingly referring to an inclusive American identity, the amateur poets on poetry.com unconsciously arrived at excluding a large percentage of the *actually existing* US community, which could not be made to fit this imaginary vision of American-ness.

In the amateur poetry written in response to 9/11, the "truth and consequences of the day [were] undermined", writes Rachael Allen. Indeed, in the sentimental poems on poetry.com, the internal differences in the US's post-9/11 society were completely glazed over. Like the circulation of Auden's "September 1, 1939", the poetic exchange on poetry.com was simplistically self-affirmative, thus foreclosing on the potential for critical self-reflection. In the aftermath of 9/11, national solidarity did not extend to all Americans, but was ideologically confined. First of all, Muslim Americans were sometimes conveniently left out of the exchange of solidarity. After the September 11 attack, Muslim Americans became "objects of suspicion" (Ali-Karamali), and between 2000 and 2001, there was a more than 1600 percent increase in hate crimes against this religious group (Schevitz). What is more, also those Americans who openly opposed the war in Afghanistan were excluded from the dominant patriotic vision of American-ness, being designated as "anti-US" (Butler 15). I would like to argue that, by ignoring these negative aspects of America's post-9/11 society, the poems on poetry.com implicitly reinforced them. The patriotic vision of American-ness as expressed on poetry.com is one that only a limited number of US citizens could actually relate to/fit in with, and the poems on the site thus constitute the American community in a narrow, exclusionist way.

In the amateur postings on poetry.com, expressions of nationalist sentiment did not only indirectly lead to intra-national exclusion, but also to the support of inter-national violence. Following Michael Billig, I argue that the nationalist rhetoric employed by many of the amateur poets active on poetry.com did not only stand in the way of plurally envisioning *nationhood*, but also excluded "other ways of imagining *peoplehood*" (28; my italics). "Nationalism is more than a feeling of identity", writes Billig, "it is a way of being within the world of nations" (65). Strong nationalist identification leads to "Us" vs. "Them" thinking; identifying with a particular national community automatically means excluding the possibility of identifying with another. Even more dangerously, it can even mean aggressively opposing oneself to this so-called "Other". In many of the amateur postings on

poetry.com, this negative side-effect of national solidarity was made clear. Strongly opposing an American "Us" to a foreign, terrorist "Them", the poems on poetry.com fostered negative emotions towards other people. Of the 85 poems that I retrieved from poetry.com, only three gave voice to sentiments of peace. Many of the other poems, in contrast, reiterated the dominant narrative of retaliation provided by the Bush administration and the mainstream media, thus constituting *the* US citizen as one naturally in favor of the "War on Terror".

Contrary to what has commonly been claimed about post-9/11 poetic practices, the exchange of amateur poems on poetry.com was not so much expressive of people's need for *human* connection, as of US citizens' (much more ideologically problematic) need for *national* connection. The many references to American togetherness that the amateur poems on poetry.com contain are not neutral, but strongly self-glorifying. Drawing comfort from patriotic sentiment, the amateur poets on poetry.com largely constitute the American nation as one of survival and strength. This is clearly shown, for example, in such lines as "soon our flag will fly high / and our Nation will recover" (capital letter in original), "they failed to shake our foundation" and "we're a nation of survivors, with one heart we share a tear". As I have already argued in the section on Auden's "September 1, 1939", a too strong cultural focus on comfort has the effect of making people politically uncritical. "The kind of poetry written to make us feel better", writes Daisy Fried, "is pro-establishment falsification, for it lets us pull the comforter back over our heads and go on sleeping". Indeed, in the postings on poetry.com, rejoicing in the American nation takes precedence over critically examining its policies. Even more problematically, in the patriotic "September 11<sup>th</sup> dedication poems", the positive visions of national strength do not just provide comfort (leading to political acquiescence), but also spill over into direct aggressive sentiments against "the enemy". One amateur poet for example writes: "the perpetrators will be found / every American working together / until the animals are hunted down". Someone else similarly remarks: "You will mess with the best?! / You will die like the rest! / We will overcome this; / We are American's!" (Sic). As Daniel Swift argued in response to the intensification of patriotism in the wake of 9/11: "The human impulse that drives us together has a streak of aggressive individualism inside it; this paradox allow Americans to hang flags on every surface in the city and declare that hatred of democracy was the cause of the attacks, and yet in the same breath to damn generically a faraway people". Indeed, this is what happens in the poems on poetry.com. In many of the works posted on the site, love for one's own nation transforms into hatred for another, and excuses violence against it. "To strike such a blow to MY nation", writes one amateur poet, "My tears will flow for days to come / Until I know that justice has been done". The American community as constituted through the amateur poet's extensive use of "We" is one that is negatively and

aggressively opposed to an exterior “Them”; one that does not allow for solidarity beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Though the US’s general turn to poetry in the wake of 9/11 may have sprung from people’s “primal need and capacity for communication”, it was not without its political implications. As the circulation of Auden’s “September 1, 1939” and the massive postings on poetry.com show, the poetic communities that were built in the aftermath of the September 11 attack were ideologically charged, giving support to and reinforcing particular visions of American-ness and peoplehood that excluded other ways of imagining these categories. Though poetry offered many people solace in the days and weeks following 9/11, it didn’t do much to make them more culturally and politically aware. Both the circulation of “September 1, 1939” and the massive posting on poetry.com were supportive of the official mnemonic discourse surrounding 9/11, making use of, and giving fuel to, the widely accepted rhetoric of American innocence and just retaliation as administered by the Bush administration and the mainstream media. Poetry, then, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, did not offer an “alternative to the insistences, the mechanized passions, of mass society”, as Gopnik would have it, but actually figured as one of these mechanized passions. Problematically, those making public statements about poetry in the post-9/11 period ascribed an aura of inviolability and moral excellence to the medium, thus placing it beyond the realm of political contestation. However, as I have shown in this chapter, and as I will come to show in the chapters to come, this vision is a false and reductive one. The connections forged via poetry, and the communities created through it, are not transcendental, but strongly societally grounded. Functioning within the public sphere, and employing a language which cannot be dis severed from its social and political connotations, poetry cannot constitute communities in a neutral way. As I have shown, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the circulation of Auden’s “September 1, 1939” and the massive postings on poetry.com (unwillingly) supported the political and mnemonic status quo, univocally positing *the* American nation as “just”, standing outside of history, and as uniformly supporting US retaliation. Later poetic responses started to question these assumptions.

## 9/11, Poetry, and the Politics of Language

"I only agreed to compromise when it became clear / they were already stealing them again out from under us: / words, one at a time", writes L.R. Berger in his 2003 poem "The President and the Poet Come to the Negotiating Table". What ensues is a scene in which president and poet make an attempt to divide the language between them, quarreling over which words belong to whom: "Okay, then, I said, you can have CONQUEST and DOW JONES. / You can have BOMBS, but we want the SMART back". Berger's poem, though seemingly (jokily) unserious, draws attention to a concern that was widely shared among American poets in the post-9/11 run-up to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Following the September 11 attack, many professional poets (largely holding left-wing political views) felt that their language was being polluted by the Bush administration and the mainstream media. In *American Writers Respond*, poet Eric Pankey refers to the "metallic taste of anger on [his] tongue" as he "look[s] for words not burdened with bigotry, self-righteousness, wrath and retaliation" (296). Likewise, his colleague Patrick Bizarro writes: "While we weren't paying attention, language grew a life of its own and we simply cannot control it anymore" (49). According to Billig, national crises are usually accompanied by an "inflamed rhetoric" (5), and in America's post-9/11 society, this rhetorical inflammation was particularly severe. Following the September 11 attack, the Bush administration and the mainstream media exploited the instrumental potential of language to persuade the American public of the importance of patriotic retaliation. "Through public rhetoric", writes Sandra Silberstein, "the nation was (re)created and united with a single purpose [i.e. to win the 'War on Terror']" (xii). As dominant cultural responses to the attack (such as the widespread circulation of Auden and the postings on poetry.com) show, this public rhetoric was very powerful in convincing its audience, and a large part of the American community adhered to it and reiterated it. Through political speeches and the media, such ideologically charged phrases as "infinite justice", "enduring freedom" and "axis of evil" were made common sense, and binaries between "Us" (i.e. the Good and Civilized) and "Them" (i.e. the Bad and Barbaric) were instituted as natural/essential.

In the face of the deceptive, reductive rhetoric that had grown out of 9/11, the public role of professional poetry produced in the wake of the attack was felt by many to be of exceptional importance. "Poetry", argues Keniston, ". . . offered a crucial intervention in a dialogue widely perceived as lacking reflection and temperance" (659). Similarly, Plate writes, "as language artists, [poets] had a particular responsibility, their work on language being all the more necessary in a time of spin doctors and sound bites, when words are charged with ideological meaning and are deliberately used to manufacture consent" ("Bearing Witness" 8). Indeed, the medium of poetry can be said to have proffered itself as counter-



rhetorical (and thereby counter-mnemonic) force in the aftermath of 9/11. However, in what particular way it did so needs some further specification. In line with the “transcendental view” of poetry, poetic language is overwhelmingly conceptualized as being naturally honest, inclusive and pure, and thus as being able to counter the deceptive, reductive and misleading language of politics. “Poets, we still seem to believe”, writes Dowdy, “can access truth by stripping back superficial appearances for deeper meanings and by giving revelatory insight into public issues in ways that politicians and journalists cannot” (8). Indeed, many scholars of poetry have given expression to this utopian view. Dana Gioia, for example, has claimed that poetry is “the art of using words charged with their utmost meaning”; it is a way of keeping the “nation’s language clear and honest” (“Can Poetry Matter?”). Similarly, Marjorie Perloff (in response to 9/11) has argued that “poets are the language users best prepared to resist [the government and mainstream media’s] ‘sloppy writing’ – writing that undercuts the relation of expression to meaning” (18). John Wrighton, in his book *Ethics and Politics in Modern American Poetry*, even takes the argument a step further. Due to the extensive ideological use of language, suggests Wrighton, all verbal signs have become de-neutralized; they have become “codified and preloaded” with social and political meaning (149). As such, there now exists a disparity between what Wrighton considers to be the medium-essential *potential* of language (i.e. its “preoriginary capacity as the vehicle of an ethical relation”) and the *reality* of language use (i.e. its existence as the “site of political coercion and social conditioning”) (180). Wrighton speaks of a “traumatized semiotics” in this respect; language has been “ontologically abused” and has lost its medium-specific ability to forge ethical interpersonal relations (149). Poetry, as illustrated by the movement of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry<sup>10</sup>, has the possibility to restore language’s ethics to itself; though poetry must now inevitably “operate within the ‘traumatized semiotics’ of our sociality”, its “ethical project is in direct opposition to the ontological basis of dominant discourses that violate language. . .” and it can thus be said to have a reviving effect on language’s natural ethics (187).

Though I believe that a counter-political potential can be ascribed to poetry, I find the transcendental vision of poetic language as essentially purifying, honest and morally good somewhat problematic. Not only does the medium of poetry lend itself to simplistic ideological expression and/or misappropriation (as I have shown in chapter 1), even at its most humane<sup>11</sup>, its language is not socially or politically neutral. Existing only in and through its everyday use, the system of language cannot be poetically “returned” to a supposed pre-rhetorical state. Since a pre-

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<sup>10</sup> Briefly stated, L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry is a form of poetry which gained prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s and which defies the notion of lyrical self-expression, instead treating the poetic voice as a purely verbal composition; a “constructed moment or effect within various intersecting discourses” (Greer 343).

<sup>11</sup> This is already a problematic statement to make, for what counts as humane?

political verbal realm does not exist, poetry cannot depollute the system of language. What is more, it seems farfetched to make an ontological distinction between poetic language and political language. On what grounds can these two (supposedly distinct) languages be distinguished? Neither poetry nor politics has a fixed nature, and it is thus impossible to ascribe a stable ontological status to either one of them, let alone to ontologically sever the two. The subversive strength of poetry, then, must not be sought in the pre- or non-political. Poetry, using a medium that is by definition socially and politically invested, cannot move beyond the realm of rhetoric. Like Pascale Casanova, I argue that “language is not a purely literary tool, but an inescapably political instrument as well”, and as such, poetry will always remain “subject to political power” (115). However, this detracts in no way from its counter-political potential. Poetic language might not be able to escape the socio-political environment in which it is embedded; it can sharply map this environment. What poetry can do is bring the rhetoric to which it is inevitably indebted into focus; by de-familiarizing those uses of language that we believe to be natural or commonsensical, poetry can draw critical attention to their (social and political) constructedness. As Kotonen argues:

Poetry is language taken to its extremes, it is a form of language most aware of its made nature. It is language at its last stage, at its most self-conscious level. Everything is ‘suspicious’ in poetry, there is no stable subject, no stable meaning of words, and the relation between form and content is problematized to such an extent that one cannot tell which comes first. (28)

In line with Kotonen, I propose that poetic language, being ultimately self-referential, has the potential to lead to a “rhetorical reorienting” (34). Poetry’s subversive potential lies not in its ability to *de*-politicize the medium of language, but paradoxically in its ability to *politicize* it. According to Kotonen, poetry draws its counter-hegemonic strength from “diagnosing the ideologies that are sedimented in language” (34). By employing a language that is ideologically charged, and by drawing attention to this language *as* ideologically charged, poetry has the ability to awaken its readers to the rhetorical implications of certain naturalized narratives that they were blind to before.

In the aftermath of 9/11, a wide array of political poets produced a wide array of political poems. Many of these poems were very straightforwardly focused on voicing critique, deploying the medium as political platform. See for example, the following fragment from R.D. Armstrong’s “The 911 Wakeup Call”, published in the 9/11 anthology *An Eye For an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind*: “Who did all this? / A man in a cave pulling the purse strings – a man we created, in a land we / created and then ignored, in a region we created (with a little help / from / our Friends), in a world we created and then ‘stepped back from’ so / we could / get back to our arrogant little lives / . . . The chickens have come home to roost, baby” (97). Though

poets like Armstrong offered a critical counter-voice to the dominant mnemonic discourse of 9/11 at a time when dissent was demonized, they didn't necessarily do so by exploiting the verbal techniques of their medium, making the aesthetic aspects of their poetry subservient to its political message.

In this chapter, I will explore three post-9/11 poems that did offer a political critique *as* poetry; Jena Osman's "Dropping Leaflets", Jorie Graham's "Passenger" and Juliana Spahr's "Poem Written From November 30, 2002 to March 27, 2003" (henceforth abbreviated as "Poem Written . . ."). All three of these poems display a hyperawareness of language and its ideological sedimentations, and are strongly text-focused/print-based. As such, I would like to argue, these poems are representative of a particular subgroup of (professional) poetic responses to 9/11, namely those produced by and consumed within the academy. Osman, Graham and Spahr all have university positions and are widely read and discussed within the educational system. A short googling of "Dropping Leaflets", "Passenger" and "Poem Written . . ." for example, reveals that these poems are all part of the curriculum of a university course called "American Literature of the 9/11 Decade".<sup>12</sup> Some further research discloses that Osman and Spahr's poems have also been featured in *Penn Sound*; a University of Pennsylvania project aimed at making poetry recordings of (academically respected) poets available online, together with in-depth discussions of this poetry.<sup>13</sup> A browsing through academic sources furthermore reveals that the poetry of Jena Osman, Jorie Graham and Juliana Spahr has often been reviewed and discussed in scholarly forums. Spahr's "Poem Written . . ." has even been published by a university press, as part of her collection *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005). All of these findings, I would argue, point to the fact that Osman, Graham and Spahr's poems are representative of *institutionalized* poetry; a type of poetry which, more than others, exploits the medium's textual possibilities and circulates largely (though of course not solely) within the print-focused academic world.

What academic (or print-based) poetry had to offer in the aftermath of 9/11 is that it allowed for a way of seeing the language of the Bush administration and the mainstream media as ideological instead of as natural. The three poems by Osman, Graham and Baraka all politicize language; all question the dominant, patriotic rhetoric growing out of the September 11 attack, taking advantage of the specific possibilities that the medium of poetry provides. As such, they also call into question the rhetorically instituted notion of the American community (as patriotic, just, entitled to retaliation), re-constituting this community in different terms. As Sandra Silberstein argues in her book *War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11*: "language

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<sup>12</sup> This curriculum, it should be mentioned, contains none of the other poems that I will come to discuss in this thesis; that is, particular slam poems and protest poems written in response to 9/11.

<sup>13</sup> Jorie Graham has also been featured there, though not with her poem "Passenger".

plays the central role in creating human societies” (64). By challenging the dominant (mnemonic) discourse surrounding 9/11, academic poets such as Osman, Graham and Spahr also challenged the American community which was symbolically constituted through its use.

In the sections to come, I will discuss each of the poems by Osman, Graham and Spahr separately, using each of them as supporting evidence for one of the main two arguments that I wish to advance in this chapter. First, I will use Osman’s “Dropping Leaflets” to illustrate how the academic, language-focused poetry written in response to 9/11 was able to make visible – and thereby challenge- the reductive rhetoric of the Bush administration. Then, I will use Jorie Graham’s “Passenger” and Juliana Spahr’s “Poem Written . . . ” as case studies for arguing that, by making visible and challenging this rhetoric, academic 9/11 poetry allowed for ways of re-imagining *the* American community, either by challenging its internal divisions or by placing this community within a larger global framework. At the end of this chapter, I will shortly reflect upon what I perceive to be the socio-political limitations of print-based, academic poetry, and will argue that, though this type of post-9/11 poetry had a latent subversive potential, this potential was not necessarily always realized.

### **Questioning Rhetoric: Jena Osman’s “Dropping Leaflets”**

Of the three poems discussed in this chapter, Jena Osman’s “Dropping Leaflets” (printed in *An Essay in Asterisks*, 2004) is the one that most overtly brings into focus (academic) poetry’s potential to make visible and critically reflect on the reductive rhetoric used by the Bush administration when speaking of 9/11. Being completely made up of words that Osman took from transcripts of press conferences given by George W. Bush, Tom Ridge, Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attack, the poem subverts the language of the Bush administration from within. When reading “Dropping Leaflets” for the first time, at a 2001 event called “Finding the Words”, Osman introduced it as follows:

I find that every day . . . I’m looking for words looking for the words that explain everything, and instead, I keep sensing, the presence if what’s not being told. [...] Recently US representative Cynthia McKinney pointed out that voices of dissent are being ignored by the media, and she said, “help me come up with a strategy to get through this white noise”. I don’t have that strategy, except to call attention to components of that white noise so we can hear it for what it is.<sup>14</sup>

In “Dropping Leaflets”, this is exactly what Osman does. Alarmed by the “dangerous euphemisms” used by the Bush administration, Osman felt that people

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<sup>14</sup> Transcribed from a video-discussion of Osman’s poem, which can be found here: <http://www.amara.org/en/videos/mkljws6roGwN/info/on-jena-osmans-dropping-leaflets-12-mins/>

needed to be made aware of the rhetorical nature of what was being said (Filreis "A Conversation With"). By appropriating the language of the Bush administration so as to undermine its underlying rhetoric, by "creating a frame by which that language could actually be heard", Osman politicizes this language, calling attention to the "white noisiness" of the post-9/11 white noise.

In a number of different ways, "Dropping Leaflets" makes strange the language which it employs, drawing attention to the actual obscurity of what's being said. On the level of form, Osman directs attention to the language which she uses by making it mechanic, clipped-up and grave. By letting almost all of her lines end with a full stop, and by installing a lot of stops within lines, Osman fragments and makes harsh the usually pleasing and easily flowing rhetoric of the Bush administration, formally mirroring what (she believes) happens on the level of this language's semantics. On the level of content, the main technique that Osman uses is that of juxtaposition. Given the fact that "Dropping Leaflets" is assembled from a number of already existing documents, the poem is not made up of logically constructed sentences, but of metonymically connected words that have been seemingly randomly placed next to each other. See, for example, the first two lines of the poem: "Are we on the ground now? Ally cells and I said operations. We cleared 50% of a wonderful friend and enduring opposition". These lines are quite nonsensical, and it's hard to distil a definite meaning from them. As a reader, you feel very estranged from the text. What are ally cells? And how can you clear 50% of a wonderful friend? The language that Osman uses is deliberately hard to penetrate, and in effect, the reader is forced to focus on the surface structure of the poem; that is, on the poem as artificially constructed out of language. In effect, the political nature of the language used is put under scrutiny. By restructuring the discourse of the Bush administration in a conspicuous way, Osman enables her readers to see it in a different light. By juxtaposing such positive words as "ally" and "friend" with such negative words as "cells" (being usually applied to terrorist networks) and "cleared", Osman calls into question the binary oppositions that the Bush administration employs, mixing them up in such a way as to (re-newly) make them visible. Though such verbal connections as "terrorist cells" and "we cleared the enemy" are easily processable, and thus do not receive strong cognitive attention, words such as "ally" and "cells" and "cleared" and "friend" are irreconcilable, forcing a clash between the different sides of the US government's installed binary. Instead of being (supposedly) natural, the connections forged by Osman are discordantly incompatible, and in effect, they force themselves onto the reader, bringing to the fore the violence inherent to the political language from which Osman draws.

Besides estranging the language of the Bush administration so as to make it visible, Osman also rebuilds it, recombining its words in such a way as to voice

dissent. In “Dropping Leaflets”, Osman calls upon the narrative of insecurity that was put forward by the Bush administration in the wake of the September 11 attack. Installing fear in US citizens by making terrorism seem all-pervasive (“there are thousands of these terrorists in more than 60 countries”; Bush “A Nation Challenged) the US government manufactured consent for war by tapping into people’s feeling of anxiety. Osman, in her poem, redefines the source of US citizens’ insecurity, locating it in The Bush administration’s misleading use of language instead of in the actual threat of terrorism. The “Us” versus “Them” distinction that the Bush administration employed in its (mnemonic) discourse of 9/11 is refigured by Osman, and in her poem this binary is re-installed so as to make a distinction between US citizens “on the ground” and the US government “in the air” (“Can be more than air. The target. The air liaison. / Campaign with the bombing and entirely happy.”). Osman’s poem depicts warfare, but in this case the war is not a “War on Terror” but an aerial war of words, with the Bush administration attacking its own citizens by “dropping leaflets”<sup>15</sup> on them. Interestingly, Osman defuses these leaflets in her poem by adding new meaning to them, engaging with them in unexpected ways. For example, she employs a lot of the words and phrases used by the US government in relation to the al-Qaeda terrorists and the Afghan people to depict the rhetoric-induced fear and disorientation of US citizens. See, for example, the opening part of Osman’s poem:

Are we on the ground now? Ally cells and I said operations.  
We cleared 50% of a wonderful friend and opposition.  
Take the solid.  
Louder.  
We clearly are loud. We are the postal system.  
No evidence has been information.  
Attacking the caves. Are you on the ground enduring?  
A wonderful friend ramped it up.  
You ought to open your mail.  
Opposition element: the air. The talents work with precision.  
84%. The population attacking the caves, the talents work with the  
caves and tunnels.  
Hiding in caves, wavering in caves and hiding in mosques.

In this fragment, Osman metonymically connects lines dealing with American information spreading (“We clearly are loud. We are the Postal System”; “No

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<sup>15</sup> On a meta-level, the poem’s title “Dropping Leaflets” also refers to Osman’s method of creation: “I read the transcripts, printed them out, I tore them up, and then I stood on a chair, and then I bombed my office floor with them as if they were leaflets and the leaflets told me what to do.” (in Filreis, “Finding the Words”). The dropping of leaflets, then, is portrayed by Osman as being both a rhetorically affirmative and a rhetorically subversive act, something strongly bringing to the fore Osman’s vision of language as both dangerous and possibly enlightening.

evidence has been information"; "You ought to open your mail") with lines foregrounding terrorist-related images of attack and shelter ("Attacking the caves . . ."; ". . . the / caves and tunnels"; "hiding in caves, wavering in caves and hiding in mosques"). Though the exact meaning of this fragment remains (deliberately) obscure, the overall theme that seems to be installed via Osman's technique of juxtaposition is that of insecurity and confusion in the face of an all-suppressing white noise. As a result of the mixing up of two distinct registers (that of "information" and "terrorism"), words such as "hiding" "attacking" "caves" and "tunnels" are dislocated from their narrow association with a foreign "Them", taking on a broader meaning so as to apply to the American "Us" as well. No longer merely connoting a barbaric operation centre for terrorists, caves and tunnels become sites where US citizens can take shelter, hiding from the paper bombs dropped by the US government.

In "Dropping Leaflets", Osman forged new semantic ties between earlier unconnected categories, linking the insecurity of those "on the ground" in America with those "on the ground" in Afghanistan, thereby obscuring the boundary between "Us" and "Them". What is more, Osman also adds obscurity to the American "Us" as such. The "us" that Osman refers to in "Dropping Leaflets" is one without a stable core. When asking "are *we* on the ground now", the lyric voice of Osman's poem institutes the US citizen as victim, locating him within a dangerous language warzone. However, when claiming: "We cleared 50% of a wonderful friend" or "We clearly are loud. We are the postal system", she calls upon the image of the American nation at large, an image in which *all* Americans (both those in the air and on the ground) are implicated. In "Dropping Leaflets", then, there is no longer one "we", but a fragmented "we" with multiple points of identification and dissociation. Osman breaks through easy categorizations in her poem, re-instituting complexity and semantic depth to words that the Bush administration has made seem simplistic or one-sided. See also, for example, her re-contextualizing of the word "information". Whereas the Bush administration uses the word "information" unquestioningly, as a neutral term, Osman shows that information is not neutral but power-dependent; what counts as relevant information is dependent on who offers it ("We clearly are loud. We are the postal system"), and as such it can be deceiving ("No evidence has been information"). Though information is indispensable, it is also potentially dangerous, as Osman hints at with her sentence: "You ought to open your mail". Evoking the post-9/11 anthrax attacks, the demand to "open your mail" (to look for rightful information), though being necessary, is also ominous in the post-9/11 context. What Osman offers to her readers, then, is a way of processing the word "information" in such a way as to be *aware* of it. Language/information is a powerful tool, but it can therefore also be easily misappropriated. In her poem, Osman shows that the rhetoric of the Bush administration is something to be

mistrustful of, and she offers an alternative by re-complicating the language that has been made simplistic through its use.

### **Re-imagining the American Community: Jorie Graham's "Passenger"**

As I shortly touched upon in the section above, Osman's "Dropping Leaflets" deconstructs and complicates the 9/11-related discourse of the Bush administration, thereby (among other things) opening up a verbal space for re-imagining the American community in a more multifarious way. In this section, I will expand on this particular poetic potential further, using Jorie Graham's "Passenger" (printed in *Overlord* 2004) as a strong example of how the medium of poetry offered a way of textually reconfiguring the notion of American-ness in the aftermath of 9/11. Like many of Graham's other works, "Passenger" foregrounds the "dissonant or negative space between self and other" (Zona 672), exploring this space so as to challenge it. In "Passenger", Graham specifically aims her arrow at the notion of America as "homeland"; a term which re-gained popularity in the wake of 9/11. Using the setting of a post-9/11 taxi ride shared by an American-born passenger and the cab's immigrant driver, Graham both draws upon the rhetoric of the homeland and calls it into question, thereby opening up the possibility for re-imagining the American community in a more critical and multifarious way.

The word "homeland", Amy Kaplan writes, "implies a sense of native origins, of birthplace and birthright". As such, the regained popularity of the term "homeland" in the wake of 9/11 helped install a vision of the American nation as one that was racially and ethnically homogenous; as the property of an exclusive group of "true", generationally rooted Americans ("Violent Belongings" 8). In "Passenger", Graham plays with this reductive understanding of national belonging. From the immediate beginning of "Passenger", she firmly installs a boundary between the American-born "self" of the poem (who is being driven) and the immigrant "other" of the poem (who must drive): "Where are you from. I have never been there. Why / did you leave. Excuse me. I cannot hear you. Because / of the partition. Is there some way you could lower / the partition". Already in the first sentence ("where are you from"), the driver is designated as being foreign to America, having been born in a different country. This notion of exteriority is also immediately mirrored in the poem's surface structure; only the American-born traveler is given the power to speak, and (s)he mediates the reader's encounter with the immigrant taxi driver. Though we learn that the cabbie answers the passenger's questions ("Where are you from. I have never been there"), the poem is kept clear from these answers, installing the driver as a voiceless exteriority. Though the passenger seemingly tries to connect with the driver by asking him questions, the absence of question marks betrays the power difference between them, making the passenger's questions seem more like investigative demands than genuine queries.



No true form of communication is established between the American commuter and the cabbie; the “partition” between them makes this utterly impossible (“I cannot hear you.”).

Though the American commuter does try to place herself<sup>16</sup> in the shoes of the cabbie, thus trying to “lower / the partition”, she is utterly incapable of moving beyond stereotypical conceptualizations. Conceiving of the driver’s country as one with picturesque “mountains”, “endless blue rivers”, “dirt cities” and a “desert” (“I have seen it in pictures, or things like it”), and envisioning the taxi driver’s motive for moving as springing from poverty (“you have had to give up something so great / . . . for money / I mean, let’s face it, for money to send home . . .”), the American commuter fails to probe the reality of the driver’s existence. Ultimately, the passenger is unable to move beyond her own narrow vision of the driver as a non-American “other”; interpreting all his acts and behaviors through this lens. For example, though the cab driver displays the American flag on his taxi, the passenger unquestioningly waves aside this (possibly nationalist) gesture, denoting it as the result of the cabbie’s fear of being associated with terrorism: “. . . you are scared / [therefore the flags on your windows] [one in the car itself]. / Scared they will say you did IT. [...]”.

In “Passenger”, the boundary between American-born self and immigrant other at first glance seems to be insurmountable; *the* (presumably white, middle class) American portrayed in the poem is unable to reach out to the supposedly (!) foreign driver, making the division between them absolute. However, during some brief moments in the poem, the American passenger betrays the voice of Graham herself, drawing attention to the way in which the medium of language/poetry can be used to circumvent this boundary. Like Osman, Graham draws attention to the surface structure of her poem in order to call into question the simplistic post-9/11 rhetoric from which she borrows. However, where Osman aims her arrow at post-9/11 language-misappropriation in general, Graham’s critique is specifically targeted at the routine words of banal nationalism; words which were unthinkingly evoked in the aftermath of 9/11 to institute the American community in a uniform, racially and ethnically “neutral”, patriotic way. Throughout her poem, Graham makes extensive use of words of linguistic deixis, with “I” and “You” occurring 32 and 49 times, respectively. By repetitively using these words, Graham is able to set up strongly the self-other (“American” vs. “non-American”) opposition that she explores in “Passenger”. However, what is crucial to the poem’s subversive potential is that she also employs particular techniques to call these words of linguistic deixis into question, thereby blocking the normalizing effect that these words, according to

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the sex of the passenger is never made overt. However, in order to establish textual clarity, I will refer to the passenger solely as a she (a decision rather arbitrarily based on the fact that the author behind the lyric I of the poem is a woman).

Billig, usually have when being used to install *the* nation-state in a supposedly natural (but in reality very particular) way. Take, for example, the following fragment of Graham's "Passenger":

Do you sing it well, the god-sanctioned anthem. Are you fluent in *this* one-god's country. I know your country also has one god but read the fine print he is not the same as ours. "Ours". How does one peel this sticky nationhood off. [...]. (Italics in original).

In this fragment, Graham highlights some of the words of linguistic deixis that she uses; "this" is placed in italics, "ours" is placed in between brackets. Precisely by emphasizing these purportedly unimportant words, Graham lays bare their actual importance for forging the nation in a particular way. By bringing these words to the fore, Graham calls into question their neutrality, showing that they set up a hostile binary between a narrowly defined national self and a narrowly defined other. In "Passenger", Graham "exposes the cost of critical narratives whose logic depends upon the language of exclusion" (Zona 669), and she does so by undermining the words of linguistics deixis; words which, I would like to argue, are quintessential to this language. We can only refer to "this" country or "our" country, because it is not "that" country or not "their" country. Graham, by using the inevitably exclusionary words of linguistic deixis critically, defuses them and disables them from normalizing *the* nation. Using the words "this" and "ours" ironically and thoughtfully, Graham calls attention to the strangeness of our unquestioning use of them, making us mindful of their actual (inevitably narrow) meaning.

Besides calling attention to the banal nationalist words of linguistic deixis, thereby de-familiarizing them, Graham also re-applies them in such a way as to counter their exclusionist effect. This can most clearly be seen in the following fragment:

We could change places. You see of course it's only on this page we can do that. I will be the one who is sleeping when I as a passenger arrive at the stand and knock at the front window, or simply open the back door. *Wake Up*. I will be the one abruptly awakened. I will be sorry to awaken you. I will say you didn't wake me I wasn't sleeping. I will say o.k. You will say I was just thinking. I will say of what. [...]. (23-29)

In this fragment, Graham calls attention to the word "I" *as* a word of linguistic deixis; that is, to the meaning of "I" as context-dependent. In order to make deictic words (such as "I" or "Us") sensible, there needs to be a "deictic center"; an anchoring point from which these words spring, and through which these utterances take on meaning. This deictic center is not stable, but changes as the speaker, place

and time of an utterance change. It is this instability of the deictic centre that Graham foregrounds in the above quoted fragment. Graham plays with the contextuality of the word "I", making this word refer to both the passenger and taxi driver simultaneously. Jumping back and forth between two different deictic locations, Graham shows that who counts as centric "I" (and who is thus able to appropriate all of the positive connotations that this centrality implies) - is dependent on which point of reference is chosen.

By playing with the instability of the deictic center, Graham undermines the US's ego-centric world view, showing that who counts as "Us" and who counts as "Them" is not absolute; that the difference does not point to some essential (quality laden) underlying distinction. Taking on a "foreign" perspective, the American (positively connoted) "Us" becomes a (negatively connoted) "Them", showing that these categories in themselves do not contain value. The distinction between "Us" and "Them" (or, in the poem, between an American-born "I" and immigrant, foreign "you") is not reality-based (in the sense of "us" being essentially "us" - and "them" being essentially "them"), but one arbitrarily made on the basis of language. It is ultimately in language that the self-other opposition is installed, labeling some as insiders and others as outsiders; some as centrally important and others as peripherally unimportant. However, as such, it is also in language that this arbitrary categorization can be questioned: "we can trade places. You see of course it's only on this page / we can do that . . .", writes Graham. It is only in language that the (by now) conceptually essentialized distinction between self and other can be wholly dissolved. ". . . How many names can you name of people who are / *true Americans*", writes Graham in "Passenger". Through her poetry, Graham offers an alternative to the narrow conceptualization of *the* American community as one without internal difference. Reconfiguring this community in such a way as to point out its diversity, and calling attention to the American nation as symbolically constituted through language, Graham opens up the possibility for imagining the American community in a non-homogenous way.

### **Beyond Borders: Juliana Spahr's "Poem Written . . ."**

Jorie Graham's "Passenger" exemplifies how the medium of poetry was able to textually refigure the notion of *the* American community by challenging its internal parameters. In this section, I will use Juliana Spahr's "Poem Written . . ." to expand on another way in which the medium of poetry was employed to re-image the American community in the aftermath of 9/11, namely by challenging this community's external parameters. Where Graham attacks the rhetoric of the American homeland, with its connotation of racial and ethnic homogeneity, Spahr seems to target the notions of American innocence and (historical) exceptionalism. Also arguing against the "Us" vs. "Them" logic as employed in the dominant

mnemonic discourse of 9/11, Spahr tries to install a more encompassing “we”, one that extends itself beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.

As the title already suggests, “Poem Written From November 30, 2002 to March 27, 2003” is a compilation poem consisting of multiple, diary-like entries that Spahr wrote in the weeks and months leading up to the Iraq war. It was first published in Spahr’s collection *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs* (2005), in which it is accompanied by a note. In this note, Spahr reflects upon her personal musings regarding the then looming invasion of Iraq: “I felt I had to think about what I was connected with, and what I was complicit with [...]. I had to think about my intimacy with things I would rather not be intimate with even as (because?) I was very far away from all those things geographically”. This personal attitude is strongly reflected in “Poems Written . . .”, in which Spahr employs the format of the traditional lyric love poem to forge affectionate connections with the larger global public. In her poem, Spahr addresses what she calls her “beloveds” and “yous”. Spahr’s remarkable use of the plural, as Lynn Keller argues, “functions with an expansive ambiguity that is thematically significant” (74). Speaking in the plural form allows Spahr to refer to both her actual lovers (as when Spahr refers to “the firm touch of yours hands on my breast”, sic) and to a global collectivity (as when she states: “beloveds, our skins are of all colors [...]. / Our world is small . . .”). As such, Spahr is able to transform intimacy from solely being an emotionally significant bond between two people to becoming an essential inter-human condition. “Embedded deep in our cells is ourselves and everyone else”, writes Spahr, “going back ten generations we have nine thousand ancestors and going back twenty-five we get thirty million”. What Spahr stresses in her poem is that a biological/species connection exists between all human beings; a connection so deeply rooted that it ultimately outweighs our socially established differences. There is nothing more binding than sharing a common origin, and as such, we are all intimately connected with the rest of humanity (as intimately as two lovers). As Siobhan Phillips argues, “the linguistic oddity of Spahr’s “yous” [and beloveds] presses the poet’s now-more-than-ever goal: a general love for specific others, a particular affection becomes general principle, a global citizenship of intimate force. Spahr wants a link among everyone who draws breath.”

In “Poem Written . . .”, Spahr exchanges the US’s rhetorically isolated American “we” for a globally interconnected “we”, stressing our intra-human bonds. However, in contrast to some of the more banal 9/11 poems dealing with global interconnectedness, Spahr’s “Poem Written . . .” doesn’t indulge in naive fantasies of universal love and equality. Americans may be globally connected; this connectedness does not dissolve international power differences. What Spahr argues for in “Poem Written” (as she already makes clear in her note) is that the American community, exactly by being so intimately connected to the rest of humanity, is also

intimately complicit in the violence acted against other human beings in its name. Inter-human connections do not only enable universal love, they also enable universal aggression. The global embeddedness that Spahr envisions for the American community, then, is not based on loving intimacy (although she wishes it would be that way), but on a mixture of connectivity and power-based separation.

In the post-9/11 period, America's sense of innocence and exceptionalism rendered it incapable of acknowledging its own destructive role in foreign affairs. Being rhetorically represented as a morally superior country unimplicated in the evils of the rest of the world, the American nation was able to deny its own global embeddedness. In "Poem Written . . .", Spahr attacks this vision of non-complicity, letting America's perceived historical exceptionalism fall in upon itself. In accordance with the traditional love poem format, Spahr establishes her lyric subject as being (physically) removed from his/her global beloveds, and as only able to bridge the gap via lyric. "While we believe that we want to believe that we all live in one bed of the earth's atmosphere", writes Spahr, "our bed is just our bed and no one else's and we can't figure out how to stop it from being that way". Separation, for Spahr, is a political reality, and one that should not be denied. Nevertheless, the intimacy of the lyric subject with his/her global beloveds causes the rigidity of the separation to be constantly challenged. "When I speak of yours thighs and their long muscles of smoothness", states Spahr's lyric subject, "I speak of yours cells and I speak of the British Embassy being closed in Kenya and the US urging more aggressive Iraq inspections. . .". In "Poem Written . . .", the sphere of personal intimacy and the sphere of global atrocity constantly flow into each other, as Spahr presents them as adhering to similar laws. The connectivity between two lovers is the same connectivity that enables large-scale violence, and this first type of connectivity thus immediately conjures up the image of the other.

Spahr's "intimate lovers" become "complicit citizens" in "Poem Written . . ." (Friedlander 5), as atrocious visions of the news constantly protrude into the intimacy of the domestic space. ". . .the military-industrial complex enters our bed at night", writes Spahr. In her poem, Spahr attacks what she refers to as the "myopia of the local" ("Discussion on Note"), letting the global constantly enter into the safety of the (national) home. "despite our isolation, there is no escape from the news of how many days are left in the Iraq inspections", states Spahr. News report piles upon news report in "Poem Written . . .", completely overtaking the consciousness of the lyric subject, who feels personally responsible for the violence enacted by her government, even though it is beyond her personal control. "We sleep with levels of complicity so intense and various that our dreams are of smothering and drowning [...]. I try to comfort myself with images of exile on this small piece of land in the

middle of the large Pacific".<sup>17</sup> The comfort that Spahr's lyric subject seeks in isolation is never granted in "Poem Written . . ."; the constantly recurring image of the bed that is shared with lovers (the ultimate embodiment of the local) offers no refuge, as the intimacy that this bed represents is the same intimacy that makes the American people responsible for the US's violent actions toward foreign others. "In bed, when I stroke the down on yours cheeks", writes Spahr, "I stroke also the carrier battle group ships, the guided missile cruisers, and the guided missile destroyers".

In "Poem Written . . .", Spahr makes visible and challenges the US's dominant rhetoric of innocence and historical exceptionalism, replacing it by a vision of American complicity based on inter-human intimacy. Though Spahr doesn't subvert the language of the Bush administration and the mainstream media as directly and overtly as Osman and Graham do (i.e. she doesn't employ this language so as to invalidate it), I would like to argue that her poem nonetheless plays itself out against the backdrop of this language, dialogically opposing it by employing an alternative speech. Spahr once stated in an interview that "pronouns have become the most loaded part of language for [her]" (Boyko); a belief which finds expression in "Poem Written. . ." Instead of speaking of an American "Us" which is rigidly isolated from a foreign "Them", Spahr employs a loving language of "porous 'yous' and 'we's"; pronouns which enable both the imagining of affectionate global intimacy and the acknowledgment of nation-bound responsibility for foreign violence (Philips). Though Spahr depicts the US's dominant post-9/11 rhetoric as constantly intruding upon her speech ("we get up in the morning and the words 'Patriot missile system', 'the Avengers' and 'the US infantry weapons' tumble out of our mouths before breakfast"), she refuses to become subsumed by it, using her "love poem" as resistance. Like Graham, Spahr opens up the possibility for re-imagining the American community by textually refiguring it; stressing the American "we"'s embeddedness in a larger global "we", Spahr is able to draw the US out of its rhetorical isolation.

### **Towards a Socio-Politics of Poetry**

In the sections above, I have shown that the medium of poetry was used to politicize the post- 9/11 language of the Bush administration and the mainstream media, thereby also politicizing the notion of *the* American community (as homogenous, innocent) as it was constituted through this language. However, strong as the political potential of academic, print-based 9/11 poetry might have been, this potential was not measured up in its reception. I would like to argue that, given the rhetorical complexity of print-based poems such as those discussed above, it seems

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<sup>17</sup> Spahr lives on Hawaii; something which has strongly influenced her thinking as expressed in "Poems Written. . ." Being geographically isolated from the US, yet complicit with the US's foreign policy, the unique status of Hawaii exemplifies the larger dilemma of global separation and global connectedness that Spahr addresses in her poem.

unlikely that these poems reached a wide audience outside of the educational system. On *Goodreads*, for example, the poetry collections in which “Dropping Leaflets”, “Passenger” and “Poem Written . . .” have been published have only received 22, 143 and 328 ratings, respectively. Of the people who have reviewed these collections on *Goodreads*, quite a number reflect on the difficulty of the works.<sup>18</sup> About Osman’s *An Essay in Asterisks*, for example (which has only been reviewed on *Goodreads* twice), one reviewer writes that it at times “makes your head feel like a dry coconut smacked against the pavement, broken and full of water”. Graham’s *Overlord*, likewise (reviewed 12 times), is described by different reviewers as “impenetrable”, “purposefully obtuse” and “pretty much beyond me”. Reviews like these point to the fact that, even if academically respected poetry is (widely) read, its message may not always be fully understood. What is more, even if its message is understood, readers may not always like this message. Reviewers of Spahr’s *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs*, for example (reviewed 33 times), though not reflecting upon the difficulty of the work, do negatively judge it for its political message (or, as one reviewer remarks, its “poetics of weak liberalism”); calling it a “document of white guilt” and a “melodramatic example of pseudopolitical liberal hand-wringing”.

What these examples indicate is that, though academic, print-based poetry may have had a strong textual potential to subvert the dominant rhetoric of the post-9/11 period and thus lead to a “rhetorical reorienting”, this textual potential was not necessarily always realized. Though it’s probably institutionalized poems like those of Osman, Graham and Spahr which will ultimately make it into the “9/11 poetry canon” – and that will thus be able to exert an effect on the commemoration of 9/11 and its aftermath in the long run – these poems seem to have little *direct* socio-political influence on the American public today. This conclusion steers us back to the main assumption underlying this thesis; poetry is not an isolated, transcendental art form but a medium interacting with, and being strongly rooted in, society. Though the argument I’ve made in this chapter – that is, that so-called “poetic language” is not politically “pure” but inevitably indebted to the rhetoric which it might wish to counter – takes some preliminary steps in the direction of viewing poetry as a socially and politically embedded medium, it is not yet enough to grasp the full socio-political existence of poetry. As Gabriel Rockhill argues, “it is important to recognise that works of art are not talismans with inherent powers” (48); “it is not the work in and of itself that produces political consequences, but the life of the work, with its various strategies and propositions, as it is received, interpreted, circulated, mobilised for various ends, etc.” (49). Though certain poems

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<sup>18</sup> See: [http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1381452.An\\_Essay\\_in\\_Asterisks](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1381452.An_Essay_in_Asterisks);  
<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/150339.Overlord>;  
[http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/368493.This\\_Connection\\_of\\_Everyone\\_With\\_Lungs](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/368493.This_Connection_of_Everyone_With_Lungs).

might have a latent political potential, it is ultimately in the interface between text and community that this potential is either realized or not. In the next two chapters then, I will explore two instances in which post-9/11 poetry took on a more active role in society, becoming more than mere words on a page.



## 9/11 and the Poetry Slam Scene

As has briefly been touched upon in the introduction to this thesis, contemporary American poetry has made a move from the page to the stage. Ever since the Beat generation (re-)popularized the performance of poetry in the 1950s, “open readings and poetry festivals grew steadily” (Harrington 168), and the poetry reading has become “one of the most important sites for the dissemination of poetic works in North America” (Bernstein 5). Where the primary mode of experiencing poetry used to be the solitary act of reading, in recent decades poetry has (again) become an art-form that is communally heard, and this has changed the way in which poetry is both produced and consumed. Print-based “academic” poetry is in retreat, and new poetic practices have started to emerge which “[recognize] and [exploit] the physical presence of the performer, the audience, and the performance space” and in which “the text is only one element in [the poem’s] artistic totality” (Gioia).

By far the most popular among the performance poetics that have recently emerged is the so-called *poetry slam*; a competitive poetry event where randomly chosen audience members are asked to judge the poets performing. Poetry slams generally consist of multiple rounds in which each poet (or each team of poets) gets some 3 minutes to perform. After each round, the lowest-scoring poets are eliminated, ultimately leaving one poet or one team to win. The first poetry slam was organized by Marc Smith in 1986 and from then onwards its popularity grew exponentially, becoming “a nationwide practice with its own organization (Poetry Slam, Inc.)”, with slams held regularly in more than fifty cities and with an Annual US Poetry Slam Championship. Internationally, the slam also gained increased popular attention, spreading out to (among other places) England, Wales, Holland, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Australia, Israel and Japan (Beach 121). In the US, poetry slam even went mainstream, being featured in such shows as MTV’s *Unplugged*, PBS’s *The United States of Poetry* and HBO’s *Def Poetry*.

What, then, explains this popularity of the poetry slam, particularly in the US? Interestingly, a large part of the poetry slam’s allure seems to spring from the extra-aesthetic potential of the practice. Though not much scholarly attention has been paid to poetry slam until now, those writing on the topic all point out the following: slam enables the establishment of democratic countercultural communities, and this accounts for (a large part of) its public appeal. Like all performance poetry, slam poetry “reclaims a social space for poetry”; it “rewrites the privatistic lyric scene into a site for public discourse (Beasley 33; Damon 326). What is experienced in performance is not a self-contained, timeless object but a dialogical process existing only in the transient moment of poet-audience interaction. Poetry, when performed, is not self-sufficient, but “requires the active involvement of others – it solicits, conjoins, provokes and incorporates people” (Beasley 32). Especially in the case of

slam, poetry has become a highly participatory experience, with poets trying to “woo” their listeners and with listeners responding to this “wooing” by applauding, yelling, whistling, hissing, or booing. In the poetry slam scene, then, poetry has freed itself from its narrow conceptualization as being *the* medium for private expression and has instead positioned itself as a medium of communication, forging relations between poet and audience and creating a community of listeners connected through their shared understanding of the poetry produced.

According to Peter Middleton, “the presentation of the poetry in a public space to an audience which is constituted by that performance for the time of the reading enables the poem to constitute a virtual public space which is, if not Utopian, certainly proleptic of possible social change, as a part of its production of meaning” (295). In the case of the poetry slam, this statement seems to ring particularly true. As a site where poets from a wide array of social and cultural positions can compete, the poetry slam has become known for its critical attitude towards dominant politics and dominant culture. Many of the poems performed on the slam stage have a markedly (personal-)political content, and politically engaged poetry is generally highly rewarded by slam audiences. As Christopher Beach remarks about the poetry slam: “the event functions as much as an occasion for venting social and political frustrations and celebrating a mixed community of non-mainstream interests as it does as a forum for specifically ‘literary’ activity” (132).

Given the political investment of the poetry slam scene, it is not surprising that critical responses to the official narrative of 9/11, and to its ideological effects, could be found there. In this chapter, I will explore the nature of these responses and the way in which they - to borrow from Gräbner - “[invited] a negotiation of self and community” (53), or, more specifically, of *American* self and *American* community. Unfortunately, due to the ephemeral nature of poetry in performance, and due to the absence of research into the slam scene’s response to 9/11, it is difficult to make valid retrospective assertions about the exact scope, duration and intensity of the slam scene’s response. Nevertheless, there is some evidence in support of the notion that poetry slams have functioned as important sites for voicing critique of America’s post-9/11 society, particularly in the first few years after the attack. Episodes of the TV series *Def Poetry* (2001-2007) - which, according to slammer and academic Cristin Aptowicz, functioned as the “cultural shorthand” of the poetry slam - indicate that 9/11 and/or its social and political ramifications (e.g. intensified racial, ethnic and religious divisions, the dominant call for war) were regularly addressed by slam (or slam-influenced) poets. Already in the first episode of the series, a politically critical poem about 9/11 was performed (Suheir Hammad’s “First Writing Since”) and many more critical reflections upon America’s post-9/11 society followed in the years to come. *Def Poetry* has been described as an “expert encapsulation of the feelings and sensitivities of minority artists in post-9/11

America” and the same can be said about the slam scene as a whole. Aptowicz, in her book *Words in Your Face*, argues that at the time of her writing (i.e. 2008), the slam scene was in the middle of a “Third Wave” of slam poetry; a wave defined as being both “post-*Def Poetry* and post-9/11”, with both these occasions having had a large effect on the slam scene and the types of poetry performed there (294). By now, in 2013, slam poets seem to have largely moved on to social and cultural issues not directly related to (the political and cultural effects of) 9/11. With performance poets in general feeling a strong “commitment to the here and now” (Beasley 31), more recent political issues are now being addressed (e.g. gay marriage and the Obama administration’s use of drones<sup>19</sup>). Nevertheless, video recordings of *Def Poetry* and poetry slam performances related to 9/11 still circulate on the internet, thus continuing the cultural role initially played by live performances in a different form (a point to which I will return later).

In the previous chapter of this thesis, I have explored the text-based potential of some (academically respected) poems to subvert the dominant post-9/11 rhetoric and its accompanying vision of American-ness. As has become clear, the limitation of politically engaged print-based poetry is that, no matter how subversive the poetry is on paper, to receive an actual political effect, the message of the poem must still be taken up by the reader. Though politically engaged slam poetry is obviously bound to this same law, I would like to argue that slam poets writing critically about American identity and American culture after 9/11 were able to exert a more direct (political) influence on their audiences than those writing predominantly for the page. Unlike the print-based poem, which is inevitably bound to the realm of the imaginative, poetry in performance also has a place in the real. When poetry is performed on stage, the lyrical subject of the poem is not just a fictive character, but often also an actual person standing in front of you and making an appeal to you as another human being. Similarly, where poetry as text is only able to evoke a *sense* of community, poetry in performance also has the potential to create an *actual* community, one consisting of the real-world people who are simultaneously engaging with that which is performed. Though I do not wish to contend that poetry in performance always realizes its latent potential, I do want to argue, following John Wrighton, that “of the multi-foliate versions of a poem, it is in its public reading that the ethical and political dynamics of the work are most *explicitly* realized (192, italics in original).

In the sections to come, I will first show how slam poets, exploiting their physical presence on stage, performed (their own) marginalized identity as a way of critiquing the notion of *the* American as it was installed after 9/11. Subsequently, I

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<sup>19</sup> see Andrea Gibson’s “I do”, written in response to California’s (anti-gay marriage) Proposition 8 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8oGYyLDxFI>), and David James Hudson’s “On Drones and Accomplishments: How Peace Takes Its Name” written in response to the 2013 controversy regarding Barack Obama’s drone-strikes program ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCI7iRt\\_Iyw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCI7iRt_Iyw)).

will offer a more detailed discussion of how the extra-textual possibilities of the slam scene enabled a more direct political exchange between poet and audience, as such helping to establish counterpublics in American society at a time when dissent was generally repressed.<sup>20</sup> Lastly, I will briefly reflect upon the cultural significance of 9/11 slam poetry's afterlife on YouTube.

### **Performing (Non-)American Identity**

One of the most defining characteristics of slam poetry is that it is strongly focused on the personal. Unlike the print-based poem, which is "voiced" by a verbally constructed lyric subject, the performance-based slam poem is dependent on an actual human being for its enunciation. As such, the nature of the poetic self - and how it is experienced by the audience - is radically changed on the slam stage. According to Ron Silliman, "there is no substantial separation in the open reading between the performer and the text performed" and "unless the performer takes an elaborate and identifiable persona . . . the "I" of the text and the "I" of the person standing in front of the audience are particularly wedded" (362). In live poetry, it is much more difficult for the audience to make a conceptual split between author and speaker than it is in print. As such, argues Julia Novak, slam poetry invites its listeners to enter into an "autobiographical pact" (359).<sup>21</sup> Even more so than in other performance-based poetic practices, in slam competitions, the personality or identity of the performing poets is central to the audiences' understanding of the recited poems themselves. In a setting where, as Silliman rightfully points out, the question is not "*what is this text?*" but "*who will win?*" (362, italics in original), the central focus has shifted from the actual poem to the author staging it. As such, identity has become something that is self-consciously *performed* on the slam stage. Though poems written in the second and third person do appear at poetry slams, the mode of address overwhelmingly chosen by slam poets is the first person. Slam poets typically stage an (ostensibly) truthful personal identity because this is something that the audience (which holds the power to judge) positively responds to. As Maria Damon writes, the single most important criterion for slam success "seems to be some kind of 'realness' - authenticity at the physical/sonic and

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<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that all but one of the poems that I discuss in this chapter have appeared on the HBO series *Def Poetry*, which, due to the absence of a competitive element, is strictly speaking not an actual slam event. Nonetheless, I treat the poetry performed on this show and the poets performing them as belonging to the "slam scene". *Def Poetry* grew out of the popularity of slam, and both the type of poetry performed on *Def Poetry* and the manner in which poets and audiences interact on this series show striking similarities with the typical slam event. As I've already mentioned, according to Aptowicz, *Def Poetry* shows "obvious" similarities to poetry slam and functions as its "cultural shorthand" (261). Likewise, *Def Poetry* contestant John S. Hall has remarked that the show is "extremely slam-informed" (qtd. in Aptowicz 295). As such, I find it valid to group my examples from this series under the heading of "slam" and to use theoretical insights from research into slam for a better understanding of the poems that appeared there.

<sup>21</sup> Novak borrows the term from: Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Paris 1974.

metaphysical/emotional-intellectual-spiritual levels" (329). What is ultimately judged by the slam audience is not the poem performed in itself, but the totality of verbal and extra-verbal techniques (e.g. body language, facial expression, posture, clothing etcetera), which either effectively or ineffectively stage the poets' "own" identity.

In the poetry slam scene, there is one type of identity which is performed particularly often and which is also received and rewarded exceptionally favourably by slam audiences; marginalized (ethnic, racial, class, sexual, gender) identity. Given the origins of the poetry slam scene, this celebration of the "peripheral" is not surprising. Growing out of discontent with the elitist, exclusive and homogeneous nature of the institutionalized community of US poets, the poetry slam scene was from the outset established as a site where anyone could compete and where anyone could judge. Taking diversity, inclusion and democracy as its main values, the slam scene was constituted as a public space where "dissidence, dissonance and difference" could thrive and where the "relative lack of diversity . . . represented in the academy, the canon, and dominant culture" could be challenged (Damon ; Somers-Willett). As a result, the slam scene quickly became a multicultural breeding ground for countercultural sentiments. A plurality of poets competes in slam competitions and the performance of marginalized identity as a way of voicing dissent to homogenously perceived social categorizations has become quintessential to the slam as a whole. Though the scene's strong focus on the marginal may at times risk fetishizing or eroticizing minority identity *as* minor (i.e. as being divergent from an essentially installed Norm), it has also "created a space where the history of an identity is made visible and authenticity can be critiqued, permitting identity itself to be questioned and behavioral norms to be upended" (Somers-Willett 95).

After 9/11, certain slam poets started to use the scene's dominant format of staging marginality as a means of countering the fantasy of *the* American identity; a fantasy which enabled the US government to overlook intra-national dissent to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and to install the American nation as one without (social) difference. Speaking from the periphery of the American community, these slam poets aimed at deconstructing this community's perceived core of white, Christian Americans in support of retaliation. One of the main techniques used by slam poets to counter the hegemonic vision of American-ness was humour. In slam competitions, humour is widely employed because of its ability to entertain an audience (and thus to have competitive success). However, in the critical slam poetry written post-9/11, humour also gained supplementary political value, as it was employed as a tool for challenging *the* American identity. See, for example, Robert Karimi's "Get Down with your Muslim-Catholic self", which was performed on *Def Poetry* in 2005. Though not directly dealing with the attack itself, the poem does seem to respond to the strong binary thinking that came about in the US after

9/11. Karimi, who is himself of Iranian-Guatemalan decent, uses his own mixed identity as a means to humorously challenge the notion of essential identities in general. In his poem-as-performance, Karimi stages himself as being visited by a transgendered Christ during Ramadan (when he is "wondering whether [he] should fast every Friday for 40 days"), who tells him to "get down with [his] Catholic-Muslim self". The message of Karimi's poem is clear: there are no essential social categories, and we shouldn't let our world be ruled by them ("I rebel...and make a crusade to rid myself of all those trying to box me into one religion. one god. one identity"). By staging his own identity as one in which Catholicism and Islamism are harmoniously fused, Karimi comically deconstructs the antithetical opposition between Christianity (the religion of "Us") and the Islam (the religion of "Them"), showing that both religions can be part of "the" American identity.

Another poem which makes use of humour as a way of challenging the dominant vision of American-ness is Danny Hoch's "Corner Talk, September" (*Def Poetry*, 2003). Though Hoch himself has the physical appearance of a white middle class man and as such cannot claim the typical minority status of the slam poet, the identity which he stages with "Corner Talk, September" is that of a lower-class man from the Bronx. In his poem, Hoch adopts the voices of a number of different characters discussing 9/11 on the streets of New York. Hoch sets up his personae as caricatures, in effect creating an exaggerated distinction between the identity of the common American man on the street (engaging in "corner talk") and the identity of those congregating in buildings of power (i.e. the Bush administration). Hoch speaks in the vernacular, deliberately using slang words so as to sever his language from the Standard English presumably spoken by the model US citizen. Speaking from the margins, Hoch's personae perceive the events of 9/11 from a radically different (social) perspective than that usually portrayed in the media and ascribed to *the* American identity as a whole. Drawing on the post-9/11 narrative of national insecurity, for example, Hoch lets two of his speakers say: "hey yo- i aint scared yo, i aint scared. people on my block was already threatening to kill me man.....what? my block already look like a plane hit it. where is my disaster fund?". Transforming insecurity from being a nationally shared feeling to being a class-based variable, Hoch is able to show that the post-9/11 US is still characterized by inequality, regardless of the unifying effect that the tragedy has had.

The speakers of Hoch's "Corner Talk, September", are not impressed by the US's general support for war, and they make strange this unquestioning support via their humorous personal observations: "i don't know to be scared some religious fanatic's gonna bomb my starbucks or one of these flag-waving nutsos is gonna bomb ME for speakin my mind.....right? these flag heads is crazy son. I was talking to this chinese cat that just came here on vacation last week, he thought it was fuckin

fouth of july kid. People actin all patriotic".<sup>22</sup> Hoch's minority speakers ridicule the dominant American response to 9/11, subverting this response by making it absurd. Forcing a narrative from popular culture onto the Bush administration's rhetoric, one of Hoch's personae says, for example:

"hey yo, i rented the siege last nite son. i swear to my mother george bush is quoting bruce willis from the siege son. they had rounded up all the arabs and put em in some sprung shit, you know like internment camps in brooklyn, and i swear to my grandmother kid, bruce willis said, "make no mistake, we will hunt them down, and find them, and we will wipe out evil in the world." Rent that shit son! george bush said that shit yesterday! He think he in a movie son!

The dominant rhetoric surrounding 9/11 is successfully defused here, as Hoch literally makes it laughable. Performing an identity of low class and low culture, Hoch is able to refigure the dominant, top-down narrative of 9/11 (trickling down from the government and mainstream media to the US citizens) from the bottom up, adding a voice of peripheral dissent to the central culture of consent.

In addition to subverting the dominant notion of American-ness through the humorous staging of minority identity, certain slam poets also challenged this notion via the staging of grief and vulnerability. In order to demonstrate this, I will discuss Suheir Hammad's "First Writing Since" (*Def Poetry* 2002) and Mike Rosen's "When God Happens" (*NYC Urbana Poetry Slam*; uploaded on *YouTube* in 2012). First, however, I will provide some contextual information through which Hammad and Rozen's staging of grief and vulnerability can be better understood. As I've noted in the introduction to this thesis, sentiments of grief and mourning in the wake of 9/11 were almost immediately overshadowed by a desire for retaliation, as there was a strong national urge to restore America's (perceived) strength and power. Within this national context of immediate power-restoration, the act of grieving gained a particular political significance. According to Butler, mourning "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order" as it makes visible people's vulnerable exposure to, and fundamental dependence on, "the other"; as such paving the way for imagining a global civic community build on a shared ethical responsibility towards the human race as such (22). A denial of grief and vulnerability, however, like the one taking place in the post-9/11 US, leads to simplistic and reductive politico-ethical thinking; precisely because the US denied its own vulnerability, it was able to guiltlessly enact an aggressive foreign policy exploiting the vulnerability of others. Mourning or grief, claims Butler, has the potential to function as a resource for an alternative politics, since "mindfulness of . . . vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability

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<sup>22</sup> In this quote, I have copied the phonetic spelling that Hoch himself employs in his transcribed version of "Corner Talk, September", which can be found on his website: [http://dannyyhoch.com/works\\_Corner.html](http://dannyyhoch.com/works_Corner.html)

through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war" (28; 29).

Where Butler ascribes a dormant political meaning to grief in general, I would like to contend that the subversive potential of grief emerged particularly strongly in its post-9/11 performance on stage. In contrast to real-life mourning, which exists only in and for itself, the performed mourning of such poets as Hammad and Rozen is actively focused on achieving an external rhetorical effect. Both Hammad and Rozen self-consciously stage their own grievance and vulnerability as a means of countering the dominant American call for power-restoration and retaliation. Due to America's pre-9/11 fantasy of indestructibility, the September 11 attack gained significantly more weight as a symbolic event than as a material event, causing the attack to lose its personal relevance and instead become installed as an overwhelmingly national happening (as Hammad states: "these stars and stripes represent the dead as citizens first, not family, not lovers"). Hammad and Rozen, in their poems, make an attempt to re-constitute the event's personal/human element, re-claiming a (marginal) voice of human vulnerability and grief within a mnemonic discourse dominated by a consensual voice of power and revenge.

Both in "First Writing Since" and "When God Happens", 9/11 is portrayed, not as an attack on America, but as an attack on human life. Opening his poem, Rozen states, "before the towers collapsed into a white noise of bodies and strewn papers there were people in the windows". Immediately, a sense of human destruction is conveyed; breathing "people" become inanimate "bodies". Hammad likewise foregrounds the notion of loss and death in the beginning of her poem: "there have been no words...no poetry in the ashes south of canal...no prose in trucks driving debris and dna." From the start, Hammad and Rozen thus install 9/11 as a material, primordially non-political event; the attack on the twin towers is something to be mourned, not something to be (symbolically) revenged. Befitting the slam format, Hammad and Rozen exploit their physical presence on the stage, performing their own marginalized identities as particularly strong subject positions of mourning. In the case of Hammad, who foregrounds her identity as that of an American-Palestinian woman, grief and vulnerability largely spring from belonging to an ethnic group connected to terrorism ("one more person ask me if I knew the hijackers", sic) and having two brothers in the navy ("my baby brother is a man now, on alert, praying five times a day the orders he will take are righteous . . . both my brothers - my heart stops - not a beat disturbs/ my fear"). In the case of Rozen, who foregrounds his identity as that of a New York citizen, grief and vulnerability stem from having experienced the September 11 attack up close ("that morning I went to the window. I whipped my hand along the sill, I watched my fingers turn grey and I thought bodies"). Both poets actively set up their own identities as



opposing the American norm. As atypical Americans<sup>23</sup> made personally vulnerable by 9/11, neither Hammad nor Rozen can identify with *the* quintessential American engaging in a “fantasy of mastery”. “Never felt less American and more Brooklyn than these days”, states Hammad in her poem. Likewise, Rozen remarks: “. . . I’m taking this one back for my home, cause under that rubble was not your country. Under that rubble was our city, our town, our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, sons and daughters.” Experiencing the events of 9/11 as having been hijacked for political ends, Hammad and Rozen aim to install a more direct vision of the attack, drawing attention to the distance between the event’s emotional implications and its ideological misappropriation. “That day had no black or white”, writes Rozen, “because under that rubble everyone was grey. Under that rubble was no red, white or blue. Under that rubble was just grey”.

According to Michael Rothberg, in “First Writing Since” “Hammad moves at once above and below the national radar, taking apart assumptions of a prelapsarian American unity in order to assert bonds of local and transnational solidarity” (155). I would like to extend this argument to include Rozen's "When God Happens" as well. Belonging to vulnerable minority groups, both Hammad and Rozen identify more strongly with war-threatened people "over there" than with the sovereign and powerful Americans "over here". In line with Butler's theory about the ethical potential lying dormant in grief, Hammad and Rozen perform their own marginalized positions of mourning in order to forge new ties between the American “Us” and the foreign “Them” on the basis of a shared vulnerability. Rozen, for example, connects his own post-9/11 fragility to the fragility of children in Afghanistan and Iraq: "Your war has done nothing but add to the list of little boys like me who wish to sleep at the feet of their father’s beds. [...] Your war has done nothing but add to the list of boys in New York, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, the list of boys still waiting for their fathers to come home". Hammad likewise foregrounds inter-national connections of grief and vulnerability: "If there are any people on earth who understand how New York is feeling right now, they are in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip". Drawing attention to what Butler calls the "primary vulnerability" of all human beings, Hammad and Rozen pave the way for imagining *the* American identity, not as one defined in aggressive opposition to the rest of the world, but as emphatically grounded within it.

### **Creating a Counterpublic**

In the section above, selective attention has gone out to the poet-performer of the slam scene, and to the way in which certain slam poets challenged the notion of *the* American identity in the post-9/11 period. However, the role of the performer in

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<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that New York has always been depicted in dominant American culture as being atypical for America, a “world unto itself” (Silberstein 91).

slam poetry cannot be seen apart from his/her interaction with an audience or from the intra-audience interactions which are constituted in and through this poet's presence. As I have previously suggested, no matter how subversive a poem is in and by itself, the political potential of the poem has to be translated to the reader/listener for it to have any real effect. In the case of poetry performed on the slam stage, I would like to argue, this process of translating happens more immediately and directly than with print-based poetry due to the fact that the receiver of the slam poem is constituted as an "active and integral context for the poem" (Beach 132).

According to Peter Middleton, "audience and poet collaborate in the performance of [a] poem. [...] During performance the audience is formed by the event, and creates an intersubjective network, which can then become an element in the poem itself" ("Contemporary Poetry Reading" 291). Unlike the print-based poem, which is self-contained, the performed poem of slam "spills over into its surroundings" and is dependent on its listeners for being fully realized (Gräbner 3). The comically subversive effect of poems such as those of Karimi and Hoch, for example, can only truly come about in the presence of an audience which can pick up on and collectively respond to these poets' exploitation of extra-textual techniques such as funny facial expression and comical timing. Likewise, the performed vulnerability of Hammad and Rozen can only fully be established in the presence of an audience which can interpret and emotionally respond to bodily significations of negative affect. Rozen, during his performance, deliberately distorts his face so as to make it seem as if he is on the verge of tears, letting his voice break as if smothered by affect and talking extremely fast as if engaging in an emotionally driven rant. Hammad, in turn, though employing a more subtle performance style than Rozen, also uses her body and voice as a means of conveying vulnerability to the audience; speaking in a soft (though at times also angry) voice and lowering her eyes to the written page of her poem for large parts of the performance (in most of her online performances she uses no text at all), Hammad stages her own person as guarded/ fragile.



Picture 1: *Karimi (as disco diva Jesus),*



Picture 2: *Hoch*



Picture 3: *Rozen*



Picture 4: *Hammad*

The extra-textual possibilities of slam poetry, such as those discussed above, exist *only* in the poet-audience interaction, as they are dependent on the audience's empathic capabilities for their full realization. It is only because the audience is receptive to the emotive markers staged by the poet-performer, and responds physically to these markers, that extra-linguistic meaning can be brought about in slam. Like other performance-based arts, slam poetry has the potential to exercise "an immediate sensual effect on the audience and trigger strong, even overwhelming affects based on its presentness" (Fischer-Lichte 94). Where the meaning of the print-based poem is largely constituted through the body of the text (i.e. through the text's verbal signification), the meaning of the performance-based poem is largely constituted through the body of the audience (i.e. through the audience's physical and emotional response to that which is textually and extra-textually performed). As Beasley states, the "raw materials of the poems are not words or sounds but the sensory apparatus of the audience" (32).

In slam, then, the general means of poetic signification are radically changed, shifting from monological (textual) expression to dialogical (human) exchange. Crucially, what the listener is confronted with in a poetry slam performance is not an inanimate text but a flesh and blood person. In violation of the traditional conceptualization of the lyric I as a transcendental textual voice, the lyric subject of slam poetry is a socially and culturally situated author who makes an active attempt to (emotionally) communicate something to the audience, exposing him/herself to this audience as *another human being*. As a result of this, a more direct political appeal is placed on the slam audience than on the audience of print-based poetry. With slam poets being able to actively manipulate the emotions of their audiences, they can strongly evoke the wish to act in them. As Fischer-Lichte argues, "strong emotions bear the largest responsibility for triggering impulses to intervene and create a new set of norms for the acting subject" (177). When poets such as Hammad and Rozen stage their own vulnerability, for example, the audience cannot be but influenced by this; empathically associating with Hammad and Rozen's lamentable

subject positions, audience members are emotionally reeled in to the pacifistic political stance taken on by these poets. Playing upon the audience's sensitivity to the (joy or suffering of) the human other, slam poets are able to induce emotional states in them through which an alternative politics can be envisioned.

Related to the politico-emotional effect of slam poetry described above is the fact that, due to the slam poets' (intentional and unintentional) foregrounding of their own human-ness, the usually authoritative relation between author and reader/listener is transformed into a democratic one in slam. Even more so than in other types of performance poetry, in slam poetry (in which marginal social and cultural positions are actively staged), the poet reveals himself to his audience "as a member of his community and not as the superior of his fellow human beings" (Gräbner 11). As becomes clear from the performances of Karimi, Hoch, Hammad and Rozen, all of these poets present themselves or their personae as (atypical) US citizens before they present themselves as authors, thus "mercifully explod[ing]" the "specialist conception and myth of the poet as separate from and above the people" (Beasley 33). Instead of functioning as spokespersons relating their own world-views to their readers/listeners as Truth, slam poets make an emphatic (democratic) appeal to their audience on the basis of their shared human-ness - or, in the case of certain 9/11 poems, shared citizenship - thus not *imposing* but *provoking* a sense of ethical responsibility to the "human other" and/or political responsibility to the "citizen other". See for example, Hammad's performance of "First Writing Since". At the end of her performance, Hammad looks directly at her audience and states: "affirm life. affirm life. we got to carry each other now. you are either with life or against it. affirm life". Speaking *to*, not *for*, her American listeners, Hammad asks them to form a caring community with all those present; a community of people who together must counter the dominant urge for US retaliation. Being *directly* appealed to on the basis of their shared US citizenship, Hammad's audience members cannot but feel implicated in the request made. What is more, being *simultaneously* addressed, all the individual audience members are inevitably made aware of their own presence within a larger group of people sharing the same politico-ethical objective (i.e. to "affirm life" and "carry each other"). As such, Hammad, for the duration of her performance, is able to transform her individual audience members into a coherent (but not uniform) counter-cultural community.



Picture 5: *Hammad addressing her audience*    Picture 6: *Audience reaction*

Characteristic for the slam scene is the fact that audience members are strongly encouraged to respond to the poetry performed. As Somers-Willett writes, in contrast to the traditional poetry reading, which usually demands of its audience to be “silently and passively receptive”, the poetry slam “puts[s] the audience in the seat of critical power, asking them to immediately and overtly evaluate performed poetry through applause, shouting, and scoring”. Even in *Def Poetry*, which doesn’t have the competitive aspect that slam events have, audience members are highly vocal, and laugh, applaud and cheer to show their approval. For the audiences of slam (or slam-inspired formats such as *Def Poetry*), being vocal is a way of actively entering into the performance of the poet, either undermining what is staged or supporting and strengthening it. Political poems performed in slam, then, such as those of Karimi, Hoch, Hammad and Rozen, always immediately becomes more than a personal statement of an isolated author; it becomes a sentiment that is either collectively shared or collectively rejected. Tellingly, in the poetry performances of the poets discussed in this chapter, those remarks most loudly applauded and cheered are exactly the ones which are most politically and culturally critical. In Hoch’s “Corner Talk, September”, applause is given after such lines as “you wasn’t patriotic when they was shooting amadou 41 times” and “you wasn’t patriotic . . . when we was bombing vieques and or buying Israel 7000 brand new torture kits, or bombing 200,000 iraqi civilians . . .” Likewise, Hammad receives applause when stating “we did not vilify white men when McVeigh bombed Oklahoma” and “if there are any people on earth who understand how New York is feeling right now, they are in the West Bank and the Gaza strip”. By applauding, the audience is able to proclaim Hoch’s and Hammad’s political views as ones that they themselves also adhere to. What is more, by being vocal, the audience can also show its approval for the minority identities performed and as such they can actively participate in the deconstruction of *the American identity*.



Picture 7: *Audience reacting vocally to Hoch's poem (through laughter and clapping)*

Through the act of collectively clapping or cheering for critical remarks and minority identities, then, the audience is able to make itself known as a community of likeminded citizens with a similar dislike of the US's dominant politics and the US's dominant identity. Even those audience members who might not share the views expressed on stage, or who might not care about these views as strongly as the other listeners, often become drawn into the general audience response. As Blitefield remarks, "no audience member can react to the slam poem oblivious to the reactions of the assembled, and remain untouched by them" (112). As a result of such intra-audience effects as stimulation (i.e. being infected by other people's emotions), confirmation (i.e. seeing one's own response reinforced by others) and integration (i.e. feeling the need/pressure to give oneself over to the group identity), "groups tend towards homogeneity in their response to a performance" (Novak 373). When a certain political view is thus shared by a large percentage of the audience, the audience as a whole will most likely support it.

Since the competitive success of slam poets is dependent on audience approval, slam audiences can exert a large influence on the type of poetry performed. The slam scene's strong focus on (identity) politics, then, does not solely stem from the critical engagement of those performing but also from the critical engagement of the audience members for whom is performed. Those poems which are most favourably received by slam audiences are poems with a decidedly political content (Beach 131, Blitefield 109), and these poems are, at least partly as a result of this, also the poems which are performed most often on the slam stage. As Somers-Willett remarks, "just as slam poets celebrate their diversity as a group, audiences come to see these declarations and celebrate the diverse identities of the poets, creating a liberal socio-political space where the values of dominant culture are suspended and poets in traditionally oppressed groups are encouraged"(70). Audience members seek out the slam scene because they *want* to hear politically subversive messages, they "want the poets/poetry to intervene in their thinking.

They come to slams to be challenged” (Blitefield 111). In slam, political engagement is not something that is unsolicitedly performed by the poets, but something that is actively requested by the audience, thus strongly enlarging the possibility for the political messages conveyed on stage to have an actual effect on those listening (and, in turn, maybe also on those performing, as positive audience feedback might stimulate enhanced political engagement).

As has already been briefly mentioned, a large part of the poetry slam’s appeal stems from the fact that it is a *shared* experience; slam poetry “brings together an audience which wishes to participate in consuming poetry with others who also wish to do so, to acknowledge poetry, and to feel part of a community” (Stern 83). People do not merely come to slams to hear politically engaged poetry; they come there to experience this politically engaged poetry with likeminded others. Besides providing politically aware entertainment, the poetry slam scene also offers its visitors the opportunity to become subsumed in what Michael Warner calls a “counterpublic” (81). Warner defines a “public” as an indistinctly demarcated group of unacquainted people which is formed through the act of being discursively addressed. A *counter-public*, in turn, is a type of public which is “constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public” (85).<sup>24</sup> This conflictual relation is not only made apparent through the divergent ideas being circulated within the counterpublic, but also through the “speech genres and modes of address” by which this counterpublic is established. Poetry slams, I argue, are discursive arenas where a markedly oppositional discourse is employed, and as such these slams offer their visitors the possibility to become included in a counterpublic. As sites where people become united on the basis of their shared participation in a discourse of powerlessness and vulnerability (audience members are generally addressed by poets speaking from the margins), poetry slams enable their visitors to dissociate themselves from the dominant American public, a public largely forged through a hegemonic discourse of power. Especially in the US’s post-9/11 society, with its inflated rhetoric of dominance and strength, the slam scene offered a space where alternative communities based on equality could be forged, and where US citizens could communally shed the notion of *the* American identity as imposed on them, together assuming a new form of US citizenship.

Negatively perceived, it can be argued that the slam scene is self-serving; slam performances are largely attended by people who already hold left-wing political

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<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that, having no clear boundaries, a public differs from an audience, whose limits are precisely known. As such, my decision to employ the term (counter)public here might seem a bit odd. I would nonetheless like to argue, however, that slam poetry can be said to create a (counter)public. When Hammad for example states: “we got to carry each other now,” though the request most directly applies to the actually present audience, no listener will think that it is *only* the other audience members which are deserving of being carried, showing that the public addressed by Hammad extends itself beyond those present and known.

views and who are thus not in need of being convinced by the views expressed. Building on Warner's notion of the counterpublic, however, I argue for a more positive reading, and contend that slam, particularly in the post-9/11 period, fulfilled a cultural demand that was not otherwise satiated. Within the US's dominant post-9/11 culture of homogeneity and consensus, the slam scene was one of the few spaces where alternative political views could be expressed and where counterpublics could be formed. Being "properly situated in the front-line of self and community defence against immense and subtle pressure to assimilate, integrate and eradicate difference and diversity" (Beasley 29), the slam scene offered a strong counterweight to the American public's dominant call for uniformity. Not only did poetry slams function as sites where audiences could come to "affirm and construct the identities of slam performers", they also functioned as sites where audiences could come to "affirm and construct identities for themselves" (Somers-Willett 80). By applauding the minority identities of such poets as Hoch, Hammad and Rozen, slam audiences were able to envision an alternative US citizenship for themselves, one that they shared with all those present. As Warner argues, members of a counterpublic (such as the one created through the poetry slam scene) are "socially marked" by their participation in a shared discursive space: "the subordinate status of a counterpublic does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways its members' identities are formed and transformed" (86; 87). Participating in the slam scene enabled audience members to assume a new group identity for themselves; one based on their shared rejection of the US's dominant culture and identity values. Herein resided the slam scene's ultimate political worth.<sup>25</sup>

### **After the Curtains Fall: Slam Poetry on YouTube**

Up to this point, I have focused exclusively on the political exchange between poet and audience in the live performance of slam poetry, and on the way in which the slam scene enabled the formation of American counterpublics in the first few years after the September 11 attack. However, live slam performances often gain an afterlife on the internet (or, in the case of *Def Poetry*, also on television) once the performance is over. Unfortunately, in this digital afterlife, a large part of the original performance is lost. With the physical co-presence of author and audience having disappeared, for example, the mediated slam poem is less able to exert a direct (politico-)emotional effect on the listener/viewer. As Middleton argues about the live performance of poetry, "one will usually be affected by the event bodily, emotionally and intellectually; and it will become a part of who one is, to a degree

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<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that the slam scene still functions as a site where alternative political views and identities are performed and celebrated, and where counterpublics can be formed. I argue, however, that as the call for consensus and uniformity was particularly strong in the first few years after the September 11 attack, so was the socio-political importance of the slam scene during that period.



much greater than any listening to [or viewing of] a recording can induce" (15) What is more, while live slam events are experienced by multiple people at once, the listening to/viewing of a recording of a slam is done solitarily, thus causing the slam performance to lose some of its communal appeal.

Nevertheless, there is also something to be gained from the recordings of slam poetry and their circulation on in the internet. Recordings are not merely "clues to lost aspects of performance", they are also "part of the repertoire of the poem and . . . establish themselves as contributions as important to the reception of the poem as print publication" (Middleton 16). Where a typical slam event may be attended by 50 to 200 people, a recording of a slam event or a slam poem is able to reach many more. Suheir Hammad's "First Writing Since", for example, has been viewed more than 584,000 times on *YouTube*. As such, the poem's circulation through this site has enabled Hammad's poem to reach a much wider audience than it would have done solely via live performances. What recorded slam poems thus lose in receptive intensity, they seem to gain in receptive scope. Moreover, with recordings being material-based, they last much longer than the transitory live performance, thus prolonging the slam poem's cultural effect. One blogger, for example, sharing the *YouTube* clip of Suheir Hammad's *Def Poetry* performance, relates: "Suheir's following words, and her entire poem continue to resonate with me today, 9 years after 9/11..."<sup>26</sup> Having continued access to Hammad's "First Writing Since" (which on *YouTube* exists as a reproducible artefact), this blogger also seems sustainably affected by it. Being able to "return" to Hammad's poem whenever she wants, the blogger can keep reproducing the effect that the poem has personally had on her, something that she would be unable to do had she merely experienced Hammad's poem transitorily in performance. Furthermore, by *sharing* the *YouTube* clip of Hammad's performance via her personal page, 9 years after its first recording, the blogger opens up Hammad's poem to new audiences, sowing a seed for the appearance of new counterpublics.

Though watching a recorded slam performance is in itself a solitary act, I argue that a community can nevertheless be created around this recording. Particularly on *YouTube*, where people have knowledge of the number of times a clip has been watched by others, and where people can publicly share their opinions about the clips posted, recorded slam performances (re-)gain a social character. As in live performances of slam poetry, on *YouTube*, viewers can show their communal approval or dislike of that which is performed; in this case via the pressing of a "like" or "dislike" button or via the posting of a personal comment. Right below the most often viewed clip of Suheir Hammad's "First Writing Since" (there are multiple ones circulating), for example, it is made visible to all viewers that 3,246 people

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<sup>26</sup> See: Amineh Ayyad. "Suheir Hammad - Def Poetry post 9/11." *Compassionate Seattle*. 10 Sep. 2010. Web. 10 July 2013. < <http://www.compassionateseattle.org/video/suheir-hammad-def-poetry-post>>

reported liking Hammad's poem and 61 reported disliking it. Even though viewers might thus solitarily watch Hammad's poem on *YouTube*, when approving of it, they automatically find themselves connected to the 3,246 others who also watched the clip and approved of it. Moreover, being able to add personal remarks to the clip, viewers can directly communicate with the other people who have watched or will be watching Hammad's performance. The most often viewed clip of Hammad's "First Writing Since" has over 1000 remarks; some of which in their turn have solicited other remarks or likes/dislikes. Many viewers have responded to Hammad's political poem with political messages of their own. One *YouTube* member for example writes: "Violence exists. Terrorism and fanaticism exist. Hatred exists. In every race, culture, religion and ethnicity. In all walks of life. It's not an Arab thing, it's simply human nature". Like the live performance of Hammad's poem, then, its video recording on *YouTube* creates a discursive space where people can come to express their own political views and become subsumed in the counterpublic of all those viewing, liking and personally responding to "First Writing Since".

Though Karimi, Hoch, Hammad and Rozen might not perform their 9/11 poems that often anymore, and though the slam scene as a whole has largely moved on to other (political) topics, the poetry performances of Karimi, Hoch, Hammad and Rozen still have the possibility of forging counterpublics via their circulation on *YouTube*. The extent to which they are able to do so of course differs; Karimi and Hoch's poems are not so popular on *YouTube* (possibly because the effect of humour is greatest when communally experienced). Hammad and Rozen's poems, however, are still very regularly watched, and both performances keep gaining a lot of viewers and responses. In its digital afterlife on *YouTube*, then, the cultural significance of Hammad and Rozen's politically critical poems lives on, continuing to offer an alternative to the hegemonic narrative of 9/11 - and to the dominant national identity associated with it - and holding the potential to influence the cultural memory of 9/11 in the long-run.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the sections above, I have argued that slam poets, via the performance of marginality, were able to subvert the dominant vision of *the* American identity, and together with their audiences (or *YouTube* viewers), were able to constitute counterpublics in which dissenting political opinions and atypical US identities could be celebrated. As a type of poetry which has made itself completely dependent on its receptive community for its existence, poetry slam points to the fact that it is always in a poem's established social interactions that its political potential becomes truly activated. The political worth of the slam scene resides not so much in the actual poetry performed, but in the interpersonal ties (both between poet and

audience and between different audience members) which are constituted through this poetry. Offering a space where poets and audiences critical of dominant US culture could come together and could create dissenting (group) identities for themselves, poetry slam offered socio-political, not aesthetico-ethical worth. In the next chapter, I will expand on the socio-political worth of (post-)9/11 poetry further, discussing the poetic movement "Poets Against the War" and the controversially received poem "Somebody Blew Up America" (written by Amiri Baraka) so as to show that poetry did not only offer refuge from dominant American politics and culture, but also led to conflict between the US's official (political) culture and its subversive verse culture.

## 9/11 and the Poetry of Protest

In the previous two chapters of this thesis, I have limited my discussion of critical post-9/11 poetry to types of poetry which predominantly circulated within subgroups of the American community; what I have referred to as academic, print-based 9/11 poetry was largely distributed within the educational system and slam poetry, though having more mainstream visibility, for the most part reached a small core of regular slam visitors. The audiences addressed with these types of politically subversive poetry, I would like to argue, were thus circumscribed, atypical audiences; the academic world and the slam scene are generally known for their progressive political affiliations and are thus divergent from the American community at large. Both the academy and the slam scene can be said to be relatively self-contained; adhering to their own political rules and norms, they are in some sense cut off from the rest of society. As such, the poems circulating within these venues, though offering the potential for critical insight, did not function as actual *protest* (since protest would imply opposition). Building on Philip Metres discussion of “war-resistance poetry”, I define protest poetry as poetry that “attempts to address both the converted *and* unconverted, to praise the committed *and* also hail the uncommitted, inviting them to partake in this collective subjectivity of resistance” (*Behind the Lines* 233, my italics). Though academic poetry and slam poetry critiqued America’s dominant culture from within their shielded societal positions, they did not manage to directly oppose it. Respectively imagining and forging alternative (inward-focused) communities, not antagonistic (outward-focused) communities, these types of poetry ultimately left America’s dominant culture unscathed.<sup>27</sup>

In this chapter, I want to broaden my perspective to include post-9/11 poetry which *did* manage to reach out to both the converted and the unconverted. In the aftermath of 9/11, there were two instances in which poetry entered into a conflictual relation with America’s dominant (political) culture, acquiring national visibility. In September 2002, African-American performance artist Amiri Baraka became the talk of the town after having read his polemical 9/11 poem “Somebody Blew Up America” at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry festival.<sup>28</sup> Following Baraka’s performance (which was briefly booed by some members of the audience), the poem started to receive negative attention for its supposed anti-Semitism. As Suzy Hansen

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<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that the term “protest poetry” has been used as being synonymous with politically critical poetry in general. However, in line with this thesis’ concern with poetry’s social embeddedness, I want to reserve the term specifically for poetry which functioned antithetically *within society*, not just on paper.

<sup>28</sup> The Geraldine R. Dodge festival is the largest poetry event in the US, and is held every other year in Waterloo Village, Northern New Jersey. The festival lasts for four days and features poetry readings, discussions and workshops.

described it: “Days after Baraka read the poem . . . the Jewish standard, a weekly newspaper in northern New Jersey, denounced the poem in an editorial. The Anti-Defamation League quickly wrote a letter to Gov. McGreevey [who had appointed Baraka to the honorary position of poet laureate of New Jersey that year] and compiled a list of Baraka’s previous anti-Semitic remarks on its website.<sup>29</sup> Various newspapers across the country also condemned the poem [e.g. the *NY Times* and the *LA Times*]. Following this commotion, New Jersey governor McGreevey asked Baraka to resign from the post of poet laureate. Baraka - arguing that the public reading of his poem was nothing more than an “insulting non-interpretation” covering up the poem’s *actual* attack on “Imperialism, National Oppression, Monopoly Capitalism, Racism, Anti-Semitism” - refused, and stated that he would not “resign” and would not “apologize” (Baraka “ADL Smear Campaign”). Because there proved to be no provision in the law for removing Baraka from his position, the New Jersey Senate ultimately decided to pass a bill eliminating the position of poet laureate all-together, thus forcing Baraka to resign from his post. The whole conflict was widely reported in the national news, reviving discussions about the relation between poetry and politics and the right to freedom of speech, and unintentionally giving Baraka’s highly dissenting poem a national readership.

In January 2003, poetry again received national news coverage when poet Sam Hamill refused to attend a poetry symposium organized by Laura Bush, which was scheduled to focus on the work of Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes and Emily Dickinson under the heading of “Poetry and *the American Voice*” (my italics). Having just read “a lengthy report on Bush’s proposed ‘Shock and Awe’ attack on Iraq”, Hamill self-reportedly felt “overcome by a kind of nausea” upon receiving the invitation (qtd. in Cusac). As a form of protest, Hamill send out an email to 50 of his poet friends, asking them to submit anti-war poems and statements to be sent to the White House as a form of petition, and asking those who planned on attending Laura Bush’s event to recite protest poetry there. Laura Bush got wind of the planned intervention, and decided to postpone the symposium. Explaining the (ultimately indefinite) postponement, Laura Bush’s spokeswoman stated: “While Mrs Bush respects the rights of all Americans to express their opinions, she, too, has opinions, and believes it would be inappropriate to turn a literary event into a political forum” (qtd. in “White House Cancels Poetry Symposium”, *USA Today*). At least partly resulting from the cancellation (whose implied censoring and smothering of dissent rubbed many poets the wrong way), Hamill started receiving an enormous number of anti-war poems. Within the first four days after sending out

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<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that Amiri Baraka has indeed held anti-Semitic beliefs in the past, but had already renounced these beliefs by the time the controversy around “Somebody Blew Up America” arose: “Anti-Semitism is as ugly an idea and as deadly as white racism and Zionism [...]. As for my personal trek through the wasteland of anti-Semitism, it was momentary and never completely real.” (Baraka, qtd. in Hansen).

his email, Hamill had gathered poems from 1500 different poets, a large number of which he displayed on the newly created website [poetsagainsthewar.org](http://poetsagainsthewar.org). By the beginning of March, the number of poems submitted had gone up to 13,000, all of which were presented as an anthology to some representatives of the US Congress, and many of which were taken up into the Congressional Record. The 13,000-poem anthology was later culled for a book publication, containing work by both professional and amateur poets.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, anti-war poetry was also brought to the public via performance; on February 12, the day the original White House symposium was scheduled, over 200 "Poetry Readings Against the War" were held all over the U.S (Hamill xviii), one of which ("A Poetry Reading in Honor of the Right of Protest as a Patriotic and Historical Tradition") even reached an audience of 700 people (Nawotka).

According to Thomas Fischer, Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" and the socio-poetic movement "Poets Against the War" "[seem] to have inspired a general renewal of poetry as part of a national discourse" (977). Both Baraka and Poets Against the War (henceforth abbreviated as PAW) seem to defy the popular image of poetry as societally inconsequential, showing that poetry can have great cultural visibility and does have the power to stir up political debate. Being widely reported on in the national media, the Baraka controversy and the PAW movement were indeed able to reach both the committed and the uncommitted, generating both positive and negative public responses and opening up the possibility for breaking through the US's (perceived) post-9/11 consensus. However, the large role that both America's official political culture and the national media have played in bringing Amiri Baraka and PAW to "stardom" also lays bare a major restriction of these forms of protest. As Fischer argues (building on Agamben), "poetry, in very certain ways, profits from its denunciation, becomes more visible and central through efforts to expel or contain it." (977). Without governor McGreevey's choice to "fire" Baraka from his poet laureate position, "Somebody Blew Up America" would never have gained such a wide audience, nor would it have stirred up a debate about the right to voice dissenting views. As someone ironically posted on a forum during the Baraka controversy: "Did you know New Jersey has a poet laureate? Hell, I didn't know New Jersey had a POET, unless the overrated Bruce Springsteen counts" ([indybay.org](http://indybay.org)<sup>31</sup>). Similarly, as *LA Times* reporter Tomas Tizon has remarked about PAW, "without the Bush name attached to the story line, [www.poetsagainsthewar.org](http://www.poetsagainsthewar.org) would be just another obscure lefty Web site". It seems the reason why controversies around poetry receive coverage (and thus national attention) is

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<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that this anthology, *Poets Against the War* was not the only anti-war anthology produced in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. *Enough, 100 Poets Against the War* and *101 Poems Against War* also spoke out against the attack. However, none of these other collections received the attention that *Poets Against the War* did.

<sup>31</sup> See: [http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2002/09/30/1524751.php?show\\_comments=1](http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2002/09/30/1524751.php?show_comments=1)

precisely because poetry is perceived to be powerless; when the supposedly inconsequential medium of poetry suddenly clashes with dominant culture or dominant politics, this is thought to be newsworthy. As such, both political figures and the national media, through their interference, paradoxically infuse poetry with the power they identify it as a priori (or independently) having.

In this chapter, I aim to explore the nature of the protest offered by (the controversy around) Baraka's "somebody Blew Up America" and by PAW in more detail. Instead of ending this thesis on the mere positive note of poetry's national visibility and politico-critical importance, I want to take on a more complex and nuanced stance to the protest offered by Baraka and PAW. Being so strongly dependent on politicians and the mainstream media for its coming into being in the first place, the nature and scope of the protest offered by Baraka and PAW was highly determined by them. Pitting the largely negative reception of Amiri Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" up against the largely positive reception of PAW, I will come to argue that the only form of poetic protest tolerated in the wake of 9/11 was one of safe marginality. First, I will discuss the content and reception of Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America", then I will discuss the content and reception of Hamill's collected "poems against the war". Lastly, I will compare the two poetic practices and their reception, and will draw a general conclusion about the possibilities and limitations of post-9/11 poetic protest.

### **Amiri Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America"**

Amiri Baraka, one of the leading figures of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s, is well known for his harsh social criticism. "Throughout his career", the *Poetry Foundation* reports, "[Baraka's] method in poetry, drama, fiction and essays has been confrontational, calculated to shock and awaken audiences to the political concerns of black Americans". This general aim to oppose, confront, shock and awaken, I would like to argue, also lies at the heart of Baraka's 2001 poem "Somebody Blew Up America". In this poem, Baraka uses the narrative of 9/11 to look critically at America's own wrong-doings. Opening his poem, Baraka states: "(All thinking people / oppose terrorism / both domestic / & international.../But one should not / be used / To cover the other)". Like the academic poets discussed in chapter 2, Baraka politicizes the language of the Bush administration, redirecting the language usually reserved for "the terrorists" to the US government itself; "They say it's some terrorist, some / barbaric / A Rab, in / Afghanistan / It wasn't our American terrorists /It wasn't the Klan or the Skin Heads / Or the *them* that blows up nigger / Churches. . ." (my italics). Re-applying the words of linguistic deixis that were used by the Bush Administration to set up an opposition between the American Just ("our") and the terrorist Evil ("They", "them"), Baraka aims to show that America itself has had its fair share in inducing terror. Aggressively focussing

attention on aspects of American history (and its present-day society) that US citizens would rather forget, Baraka forces his readers/listeners to face their own complicity in (inter)national violence.

In Baraka's poem, "They" does not refer to a hostile exteriority, but to the American nation itself, and more particularly to the overtly white, imperialist power holders (both in America and abroad) who, according to him, have formed the biggest player in world-wide terrorism. In "Somebody Blew Up America", Baraka redraws the boundaries of so-called evil, pointing out that evil is not the private property of a "cave-dwelling terrorist intent on killing Americans for their love of democracy, personal liberty, and a 'free market' economy", but a "much more potent and pervasive force, something that can be named but not always seen, felt but not always known, fought but not always with laser-guided missiles." (Gwiazda 476). The largest part of Baraka's poem forms an angry inquiry into the source of this more abstract and geographically scattered notion of evil, consisting of instances of "Imperialism, National Oppression, Monopoly Capitalism, Racism. . ." (Baraka "ADL Smear Campaign"):

Who had the slaves  
Who got the bux out the Bucks

Who got fat from plantations  
Who genocided Indians  
[...]

Who cut your nuts off  
Who rape your ma  
Who lynched your pa

Who got the tar, who got the feathers  
Who had the match, who set the fires  
Who killed and hired  
Who say they God & still be the Devil

The "somebody" who "blew up America", then, Baraka seems to argue, is not an exterior threat, but a white supremacist, imperialist essence destroying the nation from the inside out. Drawing attention to all the wrongs done by hegemonic institutions of power (and doing so by using a deliberately "poor", non-hegemonic English), Baraka manages to "expose, ridicule, and denounce the self-serving rhetoric of those who 'do the saying'" (Gwiazda 472), showing that evil does not merely reside beyond the border of the American nation-state.

Being deliberately polemical, "Somebody Blew Up America" at times seems to lapse into the rhetoric that it wishes to subvert; employing the exact same logic of "Us" vs. "Them" that the Bush administration employed, Baraka likewise installs a



reductive binary between absolute Evil (the powerful, rich, white supremacists) and absolute Good (the disempowered, poor and (racially) suppressed). As such, the poem at times seems to fall prey to that which it attacks, leaning too far over into a sort of inverted imperialism. However, as Baraka sets up his somewhat reductive rhetoric, he also undermines it. First of all, though the reader can distill a somewhat concise image of Baraka's Evil "who", ultimately, the poem does not move beyond the act of questioning, never providing definite answers. In the end, it is this continued act of questioning or probing into instances of violence and/or (perceived) injustice which constitutes the subversive force of the poem, not its implied answers. What is more, Baraka's poem "expos[es] its own rhetorical excesses" even as it installs them (Gery 174). Throughout, Baraka uses the word "who" 200 times, leading to an overpowering "accumulative aural effect" subsuming all the individual "who's" in one terrifying, overarching (overtly white, imperialist) WHO, which, like the terrorist "Them" represents a sort of Infinite Evil. However, this accumulation of "who's" also reflects back on the speaker performing the inquiry. Mixing up factual remarks with shockingly paranoid, unsubstantiated expressions ("Who invented Aids"; "Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed / Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers / To stay home that day"), Baraka's poem "reproduce[s] the many uncertainties, questions, 'facts' and rumors that were launched into a cultural climate dominated by fear, suspicion, anger, and conspiracy theories, which arose as part of the frantic attempt to identify the 'somebody' who 'blew up America'" (Roza 111). What Baraka's poem ultimately does is let its angry and aggressive rhetoric implode unto itself; at the end of the poem, the speaker's continued inquiry into the "who" of evil betrays its own inefficacy, becoming like the "whistle of a crazy dog", like an "owl exploding / in your life in your brain in your self". As Philip Metres argues, in Baraka's poem, the "desire to place all the blame on a singular 'Somebody' dramatizes the weakness of a totalizing critique of empire" and the "comic-gothic, looney-bird ending ['Who and who and WHO (+) who who ^ / Whoooo and Whooooooooooooooooooooo!'] actually "suggests the dangers of the slippery thinking of conspiracy theories, even as it revels in it" ("Beyond Grief and Grievance"). "Somebody Blew up America", then, not only harshly and confrontationally critiques hegemonic forms of injustice, but simultaneously also points to the danger of letting oneself get carried away by any overarching, apocalyptic vision of absolute Evil. The poem's excessive rhetoric is deliberately excessive, functioning as a negative symptom of a society panic-stricken by simplistic visions of Good and Evil.

### **The Reception of Amiri Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America"**

Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America", I argue, has all the ingredients of the successful protest poem. With its mix of brutal honesty and shocking aggressiveness

(an aggressiveness mirrored in Baraka's performance; his use of a loud and angry voice), and its ability to walk the fine line between indecent speech and nuanced critique, the poem seems bound to draw people's attention and get them thinking. Partly, this is indeed what happened after the controversy around "Somebody Blew Up America" arose. However, the full potential that the poem offered for making people look critically at their own national practices was suppressed in the same instance that it was controversially activated, as Baraka didn't speak with the "naturally" ethical, safely marginal voice expected of and lauded in the quintessential Poet. After having read "Somebody Blew Up America" at the 2002 Geraldine R. Dodge Festival, Baraka stirred up debate for two reasons: (1) people believed he had expressed anti-Semitic sentiments and (2) he had done so from a state position. Both of these critiques, I would like to argue, point to underlying belief systems about the nature of poetry and the permissible power of the poet. In the sections to come, I will expand on how both these critiques and their underlying belief systems limited the textual/performative power of protest latent in Baraka's poem.

#### *Baraka and anti-Semitism*

The lines of "Somebody Blew Up America" which led to allegations of anti-Semitism are the following 4 lines of Baraka's 236-line poem: "Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed / who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers / To stay home that day / Why did Sharon stay away". Interpreting the poem's reference to the then-circulating conspiracy theory that the Israeli government had pre-knowledge of 9/11 as being a not so subtle attack on the Jewish people, many US citizens (both high-profile and low-profile) publicly condemned the poem, for example characterizing it as a "maniacal litany" written by a "Jew-bashing" non-artist (Connerly, *Washington Post*) or as a "puerile, racist, semiliterate rant" (poster on [Indybay.org](http://Indybay.org)<sup>32</sup>). However, the vision of "Somebody Blew Up America" as an inherently anti-Semitic text stems from a coarse misreading of the poem. Perceived *as* poem (i.e. as a semantically and rhetorically complex text, not as a straightforward, rational argument) "Somebody Blew Up America" proves nothing in the way of either anti-Semitism or anti-Zionism. Showing concern for the injustices done to Jewish people ("Who put the Jews in ovens"; "who murdered the Rosenbergs"), and *appropriating* (not merely installing), conspiracy thinking so as to point out the post-9/11 paranoia emerging "out of a fantasy of governmental power

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<sup>32</sup> I use [Indybay.org](http://Indybay.org) (site of the San Francisco Bay Area Independent Media Centre) as an indicator for the public's response to "Somebody Blew Up America", as it harbours one of the biggest discussions on Baraka's poem that I could find on the internet, and as it seems to be less biased than some of the other forums referring to the poem, such as [Assatashakur.org](http://Assatashakur.org) (Assata Shakur is an African-American activist and former member of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army) and [beatroot.tribe.net](http://beatroot.tribe.net) (a platform wholly focussed on discussing Beat culture, to which Baraka is often linked).

and out of Manichean binaries of absolute evil and absolute good" (*Metres Behind the Lines* 221), the poem contains no evidence for the accusations made against it. The problem is, however, that Baraka's poem *was* overwhelmingly treated as a straightforward, argumentative text.<sup>33</sup> Following the poem's condemnation by the influential ADL - an organization often critiqued for covering up its pro-Israeli interests under the banner of a supposed "fight against anti-Semitism"<sup>34</sup> - "Somebody Blew Up America" became widely discredited in American society. Major newspapers started to denounce the poem, brushing it aside as an "act of sordid politics" (Rutten, *LA Times*), an "anti-Semitic Bleat" (Cohen, *Washington Post*) and a "hateful anti-Israel myth" (editorial board *New York Times*)<sup>35</sup>. What is more, also among the general US public, Baraka and his poem started to be negatively evaluated. To exemplify: when Baraka was invited to speak at Yale University some months after his controversy, this caused discontent among the student body, with 61% proclaiming that "Baraka should not have been invited to campus" (poll held by *Yale Daily News*, qtd. in Johnson). Neither the ADL, nor the media, nor the general public thus seem to have been able to look beyond the four perceivably anti-Semitic lines of "Somebody Blew Up America", disregarding the rest of the poem and its poetic-political intentions. As Roza argues, "in demanding that the poem tell 'the truth' about 9/11, the poem was reduced to a factual statement, one on a par with the news" (112). In effect, the artistic and rhetorical complexity of "Somebody Blew Up America" was lost.

As becomes clear from the public condemnations of "Somebody Blew Up America", people measured Baraka's poem against the popular, "transcendental", view of poetry as essentially virtuous and truthful (and in effect thus also as factual, rational). The problem seems not only to have been that Baraka gave expression to a widely disreputed conspiracy theory, but also that he had done so *in poetry*. Baraka had spoken with "false, inflammatory words" and had spread "lies" (Koch; Stern, qtd. in Purdy); something not expected of "the Poet". As one blogger tellingly

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<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that Amiri Baraka himself fueled the fire, as later, in his article "the ADL Smear Campaign Against Me I Will Not Resign, I Will Not Apologize", he expressed his belief in the conspiracy theory that the Israeli government had pre-knowledge of the al-Qaeda attack. As Philip Metres points out, "rather than arguing that the poem is the dramatized utterance of a suppressed but valuable point of view, Baraka assert[ed] his absolute identification with the poem's rhetoric" (*Behind the Lines* 221).

<sup>34</sup> Noam Chomsky, for example, has stated the following about the Anti-Defamation League: "The ADL has virtually abandoned its earlier role as a civil rights organization, becoming 'one of the main pillars' of Israeli propaganda in the U.S., as the Israeli press casually describes it, engaged in surveillance, blacklisting, compilation of FBI-style files circulated to adherents for the purpose of defamation, angry public responses to criticism of Israeli actions, and so on. These efforts, buttressed by insinuations of anti-Semitism or direct accusations, are intended to deflect or undermine opposition to Israeli policies . . ." (434).

<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that many (but not all) of the negative newspaper articles on "Somebody Blew Up America" were written by Jewish reporters, indicating that the public representation of the poem was for a large part determined by the Jewish community.

remarks, “Poetic license should not absolve Baraka, who professes to use poetry to make provocative social and political statements. *If that’s the ethical purpose of his poetry, he has an obligation to motivate people through truth, not lies.*” (my italics).<sup>36</sup> Since “Somebody Blew Up America” did not fit in with the popular image of poetry as morally good and honest, many readers were unable to push through Baraka’s harsh and aggressive rhetoric to get to the general social and political message of the poem.<sup>37</sup> It seems that, failing to understand the mechanisms of the deliberately extreme rhetoric/speech of a (performance) poem “aimed to probe and disturb” (Baraka “ADL Smear Campaign”), the American public was generally incapable of seeing “Somebody Blew Up America” for anything else than an extreme ideological statement.<sup>38</sup> In the media, Baraka’s poem was recurrently devalued *as poem*. *National Review* reporter John Derbyshire, for example, dismisses “Somebody Blew Up America” because it doesn’t fit the criteria of poetry as something that “must rhyme, scan and make sense”. Unable to grasp the rhetorical purpose of Baraka’s continued inquiry in the who’s of evil (“Who is this exploding owl? Where did he fly in from? Could this be some sort of typo?”), the overall message of Baraka’s poem seems to have been completely lost on him. Ward Connerly, chairman of the American Civil Rights Institute, also attacked “Somebody Blew Up America” on artistic grounds in the *Washington Post*, claiming that “artistic standards must be *civilized*” (my italics). Less high-profile readers, moreover, often responded in a likewise manner. One poster on a 2002 forum on Indybay.org, for example, retorted to Baraka: “Who smoke crack and write terrible poetry /lies in ‘poetry’ / Who/Who/Who”. Another one similarly remarked: “who say this is poetry? / Elsworth Toohey?/ Who cannot distinguish literature from crap is condemned to eat it”.

Intriguingly, even those in support of Baraka failed to grasp the underlying aim of his poem, offering “lukewarm support of his right to free speech” where they should have attempted at clarifying the poem’s poetic-rhetorical intentions (Gwiazda 481). Fellow poet Robert Pinsky, for example, argued that “The poet laureate of New Jersey has the same right as any other American to make a fool of

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<sup>36</sup> See: Ismael Ricardo Archbold. “Revisiting Baraka’s ‘Somebody Blew Up America.’” 12 Feb. 2005. Web. 27 June 2013. < <http://archbold.blogspot.nl/2005/02/revisiting-barakas-somebody-blew-up.html>>

<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, Baraka himself also adheres to the vision of poetry as ethical and truthful, and places his own poetry within this tradition. As he writes at the end of “The ADL Smear Campaign Against Me”: “. . . we feel that this state and indeed this nation and this world is desperately in need of the deepest and most profound human values that poetry can teach. That is what Keats and Du Bois called for the poet to do, to bring Truth and Beauty. To be like the most ancient paradigm mythic image of the poet. To be like Osiris and Orpheus, whose job it was to raise the Sun each morning with song and story. To illuminate the human mind, and bring light into the world. POET ON!”

<sup>38</sup> Apparently, Amiri Baraka’s performance style also had something to do with the poem’s condemnation. According to Büscher-Ulbrich, part of the reason why “Somebody Blew Up America” ultimately led to controversy is because of Baraka’s aggressive stage performance (referred to in Novak).

himself" (qtd. in Rutten). Likewise, Laura McCullough and Michael Broek, in the *Star-Ledger*, contended that "we may find the poem [Somebody Blew Up America] problematic, may even find it lacking in literary craft, but we must support artists' right to free speech". It seems that, given the anti-Semitic claims directed at Baraka, not many people felt the need to either support or take seriously the broader social and political critique voiced in Baraka's poem. Focussing solely on the four lines of "Somebody Blew Up America" assumed to contain anti-Semitic content, the poem's overarching attempt to call into question the dominant vision of American righteousness was largely disregarded. Instead of using Baraka's text as a way of probing into the American consciousness, it was discarded as rubbish, as "hate speech" (Gwiazda 461). The anti-Defamation League even went so far as to designate Baraka's poem as being "anti-American", and as such (despite the poem's obvious condemnation of violence) as being automatically in support of terrorism. In their letter to Governor McGreevey, the ADL wrote: "We know you as Governor of the state of New Jersey do not agree nor support the anti-American hostility, tied to the terrorist attack on America, expressed in the poem". By playing the enemy-of-the-country card, the ADL set out to diffuse the counter-political potential of "Somebody Blew Up America", something which it, given the poem's "almost universal condemnation" (Gwiazda 461), seems to have succeeded in.

As a rhetorically and artistically complex poem, "Somebody Blew Up America" was ultimately unable to exert its latent political power. Ironically, due to the angry and confrontational nature of Baraka's protest poem, his act of protest was not taken seriously by the media, and subsequently also not by the general American public. Since many people still held reductive views of poetry as essentially ethical and truthful, Baraka's poem aimed to "probe and disturb" was experienced by many to be offensive, not stimulating. In the end, it was thus largely in the extra-poetic effect of the stirred up debate over the right to freedom of speech and the right to proclaim non-official narratives of 9/11 that Baraka's poem functioned as a valuable tool for protest, not in any artistic sense.

#### *Baraka as Poet Laureate*

In the section above, I have discussed the strong public reaction to Baraka's perceived anti-Semitism. However, as I will come to argue, this strong public reaction was not necessarily focused on Baraka's perceived anti-Semitism as such, but on his expression of anti-Semitic views from within a position of *discerned power*. Baraka had already written "Somebody Blew Up America" in October 2001 (Santora), and had performed with the poem from then onwards without much cultural notice. National commotion didn't arise until a month after Baraka was selected as poet laureate of New Jersey. In many newspapers discussing the matter of Baraka's right to freedom of speech, the argument is made that Baraka has the

right to say anything he wants as a person and poet (apparently also things perceived to be discriminating), but not as a “spokesperson of the state”. Ed Koch, for example, in his *Bloomberg Radio* commentary, argues that if Baraka had made anti-Semitic remarks as a “private citizen” it “would have been evil but it would have been his right. But he does it as poet laureate of New Jersey, to which he was nominated by a committee and confirmed by New Jersey Governor James McGreevey”. Also McGreevey himself has given expression to this view: “What was particularly disconcerting, the designation of poet laureate granted an aspect of official recognition or an imprimatur to his poetry. And the statements were patently false and clearly the state needed to clearly and unequivocally reject them” (qtd. in Clough).

What is interesting about the argument stated above is that the post of poet laureate is discussed here as being an official state post, whereas it is actually an honorary position meant to “promote and encourage poetry” (Senator Garry Furnari, qtd. in Clough) and to give cultural visibility to the poet holding the post. As Robert Pinsky has remarked, “Poet laureate does not entitle one to anything or oblige one to anything. It is like being given a compliment” (qtd. in Rutten). The poet laureate has no responsibilities whatsoever, other than to bring his poetry to the public, which is exactly what Baraka did. The problem, then, does not so much seem to have been that Baraka spoke from an official government position (which he didn’t), but that the usually marginal and harmless voice of the poet had suddenly gained authority. It should be noted that an important contributory factor in the selection of Baraka as poet laureate had been his minority status. Gerald Stern, New Jersey’s first poet laureate and member of the selection committee, has admitted that he pushed for Baraka because he “thought it was important for the black community to get recognition” (qtd. in Purdy). The position of poet laureate was thus filled with an emancipatory ideal in mind; promoting Baraka meant giving a socially and culturally marginal group a voice. However, when the supposedly marginal voice of Baraka suddenly became a (perceivably) authoritative one, the emancipatory potential of the poet laureate position wasn’t appreciated anymore, and Baraka’s voice was smothered.

Not only by voicing his antagonistic critique, but later also by refusing to resign from the post of poet laureate, Baraka claimed a power for the poet which was considered to be inappropriate. This is very clearly expressed in the *LA Times* article “Poetry May Outlast these Laureates’ Woes”, in which journalist Tim Rutten makes a comparison between Quincy Troupe, a former poet laureate of California who had to resign from his post because he had lied on his resume about having a university degree, and Amiri Baraka. Rutten juxtaposes Troupe and Baraka on the basis of their respective morality, pronouncing Troupe as the clear winner. Whereas Troupe had resigned “voluntarily and at his own initiative”, and was thus not such a bad guy,

Baraka was deemed to be “another matter entirely”. Giving an outline of the “entirely different attitudes” taken on by Troupe and Baraka during their respective controversies, Rutten lauds Troupe for his humble response, and vilifies Baraka for his reactionary one. The poet then, both politicians and the media implicitly seem to put forth, has the right to voice dissent, but *only* when (s)he does so from a marginal, humble, and inconsequential social position. This same idea, I will come to argue, is also made visible through PAW’s poetic content and reception.

### **Poets Against the War**

Since it is impossible to say something about all of the 13,000 or so poems submitted to poetsagainstthewar.org, and since most of these poems are no longer digitally available, I will limit my discussion of the poetic content of PAW to those poems that have been included in the published anthology of the same name. *Poets Against the War* is composed of both poems and statements of conscience, 262 in total, which have been alphabetically ordered according to author. The collection is deliberately democratic, containing both professional and amateur poets, and representing poets from a range of different races, ethnicities and ages (the youngest person in the collection is 6, the oldest 97). The anthology is prefaced by Sam Hamill, the main editor of the book and, as has been previously stated, the initiator of the Poets Against the War movement.

In his preface to *Poets Against the War*, Sam Hamill writes that poetry is “born in the act of questioning”. He then continues: “Since poets write in the same language politicians are given to abuse, in the language of everyday common speech, they must struggle to reveal *clarity* by way of musical and imagistic expression, and by *transparency* of emotion” (xx, my italics). Hamill, then, like many of the poets and scholars discussed in chapter 2, adheres to a vision of poetry as verbally purifying, and optimistically presents his collection as forming a counterweight to the reductive speech employed by the Bush administration. However, as Thomas Fischer rightfully remarks, “whether or not Hamill’s editorial manifesto accurately represents the diverse and inclusive range of poetry in the anthology and on the various websites is arguable”, arguable at best (987). Though it is obvious that all of the poets included in the collection aim at countering the US government and the language it deployed, and in some instances also succeed in doing so, as a whole the collection unwittingly ends up supporting the rhetoric which it aims to defuse, thus not being able to deliver its promised protest.

One of the main handicaps of *Poets Against the War* is that the assumptions underlying many of the collection’s texts ultimately “undercut their stated objective” (Brink 14). First of all, most of the anthology’s individual poems, and also the anthology as a whole, reiterate what Brinks refers to as the “ideological framing of the invasion and occupation of Iraq as a war...and 9/11 as the cause of the war” (14).

As Lakoff points out<sup>39</sup>, after 9/11, the Bush administration installed the rhetoric of the “War on Terror” so as to create consensus for the US’s invasion of Afghanistan. Calling upon (what Lakoff refers to as) the “metaphor” of war, with its dominant connotation of inter-national conflict, the Bush administration was able to sell its attack on a specific country and its people as just, even though the US’s designated enemy was actually a globally scattered, largely unknown, unclearly demarcated terrorist organization. Later, Lakoff contends, the “war metaphor” also enabled the US government to justify the “war” in Iraq morally, as it was able to sell the actually unprovoked invasion of Iraq to its citizens as being a defensive measure taken against a global “Terror” expressed in, and set in motion by, the events of 9/11.

*Poets Against the War*, though raising moral questions concerning the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq, ultimately fails to penetrate to the core of the problem; that is, it fails to cut through the rhetoric which enabled the Bush administration to justify its unprovoked invasion of Iraq as war. Bearing such titles as “War Breaks Out Again”, “Poem of War”, “Wartime radio”, “American Wars”, “The Poem in Time of War”, “Trying to Write a Poem Against the War” and “After the Anti-war March”, many of the poems in Hamill’s collection unconsciously, connotatively supported the idea that the looming Iraq “war” was indeed a bilateral conflict and not an unprovoked, pre-emptive strike based on the unsupported claim that Iraq harbored weapons of mass destruction. What is more, with the anthology including poems which directly address the September 11 attacks and/or have also been incorporated in earlier 9/11 poetry collections (e.g. Martin Espada’s “Alabanza: in Praise of Local 100”, included in *Poetry After 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets* (2002) and Tess Gallagher’s “I Have Never Wanted to March”, included in *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*, (2002)), *Poets Against the War* reinforces the false proposition that the Iraq “war” was part of the US’s general defense against terrorist evil.

Secondly, besides unwittingly reinforcing the Bush administration’s “war metaphor”, *Poets Against the War* also winds up unconsciously supporting the US government’s logic of Us vs. Them. Though attempting to undermine this logic by laying a strong focus on America’s moral responsibility towards the foreign other, *Poets Against the War* ultimately does not manage to truly move beyond it. Employing the same narrative of Good versus Evil that the Bush administration employs, albeit now from a different perspective, the US’s dominant post-9/11 rhetoric is only superficially attacked. This is most clearly expressed through the collection’s recurrent use of the “figure of the child” (Franke 242). Aiming to clearly bring into view the immorality and inhumaneness of the Bush administration’s

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<sup>39</sup> See: George Lakoff and Evan Frisch, “Five Years After 9/11: Drop the War Metaphor.” Common Dreams. 11 September 2006. Web. 23 June, 2013. < <http://www.commondreams.org/views06/0911-20.htm>>



proposed attack, many of the poets included in the anthology sentimentally foreground the fact that *innocent* children (with "innocent" and "children" being used as interchangeable) will be harmed and killed. Pamela Hill, for example, writes: "I'm sorry your mom was killed / when a missile struck your home / you were only three, and innocent". Maxime Kumin, relates: "Nowhere, reruns / of the bombing in Vietnam / 2 million civilians blown / apart, most of them children / under 16 . . ." Tess Gallagher, furthermore, speaks of the war-child's "ever-squandered innocence". Using the figure of the child, many of the poets included in Hamill's anthology call upon the fantasy of what Astrid Franke calls the "moral purity of the sufferer" (242). In *Poets Against the War*, the (perceived to be) essentially innocent child becomes an emblem of the essential innocence and innate goodness of the suffering Iraqi people as a whole, portraying the US's attack on Iraq as an attack on moral purity as such. The US and its government, by default, come to be perceived as wholly Evil, as is also made clear through the anthologized poets' speech. Hayden Carruth, for example, refers to Bush as a "tyrant"; Willis Barnstone likewise calls him a "barbarian". Merely inverting the Manichean opposition employed by the Bush administration, not subverting it, the poetry in Hamill's anthology forecloses on the possibility of nuanced, political debate. Reproducing the Good vs. Evil binary that lay at the base of the US's justification of the Iraq invasion, *Poets Against the War* only in a very limited way enables its readers to take on a meaningful stance of protest.

Besides undermining its own aim of voicing successful protest by reiterating certain ground assumptions of the Bush administration's rhetoric, Hamill's anthology also undermines this aim by taking on a position of helplessness and powerlessness. According to Astrid Franke, many protest poems written in the wake of 9/11 "register tremendous doubts about the power of both poetry and social action". "In a predominantly elegiac mood", she argues, "they convey a sense of loss of individual agency in a complex, global network of political relations" (5). This notion of the loss of individual agency is broadly portrayed in *Poets Against the War*. First of all, many of the poets included in the anthology draw attention to their own social and geographical distance from the people in war areas, thereby taking on a stance of political detachment instead of engagement. A recurring theme in the collection, for example, is that of looking at /seeing violence. Joe Peckham, for example, writes: "I think of the photographs on CNN - gaunt Afghans, Palestinians. Kids - staring out the bombed-out shells / of their bodies". Patricia Monaghan, likewise, describing a "woman from Baghdad", states: "I can see her through the blue / glow of the news . . ." Instead of presenting themselves as social actors speaking out against the US's foreign aggression, the poets in Hamill's anthology overwhelmingly foreground themselves as the passive onlookers of a distant violence that they cannot control. Atrocity only reaches the American poets through

mediation; only known to them as video and photograph representations, the poets can't do anything but watch it in horror. Elisabeth Hallett's poem is exemplary in this respect, as she even goes so far as to represent herself as mediator: ". . .the sadness of children / saturates this film I am, silvery emulsion / that registers too much, too little." The poets of Hamill's anthology, then, though wanting to protest the invasion of Iraq, ultimately get stuck in their own feelings of helplessness, and fail to represent the looming invasion of Iraq as anything else than an uncontrollable, physically distant event.

Focussing so strongly on their own feelings of helplessness and abhorrence, many of the poets writing against the war lose sight of the war's real victims. As Philip Metres argues, the poems in Hamill's anthology too heavily "rely upon a kind of privileged distance from conflict - and too frequently wallow in impotent sensitivity" (*Behind the Lines* 224). With the poems' predominant use of the autobiographical lyric format, *Poets Against the War* ends up portraying the invasion of Iraq as something that will be particularly hard on the *American* people. When Holly Thomas writes: "I don't know you, child. / I've never seen your country / or spoken your tongue. / But I see you burning / like an oil-soaked rag", attention indeliberately goes out to the (safely removed) person doing the gazing, and to the horror of having to watch such a gruesome scene. Pity, then, is redirected from the victims to the enactors of violence, and the Iraq war becomes something that is, to quote poet Joan Aleshire, "forced upon us"; that is, the citizens of the US, not those of Iraq.

*Poets Against the War* overwhelmingly represents the impending Iraq war as an inevitability. Instead of trying to stop the invasion, something which one might expect from a self-proclaimed protest anthology, the collection as a whole expresses a sense of resignation. Containing such lines as "War breaks out again" (Penelope Austin), "this will be the final / war" (Frank Judge) and "the war is ours, now, here . . ." (Ursula K. Le Guin), the poems in Hamill's anthology already unquestioningly accept the premise that the Iraq war will indeed take place. Adhering to Seamus Heaney's famous dictum that "no lyric has ever stopped a tank" (107), most of those included in Hamill's collection lament the inconsequentiality of poetic protest in the very act of offering it. Geoff Brock, for example, contends that "if there comes a dissenting voice, / a cautious word / whispered or shouted, it isn't heard" and Elizabeth Austen asks herself, "Why persist, scratching across the white field, / row after row? . . . / Nothing changes, no one is saved." Believing that the "power of the powerful will not falter" (Wade, *Poets Against the War*), many of the poets in the collection undermine the political value of their own (perceived to be) marginal poetry. However, by doing so, these poets not only weaken their own position of protest, they also (again!) unwittingly support the rhetoric of the Bush administration, which, like the poets opposing it, publicly represented the Iraq war

as unavoidable and as unwished for. "The American people can know that every measure has been taken to avoid war . . .", stated Bush in his 2003 "War Ultimatum Speech". He then continued, "Americans understand the costs of conflict because we have paid them in the past. War has no certainty, except the certainty of sacrifice." Arguing that the US did not want, but *had* to invade Iraq for humanitarian reasons (i.e. to prevent the American nation from "drifting along toward tragedy" and to "liberate" the Iraqi people from their "tyrant"), the Bush administration was able to sketch a picture of the invasion of Iraq as unavoidable yet deplorable. *Poets Against the War*, then, which generally adhered to a similar narrative of unavoidability and deplorability, failed to truly and forcefully speak up against the invasion of Iraq and to the reductive rhetoric which enabled it.

### **The Reception of Poets Against the War**

In the section above, I have tried to show that the PAW movement, though aiming to protest the invasion of Iraq and lay bare the language "abuse" of politicians by way of poetic "clarity" and "transparency" (Hamill xx), was ultimately unable to move beyond the mere act of lamenting, and ended up reiterating a lot of the political language that it had wanted to defuse. Textually speaking, PAW was thus less apt at voicing protest than the more angry, confrontational and undermining poem "Somebody Blew Up America". However, the media responses to PAW were much more positive than the media responses to Amiri Baraka, and as an act of protest, the PAW movement thus gained much wider recognition. Though PAW had initially caused controversy when planning on reading anti-war poems during Laura Bush's symposium on "Poetry and the American voice" (the perceived danger probably again being that speaking at a government platform would give the poets official recognition/power), the movement as a whole (as it manifested itself on the internet, in its published anthology and in its public readings) was largely positively received. Though some negative voices could be heard in the media (Leonard Garment, in the opinion section of the *New York Times* for example called PAW "bad behavior" and J. Bottum, in the *Weekly Standard* argued that PAW showed "Vietnam envy, gleeful adolescent ill-manners, and straightforward political partisanship"), the general media response was favorable. Though the poetic protest of PAW was textually rather soft, journalists covering the movement described it in exaggeratingly forceful terms, reporting on it under such headings as "Poetry slams into Politics at White House", "Seeking Poetic Justice" and "Poets Pit Pens Against Swords" (Brodeur, *Seattle Times*; Tizon, *LA Times*; Arnold, *NY Times*). Furthermore, through the media's quoting of those associated with the movement, a skewed picture of the poetry's protesting power was created. Hamill, for example, is referenced in the *New York Times* as saying that "poets have become the conscience of [American] culture" and that "protest has always been the role of the poets" (Arnold). Marcy Kaptur (one of

the representatives of Congress who accepted the digital anthology of PAW) is likewise reported as stating in the *Baltimore Sun*: "The words of these poets are piercing enough to cut through some of the Washingtonese, or language of policy, and address the fundamentals. . . They're giving us a very sober message, one that needs to be heard." (Knight).

In contrast to Amiri Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America", then, PAW was largely legitimated by the media as an instance of (successful) protest. However, as I will come to argue, it was legitimated *only* as a particularly inoffensive (and thereby ultimately ineffective) type of protest. First of all, it should be noted that many of the news articles reporting on PAW place a greater focus on the increased cultural visibility of poetry as a result of the movement than on the movement's actual political message. "This is the largest assembly of poets ever to speak in all of recorded history", Hamill is proudly recorded as saying in the *Seattle Post* (McGann). *Publisher's Weekly*, similarly, reports Zachary Marcus (Northshire Bookstore marketing director) as arguing that "poetry hasn't had this much attention in America for 100 years", and poet Galway Kinnell as retorting: "poetry has never had this much attention in America." (Nawotka). What was newsworthy about PAW is that it put poetry "back on the map", not necessarily that it aimed at voicing protest. As Philip Metres points out, though the movement itself (i.e. its "history", scope etc.) is clearly mapped, "what remains less well defined is how the PAW project is connected to political activism." "The occasionally self-congratulatory tone of the PAW project", Metres continues, "leads one to question: should an antiwar poetry anthology just instigate more poetry readings?" (*Behind the Lines* 225). Indeed, with the poets of PAW (and the media quoting them) largely explaining the success of the movement in terms of its PR achievements, not its political achievements, PAW's initially central aim of protest became peripheral; became an ancillary, add-on element to a movement now portrayed as existing for poetry's cultural enhancement. What is more, with the media placing such a strong emphasis on the sudden cultural visibility of poetry, the medium's usual marginality was actually accentuated, thus attenuating the protesting power of PAW even as it was installed.

To the extent that poets and the media did focus on PAW as a movement of protest, PAW was represented as being a decidedly ethical response to the invasion of Iraq. Stanley Kunitz related to *CBS News* that the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq was "contrary to the humanitarian position that is at the center of the poetic impulse" and Lawrence Ferlinghetti argued that "the poet by definition is the bearer of freedom and love" (qtd. in Walsh). Alice Quinn (then poetry editor of the *New Yorker*) was likewise quoted in *Publishers Weekly* as stating that the anti-war poetry produced had "answer[ed] the highest obligation of poetry; to wake people up to life in its fullest terms." (Nawotka). However, speaking of poetry in these glorifying terms, PAW unconsciously undermined its own oppositional purpose. By

depicting poetry as an elevated medium of “freedom” and “love”, PAW, via its media portrayal, took the sting out of its own protest. In contrast to Amiri Baraka, who had claimed a socially unacceptable role for himself and for his poetry (i.e. to forcefully attack the US government and to shock and confront the public), PAW, both in its peaceful public manifestation and in its feeble poetic content, remained safely within the bounds of what was expected of and valued in poetry; namely that it speak humanely and truthfully, or, more accurately (as the controversy around “Somebody Blew Up America” points out), decently and harmlessly. As such, the movement never truly became antagonistic.

The main shortcoming of PAW as a movement of protest is that its supposedly “ethical” response to the invasion of Iraq was not necessarily incompatible with the dominant American pro-war position. As pro-war editor of the *New Republic*, Leon Wieseltier, tellingly remarked: “It’s the role of the poets to suggest that war is a bad idea, the role of the president to say war is a bad idea but necessary. It’s the role of the poets to speak truth to power, and the role of power to welcome truth” (qtd. in Bottum). Problematically, the humanitarian critique of war voiced by PAW is one that it is difficult to find opponents of; the messages presented to the public by PAW (i.e. killing innocent people is wrong, we wish we weren’t forced to go to war) are messages that all US citizens could potentially relate to. As Jeffrey Gray argues, “As with politicians’ ‘Save the Children’ campaigns, who will disagree with the choices of children over bombs, or orioles over bombs? . . . The problem with the poems is not that they are “engaged” but that we are offered a world tout connu. Nothing is defamiliarized” (267). Since none of the ground assumptions underlying the US’s pro-war arguments were undermined by PAW, and since the movement’s overarching point of critique (“war/killing is horrible”) was already shared by anti- and pro-war citizens alike, it seems unlikely that PAW had a great persuasive and disruptive power over those holding pro-war beliefs.

Voicing a safe (and largely agreed upon) critique of the invasion of Iraq, PAW posed no danger for the American status quo. Never becoming truly conflictual or polemical, PAW was promoted by the media as an “ethical” voice of protest; a protest indicating that the American people were engaged enough to *care* about having to “go to war”, yet not threatening enough to truly place anything in the way of this war happening. It should be noted that, though PAW had initially, somewhat controversially, claimed power by planning to read protest poetry at an official White House event, once the event was cancelled, the poets immediately retreated to less authoritative, more marginal routes of information spreading, posting their poetry on a demarcated website established particularly for this purpose, and reciting their poetry at protest readings largely attended by a “self-selected”

audience.<sup>40</sup> As such, PAW unproblematically molded itself to the dominant vision of the poet as a marginal and insignificant social figure; a vision also already expressed in the poetic content of the movement. Though I do not want to downplay the cultural importance of PAW – the movement quickly reached a lot of people and enabled those opposing the war to speak up and assemble themselves in a counterpublic – as a form of *protest*, meant to persuade both the converted and unconverted to participate in actual acts of resistance, PAW ultimately fell short. Foregrounding its social success over its political success, and claiming only a peaceful, non-conflicting, non-powerful role for itself, the movement could only limitedly establish a change of consciousness in its adversaries.

### **The Politics of Poetic Protest**

In this chapter I argued that, though poetry functioned as a medium of protest in the post-9/11 period, the nature and scope of this protest was circumscribed by politicians and the media. Amiri Baraka's protest poem "Somebody Blew Up America" was vilified by media reporters and politicians because neither the poem nor its author fitted in with the popular image of poetry/the poet as naturally virtuous and safely marginal. Speaking with a strong, angry and aggressive voice, and continuing to claim a position of power even when this power was politically denied, Baraka defied the "rules" of poetry, and was shot down for it. PAW, in contrast, which largely spoke with the expected and valued voice of poetry (i.e. with a powerless, marginal and "ethical" – that is, decent, uncontroversial - voice), was largely legitimated by the media. PAW was only firmly oppositional when it had aimed at disrupting Laura Bush's literary event. The protest offered afterwards, however, was largely societally accepted as this protest never truly undermined the political status quo. Paradoxically, then, it seems that poetic protest was only given weight in the post-9/11 US when this protest wasn't really protest at all; when it was harmless, unfrontational. Though both Baraka and PAW reached a national audience and thus may have at least influenced some of the "uncommitted" (if only because these poetry movements stirred up debate in a consensus-driven society), the full potential of poetic protest wasn't reached by either of them, as "Somebody Blew Up America" was externally undermined and PAW was internally undermined. The political influence of poetry, then, at least as was evidenced in the wake of 9/11, seems to have largely played itself out on the level of the local, not the national.

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<sup>40</sup> See Nawotka, Ed. "Resist Much, Obey Little." *Publishers Weekly*. 24 Feb. 2003. Web. 27 June 2013. <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/print/20030224/30545-resist-much-obey-little.html>>

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have tried to gain insight into the socio-political workings of (post-) 9/11 poetry. In chapter 1 I focused on the initial democratic poetic response to 9/11: the circulation of Auden's "September 1, 1939" and the massive posting on poetry.com. I have argued that these poetic practices helped create communities of comfort, but did so in a way that was ideologically charged, giving support to and reinforcing a simplistic, one-sided vision of American-ness that excluded other ways of imagining this category. In chapter 2, I explored the poetic reaction to 9/11 and its aftermath as it was produced and consumed within the academy. I advanced the idea that this poetic reaction was for a large part aimed at making visible and undermining the (patriotic) rhetoric of the Bush administration and, as a result of this, offered the possibility for re-imagining the American community in a more inclusive way. In chapter 3, I examined the poetic response of the poetry slam scene to 9/11, arguing that this poetic response, like that of the academy, re-figured the dominant notion of *the* American community; in this case via the performance and celebration of marginal American identities and the creation of American counterpublics. In chapter 4, I studied two instances of protest poetry which caused controversy and received national news coverage, contending that, though these protest poetries managed briefly to open up national debate in a consensus-focused society, neither of them became truly oppositional, as the only form of poetic protest allowed for in the US' dominant post-9-11 society was one of safe marginality.

First of all, what these discussed poetic practices show is that there was no *one* homogenous poetic response to 9/11. In the aftermath of the attack, there were many different types of poetry produced, which were distributed and/or made visible via different routes (e.g. the internet, paper publication, performance, news coverage etc.), which reached different audiences (e.g. academic, slam and national audiences), and which related to political issues in different ways (e.g. politically affirmative, rhetorically undermining, politically substitutive, or aggressively opposing). As such, we cannot really speak of *the* socio-politics of poetry; the medium spoke differently to different people, offering and enabling a wide range of responses to (the aftermath of) 9/11. Nevertheless, I would like to argue, the diverse poetic practices under discussion together do enable us to draw some general conclusions about the specific role that poetry performed in the first decade after the September 11 attack. In a climate in which a reductive mnemonic discourse of 9/11 prevailed – a mnemonic discourse which was from the start strongly ideologically charged, causing a narrowly defined national identity to arise and an aggressive foreign policy to be uncontentiously accepted – poetry enabled small-scale social dissent. In contrast to the Romantic vision of poetry as a highly individualistic medium, the poetic responses to 9/11 all indicate that poetry actually performs, or

can actually perform, an important social (or socio-political) role. In the wake of the attack, engagement with 9/11 (-related) poetry made it possible for US citizens -via (1) the community-focused content of the poetry and (2) the easiness of this poetry's distribution and sharing - to create particular national identities for themselves and to become part of, or envision themselves as being part of, particular political communities. As the circulation of Auden and the massive posting on poetry.com show, the medium of poetry was sometimes used to create affirmative political alliances. In most cases, however, poetry performed (or at least aimed to perform) a politically subversive function, undermining the hegemonic narrative of 9/11 and enabling US citizens to voice dissenting beliefs and/or align themselves to American counterpublics.

I contend that poetry's medium-specific worth in the first ten years after 9/11 resided in its ability to *envision* alternative political communities and in its ability to *create* these alternative political communities (or counterpublics) in real life, on a small, local scale. Though poetry has moved (back) into the public sphere in recent times, thereby enhancing its cultural visibility, I argue that the medium doesn't have the recognition needed for influencing political beliefs and/or ideological assumptions on a national level, at least not within a short time frame. As has been argued, the politico-critical 9/11 poetry of academic poets for the most part remained unread outside of the university, and also the more mainstream poetry of slam poets largely reached pre-established audiences. What is more, even the politico-critical poetry which *did* reach a national audience, namely Auden's "September 1, 1939" and Amiri Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America", and also the poetic movement Poets Against the War, was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving its political potential. Partly, as I have argued in relation to the texts of PAW, this was due to shortcomings in the poetry itself. However, as I have argued in relation to Auden and Baraka, it was also because this poetry was misunderstood and misread, and its general political message overlooked.

As this thesis has hopefully made clear, poetry is not a naturally virtuous medium standing apart from society, but a societally anchored, politically influenced one. However, regardless of the evidence in favor of this stance, poetry journalists, poetry readers and even poets themselves still overwhelmingly adhere to the simplistic transcendental vision of poetry. As a result of this, I argue, the ability of 9/11 (-related) poetry to voice successful (national) dissent to the hegemonic mnemonic discourse of 9/11 and its cultural and political ramifications was restricted. The reception of both Auden's "September 1, 1939" and Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America", for example, were negatively influenced by the stereotypical conceptualization of poetry as transcendental/non-political and ethical, as this conceptualization caused Auden's poem to be read as a virtuous call for loving community building, instead of as a critical investigation into the misleading



use of rhetoric by politicians, and caused Baraka's poem to be vilified and undermined for its perceivably *un*-ethical, aggressive, confrontational tone. As a tool for countering the hegemonic memory of 9/11 and its ideological misuses, poetry seems to have suffered from simplistic visions of what the medium of poetry *is*, as these visions caused (the) safe or affirmative (aspects of) poetry to be valorized and (the) politically critical (aspects of) poetry to be looked upon with suspicion. For the medium of poetry to be able to exert a short-term, large-scale political effect, then, it seems that the dominant cultural conceptualization of poetry first needs to change. As long as poetry continues to suffer from being misunderstood as a purely ethical, non-political medium, I argue, its effects will most likely not extend themselves beyond a small, sympathizing audience.

The poetic practices discussed in this thesis point out that poetry's (actualized) political potential in the first decade after the September 11 attack resided in the fact that it voiced small-scale dissent and that it was able to reach and influence certain subgroups of the American community, enabling them to envision and/or truly form alternative political communities in which non-hegemonic visions of 9/11 and its aftermath could be held and shared. When compared to scholarly articles arguing for the revolutionary importance of political art, this thesis's conclusion might strike some readers as being bleak. To a certain extent, I would agree with this reading; the scope of poetry's socio-political influence in the wake of 9/11 was ultimately not great enough to efficaciously challenge the US's cultural and political status quo, and the findings of this thesis, I would argue, point to the fact that scholars should be cautious about ascribing too strong a potency to the medium of poetry (and to art in general). Circulating in a society in which poetry was narrowly understood, during a time of, what Herbert Marcuse would call, "repressive tolerance" (i.e. a period in which opposition was permitted, yet only when this opposition remained - as the reception of Baraka and PAW show - "within the framework determined by the constituted authorities"; 95), poetry was unable to effect a meaningful change in the national consciousness. Nevertheless, I do not want to completely downplay the importance of poetry in the wake of 9/11. Though the political significance of poetry should largely be sought in its local, small-scale effects, these minor effects did, to some degree, feed into America's general (political) culture. In a strongly consensus-driven society, poetry, via its creation of counterpublics, assisted in keeping the public sphere as a whole open to debate. As Nancy Fraser argues, the public sphere, by its very definition, must function as a critical entity. "The concept of the public sphere", Fraser contends, "was developed not simply to understand communication flows, but to contribute a normative political theory of democracy". She then continues: "in that theory, a public sphere is conceived as a space for the communicative generation of public opinion. [...] publicity is supposed to hold officials accountable and to assure that

the actions of the state express the will of the citizenry” (7). In America’s post-9/11 society, then, poetry managed to safeguard the preconditions for the existence of the public sphere as such. Herein, I would argue, must the medium’s large-scale significance be sought.

Before ending this thesis, there is still one issue that needs to be addressed (one that I have touched upon in my introduction, yet has remained largely latent throughout the chapters); given the particular socio-political workings of (post-)9/11 poetry, as explicated above, how must the importance of poetry for the cultural memory of 9/11 be understood? Of course, considering that only 12 years have passed since the attack, it is impossible to draw any definite conclusions regarding this issue. It is already doubtful whether or not we can actually speak of a “cultural memory” of 9/11 within this short time span, let alone make statements about what this cultural memory entails. Nonetheless, I want to make a cautious attempt at characterizing the position that poetry adopted in relation to the memory of 9/11 in the first decade after the attack. As I have already argued, the medium of poetry was not so much concerned with commemorating the attack as a past event as it was with critiquing and countering the way in which the dominant mnemonic narrative of 9/11 was ideologically misappropriated in the present. As such, I wish to advance the idea that poetry’s value in the first decade after the attack resided in the fact that it engaged with the memory of 9/11 in a *non-monumental* way. In order to make my argument more clear, I will unpack the threefold meaning that the term can be said to hold.

First of all, non-monumentality equals *non-hegemony*. As Esra Ackan relates in her article “Apology and Triumph”, monuments are objects of commemoration which often “overemphasize” and “stabilize” the dominant mnemonic discourse surrounding an event, and as such, they can take part in “cultural repression” (158).<sup>41</sup> To speak of *non-monumentality*, then, connotes the opposite effect; that is, connotes the opening up of the cultural debate about memory by adding a peripheral voice of dissent. Poetry, I argue, was able to block the dominant mnemonic discourse of the Bush administration and the mainstream media from becoming all-pervasive; it challenged the hegemonic process of memory and identity-fixing, keeping the narrative of 9/11 open to critical examination and variation in the first decade after the attack. Second of all, non-monumentality equals *ephemerality*. Though some of the poetry discussed in this thesis may survive the sands of time, thus influencing the cultural memory of 9/11 in the long-run, what is central to the poetry produced in the first decade after the attack is that it was short-lived. The “September 11<sup>th</sup> dedication poems” website on poetry.com, for example, is now off the air, the slam scene has moved on to other topics, and PAW

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<sup>41</sup> For a detailed discussion of how the monumental “Freedom Tower”, being built on the destroyed WTC site, supports the dominant narrative of 9/11, see Ackan’s article.

has lost its protesting relevance since the Iraq war was commenced, being referred to in the past tense on its (now poetry-less, stripped-down) website [poetsagainsthewar.org](http://poetsagainsthewar.org). Though this observation could easily be interpreted negatively, I would like to make a case against doing so. Most of the poetry produced in the wake of 9/11 was not intent on bringing about a long-lasting commemorative result, but on achieving a particular cultural and political effect in the here and now; its medium-specific value resided in its ability to create particular counterpublics in which a different story of 9/11 and its aftermath could be circulated and within which a non-hegemonic national self-image could be instituted. Within a mnemonic climate dominated by voices of innocence, power, and military righteousness, poetry offered an alternative, and herein lay its ultimate worth. Lastly, non-monumentality equals *smallness*. As has already been noted, poetry did not change the mnemonic discourse of 9/11 in a revolutionary way, nor did it manage to counter its cultural and political ramifications. However, it did create loci of dissent in an otherwise consensual society, thus keeping the public discourse surrounding 9/11 (and its aftermath) open.

Poetry, to sum up, in the first decade after the attack, related itself to the (official, ideologically charged) memory of 9/11 in a non-hegemonic way, effecting it ephemerally and on a small-scale. How the mnemonic role of 9/11 poetry will develop itself in the years to come, and what the long-term effect of poetry on the cultural memory of 9/11 will be, is of course yet unknown. It would be interesting to know which poems from the first wave of 9/11 poetry will ultimately survive, and what new (type of) poetry will be produced. Also, it might be worthwhile to find out if the poetry of 9/11 will continue to exert a social function (e.g. by being performed at official commemorative events), or if it will start to influence the memory of 9/11 via different routes, for example by being included in a literary canon, or by becoming part of certain memorials etc. (thus becoming monumental). Furthermore, with the ideological framework surrounding 9/11 becoming more nuanced as people gain emotional distance from the event, it would be valuable to know if poetry will continue to exert a politico-critical role regarding the memory of the attack and its aftermath, or if it will, for example, retreat into its traditional role of elegiac medium. Future research should address these questions.

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