

GRIEVANCE, GRIEF, SELF-GRATIFICATION, GRATITUDE AND GRACE: INTERNALIZING THE DEMONS

"I deeply distrust this tool I work with — language." — M. NourbeSe Philip

"I don't really have contempt for the word. I have contempt when the word is used as the glue of something." — Meredith Monk

"I hate speech." — Robert Grenier

"... una cosa hálló & sácro por conclusion mui cierta: que siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio: & de tal manera lo siguió: que junta mente començaro. crecieron. & florecieron. & despues jūta fue la caida de entambos."

"... one thing I find and draw as a most certain conclusion, that language was always the companion of empire, and followed it in such a way that jointly they began, grew, flourished; and then, together, collapsed." — Antonio de Nebrija, Grammatica de la lengua castellana, 1492

And for ther is so gret diversite

*In Englissh and in wrytyng of oure tonge,
So prey I God that non myswrite the,
ne the mys metre for defaute of tonge.*

And red whereso thou be, or elles songe

That thou be understonde, God I biseche! — Geoffrey Chaucer, Troilus and Criseide

So that at last possibl - even if unbearable to bear - but bearing - still bearing and at least & at last no(w) possibl - what yesterday was impossibl - a pathway no possibl - no(w) possibl - she leaving him new at this door at this threshold this light of forever w/in her. bearing down. — Kamau Brathwaite, "Kumina" from Born to Slow Horses.

Is it even possible to use language for "good"? Is "use" the wrong word? Language viewed as a tool is certainly as perilous as ... language. Is hating speech hate speech? We've grieved over words in order to throw off the imperious, to liberate a particular use of words by making that use consubstantial with personal and social transformation. We've grieved over words to liberate language from our use of language, from its use of us; to decontaminate the language itself; to

stop imitating what we say (Louis Zukofsky's *80 Flowers*, 80 8-line poems, 5 words per line, not a word of speech,) or to undistort thought transcription; to open a neo-Cratylist, Kukai-esque word reality; to decondition, undo convention; to break the chains, or merely musically rattle them; to keep breathing page by page, to stop breath regimentation; to confess formalist fundamentalism; to arrogate the arrogated (" ... I would have to appropriate these white centuries. I would have to make them mine ... otherwise I would have no place in any scheme." — James Baldwin); to extol inimitable everyday talk; to be vapidly provocative, superciliously unimaginative; to hurt in return, de-traumatize through shock; to revile rapacity; to close the gap between horror and its expression; to explode any objective correlative; to be entirely unbeguiled; we grieve over words to care for them, love through them, depending and dependently.

Is it gratitude that's becoming impossible to profess?

Remove all prosody, and there you have ... a pure poem. The impossible making possible. And so? Or write only the prosody, a so-called sound poem? Prosody is so inherent to our experience that any imitation may sound perfectly horrid (A. Pope's *Sound and Sense*):

*True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
The sound must seem an echo to the sense:
Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
But when loud surges lash the sounding shoar,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar.
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labours, and the words move slow;
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flies o'er th' unbending corn, and skims along the main.*

Can there be a prosody that can do no harm? Perhaps a non-impulsive prosody (even though "pulse" is what makes prosody *prosody* ... or its eschewal.) Prosody as attention to its point of arising; before it exists, before it has "struck." Not a matter of tinkering with effects; prosody can't be applied, nor is it automatic, nor a matter of *grace*. Can it be taught? Or appropriated, as in oratory, branding or campaigning (as in "stop the steal")? It's all happened before. When truth becomes the phantasm, as in Renaissance magic, we say whatever we want the perception to be.

Perception is but one of five frivolities.

A parallel question: can compassion be taught. No, it cannot. But we can be *surprised*. The more attuned, interoceptively, the greater the empathy. (It was the extemporaneous over-the-top thankful response of the man in the subway for whom I opened the emergency exit without thinking, as he caught the train just in time, that carried us both away.)

The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis is among the elements of composition of poetry. Thus *stress!*

Whether cultivated or connate, as revelation or violation, language lies within, in conspiracy. How protest its embodiment with a language historically committed to atrocity, or with forms formerly, obviously, oppressive? From within.

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In *The Descent of Alette*, Alice Notley undercuts the mode of the story-telling itself, using dialogic phrases to replace the male, mercenary convention of "epic" with an *epic*.

Of course an inelastic ear must disregard meter altogether (and become its casualty.) Conversely, measure can be embraced to in order to subvert its mores. Emily Dickinson chose to interact with — not eschew — metric convention. Warring against epic and patriarchy, associating through-composed iambic pentameter with confinement and subjection, she wrote stanzas that intermix hymn and iamb. Although Walt Whitman professed that the soul was "too whole and pure for mechanical assistance and measure," and although he (in his essay "Real Grammar") claimed the English language is "grandly lawless like the race who uses it and . . . breaks out of the little laws to enter truly the higher ones," he tended to draw on the dactyl to carry emotions of commonality, and the iamb to drive home individuality, while anaphora and syntactic recurrence are rampant in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman was a captive of the prevailing ethos. He abhorred both slavery and abolitionism as divisive, and, as a gradualist, was in no position to radically critique his nation's promise of democracy or his own Panglossian vision of progress. The promise remains impossible (though Whitman captured it writing) — even the most sanguine empathy founders in the face of normalized dehumanization, "the lives of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the enslaved."

In her essay *Venus in Two Acts* Saidiya Hartman tells a story impossible to tell, of a girl, "Venus," one of two girls murdered on the Middle Passage by Captain John Kimber on board the slave ship *Recovery* in 1791. The story is impossible to tell because there is no biographical trace of the girl, the telling might amount to no more than a re-victimization ("committing further violence in my own act of narration" "replicating the grammar of violence" "delighting and titillating") and the *actual* horror is unspeakable. "Why subject the dead to new dangers and to a second order of violence?" Yet, respecting the limits of the historical record — the erasure of the two girls — again "consigns them to oblivion" and confines (silences) the narrator under the same brutal power and authority that has sanctioned the wasting of lives. Hartman's intensive interrogation of the archive, the narrative form, and her own motivation generate a litany of questions that constitute the telling of the story, to the extent it can be told, as a history of the present, "the afterlife of property" and the "as-yet-incomplete project of freedom."

Hartman closes her essay with a litany of reparative approaches. She names her narrative method "critical fabulation." Critical fabulation calls upon "the conditional temporality of "what could have been" ... exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive ... and the "transparency of sources" as fictions of history." "Writing history within and against the archive." Listening for "the mutters of oaths and cries of the commodity." "... flattening the levels of narrative discourse

and confusing narrator and speakers ... to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices. The outcome of this method is a *recombinant narrative*." She amplifies the impossibility by amplifying "the instability and discrepancy of the archive" to exhume the voices of the two girls, and write a "free state" in which they can be heard speaking. in their persons, as though none of *this* had ever happened, or ever could. A "social sacrament."

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The marine law of "the general average" is a law of *jettison*. If a ship is in distress, cargo can be deliberately thrown overboard for the greater good of the ship, and compensation can be received for the underwritten "sacrificed" goods on the basis of their value *had they safely arrived*. In 1781, the captain of slave ship *Zong* "jettisoned" 133 lives in order to make an insurance claim. The King's Bench hearing treated the circumstance not as a murder case but as a civil proceeding bearing on a property dispute. Also not placed on trial was the norm of justice or contract law that procured people as a type of transactable money and recuperable value, nor the globalizing, actuarial, credit-driven, interest-bearing, finance capital revolution insidiously transforming 18th century citizen-subjects into monetized Selves, all of which, as organizing principles, allowed the *Zong* captain to read the general average like an invitation to massacre.

M. NourbeSe Philip's epic poem-wake titled *Zong!* is an impossible telling, by not-telling, of this story that can't be told, by letting it tell itself (her undergoing of what happened, of the historical record, of her own writing process, and her intrinsic critique of language) and by telling precisely how the story is not to be told, i.e., the material of book itself. To tell the story by not telling, Philip locked herself in the text of the legal decision (*Gregson v. Gilbert — insured v. insurer*) "the mother document" "the magma" "the tombstone which speaks" "in the same way men, women, and children were locked in the holds of the slave ship *Zong*." In one telling of her process, to make the legal record make the sounds it was unable to make, in sympathy with those mutilated and murdered, the poet acts as the perpetrator: "I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object — create semantic mayhem, until my hands bloodied from so much killing and cutting, reach into the stinking, eviscerated innards, and like some seer, sangoma, or prophet who, having sacrificed an animal for signs and portents of a new life, or simply life, reads the untold story that tells itself by not telling."

A historicist poem that is nondelusional would not be a further fabrication distancing, distorting, desecrating its subject matter. This is *Zong!'s* impossibility. Just as the law, magically, willed people to be property, *Zong!* would miraculously return their humanity. Its "recombinant antinarrative" re-sounds the massacre, resurfaces ("exaqua") the bodies, impossibly identifying the unnamed drowned, as it at once establishes a long contemporaneity with the exorbitantly hypercapitalized present, our nonsynchronous now and continued exclusion of "New World Africans" from systems of value. It's real — completed — once the reader is implicated. She doesn't tell the story impossible to tell, except fully, as the song that *Zong!* is.

Murder is a double homicide which includes the soul of the murderer.

Here I'm not citing the poem, just as Philip could not actually witness what happened on the *Zong*.

Spellbinding is the evolution of her distrust of language ... *Zong!*'s point of debarkation. "Words break into sound, return to their initial and originary phonic sound — grunts, plosives, labials — is this perhaps how language might have sounded at the beginning of time? ... There are times in the final book, *Ferrum*, when I feel as if I am writing a code and, oddly enough, for the very first time since writing chose me, I feel that I *do* have a language— this language of pure sound fragmented and broken by history... And, in its fragmentation and brokenness the fragment becomes mine. Becomes me. Is me. The ultimate question on board the *Zong* is what happened? Could it be that language happened? The same letters in the same order mean different things in different languages: *ague* and *ague* — the first English, the second Yoruba. The former means bodily shaking in illness, the latter, to fast. Take a letter away and a new word in a different language is born. Add a letter and the word loses meaning. The loss of language and meaning on board the *Zong* levels everyone to a place where there is, at times, no distinction between languages — everyone, European and African alike, has reverted, it appears, to a state of pre-literacy. This reversion is a reversion to precursory prosody (a *ta 'wil* or *apeiron* event, if you will) although bearing all that has happened (especially the horrific) within it, and especially the duplicitous history of the English language. A further chronological impossibility and dimensionality, the depth of tone of *deuil*. The course we each run when uttering a word, any word, is the viewing of 133 bodies being thrown to their liquid graves through a porthole, one by one, today, before language ever existed. All at once.

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Poetic burden of grievance can be against the history of one's language, whether ancestral or imposed; the language's inhering hierarchies, power structure or prejudices of race, gender, class, aporophobia, nativism, ephebiphobia, political party affiliation, ableism, audism, attire, accent and even xenophilia or self-execration. The poet can distrust the authority of language over reality, silence and those unable to speak out. On the other hand, the burden can be the limitations of language itself, its insufficiencies in expressing our emotional and mental being, and the inescapable misunderstandings, misinformation and misappropriations. Protest can be against restrictive poetic conventions ("lyric" is a typical target,) word-ordering and grammar as regimentation, or the despotic demands of innovation against the backdrop of everyday transparent, oblivious, unimplicated use of language — freedom of speech, free verse, self-expression, viewpoint, conceit, idiolectic indulgence, personal imperiousness, what have you.

"I'd rather risk destroying the whole language than bore myself." Clark Coolidge

What makes a poem possible is necessity's insight into form and purpose as co-constituents. And the need, in my opinion, is a matter of bringing things into balance, aligning with one's nature; radical only in this sense — the greater the imbalance, the more extreme the aligning forces must *seem*. "Balanced" in terms of, say, Diné *Hózhó*, beauty of our actions in relation to others and the environment, or Tibetan Medicine's 2 flowers and 3 fruits of good health, long life, wisdom (nonconfusion,) prosperity and happiness. I.e., prosody as prosody of the impossible

(what prosody calls for, begs of us, that it provide) — not the "desiccated subject matter" and anodyne, boxed-up poem, as conventionally taught.

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In *Autobiography of Death*, South Korean poet Kim Hyesoon writes a poem for each of the 49 days of mourning during which the spirit roams the liminal space between death and reincarnation. Although the book was written "for all the unjust deaths that have occurred in South Korea," the precipitating event was the 2014 MV Sewol Ferry Disaster in which 250 high school students on a field trip drowned as the ship's captain and most of the crew abandoned ship to be rescued. The structure of death that we remain living in." She speaks as a multitude, "in the structure of death that we remain living in," without a mother tongue (as available literary conventions are prescribed by men) in a medium her translator Don Mee Choi calls "expelled tongue."

*Water collects in your coffin
You've already left the coffin*

...

*So after you've gone don't go, don't
So after you've come don't come, don't*

...

*When you're pressed up against the window like a cat and say open the door open the
door, they say don't come don't come*

...

A letter will arrive from a place where your reply can't be sent

*Like the days before you were born, a widely wide letter without yesterday or
tomorrow will arrive*

...

"Really, it felt as if the ink inside a bottle as big as the Pacific Ocean was oscillating. I wept, wondering how I would ever use up all that ink, writing about all the unjust deaths, with my tiny pen as skinny as a butterfly's hind legs?"

Perfectly implicated, incriminated in *Autobiography of Death* is the politics of political repression, government/industry collusion, the neoliberal practices of deregulation that failed to enforce the safety measures for the Sewol Ferry, and the official abdication of responsibility for the botched rescue operation that was the ultimate cause of so many deaths.

From the last poem of Kim's book:

"Women's language is a language of death. The body of a woman poet is a form of text. But it's a text of the deaf, mute, and blind. That's because the mother-tongue sits on men's tongues. Listen

to the body's speech—you hear the hiccups, coughs, phlegm bubbling up. It may be that women's or death's song is sung only in vowels, without the consonants. They say the name of Father, God, is made only of consonants, but the language of women, death, is made up of sounds that come before or after language. The sounds of vowels can be made with lungs, diaphragm, kidneys, anus, genitals, and heart. Vowels are connected to the holes of the body." "Pain is physical and rhythmic, whereas anguish is mental and melodic. My pain had no meaning. The only thing that lived in that meaningless space was rhythm. Rhythm is bodiless; it exists alone like the planetary orbits that keep the stars of the universe in motion, allowing us to be born then ruthlessly discarding us. The pains that came to me were the mere pains sent by the gigantic rhythm, then forgotten by it. Eventually I realized that I needed to look directly into the face of rhythm that turns the wheel of time, the rhythm that, moreover, doesn't exist. And I thought to myself that I needed to excavate the faceless face with language, excavate the face with the rhythm embodied in language."

(And this language is not *language-specific*.)

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Egyptian/American poet Marwal Helal practices a mode she calls "the Arabic," writing English as right-to-left script. From her poem *WHO REAL?:*

*lol
well are unwell the why is it
unwell are well the and
duress under
11:11 is it
many am i
air the in miles thousand*

sound a without poem a make to trying

*words english of number the counting of tired grew i wrote i
capture to takes it
another in one
writing of tired grown have i now but
limitations inherent your towards*

*compassion
yes
have i
it*

*up woke you
iraq in
you among dull the
metaphor a is that think still*

*storm / desert am i then hello well
up wake woke the watch and dawn at sill your on sit i
gender had sandman the thought you haha
eye your out sleep the wipe i*

*evr nevr was iraq :news breaking)
spreading creamcheese your on waiting
(democracy cube ice free BPA infused charcoal*

*species Invasive i
Ante i
body
language own your in you*

*how look
light we
n
language
we so
fly*

Has there ever been an egalitarian language? The *Haudenosaunee* (Iroquois Confederacy, The Great Law of Peace) was not formed from a history of nonviolence, rather for protection in a warring culture of fear and intertribal slave raiding; a confederacy facilitated by the common Iroquoian language of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk,) Oneyoteaka (Oneida,) Onoñda'gega', Gayogohono (Cayuga,) Onandowaga (Seneca) and Skarù·rę? (Tuscarora) Nations. Old Tibetan developed as a dharmic language based on compassion (its overspreading now benefitting the entire globe) at a time when the military of the Tibetan Kingdom was powerful enough to exact tribute from China, even capturing its capital (Chang'an) in 763.

Is multilingualism ideal or detrimental for the development of democracy? Slavers separated speakers of the same African language in order to thwart rebellion. America supposedly celebrates the multicultural. Although yet to pass into law, a "well-intentioned" amendment (S.163) has been repeatedly brought before the New York State legislature that would make English the official state language (along with yogurt as the official state snack.)

Non-populous dominance? It takes but another, a neighbor or a brother, to condescend. Scales of empire, supreme swings? Given amply propitious conditions, what people wouldn't ascend — why have U.S. Americans, of all people — a people of all peoples — not done otherwise?

Was the AngloSaxonJute language that we now speak varieties of (Ansaxute, English, Angluish) doomed from the start to be the speech of a duplicitous, unfree people — as the three Germanic tribes, hired as mercenaries in 449, set sail to protect Britons from Picts as the Roman army withdrew, in sooth secretly planning to plunder?

Was raw, brainwashable, amalgamative, stressed-out, gung-ho, barbequed, despiteous, defeasible, likerous, plain-old, tortious, backstabbing, blockbuster, blowhard, beorht, lush, commodious, jumbo, ælmihtig, snottor, edgewise, chop-chop English ... rotten from the start? A scarcely-inflected, glitched, opossumed, rear-ended, rodeod, railroaded, ketchup-coated, easy to spread, come as you are, no dimwit let up, fried, zombie-owndom, halig, high-falutin', beautician shootout? I.e., this suspenseful, peaceably accessorized, orthographically beguiling, bittersuet, engolashed, anywise brainstrum.

Shall we begin or commence the story of vehicular English? Shall I aim at the start or start at the aim?

Of course the checkered prosody of English is commensurate with the ins and outs of its cultural history (under the principle of vibration/volition-indivisibility.) No buts about it. But, is one a consequence of the other? Although the two (prosody and culture) are intertwined, they can yet be teased apart — as ontogeny continues to mimic phylogeny, as cause continues to compel effects and we can speak of language karma, simply remove experience; just listen to unjustness, to what is; the sound of the word no poet agrees to: *pristine* — a *tantric* approach, transforming the toxins (too late to renounce or avoid them.)

The same question asked of the origin of language — to what extent is it intrinsic or acquired, nature or nurture — can be asked of the acoustic properties and repercussions (i.e., *prosody*) of a particular language. In this regard, in my own writing, I've used two practices: "reEnglish" and "undiscovery." These practices were presented in a 2016 libretto titled E-V-E-R-Y-O-N-E. Underlying questions were posed as adversely as possible: "is English an inherently commercial, mercenary, discursive, duplicitous tongue, or is that just human nature?" "are volition and vibration indeed co-constitutive?" "who wouldn't choose to rule the world instead of being ruled over or overruled?" "is it not obvious that today's economic, ecological and inequity crises direct consequents of the sonic and connotative qualities of superpower English?" — questions asked in order to impossibly, experientially, as a multilingual cast of 30 performers, "re-tune, detox and de-delude our tongue, imbuing it with heretofore unheard of inferences, moods, admixtures and admonishments." The libretto includes a series of "reparative narratives" that locate decisive moments in time when English (as a character) sealed its (headlong) hegemonic fate ... including power over its "own" people. To offer one instance:

Of the several hundred children shipped to Virginia in sixteen nineteen, of the one hundred sixty five children whose names were recorded, only twelve were still alive in sixteen twenty five.

Of the laws sanctioned by the Second Charter of the Virginia Company, twenty five of thirty seven articles prescribed capital punishment— principally intended to prevent new world workers from gazing beyond fortress walls into the frightfully novel where they could only see roome enough, plenty, liberty and classless Algonquin ease.

*You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse: the red plague rid you,
For learning me your language!*

— Caliban to Prospero

From Marianne Moore's poem titled *Poetry*:

*I too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all
this fiddle.*

*Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
discovers that there is in
it after all, a place for the genuine.*

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While there is a massive amount of research examining the effects of trauma on language development, few studies focus on language development itself as traumatic. Moving on from "motherese" — (or IDS, infant-directed speech,) the pre-linguistic swaddling of an infant in affectionate sound-play, characterized by hyperarticulation, extra-phonemic vocables, melodic contours and exaggerated prosodic features, such as higher and wider pitch range, slower speaking rate, sing-song repetition, longer pauses, facial and gestural dramatization — can be a startling process, as the range-of-all-possible-phones reduces to a handful of preferential, reinforced speech sounds, as corrective feedback takes over, as learning pressures mesh with innate language capacity and the pressure to perform properly intensifies, as sound-streams break down into word segmentation, as speech rhythms regiment mouth movement, as the infant begins to subserve grammar and the brain-wide playground becomes impounded as Broca and Wernicke's areas, it's all too easy to assume that, as language appears impossible to not learn, that we do so without ingraining any developmental resentment. The burden of the original expulsion from the garden, from pure vibration, the fall from grace and complete inconceivable comprehension into "communication," developmentally reiterated, already underway at conception, as we were already able to discriminate, in utero, between native and non-native vowel sounds.

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As a final note, it's most fitting to cite the writing of James Baldwin ... not as an attempt to reconcile all resentments or heal-over irremediable wounds, rather as a testament to an impossible integrity. At length from his essay *Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare*:

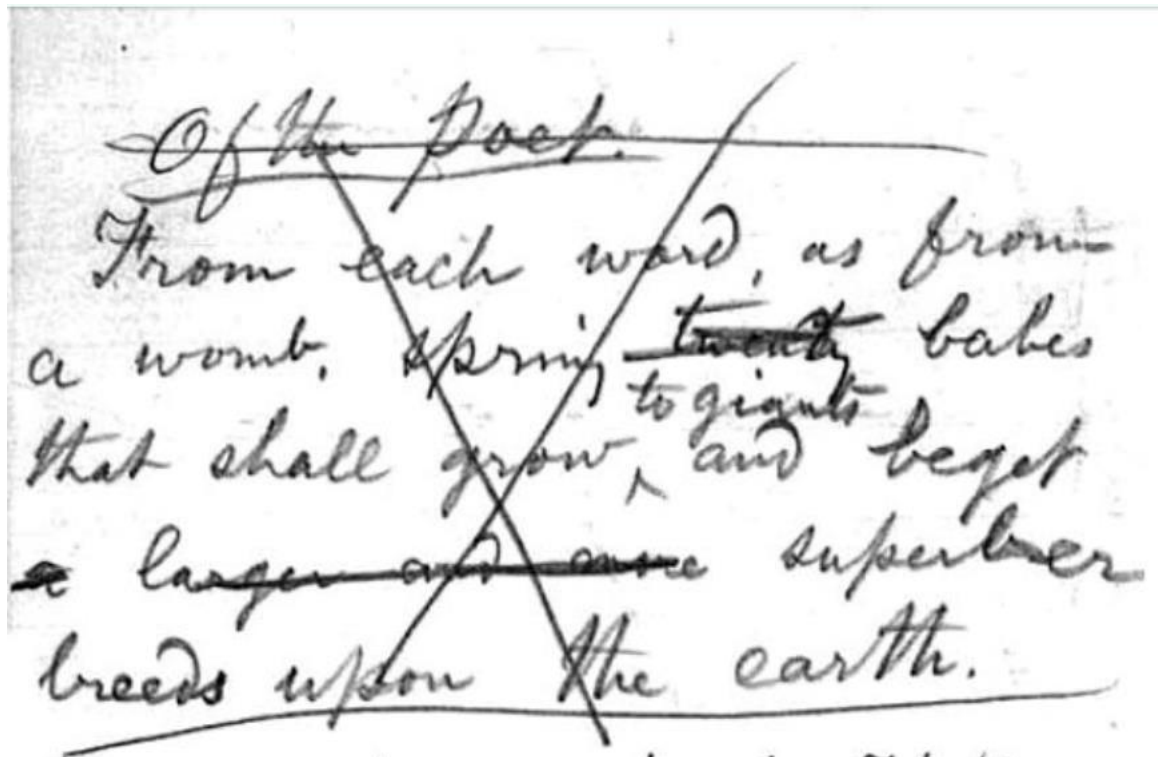
"In my most anti-English days I condemned him as a chauvinist ("this England" indeed!) and because I felt it so bitterly anomalous that a black man should be forced to deal with the English language at all — should be forced to assault the English language in order to be able to speak — I condemned him as one of the authors and architects of my oppression.

"My quarrel with the English language has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter in quite another way. If the language was not my

own, it might be the fault of the language; but it might also be my fault. Perhaps the language was not my own because I had never attempted to use it, had only learned to imitate it. If this were so, then it might be made to bear the burden of my experience if I could find the stamina to challenge it, and me, to such a test."

The greatest poet in the English language found his poetry where poetry is found: in the lives of the people. He could have done this only through love — by knowing, which is not the same thing as understanding, that whatever was happening to anyone was happening to him. It is said that his time was easier than ours, but I doubt it — no time can be easy if one is living through it. I think it is simply that he walked his streets and saw them, and tried not to lie about what he saw: his public streets and his private streets, which are always so mysteriously and inexorably connected; but he trusted that connection. And, though I, and many of us, have bitterly bewailed (and will again) the lot of an American writer — to be part of a people who have ears to hear and hear not, who have eyes to see and see not — I am sure that Shakespeare did the same. Only, he saw, as I think we must, that the people who produce the poet are not responsible to him: he is responsible to them.

That is why he is called a poet. And his responsibility, which is also his joy and his strength and his life, is to defeat all labels and complicate all battles by insisting on the human riddle, to bear witness, as long as breath is in him, to that mighty, unnameable, transfiguring force which lives in the soul of man, and to aspire to do his work so well that when the breath has left him, the people — all people! — who search in the rubble for a sign or a witness will be able to find him there."



~~Of the poet.
From each word, as from
a womb, spring ~~twenty~~ ^{to giants} babes
that shall grow, and beget
~~a larger and more~~ ^{superb} breeds
upon the earth.~~

In terms of language/cultural-history indivisibility where are we in American English now? in this "sort of universal absorber, combiner, and conqueror" (from Whitman's short essay Slang in America.) As peoples are to America, languages have been to AmE, as it reradiates. Pluck and patriotism at this point? As a poetic egalitarian and prose eugenicist, a Whitman today would not be a Proud Boy, nor antifacist, as he would not trouble his work to commit.

Grateful for a language that could not be one's own without making it one's own, in order to be free of ownership and the burden of grievance? Careful, who grieve, the tongue in progress we remediate and acquit, and the tone in which we do so and fail to do so, as utterly vibrant beings.