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UNFATHOMABLE POETICS: QUEER INTERPERSONALITY IN THE NEW YORK SCHOOL

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The New York School was a heterogeneous collective of artists that dealt with a startling number of themes in an equally diverse gamut of styles. It is then understandable that there is a certain informality or looseness to the group, as its members suffer the burden of being *too* inimitable, *too* incomparable, and too stubborn to be pinned down to just one ‘thing.’ If there is one ‘thing’ that can unite such disparate geniuses, it is that of an overwhelming desire to innovate, as the collective was characterized as “a mobilized grouping, like a school of fish, creatures who share a love for traveling in the same (avant-garde) currents” (Gray 543). But, more than that, as a community, it afforded some of its members the opportunity to express their otherwise threatened selves in a safe space. As most of the poets of the New York School were homosexual, a type of support network developed within the group. The amity of this gang of artists allowed for its queer constituents not only to exist safely but to develop and expand their poetics through the interpersonal relationships afforded by the gift of communal artistry.

Perhaps the most outgoing of these poets was the great Frank O’Hara. As a social busybody, this infectious desire to be with and around, seen and heard, understood and misunderstood by people permeates every line of O’Hara’s poetry. Many have remarked on the uncontrollable energy shooting through his poems that give them this wonderful semblance of being alive. O’Hara himself expressed an interest in letting his poems simply *be*.

The busy nature of O’Hara’s poems is nothing compared to the process that brought them about. As someone with an avowed interest in Abstract Expressionism, O’Hara valued the artistic process just as much as if not more than its product. As a result, the poets of the New York School found themselves embroiled in a sort of lived poetry, where the trivial goings-on of their lives could be suddenly immortalized in verse. Bruce Boone insists that “the writing of these

poets was a project for self-referentiality: a textual project, an act or event that displaced the subject into an object produced, making the production process itself its own referent" (69). O'Hara is then reproducing microcosms of lived experiences in his work, experiences that were facilitated by the presence of a community to interact with and respond to.

These microcosmic poems represent for Terrell Scott Herring an "alternative literary public sphere." Using Habermas' concept of a bourgeois public sphere, Herring positions O'Hara's poetry as an outgrowth of a de-intellectualized, culture-consuming postwar America. In his "Personism: A Manifesto," O'Hara outlines his plans for mediating this new attitude towards art, where "the literary public sphere has lost its cultural capital to the movies, pulp fiction, and brand-name labels" and poets must then "advertise their work as if it, too, were commodity" (Herring 419).

O'Hara then creates what Herring calls a "poetics of impersonality," where the poems are packed full of hyper-specific details and the minutiae of everyday life (414). This overabundance of personality is coded in such a way that it registers as impersonal, as it is so particular that it escapes identification or, heaven forefend, resonance. For Herring, then, "gay presence is simultaneously gay absence" in Frank O'Hara's poetry, as the speaker overdetermines the contents and context of the poem to such an extent that the reader, particularly a straight reader, would be left feeling the same way as they did before they engaged with the poem. It is then possible for the reader to consume the poem without its having "distracted him into feeling about the person" for whom the poem is written for (28). Media doesn't get much easier to digest than that.

Herring uses the "Poem [Lana Turner Has Collapsed!]" as an example of this impersonal personality. Following Michael Warner's suggestion that "mass subjectivity" is enabled by an "infatuation with mass disasters that destroy bodies (plane crashes, train wrecks, school shootings) and with minor disasters of the celebrity body (movie stars' weight gains or drug arrests)," Herring reads the poem as an embodiment of this fascination with bodies that are not our own (419). In the poem, the speaker is on their way to meet a friend when they spot a headline telling them that Lana Turner has collapsed. The speaker's thoughts then "turn to" Lana Turner, her location and her actions. The speaker's emotions are mediated through a negotiation with Lana Turner's circumstance; he only exists in relation to her. The poem ends with a collective "we" wishing Lana Turner well, urging her to "get up" (78). Herring avers that Lana Turner is "the disgraced body [that] succeeds in connecting a disembodied mass public through

print" (421). Lana Turner's misfortunes are what allow the speaker of the poem to regain their composure. It is only through the ritual sacrifice of *an other's* body that our own bodies can persist.

Herring positions O'Hara as the body being sacrificed for the continued survival of this "alternative literary public sphere." For him, "the irony of personism is that the moment O'Hara speaks of himself through the discourse of the alternative public sphere, he immediately loses his face—his identity—through the impersonal poetic medium," as the private is being made public and thus the self is being given up (425). But O'Hara does not die; he becomes instead a cipher: "Achieving depersonalization through the language of the public sphere, the anticonfessional poet reveals all, only to reveal nothing about himself" (425). O'Hara martyrs himself as a poetical subject so that homosexuality can exist in the public sphere as something both hidden and discovered, just as he presents himself in his poetry.

If O'Hara's poetry is "a cruising ground on which men come together through impersonal intimacy," what does that make the New York School clique? (422). Is there a necessity for this covert homosexuality? Or are the poets allowed to exist as exuberantly as their poems threaten to be? A small peak into the nightlife of this mob of queer ebullience could provide us with an answer. But before the curtain is lifted on the outings of these poets, it would be prudent to examine them in their natural habitat.

John Ashbery has earned the reputation of a poet whose "language can, most of the time, only be trusted to be *untrustworthy*" (Fink 1). Ashbery's "Some Trees" has been described as an "elusive, mysterious piece" that "resists [the readers'] understanding" (Silverberg 42). The poem is replete with contradictory statements such as "arranging by chance," "To meet as far this morning / From the world as agreeing / With it," and "A silence already filled with noises" that Mark Silverberg is in favor of not solving or reconciling, instead asserting that these paradoxes are meant to be "savored" (43). For Silverberg, these enigmas are "part of the oddly inviting impermeability that absorbs so many of Ashbery's readers" (43-44).

But this charming obtuseness might have a grimmer purpose than coyly beckoning the reader onward with a sly smile that dares them to unwrap its infinite layers. Silverberg includes readings from John Shoptaw and Vernon Shetley where "the poem's reticence marks the desire it dare not speak aloud under the regime of homophobia and surveillance in which it was written" (45). But Silverberg argues against this interpretation, observing that the "you and I" of the poem are never clearly defined. It is possible then that the "you and I" refer

to the reader and the speaker of the poem:

On this reading, the arranged chance meeting is the encounter of the poem itself, a space that “surrounds” and includes both reader and author (“A silence already filled with noises, / A canvas on which emerges / A chorus of smiles...”). What is being protected is more than a secret human love affair; it is also a love affair with language, with a poetic process that is unwilling to reduce poems to paraphrasable meanings and simultaneously to consumable products. (45)

Ashbery is keeping his poetry from being consumed as a cultural artifact. This is quite unlike O’Hara’s unwilling willfulness to be subsumed into the ether of his readership and passive-aggressively placating their desire for easily digestible goods. Where O’Hara sacrifices himself at the altar of pop art, Ashbery, as Silverberg illustrates, “protects his work against the pitfalls of the contemporary avant-garde, against a public eager for artistic products and personalities to consume” (45).

In Ashbery’s poetry, readers see someone who is deeply implicated in the politics of sexuality and is ever conscious of the encroaching danger at the outer limits of his poetry. In short, someone fraught with worry and uncomfortable with the notions a heteronormative society might have of his body and the bodies they associate with. This is an altogether different person from the one who experiences gay encounters in the company of fellow homosexuals with whom he has forged a bond through the interpersonality of a queer community that grew out of and within the New York School.

The glimpse into the double life of New York School poets comes, funnily enough, in the form of a poem: Frank O’Hara’s “At The Old Place.” In it, O’Hara describes how he and a couple of friends decide to go to The Old Place, a gay dance-bar in Greenwich Village. The suggestion to go there is not spoken but mouthed, and even then in code: “L G T T H O P” (Let’s go to the Old Place). It is not safe to shout suggestions about going to gay bars if not already in a gay bar. It is so unsafe, in fact, that the code survives encrypted and untranslated in O’Hara’s poem. We can intuit the meaning of the code by reading the rest of the poem, but the fact that it is presented as is serves as a gesture at the transgressive nature of the events being described. It is also perhaps a spiteful jab at straight readers, tasking them with *working* for the meaning of the code instead of simply handing it to them as is expected from something that has been produced in a market with a heteronormative bias as a cultural artifact to be consumed by privileged heterosexual subjects.

On their way to the bar, most of O’Hara’s friends “malingers.” One of these friends is referred to as “Ashes,” and then “J.A.” It would not

be too much of a stretch to suggest this “Ashes”/“J.A.” to be John Ashbery himself. Much like in his poems, Ashes “malingers” instead of “dart[ing] ahead,” like Alvin does. He is not eager to throw himself further into a public, heteronormative space even if it means eventually reaching a private, queer one.

But, once he gets there, he cuts loose. “Wrapped in Ashes’ arms [O’Hara] glide[s].” Ashes no longer “malingers” by himself, but “glides” across the dance floor with his fellow poet. The space they have created for themselves allows them to blossom, unencumbered by the judgment of others. Ashes feels comfortable enough to exclaim, upon the arrival of another group, one that had previously declined to accompany them, “I knew they were gay the minute I laid eyes on them!” He discloses not only his sexuality but the sexuality of others, a potentially dangerous and even lethal act under other circumstances, circumstances thankfully not provided by gay bars, circumstances that could regrettably be described as “normal.”

Boone characterizes the poem as “a displacement of connections, [which] will be understood by those with a common experience; not by the dominant other, for whom it will be simply idle chatter with no meaning at all” (86). He contrasts this building of a “community code” with a poem of Ginsberg’s, “Chances ‘R,’” which also happens to involve a gay bar:

The Ginsberg poem, we are tempted to say, shows a certain kinship with what Sartre has called “the spirit of seriousness.” And to be sure, the speaker seems painfully distant from the scene he describes. The terms of the description are hardly friendly, and the gay men dancing are “fairy boys,” “gay sisters,” with no “religion but the / old one of cocksuckers.” Such a language characterizes the viewpoint of the dominant “other”—an outsider. The speaker *observes* rather than participating in the scene, from a juridical standpoint that echoes the terms of male supremacy (85).

Ginsberg exemplifies for Boone a case of internalized homophobia that does nothing to build a community of support for fellow peers, something he describes as Ginsberg’s “defining reluctance to be politically homosexual” (85).

Boone typifies O’Hara’s poetry as a “trivialization” of homosexuality, drawing parallels to Frantz Fanon’s colonized subject. The homosexual subject, like the colonized subject, is afraid directly to confront its oppressors and so directs its aggression towards itself:

Postulating a gay subtext to these poems would help make comprehensible one of the otherwise rather puzzling features of the poetry: O’Hara’s constant tendency to present symbols of deep and violent pain and then ‘contextualize’ them, either turning them against himself in minimizing them or else by parodying his own feelings about

the pain. The violence of the language of these poems is first of all *repressed* violence, as if gay language were being repressed by straight language. (75)

The violence being repressed in O'Hara's poetry is the one that would be done to his oppressors. In fact, violence is done *to* O'Hara's poetry by any reading that neglects to take into account this gay language that struggles with itself to surface. Boone suggests that an "oppositional gay language" is "disguised, and makes itself available to the repression of later critical discourse" (78). He is referring to the "dominant art-institutional language" that would have been available to O'Hara, as someone who received an upper-class education and was employed in a museum (78). Boone notices a tendency to conflate "talking gay" with the "art talk" of the period, a trend that allows O'Hara's gay language to be swept under the umbrella of the dominant discourse and appropriated

Boone goes on to hypothesize that O'Hara's awareness of his art's becoming commodified and, indeed, his own complicity in the process of commodification as a curator for the Museum of Modern Art goes beyond any sort of stubborn adherence to irony and contradiction. For Boone, O'Hara's relation to the machinery of capitalism is that of morbid curiosity, pointing out that, at the time, homosexuality was thought of and talked about in the vein of prostitution, in terms of "tricks" and "numbers," and was subsequently fetishized and commodified (79).

This reification of the sexual desires inherent to the queer community frustrates O'Hara. Kevin Floyd posits that this historical vantage point, a queer one that brings to the forefront the questions of subjectivity elided by Marxism in the search for totality, is the key to rethinking and ultimately rescuing the dialectic of reification and totality from the grasp of infinite abstraction and dawdling metaphysics.

O'Hara is then interrogating this violent reification of desire in his dear, heretofore unsullied queer community which functioned as an escape from capitalism by having his text occupy the role of a surrogate for his queer body, as both are being subject to the process of commodity fetishism. It is no surprise that Boone finds it so frustrating that the queerness of O'Hara's poetry was so often stripped away or disregarded entirely by early scholarly work on his oeuvre.

The importance of historical context to any reading of O'Hara's poetry can therefore not go unsaid. More than just the key to understanding the biographical aspects of his poetry, history is put at the forefront of John Lowney's analyses of O'Hara's work. For Lowney, O'Hara is a medium through which history can be interrogated.

O'Hara becomes a way of discovering historically situated modes of desire through his "compel[ling of] readers to continually [...] decide on what is significant while concurrently reflecting on the grounds for such a decision" (257).

If it can be accepted that O'Hara's texts functioned as an interrogation of the processes constructing history and reifying literature and queerness, it cannot be denied that the altercation that ensued between the interrogator and the interrogated was a gruesome one. In "Personism: A Manifesto," O'Hara blithely confesses that what he is proposing could quite possibly be the "death of literature as we know it" (29). "As we know it" could here correspond to the aforementioned depreciated state of literature in the bourgeois public sphere that Terrell posits, where it is stripped of all cultural capital, worthless to a society that hungers for easily digestible morsels of media. Except that O'Hara's "alternative literary public sphere" is little more than a caricature of the bourgeois one, so this heavily apocalyptic proclamation (delivered with his characteristic insouciance) would probably be reserved for capital L Literature, the whole of it.

There is a type of frustration displayed in O'Hara's poetry borne out of a desire to escape from the discourses he is currently, unavoidably contributing to and being produced by. He mentions Artaud and how he was supposed to be the one to bring about the death of literature, but concludes that "for all its magnificence, his polemical writings are not more outside literature than Bear Mountain is outside New York State" (27). Multu Konuk Blasing latches on to this unfulfilled, eternally postponed eschatology. O'Hara knows he is doomed to the same fate as Artaud, but finds a way of putting off this destiny, however briefly. Using "Biotherm" as an example of this, Blasing imagines the poem as

a sort of digestive system, and what we experience while reading it is the sense of the passage of time through the man writing it. Everything is in flux—ingested, processed, and voided by the poet's body. And if a poem is not the process of this passage, it is inert and alien—waste or excrement. (57)

The excrement is the literature that O'Hara cannot, despite all of his ostentation and intimidating posturing, get rid of. He then endeavors to create this new type of literature, this *negation* of literature, where he "[talks] faster and faster and [piles] up more and more minute personal details, more and more intimate revelations, and more and more physical 'speech'—all in an attempt to escape the finality or 'death' of literature" (59). But this, for Blasing, ultimately is merely "another way of writing literature" (59).

Why, then, does O'Hara continue to write? Why doesn't he simply

use the phone instead of writing another doomed poem? Using Winnicott's theories on child psychology, Caleb Crain recuperates from the outwardly happy accidents of O'Hara's poetry a volatile subject in search of something it can never hope to attain: a true self. For Crain, O'Hara's poems are where "O'Hara plays along the border of two worlds: between on the one hand compliance, the false self's accumulation of hollow and arbitrary detail, and on the other hand what Winnicott called 'fantasying'—suppressed processes of desire that may have lost touch with the outside world" (300).

To make sense of this we must understand that Crain thinks of O'Hara as someone who has created a host of false selves in order to hide his gay self, someone who has employed a defense mechanism that has destroyed that which it aimed to protect. O'Hara then subjects himself to a "willful disorganization" that Crain prescribes as the most useful tool in "resist[ing] compliance" (306). But O'Hara lacks a proper object through which he can demonstrate this "willful disorganization," citing an example of Winnicott's:

Winnicott described a one-year-old who at first was tormented by her destructive impulses. She cried nonstop as she bit spatulas and threw them to the ground. Winnicott allowed her to bite his knuckles without punishing her; he then introduced her to her toes. She was fascinated. (303-304)

The introduction of an object that cannot be gotten rid of, a toy that cannot be broken no matter how hard it is played with, is what O'Hara lacks, because "he is never confident he can hate the person behind [his poems]," ostensibly the ideal object of O'Hara's "willful disorganization" (304). He is doomed to that wasteland mistaken as providence between "compliance" and "fantasying," willfully disorganizing himself, spreading himself thin, too thin, in futile attempts at recovering the unrecoverable. Such is the beautiful failure of O'Hara's poetry.

Cain uses O'Hara's "Mediations in an Emergency" as an example of this "transitional object" he is forced to content himself with (305). Cain is disturbed by the notion put forth by O'Hara in the poem that "'becom[ing] someone other' is in fact not as easy as 'choos[ing] a piece of shawl and my dirtiest suntans.'" Not only does the speaker of the poem not know who they are becoming, it is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine the possibility of recuperating their lost identity. Cain worries that O'Hara might descend into a madness precipitated by the lack of an object, a madness we can catch a glimpse of in Blasing's reading of "Biotherm," where O'Hara voraciously gobbles up the words in his poems signifying food as an act of consolidating the signifier and the signified.

And so all O'Hara has to keep him company in this heightened

state of self-lessness are the charms in his pocket in “Personal Poem,” “an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave [him] and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case when [he] was in Madrid.” These lucky charms represent for Cain the magic of possibility, the promise of a future brought about by chance. For Michael Clune, however, these charms are representative of an antidote to the free market discourse that dominated the postwar climate of the time. Clune thinks of O’Hara as a poet “shopping without a list,” that is to say a poet who chooses to include things in his poems based on an “instant response to the immediate environment rather than by the speaker’s immediate fixed values, desires, or beliefs” (183).

Clune avers that “In choosing without knowing why, O’Hara enters into a direct relation with society” (187). O’Hara gives himself over to the flow of a social organism in a boldly defiant move towards a collective. O’Hara’s revolutionary praxis is an effacing of the self for the whole of the selves.

It is this selfless self-lessness that functions as the driving force behind the communal project of the New York School. O’Hara’s reliance on others, on interpersonality, for a self he can no longer have is ameliorated by his sacrifice *for* others, *for* interpersonality, through the painful exploration of the self he does not have. He martyrs himself for the creation of queer spaces and an interrogation of the material conditions under which he lives. O’Hara’s poetry is doomed to failure, but, as much as he would hate to admit it, it is the sentiment that counts.

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