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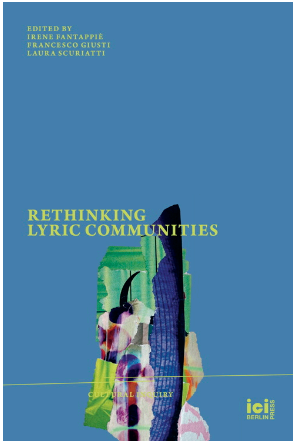

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Mina Loy's Interrupted Communities

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ABSTRACT: This chapter explores the different types of communities produced in Loy's works, with a focus on her theorization of modernist poetry in the essays 'Modern Poetry' (1925) and 'Gertrude Stein' (1927), the pamphlet 'Psycho-Democracy', the poem *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* (1923–25), and the sequence 'Italian Pictures' (1914), showing that Loy considered the questioning of types of collectivities and communities a fundamental element in the production and reception of modernist art and literature. Through the investigation of Loy's multilingualism, poetics, and style, the chapter argues that the insistence on the ephemeral, precarious, and shifting temporality of textual communities is the result not only of Loy's presence within mobile, transnational expatriate groups but also of a feminist stance that refuses participation in patriarchal or oppressive forms of togetherness, aiming instead to imagine possible alternatives.

KEYWORDS: Loy, Mina; modernist poetics; multilingualism; communities; sociability; feminism; poetic address

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Mina Loy's Interrupted Communities

LAURA SCURIATTI

In 1927 the British poet, painter, and designer Mina Loy wrote an introductory essay on Gertrude Stein, whom she had met and befriended during her long stays in Florence (1906–16) and, at Natalie Barney's famous salons, in Paris (in the 1920s and 1930s). Barney ran two different types of salon in the French capital: one saw the participation of a number of French and Anglo-American writers and artists; the other was a circle of intellectual women who gathered as the Académie des Femmes, a (mostly) queer community of women artists, writers, and thinkers, conceived as a provocative counterpart to the Académie française, which excluded women.[1] Both Stein and Loy were part of the anglophone expatriate community in the French capital and participated in Barney's gatherings. Loy's essay, written and read aloud in French, was not her first assessment and celebration of Stein's work: in 1924, she had published a two-part essay on the American novelist

1 For an account of the salons and their participants, see e.g. Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 268–308; Gloria Feman Orenstein, 'The Salon of Natalie Clifford Barney: An Interview with Berthe Cleyrergue', *Signs*, 4.3 (1979), pp. 484–96; George Wickes, 'Comment on Orenstein's "The Salon of Natalie Clifford Barney: An Interview with Berthe Cleyrergue"', *Signs*, 5.3 (1980), pp. 547–50. For an overview of the debates around the scholarship on Barney's salons, see also Chelsea Ray, 'Natalie Barney (1876–1972): Writer, Salon Hostess, and Eternal Friend; Interview with Jean Chalon', *Women in French Studies*, 30 (2022), pp. 154–69.

in the *Transatlantic Review*, prefaced by her famous dedicatory poem, 'Gertrude Stein'.[2]

For all their differences, both essays explore and celebrate the specificity of Stein's genius within the context of an Anglo-American modernism, and they do so by analysing the ways in which modernist literary experimentation and modernist genius emerge within, and are able to create, communities of like-minded readers and artists. Indeed, in 1924, Loy celebrated Stein's works precisely for their ability to engender a sort of 'imaginary community' of readers who, almost imitating the precise craftmanship of the author, undergo the process of understanding her experimental work. While Loy herself was never an official member of structured communities such as artistic movements or avant-garde groups, her poetry and essays often reflect and theorize on the processes subsuming the formation of such communities inside and outside the texts, and posit them as a fundamental element of the production and reception of modernist art and literature. This chapter explores the different types of modernist collectivities in Loy's works, arguing that the insistence on their ephemeral, precarious, and shifting temporality is the result not only of her participation in mobile, transnational expatriate communities but also of a feminist stance that refuses participation in patriarchal or oppressive forms of togetherness and community, aiming instead to imagine possible alternatives.

The first few lines of the 1927 essay on Stein, translated into English by Martin Crowley, are useful for understanding Loy's scepticism towards facile and stable notions of a collective, even within the rarefied small modernist world involved in debates on genius:

> Twenty years ago, people used to say to me, 'the days when a genius could appear suddenly, and be unappreciated, are well and truly gone'.
>
> They said we were so very civilized, so blasé in the face of any conceivable surprise, that no-one could ever again leave the critics baffled.
>
> Bizarrely, however, our culture is destined to find that any truly new thought will burst upon it like a fury. And it is to this

2 For information on the publication history of these essays, see Sarah Crangle, 'Notes', in *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*, ed. by Sara Crangle (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011), pp. 297–416 (pp. 379–80).

> destiny that the critics have once more succumbed in the case of Gertrude Stein.[3]

In this essay, Loy stages from the outset a tension between individual personas and collective entities. Alongside the collective designations 'people', 'we', and 'our culture', the singular 'me' appears as the addressee of a purported pessimism about the status of contemporary art. The 'me' hovers between being a singular entity separate from what 'they' or 'people' say — the French original deploys the impersonal 'On disait que nous sommes à tel point cultivé',[4] which in the English translation is rendered as 'They said we were so very civilized' — and belonging in a collectivity of artists to which 'people' in general are inimical. Similar constellations are typical of avant-garde stances, and are also at the centre of Loy's poem 'Apology of Genius'. The collective pronouns, however, do not survive beyond the first few lines, and give way to a critical engagement with the work of Stein which only foresees the presence of a 'she' and an 'I', whereby the 'I' assumes the detached position of a critic and observer of Stein's progress towards international success.

Two interesting things happen in this essay. First, it starts with a sort of indecision about the position of the singular pronoun, of the individual subject, in relation to different collectivities, and then resolves this indecision in favour of a strong 'I'. Second, Loy claims for Stein and her literary works a crucial role not only in the defamiliarization of the English language but also in its deterritorialization, in the dismantling of a monolithic notion of national identity:

> I doubt any of her writings has appeared in French, especially as the essential feature of her work is its untranslatability into even its own language. For our obliging pioneer has reduced the English language to a foreign language even for Anglo-Americans.[5]

3 Mina Loy, 'Gertrude Stein', in *Stories and Essays*, pp. 232–34 (p. 232). All quotations from Mina Loy's works are by kind permission of Roger Conover, Mina Loy's editor and literary executor.

4 Crangle, 'Notes', p. 380.

5 Loy, 'Gertrude Stein', pp. 234–34.

Loy here questions the identification of language with nationality or ethnicity,[6] referring not only to Stein's English as a foreign language but also extending the reach of English to a wider body of speakers beyond national borders.[7] In a move similar to that which occurs at the beginning of the essay, Loy in this passage posits and then immediately dismantles the possibility of a collective subject or audience identified by a possible shared reaction to the text. Closing the essay, Loy returns to using the general collective noun 'people' with which she started the essay, but qualifying it: 'Perhaps much of the opposition unleashed against Gertrude Stein stemmed from the fear of those people who claimed to be stunned.'[8]

The essay performs its scepticism towards collectivities of various kinds, and proposes a jolting journey of identification and disidentification, traversing politics, reading practices, and emotional reception. A similar contradictory position characterizes the 'Feminist Manifesto' (1914) and 'International Psycho-Democracy' (1918), which do not really produce 'isms' or real political parties with which to identify, but instead propose radical programmes using a language that does not really aim at any political activism but rather at what Martin Puchner has defined as a 'poetics that aspired to the condition of the manifesto'.[9] Indeed, the 'Feminist Manifesto' and 'International Psycho-Democracy' gesture towards the form of address found in political or artistic manifestos, but paradoxically, the first person plural, when it appears at all, is vague and shifting, as the texts also express a suspicion towards political and social forces based on collectivities.

In what follows, I shall explore the connection between Loy's textual strategies and the mobile clusters of communities produced by them. I examine in particular her multilingual coinages and her

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6 In French, Loy uses the designation 'Anglo-Saxons' (Crangle, 'Notes', p. 382).

7 See Marjorie Perloff, 'English as a "Second" Language: Mina Loy's "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose"', in *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*, ed. by Maeera Shreiber and Keith Tuma (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1998), pp. 131–48.

8 Loy, 'Gertrude Stein', p. 234.

9 Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Garde* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 71. For further theorization of the political implications of the collective subject of manifestos, see also Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 12.

use of pronouns in the situation of poetic address. And I start from a paradox: on the one hand, Loy's aesthetic and social exceptionalism, eccentricity, and satirical stance have nurtured the impression that she kept a programmatic distance from any kind of communal or communitarian project, even within the world of modernist poetry. Indeed, as Roger Conover remarks, Loy's idiosyncratic and satirical poetic style had caused her relative isolation among her contemporaries and made her an exceptional figure in modernist poetry.[10] And so, to segue into Loy Alice Oswald's judgement on T. S. Eliot, Loy 'is a satirist, and a satirist is a brilliant critic, rather than a compassionate fellow traveler'.[11] On the other hand, Loy actively participated in modernist networks, groups, and sometimes institutions, including the Futurists in Italy, the surrealists in Paris, and a variety of salons and avant-garde gatherings in New York. Therefore, using more nuanced notions, as Stephen Voyce and Yasna Bozhkova have shown with the concepts of *mêlée* and constellations, will equip us better to account for the extremely complex and mobile set of connections, relationships, and groupings that Loy participated in, made possible, or invoked in her texts.[12] One of these useful notions is the concept of sociability, usually associated with the salon and with Loy's pamphlet 'International Psycho-Democracy', which was republished in 1982 together with the introductory 'Mina Loy's Tenets' (1918), where Loy, somewhat mimicking political pamphlets and foundational manifestos, speaks in a first person plural about 'our party' and 'our purpose', specifying that the party, is, after all, 'an Invitation, not a Control', and calls her readers to action by inciting them to 'make the world your salon'; indeed, as she defines the essence and purpose of 'Psycho-Democracy', she posits as one of its main goals the substitution of 'Sociability for Sociology'.[13]

10 Roger Conover, 'Introduction', in Mina Loy, *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (Highlands, NC: Jargon Society, 1982), pp. xv–lxi (p. xxii).

11 Alice Oswald, 'The Life and Death of Poetry', University of Oxford Podcasts, 2 June 2022 <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/life-and-death-poetry> [accessed 8 January 2024].

12 Yasna Bozhkova, *Between Worlds: Mina Loy's Aesthetic Itineraries* (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2022), e.g. pp. 6–26; Stephen Voyce, '"Make the World your Salon": Poetry and Community at the Arensberg Apartment', *Modernism/Modernity*, 15.4 (2008), pp. 627–46.

13 Mina Loy, 'International Psycho-Democracy', in *Last Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 276–82 (pp. 276, 277).

SOCIABILITY, COMMUNITY, AND POETRY

As I have discussed elsewhere,[14] sociability emerged as concept and practice in the eighteenth century in texts by the German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and the works and social gatherings of the Jewish *salonnières* of the Haskala (or Jewish Enlightenment) in Berlin, especially Rahel Varnhagen (1764–1847) and Henriette Herz (1764–1847), and was then revived by Georg Simmel in his essay 'The Sociology of Sociability' ('Soziologie der Geselligkeit', 1911).[15] As Janet Lyon observes, for Simmel, *Geselligkeit* — 'sociability' or 'conviviality' — was a specific practice and set of social relations based on impersonal intimacy, equality, and free conversation liberated from instrumental ends.[16] In Simmel's theory, the communality of sociability/conviviality depended on the spontaneous, brief, and ephemeral temporality of the exchange and pleasure of conversation, ideally bypassing hierarchies and social constraints. It was compared to play and art, and was founded on purposelessness — a purposelessness that included renouncing the self and one's own individual pleasures or interests as the sole aim and goal of sociable communality, and opening up instead to reciprocity, whereby, for example, the pleasure of the individual was predicated on the pleasure of others. Sociability/conviviality was thus considered a possible vehicle for utopian forms of community. Sociability also functioned as a corrective to conservative theories of community such as those of Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), who in 1887 compared what he saw as two opposite versions of collectivity, *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (civic society): *Gemeinschaft* represented an organic

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14 I have previously discussed the relationship between Simmel's theories and Loy's notion of community in Laura Scuriatti, 'Together, on her Own: A Survey of Mina Loy's Textual Communities', in *Groups, Coteries, Circles and Guilds: Modernist Aesthetics and the Utopian Lure of Community*, ed. by Laura Scuriatti (Oxford: Lang, 2019), pp. 71–96. For a discussion of sociability, conviviality, and modernist aesthetics, see Janet Lyon, 'Sociability in the Metropole: Modernism's Bohemian Salons', *ELH*, 76.3 (2009), pp. 687–711. See also Voyce, 'Make the World your Salon'.

15 Georg Simmel, 'The Sociology of Sociability', trans. by Everett C. Hughes, *American Journal of Sociology*, 55.3 (1949), pp. 254–61. For a discussion of sociability in the Haskala in relation to Simmel, see Ulrike Wagner, 'The Utopia of Purposelessness', in *Groups, Coteries, Circles and Guilds*, ed. by Scuriatti, pp. 17–41.

16 Lyon, 'Sociability in the Metropole', p. 688.

notion of community, rooted in what Tönnies thought were the shared natural values embodied by patriarchy, religion, and national identity, whereas *Gesellschaft* was an aggregate of people with little in common but artificially associated by instrumental aims, which were necessary to hold together heterogeneous organisms such as modern cities.[17] For Janet Lyon, sociability was *the* fundamental aspect, despite their differences, of the modernist salons, where the exercise of free conversation and rational discourse was connected to the 'ameliorative power of *Geselligkeit*'.[18]

Loy's appeal to turn the world into a salon in 'Psycho-Democracy', which, as Stephen Voyce and Yasna Bozhkova remind us, probably referred specifically to the Arensbergs' salon, seems indeed to aim at the creation of such ephemeral, mobile communities of choice, and to reject organic communities such as those theorized by Tönnies or embodied by political parties, institutional religions, or even structured avant-garde groups. And it also seems clear that for Loy, at least in the first phases of her writing life, this type of community could only be achieved through artistic practices and through the work of literature.[19]

Considering the delicate balance between single individuals and the group, the emphasis on reciprocity and renunciation which characterizes the mobile communities of sociability is also present in Roberto Esposito's theory of *communitas*. Esposito is helpful for considering Loy's work because he suggests a fundamental rethinking of the very idea of community, which, for him, should not be conceived as a 'fullness or a whole' or a 'principle of identification', or as a 'body' or a 'corporation', or be interpreted as intersubjective 'recognition' either. Community, for Esposito, is rather 'the totality of persons united not by a "property" but precisely by an obligation or a debt; not by an addition but by a subtraction'; working from the Latin etymology of *munus* (a gift that cannot not be given, a debt) and *communis*, Esposito proposes a concept of *communitas* held together and defined by a com-

17 See Lyon, 'Sociability in the Metropole'; Scuriatti, 'Together, on her Own'; Voyce, 'Make the World your Salon'.

18 Lyon, 'Sociability in the Metropole', p. 687.

19 This stance places Loy fully within the objectives and discourses of the historical avant-garde, as theorized by Peter Bürger in his seminal *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

mon debt, a bond, that is owed by individuals to others in order to participate in society: this is

> not a mode of being, much less a making of the individual subject. It isn't the subject's expansion or multiplication but its exposure to what interrupts the closing and turns it inside out: a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject.[20]

This notion of community, characterized by a haphazard and ephemeral temporality, by interruptions and lack of closure, emerges from Loy's corpus, even when individuality seems to be the goal. And while ephemerality might be expressed by the sociability of the salon, I think that it gains its particular traction from Loy's handling of poetic form, without necessarily presupposing political indifference or insignificance. I see Loy's position also in relation to Charles Bernstein's scepticism about the identification of communities, especially literary ones: for Bernstein, 'any discussion of community would do well to start with the idea of institution rather than association'; if community is about having something in common — 'a place, an ideal, a practice, a heritage, a tradition' — it posits its own outside, and, in the modern literary world, this position is usually occupied by poetry:

> Many poets that I know experience poetry communities, say scenes, as places of their initial exclusion from publication, readings, recognition. Being inside, a part of, is often far less striking than being left out, apart. [...] To have a community is to make an imaginary inscription against what is outside the community. & outside is where some poetry will want to be.[21]

He therefore suggests that some types of poetry might be particularly keen on working against given notions of those versions of community, and might be reluctant to use collective nouns or to appeal to a defined collectivity — a position that is also visible in Loy's texts.

Turning to the relationship between poetry and conviviality, the latter appears, somewhat surprisingly, in Jonathan Culler's *Theory of*

20 Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. by Timothy Campbell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 2, 6, 7.

21 Charles Bernstein, 'Community and the Individual Talent', *Diacritics*, 26.3/4 (1996), pp. 176–90 (pp. 178, 177).

the Lyric: as he discusses Hegel's postulation of the centrality of the subjective in lyric poetry, Culler finds an unexpected opening towards a more relational type of subjectivity, precisely through the dimension of conviviality, in terms that echo Schleiermacher and Simmel:[22]

> [Hegel] evinces particular admiration for lyrics of Goethe which 'may be called convivial' in that a man in society 'does not communicate his self' but, putting 'his particular individuality in the background', amuses the company with his anecdotes and reflections, 'and yet, whatever he may portray, there is always vividly interwoven with it his own artistic inner life, his feelings and experiences'.[23]

This dynamic is fundamental for enabling the reception of poetry, in that the audience can recognize and have access to a very particular subjectivity without necessarily identifying it solely with one individual. In Culler's theory, poetic texts structurally rely not just on a situation of direct address but most fundamentally on indirect address. This involves the presence of a broad audience that is evoked as listeners or voyeurs and constitutes the real addressees of a poem, even if it is, in the first instance, addressed to an object or a lover. This structure, for Culler, is associated with the iterative quality of poetry, namely the possibility that, whatever the speaking voice or addressee, the poem can be potentially received, repeated, and rehearsed by a broader audience. Moving away from the solipsistic, expressive, and elitist model of lyrics from the Romantic period, Culler's theory opens up the possibility of lyric poetry creating a dynamic community of reception: community creation is made possible by the ritualistic nature of poetry and, especially, by its iterability, which is rooted not only in the situation of indirect address but also in non-narrative and formal structures relying on aurality and the materiality of language, such as rhyming, patterns of repetition, prosody. Through its reliance on aurality, poetry creates an effect of voicing — i.e. the effect of an utterance that can in theory be voiced, rather than the effect of a specific voice — which constitutes the poem's shareable quality and potentially opens up the poem to a

22 For a discussion of the relationship between Schleiermacher's and Simmel's theories of conviviality, see Wagner, 'Utopia of Purposelessness'.

23 Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 95.

community of readers or listeners who are able to participate in the poem's iterability.[24] My contention is that Loy's poetic style makes programmatic use of this possibility: in the texts that I explore, we do not have a rhetorical move where direct address masks or hides the real addressee or a general audience; rather, we have a multiplication of mutable audiences and addressees — potential communities ensuing from ephemeral processes of identification with the voices of the poem through different modalities of reading that are activated by poetic technique, form, and a focus on the materiality of language.[25]

A BALANCING ACT: READERSHIPS IN 'MODERN POETRY'

As examples I discuss the 1925 essay 'Modern Poetry', the long autobiographical poem *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* (1923–25), and then two poems from the sequence 'Italian Pictures' (1914). 'Modern Poetry' is Loy's only contribution to *Charm*, a New Jersey women's magazine published by the Bamberger's department store, which normally focused on lifestyle, fashion, beauty, and society but also made room for articles on art, politics, and culture, with contributions by important modernists, such as Djuna Barnes, Walter Pach, Man Ray, and Allen Tate.[26] Indeed, the tone of the essay is almost pedagogical and addresses poetry from the perspective of reception and readership, rather than from the point of view of authors. It teaches how to recognize and learn to appreciate modernist poetry in spite of its difficult form, obscurity, and radical language, explaining that these are inevitable, as they are the poet's tool for responding to and capturing the variety of the modern world. It offers a list of Loy's preferred poets and a succinct account of their main characteristics. It does not rely on technical

24 Ibid., p. 305.

25 For further reflections on readership in Loy's poetry in relation to reader-response theory and ethnography, see Sanja Bahun, '"Me you — you — me": Mina Loy and the Art of Ethnographic Intimacy', in *Modernist Intimacies*, ed. by Elsa Högberg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), pp. 129–43 (pp. 141–42).

26 Sophie Oliver, 'Mina Loy, Bessie Breuer, *Charm* Magazine and Fashion as Modernist Historiography', *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, 11.2 (2020), pp. 248–69 (p. 251). As noted by Roger Conover, 'Notes on the Text', in Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), pp. 175–218 (p. 217), Djuna Barnes signed some of her contributions as Lady Lydia Steptoe. I am indebted to Alex Goody for her extremely helpful suggestions concerning *Charm* and its readership.

terms or speak of problems of voice, dramatic form, images, or address, but rather asks the reader to imagine sounds and metre through comparisons with activities that would have been familiar to the white middle-class suburban audience which constituted the readership of the magazine[27] — 'Imagine a tennis champion who became inspired to write poetry, would not his verse be likely to embody the rhythmic transit of skimming balls? Would not his meter depend on his way of life [...]?'[28] Most importantly, though, Loy creates a version of modernist poetry that is at first glance affirmed as being deeply American, and made possible by the American 'melting-pot' and by the speed of urban life and economic exchanges that characterize it:

> So in the American poet wherever he may wander, however he may engage himself with an older culture, there has occurred no Europeanization of his fundamental advantage, the acuter shock of the New World consciousness upon life. His is still poetry that has proceeded out of America.[29]

As Sophie Oliver notes, Loy inserts the notion of the fleetingness of the modern into the stability of tradition — 'those I have spoken of are poets according to the old as well as the new reckoning; there are others who are poets only according to the new reckoning. They are headed by the doctor, Carlos Williams'[30] — and therefore presents a more complicated view of modernism, one that does not rely exclusively on rupture and breach but rather represents a fleetingness and ephemerality rooted in a dialectic view of history where past and present are intertwined in an unstoppable movement and the present tends inexorably towards becoming past.[31]

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27 Oliver, 'Mina Loy, Bessie Breuer, *Charm*', p. 252, explains that the magazine was sent monthly for free to selected customers of the department store, and that, while the readership influenced the content of the magazine with its local interests, its editors, and in particular Bessie Breuer, were instrumental in expanding the scope of the articles to include avant-garde and even feminist topics and authors, as well as taking on a markedly cosmopolitan outlook, to compete with both *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar* and *Good Housekeeping*, combining 'localism with modernism'. This, as Oliver shows, meant that, even in terms of fashion, the magazine had to find a balance between celebrating novelties in fashion, art, and ideas, without being too radical.

28 Mina Loy, 'Modern Poetry', in *Lost Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 157–61 (p. 158).

29 Ibid., p. 159.

30 Ibid., p. 161.

31 Oliver, 'Mina Loy, Bessie Breuer, *Charm*', pp. 262–63.

The almost contradictory versions of modernism which Oliver sees as carefully balanced out in the essay, and the conflicting reading strategies that such an approach and such a readership implied, are matched by the types of audiences in the essay. They are defined by two radically different types of reception of poetry, based respectively on voice or on silent reading on the printed page:

> the sound of music capturing our involuntary attention is so easy to get in touch with, while the silent sound of poetry requires our voluntary attention to obliterate the cold barrier of print with the whole 'intelligence of our senses'. And many of us who have the habit of reading not alone with the eye but also with the ear, have — especially at a superficial first reading — overlooked the beauty of it.
>
> More than to read poetry we must listen to poetry. All reading is the evocation of speech; the difference in our approach, then, in reading a poem or a newspaper is that our attitude in reading a poem must be rather that of listening to and looking at a pictured song.[32]

Here Loy affirms a specific, ritualistic, iterative aspect of poetry which is determined by its roots in music, as reaffirmed elsewhere in the essay through comparison with jazz;[33] the different publics are addressees that, however, coalesce around the ability to receive and iterate poetry through the performance of language in its materiality. This is, for Loy, a fundamental feature not only of Gertrude Stein's style but also of modernist poetry. As Craig Dworkin argues, Loy is able to capture the fundamental characteristic of Stein's style, namely its ability to extract 'powerful elements below the level of the word and beyond "consciousness" to release a language working independently of human intentions and free from the psychologies of the speakers'.[34] This ability manifests itself in Loy's work in at least two ways: first of all in her parodic poetic

32 Loy, 'Modern Poetry', p. 157.

33 For a discussion of the significance of jazz for Loy's poetics, especially in relation to the poem 'The Widow's Jazz', see Marisa Jannuzzi, 'Mongrel Rose: The "Unerring Esperanto" of Loy's Poetry', in *Mina Loy*, ed. by Shreiber and Tuma, pp. 404–41 (pp. 434–37); Andrew Michael Roberts, 'Rhythm, Self and Jazz in Mina Loy's Poetry', in *The Salt Companion to Mina Loy*, ed. by Rachel Potter and Suzanne Hobson (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2010), pp. 99–128.

34 Craig Dworkin, *Radium of the Word: A Poetics of Materiality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 68.

technique, which draws attention to itself through, to quote Elisabeth Frost, 'overdeterminacy of meaning in verse saturated with polysemy, alliteration, inflated diction, punning, bathos, and ironic rhyme — a ragbag of techniques that mimic poetic convention';[35] and second, in the defamiliarized English, Marjorie Perloff's 'English as a second language', that Loy praises in the following passage from 'Modern Poetry', with a distinctly Whitmanian tone:

> It was inevitable that the renaissance of poetry should proceed out of America, where latterly a thousand languages have been born, and each one, for purposes of communication at least, English — English enriched and variegated with the grammatical structure and voice-inflection of many races, in novel alloy with the fundamental time-is-money idiom of the United States, discovered by newspaper cartoonists.
>
> This composite language is a very living language, it grows as you speak. For the true American appears to be ashamed to say anything in the way it has been said before. Every moment he ingeniously coins new words for old ideas. [...]
>
> You may think it impossible to conjure up the relationship of expression between the high browest modern poets and an adolescent Slav who has speculated in a wholesale job-lot of mandarines and is trying to sell them in a retail market on First Avenue. But it lies simply in this: both have had to become adapted to a country where the mind has to put on its verbal clothes at terrific speed if it would speak in time; where no one will listen if you attack him twice with the same missile of argument. And, that the ear that has listened to the greatest number of sounds will have the most to choose from when it comes to self-expression, each has been liberally educated in the flexibility of phrases.[36]

Instead of hindering communication, this syncretic language fosters understanding among groups where it might not otherwise be found, creating what Matthew Hart calls 'nations of nothing but poetry'[37] — clusters created by the poems and realized in small groups of readers

35 Elisabeth A. Frost, *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), p. 52, quoted in Sean Pryor, *Poetry, Modernism and an Imperfect World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 116.

36 Loy, 'Modern Poetry', p. 158–59.

37 Matthew Hart, *Nations of Nothing but Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For a brief

which only partially intersect. In this account, poetry features as a kind of mediator and creator: its adoption of this defamiliarized language opens up possibilities of communication that are attuned to the present, creating its own communities, even if ephemeral and moveable, in the same way as the living, evolving language of the street that makes America possible. Simultaneously though, this language is a stumbling block that forces readers to become attentive to the process of reading and listening to poetry, and to the potentially fraught moments of identification with a stable community of speakers or listeners.

SHIFTING COMMUNITIES: *ANGLO-MONGRELS AND THE ROSE* AND 'ITALIAN PICTURES'

In order to explore the textual mechanisms that correspond to these programmatic statements, I will now turn, by way of example, to the first section of *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* and then 'Italian Pictures'.

Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose is a long autobiographical poem, an 'auto-mythology', in Roger Conover's words,[38] which appeared in fragments in various magazines and journals, and was published posthumously in its entirety in 1982. The first section of *Anglo-Mongrels* is dedicated to the character Exodus, who represents Loy's father, and introduces Exodus in what seems to be an uncertain, tentative English:

> Exodus lay under an oak tree
> bordering on Buda Pest   he had lain
> him down   to overnight   under the lofty rain
> of starlight
> having leapt from the womb
> eighteen years ago   and grown
> neglected   along the shores of the Danube
> on the Danube in the Danube
> or breaking his legs behind runaway horses
>   with a Carnival quirk
>   every Shrove Tuesday[39]

account of this passage in relation to contemporary notions of the American 'melting-pot', see Peter Nicholls, 'The Poetics of Modernism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. by Andrew Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 51–67 (esp. pp. 55–56, p. 65 n. 22).

38 In Loy, *Last Lunar Baedeker*, p. 326.

39 Mina Loy, *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*, in *Last Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 109–75 (p. 111).

The wish to explain Exodus's predicament produces a sequence of verses in which syntactic and lexical correctness are partially disregarded: in 'he had lain | him down', the peculiar usage of the verb 'to lay down' could be transitive or intransitive, maybe even reflexive, although the reflexive pronoun is missing as an effect of the enjambement; the verb 'overnight' is a rare occurrence in the 1920s, according to the *OED*;[40] the location of Exodus's birth and childhood is expressed in an uncertain way with the sequence 'of the Danube | on the Danube in the Danube', which echoes either a nursery rhyme or a tentative sentence uttered by a foreigner trying out random prepositions in a language that they have not yet fully mastered. Here the poetic voice speaks in the third person singular, and its eloquence vacillates between the probable imitation or even ventriloquizing of the parlance of a foreign speaker and the refined rhetoric of a different persona, able to produce 'under the lofty rain | of starlight' and 'with a Carnival quirk | every Shrove Tuesday', as if shifting between identification with Exodus and an external perspective. These are two voices that are not mutually exclusive, but entangled and linked in a dialogic and dialectical manner, one implicating, but not subsuming, the other.[41]

The multilingual world of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in which Exodus grew up, however, is not a Utopia of communication like the American melting-pot in 'Modern Poetry', but is mired in the ideologies attached to each language:

> Imperial Austria taught the child
> the German   secret patriotism
> the Magyar tongue   the father
> stuffed him with biblical Hebrew and the
> seeds of science   exhorting him
>   to vindicate
>   his forefathers' ambitions[42]

40 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'overnight' <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/overnight_v?tab=frequency> [accessed 23 February 2024].

41 Indeed, as Roberts, 'Rhythm, Self and Jazz', pp. 101–02, summarizes, Carolyn Burke sees Loy's poetry as a 'poetry of the subject, [...] taking up positions in language' rather than a 'lyric poetry of self (consistently confessional, homogeneous, integrated, seeking wholeness)'.

42 Loy, *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*, pp. 111–12.

Exodus's unhappy childhood and lapse into relative poverty and neglect are accompanied by a parallel process of language impoverishment and confusion:

> […] hired
> Exodus in apprenticeship
> to such   as garrulously inarticulate[43]

This process culminates in his emigration to Great Britain,

> where the domestic Jew in lieu
> of knouts is lashed with tongues[44]

and where he begins to fluently speak

> […] 'business English' […]
> jibbering stock exchange quotations[45]

Yet the language expressing Exodus's multilingual exile is extremely refined, relying heavily on rhetorical figures such as paronomasia, alliteration, and onomatopoeia, which bring attention back to poetry and poetic voice:

> Blinking his eyes
> at the sunrise   Exodus
> lumbar-arching   sleep-logged   turns his ear
> to the grit earth   and hears
> the boom of cardiac cataracts
>   thumping the turf
> with his young pulse[46]
>
>   Exodus lifts his head
> over the alien crowds
> under the alien clouds[47]

This section of *Anglo-Mongrels* offers us not a mimetic version of a single poetic voice within or outside the text, but the performance of poetic language. In fact, the process of language assimilation and alignment which Exodus has to go through in England is epitomized

43 Ibid., p. 112.
44 Ibid., p. 113.
45 Ibid., p. 115.
46 Ibid., p. 113.
47 Ibid., p. 117.

by the jettisoning of or return to two different but intertwined lyric traditions — the ancient one associated with the Hebrew Bible, and the Western lyric, ironically symbolized by the thrush's song — both of which are marked by music and aurality:

> Hymns   ancient and modern
> belabour   crippled cottage-grands
> in parlor fronts
>   A thrush
> shatters its song upon the spurious shade
> of a barred bird fancier's
>
> The dumb philosophies
> of the wondering Jew
> fall into rhythm   with
> long unlistened to   Hebrew chants[48]

As well as not fully empathizing with the predicament of Exodus, the poetic voice is able to represent it precisely because its language is poetic and not identifiable with Exodus. Indeed, the poem implies a multilingualism which goes beyond the languages that Exodus masters or is mastered by; for instance, the stanza which precedes the ones quoted above includes puns which seem to be specifically directed at Italian-speakers:

> This jovian Hebrew 'all dressed up
> and nowhere to go'
> stands like a larch
> upon the corners of incarcerate streets
> deploring the anomolous [sic] legs
> of Zion's sons
> with the subconscious
> irritant of superiority
> left in an aristocracy   out of currency
>
> paces
> the cancellated desert of the metropolis
> with the instinctive urge   of loneliness
> to get to 'the heart of something'[49]

'Incarcerate' and 'cancellated' resonate and are both loanwords that can be read as anglicized versions of the Italian *incarcerato* and *cancellato*, meaning 'jailed' and 'cancelled' respectively. The significance

48 Ibid., pp. 116–17.

49 Ibid., p. 116.

of the chiming of the two words cannot be fully understood without considering the polysemy of the Italian *cancellato*: since 'cancellated' is a fusion of the English 'cancel' and the Italian *cancellata/cancello*, it contains both the notions of cancelling and of a gate with bars, thus reformulating the erasure of Exodus's identity as not just imprisonment but also exclusion.

Even when she describes such a paradigmatic narrative moment of formation and assimilation into English society and the English language, Loy decides to add an extra dimension to her defamiliarized English by interrupting and reshaping the imagined communities of her readers: these intersected and shifting communities are constituted within the possibilities of a poetic style which emphatically relies on the materiality of language in both its aural and written dimensions. Such a strategy recalls and problematizes the celebration of multilingualism as the foundation of American modernism that characterizes 'Modern Poetry', written in the same years. It also seems to invest poetry with a deeply pessimistic ironic charge: not only does multilingualism per se not provide the much-desired utopian space of communication; as Sean Pryor argues, poetic technique from specific traditions also becomes the object of satire through the use of its own tools. In this way, according to Pryor, *Anglo-Mongrels* is a modernist anti-poetic poem which performs poetry as a language that does not manage to fulfil its functions.[50]

Another eloquent example for this poetics is the sequence 'Italian Pictures'. I shall focus on 'The Costa San Giorgio' and 'Costa Magic', the second and third parts of the sequence respectively. The poems were written in 1914, during Loy's residence in Florence, and published in November of the same year in the short-lived avant-garde magazine *The Trend*, edited by Carl Van Vechten, Loy's agent. They were therefore written in Italy by an English expatriate and presented to an unknown and distant American audience, for whom the references to the Florentine life of a British expat were in all probability utterly alien — a feature that Tara Prescott and Linda Kinnahan see

50 Pryor, *Poetry*, pp. 93–97, 100–02, argues moreover that the materiality of Loy's poetry, especially in *Anglo-Mongrels*, 'The Effectual Marriage', and 'Love Songs', shows Loy's interrogation of the pleasure offered by the rhyming and chiming of poetic texts — a pleasure that may be seen as fostering complicity with the 'fallen' state of modernity.

expressed by the poems' play with tropes of closeness and distance between the speaking voices and the observed objects.[51]

'The Costa San Giorgio' establishes from the very beginning a first person plural which seems relatively self-explanatory and fixed: the English. This seems to be the perspective from which the poem unfolds. However, as Marisa Jannuzzi observes, the whole first stanza is shaped by the associations between words in the semantic field of the archaic 'frescoe' and the technique that this form of painting requires — namely the words 'blot' and 'stained' — and, I would add, also by the Italianate echoes of 'frescoe' and 'porta', which constitute a modification of the initial statement about Englishness — a statement that aligns with Loy's own perception as a polyglot speaker who thinks 'in a subconscious muddle of foreign languages', without a 'notion of what pure English is'.[52]

> We English make a tepid blot
> On the messiness
> Of the passionate Italian life-traffic
> Throbbing the street   up   steep
> Up   up   to the porta
> Culminating
> In the stained frescoe of the dragon-slayer[53]

The third stanza introduces another voice, which also speaks in the first person plural and claims to speak for a group:

> Oranges half-rotten are sold at a reduction
> Hoarsely advertised as broken heads
> BROKEN HEADS   and the barber
> Has an imitation mirror
> And Mary preserve our mistresses from seeing us as we see ourselves
> Shaving
> ICE CREAM
> Licking is larger than mouths
> Boots than feet[54]

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51 Tara Prescott, *Poetic Salvage: Reading Mina Loy* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2016), pp. 14–19; Linda A. Kinnahan, 'Costa Magic', in *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Suzanne W. Churchill, Linda A. Kinnahan, and Susan Rosenbaum <https://mina-loy.com/split-texts/gender-power-in-the-street/> [accessed 9 January 2024].

52 Jannuzzi, 'Mongrel Rose', pp. 427 (for the quotation, from an undated letter written in the 1930s), 428 (for a discussion of the significance of the word 'frescoe').

53 Mina Loy, 'The Costa San Giorgio', in *Lost Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 10–12 (p. 10).

54 Ibid., p. 11.

This is probably the inner voice of the barber, who seems to speak collectively for the male gender. But this voice is interrupted by the ambiguous 'ICE CREAM', which may indicate the shouts of an ice-cream vendor or the performative utterance of an unidentified first-person speaker who screams they are screaming. Stanza 4 has yet another, different, first person plural:

> And warns the folded hands
> Of a consumptive
> Left outside   her chair is broken
> And she wonders how we feel
> For we walk very quickly
> The noonday cannon
> Having scattered the neighbour's pigeons[55]

Is this 'we' the English throughout the poem? Here, as in other poems that Loy wrote when she lived in Florence, the ability to speak in the first person plural depends among other things on the vacillation between the position of subject and object in a situation of spectacle: here, the Italians are observed and objectified by the English, but the latter become, in turn, a spectacle in the public square. Given the markedly gendered use of the first person plural in stanza 3, it is difficult to determine whether the 'we' in stanza 4 still refers to the English, or now to English women in particular. The possible meanings of these first person plurals are predicated on the unexpressed dialectic of binary otherness — the English and the Italian, male and female, those who look and those who are seen — but these positions seem to be at least potentially exchangeable. 'Englishness', for example, is posited as a contested category from the very start. First, the English are presented as different, but they are also implicated in, and are part of, the very place that they modify by being 'a blot'. Second, while a reader of *The Trend* might not have been able to detect any ambiguity in the beginning of the poem, the juxtaposition of the title 'The Costa San Giorgio' with 'we English' might have been received with scepticism by a British expat living in Florence, due to the fact that the Costa San Giorgio was located in the working-class district of Oltrarno. Admittedly, Gordon Craig had set up his theatre in that area,

55 Ibid.

and the Brownings' Casa Guidi was located nearby, but Loy herself was conscious of the fact that living in Oltrarno put her in an awkward position, that of someone who did and did not fully belong to the English community. Third, as Linda Kinnahan suggests, Loy's refusal to properly name the gate, Porta San Giorgio, and thus to make it clear to readers unfamiliar with Florence by quoting its name as a tourist guide would, points to a yet another addressee that would not need such indication — an English-speaking, but not necessarily English, resident of the city.[56] The uncertain first-person plural pronouns seem to probe and perform this condition, which demands the intersection and multiplication of a variety of audiences which, in turn, create different but related, interdependent textual communities.

'Costa Magic' is a narrative poem about an episode in Florentine life in which a sick girl named Cesira, considered 'bewitched', suffers not only from her illness but also from her father's tyranny; she is driven to the countryside in order to be diagnosed and cured of her disease — which is actually phthisis — by being brought into contact with an old tree. The deictic nature of the possessive adjective in the first line of the poem establishes a relationship of distance between the poetic voice and the object of its reflection, creating a narrative situation which immediately gives way to the voice of a first person, probably the father: his patriarchal desire to control is expressed by the deictics 'this one' and 'here'. The latter word, in its isolation, sounds like an injunction to come closer but at the same time remains suspended in the possibility of being appropriated by another speaker:

> Her father
> Indisposed to her marriage
> And a rabid man at that
> My most sympathetic daughter
> Make yourself a conception
> As large as this one
> Here
> But with yellow hair[57]

56 Linda A. Kinnahan, 'Mapping Florence: First Tour, Loy at Home', in *Mina Loy*, ed. by Churchill, Kinnahan, and Rosenbaum <https://mina-loy.com/chapters/italy-italian-baedeker/02-oltrarno-costa/> [accessed 9 January 2024].

57 Mina Loy, 'Costa Magic', in *Lost Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 12–14 (p. 12).

Suddenly, another 'I' emerges in the third stanza: a wife who is paying attention to both her husband and the goings-on surrounding Cesira's illness:

> While listening up I hear my husband
> Mumbling Mumbling
> Mumbling at the window[58]

The 'I' quickly turns into a 'we' that seems to indicate a community of neighbours ready to help the sick girl and follow the indications of the 'wise woman' rather than those of the doctor:

> The doctor Phthisis
> The wise woman says to take her
> So we following her instruction
> I and the neighbour
> Take her —
>
> The glass rattling
> The rain slipping
> I and the neighbour and her aunt
> Bunched together
> And Cesira
> Droops across the cab[59]

The discrepancy between scientific discourse and superstition which opens the stanza seems to vanish with the momentary agreement followed by collective action.[60] But immediately, the 'we' splits into 'I and the neighbour', and then becomes 'I and the neighbour and her aunt': it is one plus one plus one, no longer an undifferentiated 'us'. The poem here points, in Bonnie Costello's words, to 'the power of the first-person plural pronoun and alert[s] us, intentionally or not, to its dangers, probing the implications of its use'.[61] It rejects the romanticization of community, but the qualification of the 'we' also seems to suggest that an improbable, momentary, and ephemeral community may emerge in the poem out of a mixture of neighbourly

58 Ibid., p. 13.

59 Ibid.

60 For a discussion of the word 'Phthisis' in this poem, see Jannuzzi, 'Mongrel Rose', pp. 414–15.

61 Bonnie Costello, *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 3.

and familial ties — a community of purpose that may also include the speaking voice and the sick girl. They are 'bunched together' in a moment, forming an improbable new entity, making it possible for the voice to think of Cesira as 'my girl' — 'A wheel in a rut | Jerks back my girl on the padding | And the hedges into the sky'[62] — a possessive that modifies the significance of 'her father' in the first verse, thus instituting a community or even family of choice. This in turn allows the poem to end with an agreement about the 'we' in the penultimate stanza — 'Knowing she has to die | We drive home | To wait | She certainly does in time' — which may even be a worried realization that the ability to speak and act in the first person plural as the subjects of this particular community may still be the result of a complicity with the very cause of Cesira's condition, namely patriarchal culture.

The sequence 'Italian Pictures' begins with 'July in Vallombrosa', a reflection on British expatriates and Italian ladies recovering in a sanatorium in Vallombrosa, outside Florence, where the lyric subject, speaking in the first person singular, maintains a clear distance from its multiple objects and draws its epiphanic moment from a position of externality to the depicted groups, addressed in the second or third person singular. 'The Costa San Giorgio' and 'Costa Magic', on the other hand, perform the creation of communities that are changeable and require constant shifts of perspective, negotiating closeness and distance, communality and property, critique and complicity: they perform what Bonnie Costello sees as one of the fundamental abilities of poetry, namely to 'constantly modulat[e] among various "we's" and check […] one against the other'.[63] These shifting perspectives are expressed by the poems' creation of different audiences simultaneously, as in *Anglo-Mongrels*, but also by their refusal to present a solid, stable, collective entity.

The vacillation in the 'Italian Pictures' between the singular and plural first persons, and the uncertainties about the stability of a community based on national identity or national language, certainly reflects a number of questions pertaining to the local debates that Loy experienced in Florence: Loy's engagement with the Futurist group

62 Loy, 'Costa Magic', p. 14.

63 Costello, *Plural of Us*, p. 15.

dynamics, the language of their manifestos, and Marinetti's programmatic call to 'destroy the I in literature', which Gottfried Benn still identified in 1951 as one of the main features of modernist literature, and of modernist poetry in particular;[64] the public debates about the intersection between local, regional, and national identity in Tuscany and Italy; and the precarious or reluctant experience of belonging which characterized the Anglo-American expatriate community in Florence. However, it is also a marker of Loy's style more broadly.

Thus, performing the fundamental nature of lyric in its iterability through their shifting pronouns, multilingual prosody, and emphasis on the materiality of poetic language, Loy's poems open themselves up to multiple addressees. Although these addressees are entangled with one another and with the speakers through words rather than physically, to borrow Reuben Brower's 1951 formulation,[65] these entanglements hardly yield stable collectives or communities of readers. Instead, they are interrupted, they remain mobile and ephemeral, perhaps as the expression of an unfulfillable desire or as a resistance to the increasingly dogmatic communities of the twentieth century. Rephrasing Sean Pryor's assessment of the modernist debates about the efficacy of poetry in a 'modern fallen world' and its complicity with the political status quo, one could say that, considering the kind of communities emerging in Loy's poetry, 'the problem was not to decide whether poetry only imagines a beauty which can never exist, or instead makes a beauty which has not yet existed'[66] — but rather whether it created the spaces for voicing unofficial, ephemeral communities that already existed, thus turning a seemingly artificial and excessively aesthetic style relying on the materiality of poetry into a potentially political tool.

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64 Gottfried Benn, *Probleme der Lyrik* (Wiesbaden: Limes Verlag, 1951), pp. 15–16. The formulation, which Benn quotes in French, is the beginning of point 11 of Marinetti's *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista* (11 May 1912), which was printed in Italian and French as a broadsheet of the Direzione del Movimento Futurista, then published in the same year in *La Gazzetta di Biella* in Italian and in *Der Sturm* in German. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista*, in *Manifesti del Futurismo*, ed. by Viviana Birolli (Milan: Abscondita, 2008), pp. 58–64 (p. 61; publication details on p. 205).

65 Reuben Brower, 'The Speaking Voice', in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 211–18 (p. 212).

66 Pryor, *Poetry*, p. 6.

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