Joan Retallack's G'L'A'N'C'E'S'

John Gordon Adams

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy University of Auckland, 2020.

Abstract

This thesis posits the existence of fractal grammars (namely, word grammars, letter grammars, and unwritten feminine grammars) in the poetry of Joan Retallack, a central figure in current US experimental philosophical poetry. With special focus on her early mature works *Afterrimages* (1995), *How to Do Things With Words* (1998), *The Poethical Wager* (2003) and *Memnoir* (2004), the thesis contextualizes her developments in lexical and intra-lexical grammars with reference to philosophers and linguists including F. de Saussure, J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida and John Cage. Modernist and contemporary poetry and poetics focused in lexical innovation, from Gertrude Stein and James Joyce to Susan Howe and P. Inman, provide another analytic pivot point, and the thesis demonstrates how a poetics of grammarly linguistics operates in contemporary US poetry at granular and concept levels. Within its frame of fractal grammars, the thesis identifies Retallack's non-normative performances with alphabetical and punctuational material as grammatical moves. Beyond its primary argument about the existence of fractal grammars, the principal subsequent question for the thesis is how we perceive the performance of concept-based embodiment at the lexical and punctuational levels of Retallack's work: how her ethical play commitments manifest in the word-level and lettristic details of her poetry. Retallack's work shows the embodiment of poetic language as a performed investigation of modern histories of language communication and, also, as a pointer for the linguistic freedoms of the present.

Acknowledgements

Tēnā koutou katoa. Ngā mihi kia koutou.

Although I began formal PhD studies in 2016, this thesis journey started in late 2008 when Professor Lisa Samuels introduced me to *The Poethical Wager*, Joan Retallack's collection of performative essays. I thank Lisa for her encouragement, supervision and companionship. I also thank those other worthy scholars at Auckland University's English Department with whom I took classes over the past decade. Much of what I learned percolates through this work.

And to Joan Retallack, who wrote the principal material I studied: thank you for facilitating my visit to Bard College in August 2018, and for your generous allocation of time and provision of documents. Thanks too to Professor Laura Kuhn and Emily Martin of the John Cage Trust for so comfortably welcoming me and furnishing my stay at Wilson House, Bard College.

Fellow students, friends and family members, too, have been generous to me on this journey, especially my wife, Usha Patel. I also acknowledge my late mother, who, decades ago, encouraged my earliest readings, setting me on the path that later swerved to this work.

I repeat my gratitude to Lisa Samuels for persistently coaxing me to produce better work, better thinking, and thereby better realising my critical response to lettristic aspects of Joan's experimental poethics. My work would cast a paler shadow without Lisa's provocations. And I value the opportunity to link with Joan's desire for a fairer and, adopting her term, feminine culture.

I have greatly enjoyed this exploration. I am learning so much. Thank you. Thank you all. Ngā mihi kia koutou, tahi ai tātau. No reira, tēnā koutou katoa.

Table of Contents

Abbreviations

The Poethical Wager, Joan Retallack's 2003 collection of essays, is generally referenced in this thesis as *TPW*.

How to Do Things with Words, the title to both J. L. Austin's 1962 book and Joan Retallack's 1998 poetry volume of the same name, is generally referenced in this thesis as *HTDTWW*. Where the context is ambiguous, the author's name is noted. The title to Retallack's poem "How to Do Things with Words" (in her 1998 volume of the same name) is set out in full.

Joan Retallack's G'L'A'N'C'E'S'

Initial Glances

> I have always been very fond of the books that have little quotations
> at the head of each chapter.
>
> – Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America*

My main interest in this work is to develop my thesis that Retallack's messing with the internal workings of words amounts to a fractal grammatical move. In pursuit of that interest, I posit the existence of fractal grammars, and recognise fractal grammars in her lettristic intra-lexical practice. My pursuit extends to examining the materiality inherent in that practice, leading to my projection that unwritten feminine text can be imagined even in the margins of Retallack's page.

I shall later establish that grammar, form and style have long been of great interest to Retallack even though she has never explicitly nominated fractal grammars as a distinct aspect of her practice. Nonetheless, even if performed without her having noticed that character, fractal intra-lexical grammars constitute a recognisable aspect of her practice. Coupled with her attentiveness to the materiality of both page and text, pursuit of fractal grammars enables us to project a silent body of unwritten feminine text. Accordingly, my thesis realises these moves (fractal grammars, unwritten feminine text), highlighting them from practice into explicit, identifiable features.

In pursuit of that focus, the material selected for this study, drawn mainly from her early mature work and scarcely mentioning work published after 2004, tends to reveal Retallack's concern about gender unfairnesses, a feminist concern. Thus, although I am not a feminist scholar, I acknowledge that the material I examine reflects gender concerns. Accordingly, many of Retallack's wide-ranging concerns are not noticed or scarcely noticed, in this study. Although her interests in philosophy and, to a modest extent, science, are represented here, some of her other important interests are largely absent: for example, her interests in ecology (*TPW, 1, 39)*, anti-war stances (*Icarus Fffffalling*), politics (*Afterrimages*), mingled human origins (*Mongrelisme*), and music and musical notation (*Errata 5uite*). This study should ideally be read in the knowledge of its focus on grammatical constructs and moves, which the title's "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'" exemplifies.

Having focused the concerns of this thesis, I begin with its three-word title, the third being the most eye-catching. The third word of my thesis title is metonymic, microcosmic, performative

and characteristic of Joan Retallack's work. Her lettristic attention to alphabetical letters and other marks, including punctuation marks, performs here in her lexemic construction **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**, an example of how her work values example over propositions that purport to stand for truths. Later in this introductory section, "Initial Glances", I discuss, as an example of her experimental work, a passage that includes **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**. But first, I pay attention to what flows from the normative grammar of the first two thesis words "Joan Retallack's": the poet and – indicated by the apostrophe mark and final letter "s" – features belonging to her, arguably central in her work.

Joan Retallack and geometries of attention

Joan Retallack is a contemporary experimental US Language poet. Disrupting cultural structures and grammars through performativity in written text is important in her work. In her study of feminist Language writing in contemporary American poetry, Ann Vickery observes that Language writing "seeks to understand how relations of power that inform the everyday are disseminated and veiled through language" (7). Vickery distinguishes Language writing from much modern poetry in this way: "Whereas the workshop poem constructs the poet as self-determining viewer of the world, Language writing emphasizes the existence of [what Charles Bernstein terms] 'multiple conflicting perspectives'" (6–7). Citing poet Susan Howe's questions "Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence?", Vickery argues that "Language writing undermines interpretive codes by self-consciously playing against ingrained habits of reading" (7). In her own plays against habits, Retallack is particularly interested in relations of power in gender imbalances and in anti-war activism, although most material for this thesis draws from the first of those interests.

Retallack was living in Washington, DC, in 1985 when, in her early forties, she produced her first volume of poetry, *Circumstantial Evidence*. Later, she moved up the Hudson River Valley to Bard College, where she had already been teaching. In the Northeastern US, Retallack shares a regional location with several experimental Language poets, such as Susan Howe, whose work also displays visual performativity and fieldwork. A confidential reader for Wesleyan University Press commented on the script of Retallack's *Afterrimages*: "because both [Howe and Retallack] are working from historical sources and because both have a highly visual intensity to their work, they will inevitably be compared" (Report). Others within her regional location whose work may be compared with hers include Rosmarie Waldrop, Tina Darragh and Darragh's partner, P. Inman. Retallack's close associations with those three poets are evidenced

in multiple mutual references, dedications, publishing connections, support and acknowledgements. Vickery notes the relationships between Darragh, Susan Howe and Retallack (191). Valorising community engagement, Retallack says, "My sense of the value of my work must enter in community, must be validated by others whose opinion I respect, must be tied to (perhaps illusion of) social implication . . . feeling that I am part of a project that generates new possibilities" (qtd. in Vickery 6).

Following *Circumstantial Evidence*, notably more mainstream in form than her later work, Retallack signals, in conversation with P. Inman, her desire to do more ground-breaking work:

> I want it to be synchronic as well as diachronic, to operate with multiple vectors. But there's a syntactic momentum that is forcefully, oppressively linear – as historical history is, unlike lived history. I try to figure out ways to interrupt that momentum, to explode it in multiple directions (the "exploded view" of the graphic artist comes to mind) like "real life" which is always synchronic, anachronistic, confounding to the plane geometry of linearity and single strand causal chains. ("Conversation with Peter Inman")

Retallack labels her cohort's work as postmodern: "Modernism bases its purest logics on Newtonian principles. Postmodernism is already beginning to adopt the non-linear silences as models" (Cover endorsement, *a(gain)*^{2}*st the odds*). Valorising experimentalism, Retallack comments that "poets and theorists of complexity have been cavorting in delight as they engage in newly energized explorations" (*TPW* 82–83).

In her work, Retallack's "newly energized explorations" include her engagement with philosophy, a theme central to academic critic Burton Hatlen's comprehensive 30-page essay "Joan Retallack: A Philosopher among the Poets, a Poet among the Philosophers". Rather than duplicating Hatlen's insightful situating of Retallack as a Language poet backgrounded against the movement from modernists to imagists, I quote from his essay at length to begin my short literature review of her scholarship:

> Retallack, however, has chosen to write not as a professional philosopher but as a poet and essayist; and further, she has located herself within an experimental tradition of American poetry that looks back to the major modernists (Pound, Williams, and Stein in particular – the lingering Romanticism of H.D. makes Retallack suspicious of this poet [see her "H.D., H.D.*"]) and passes down through the objectivists and the Black Mountain school to issue, among the members of Retallack's generation, in the work of the poets affiliated with the magazine L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. Given Retallack's critique of the image that claims "to reveal (rather than construct) a world," it is ironic that the poetic tradition I have here sketched out originates in the imagist movement of the period around 1914. Yet in retrospect it seems clear that at least some of the poets of that moment (Williams, Pound) were seeking to break out of the sterile Romantic opposition of self and world by stripping away everything except the pure moment of experience, in a way perhaps analogous to Husserl's phenomenological reduction. . . . At the same time, Pound and some other poets moved out of imagism in a different direction, toward a constructivist poetics that shifts attention both from the "I" and the "thing" it perceives toward language as an open field within which alone both "I" and "world" come into being. These poets also have had their modern heirs, among the practitioners of what Marjorie Perloff has called the

> "poetics of indeterminacy" – including, most significantly for my purposes, John Cage, whom Perloff sees as a major figure . . .(352 – 3).

Careful attention to Retallack's work like that from Hatlen is not representative of general scholarship in Language poetics. Apart from good reviews from several others, feminist scholars Lynn Keller and Ann Vickery proffer the main sources of in-depth scholarship on Retallack's work, highlighting her intertexts, proceduralism and visuals.

In her *THINKING poetry* (2010), Lynn Keller includes Retallack's among those works that "have received little critical attention, though their creators, all of whom are now at least in their fifties, are widely respected", and this despite "some mainstream recognition in the form of major awards or publication with established presses" (7). Keller, like Vickery, notes the close ties between many women poets, including the long-standing friendship between Retallack and Waldrop. Keller's book contains her 27-page essay "Fields of Pattern-Bounded Unpredictability: Palimtexts by Rosmarie Waldrop and Joan Retallack". Paying respectful attention to Retallack's *Circumstantial Evidence* and *Afterrimages,* Keller highlights "palimtexts" produced through palimpsest work done in various ways on existing texts. Keller delves into Retallack's feminist performativity in the poem "Afterrimages" and her fractal use of overlapping texts in "*ICARUS FFFFFALLING*", which draws attention to "the ways in which Western society . . . forces young men to take terrible risks, manipulates them into being 'ready to die for theher thefamily thetribe therace thenation the onthemoney big idea'" (*THINKING poetry* 93).

Ann Vickery's impressive *Leaving Lines of Gender* (2000) devotes a chapter to Retallack, "Taking a Poethical Perspective: Retallack's *Afterrimages*", exposing feminist aspects of her intertexts. The scholarship reach of Vickery's chapter is strengthened by deep attention to other comparable feminist Language poets, including those working with visuals. These include Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe and Kathleen Fraser, together with Retallack's close friend Tina Darragh, in whose poetic development Vickery traces Retallack's influence as "pivotal" (Vickery 191). Vickery's scholarship provides several reference points for this thesis where I quote from her work.

In 1978, Bard University's Alan Devenish reviewed Retallack's long poem WESTERN CIV, later developed further as ongoing work in *Procedural Elegies/Western Civ Cont'd* (2010). Devenish notes features that continue to pervade Retallack's later work generally when he observes "the poem effects a synthesis, a con-fusion which embraces the supposed antagonisms of then and now into an inclusive here-and-now, a sort of continuous and tenseless once-upon. And in this sense it participates in the "elegy" of time and remembrance" (549). He recognises

her thoughtful philosophical bent in describing the poem as “a linguistic map of a cognitive process” (563), “pushing at the edge of language and thought” (566).

Another distinctive feature commented upon by Devenish is the performance of “multiple voices and tones” (quoting Retallack in conversation with P. Inman, 552); and the “*equivocal* conversation [of feminine and masculine discourses]” (555), steering him to remark “This is not history or any story evolving inexorably toward a foregone conclusion. This is ravelment. Politically and poetically the work speaks for creative indeterminacy, commitment to possibilities, and invention” (554). And: “Its philosophical and p[s]ychological dialogue opens onto a wide range of discourse – wider, I think, than the more rigorous idiolects of Language poetry” (563). I agree that it is fair comment that Retallack’s work showcases multiple voices and discourses, is unconstrained within gender or genre lines, and courts the indeterminate, the transgressive, and the alterities.

For my purposes, I emphasise Devenish’s (passing) mention of grammar: “The ‘grammar’ of the poem suggests that our traditional ways of speaking of history, our logical and linguistic attempts to "grasp" its "truth," may come to nothing in a time of buried atomic clocks that go on ticking long after “we” have done with time” (561). Here, I foreshadow my pursuit of Retallack’s grammatical moves, including fractal grammatical moves, which I am yet to explicate.

Academic critic Stephen Behrendt’s 1996 review of Retallack’s *Afterrimages* likewise highlighted her novelty of styles and presentation, saying it “defies easy classification in its remarkable explosion of the possibilities of layout, typography, and overall visual image” (176). He opined that it was a good book because it made the reader think. Retallack called his review “thoughtful.” (email 14 April 1997). Provoked by his reading, Behrendt thought that “our lives are a series of afterimages, each at once both muddled and modeled by the one that preceded it, and each one imposing upon the one that that will succeed it” (177). Behrendt clearly acknowledges that Retallack’s poems require work by her readers, work that rewards thinking readers.

In his 2006 essay published in *Poetics Today,* Bryan Walpert, a poet and critic with an interest in poetry relating to science, makes two significant contentions about Retallack’s poem “AID/I/SAPPEARANCE”: that it subverts scientific language and, that, counter to postmodern critiques of subjectivity, it offers a defence of the subject (Walpert 693). In Chapter One, I quote the entire poem and offer my own reading. Walpert accurately notes how the poem takes a fragment of scientific discourse along with fragments of other discourses and treats them

according to certain lettristic procedures. Letters are successively abraded until none remain. Consequently, at intermediate steps, varying configurations of letters perform. Some suggest resonances to Walpert.

In my reading of Walpert's essay, too much is demanded of this excellent poem. As to his first contention, the treatment of science text fragments is merely equivalent to that for other discursive fragments. Thus, Retallack's selection of science material is not necessarily discriminatory about science discourse. If anything, the poem demonstrates that science language is uniformly susceptible to the same treatments as other language material. Nonetheless, his allied point that the poem showcases oddities in scientific naming of the disease as "AIDS," for example: "that the poem resists the authority of the scientific discourse to *define* AIDS: a resistance to scientific description as the only or the best way to understand AIDS and engage with its consequences" (703), is well made. Retallack's poem demolishes all discourses (including science), mirroring the viral defeat of the human body by AIDS. Walpert makes a good point when he adds: "Retallack's poem refuses the scientific tendency to treat language as transparent by revealing a slippage in the language—showing that 'aid' exists as an inherent contradiction or call for help within the disease we have named 'AIDS'" (704).

As to Walpert's second contention, he situates the poem as an exemplar of postmodern work, one against which he wishes to test the purity of postmodern theory, and loads it with what strikes me as a misunderstanding of the range of practices occurring within that broad church, postmodern poetics. I agree with Walpert that the lettristic attenuation performed by the poem opens to affective readings, sorrow for the loss of the man who died from AIDS. Moreover, affective responses ranging from terror to compassion are available from readings that enact the horror of viral deconstruction. But these features should not, in my view, be conflated with an emergence of authorial ego in a postmodern piece, nor suggest that the procedural approach thereby drifts back to a lyrical poetics. As Caroline Bergvall observed in her Foreword to *I'll Drown my Book*: "Cultural pillaging provides a poetic trajectory that negates the original authorial voice" (18). Postmodern works need not be devoid of a subject, human or otherwise. Retallack's understanding of language operations, and her practice, wagers on traces coming through, whatever procedures are employed. I shall note this later, arising in her discussion with Rosmarie Waldrop. Thus, it is entirely consistent with her poetics that her mechanical lettristic attenuations will produce resonances for the reader.

Despite my disagreement with his two main contentions, many features of Walpert's analysis provide insights into Retallack's practice. For example, that "Retallack uses two connected lines of the postmodern critique of science—linguistic slippage and paradigm-dependency— …

suggesting that the individual becomes lost in the analytical, object-centered epistemology of science" (693), accurately classifies two tools employed in this poem. Walpert also picks up on the multiple-voice characteristic, noted by Devenish (Devenish 563). For example, Walpert notes that the "'meaning' … lies not in an expression of the individual author or speaker but in the collision of languages or discourses (699)." A little earlier, he observes:

> Language poems such as Retallack's often adopt multiple voices to refuse an easy identification of ''speaker'' and poet; they often also draw attention to the materiality of the sign, in order to complicate notions of ''plain, simple, sincere language,'' through disjunction at the level of the paragraph (disrupting the logical relation of one sentence to the next), at the level of the sentence (incomplete syntax), and at the level of the word (incomplete or combined words)" (696).

Walpert's attention to the materiality of the lettristic, experienced through disjunctive practices at paragraph, sentence and word levels highlights features valuable in this thesis too.

Walpert notices the lettristic level when he says: "Retallack's poem refuses the illusion of a unified authorial voice, forcing us instead to focus on discourses (scientific, meditative), and it draws attention to individual signifiers (letters and words) rather than to individual referents (701)." He then reinforces that materiality in the concrete physicality of words, as objects:

> By reminding us of the physicality of the words (they can be moved, connected, their components rearranged on the page), both the title and the poem use words, then, not merely as transparent signs (the way, for example, the word *rose* might point to an object in a vase) but as objects in their own right (701).

In the poem "AID/I/SAPPEARANCE," letters, which are themselves signs, are treated in the ways Walpert notes.

Walpert follows Behrendt's point that reading Retallack involves readerly work: "The reader shares in the creation of the poem with the author— is encouraged to follow the language of the poem wherever it may lead (702)." Walpert notes that this falls within a rubric applicable to postmodern poetics: "For Language poets, then, writing becomes ''a political action in which the reader is not required merely to read or listen to the poem but is asked to participate with the poet/poem in bringing meaning to the community at large'' (702, quoting Douglas Messerli, 1987 ''Introduction,'' in ''Language'' Poetries: An Anthology, edited by Douglas Messerli, 1–10 (New York: New Directions). 3)."

Australian experimentalist and academic, A. J. Carruthers, has written two substantial pieces on Retallack's work. His work on Retallack's *Errata 5uite* now forms a chapter in his book *Notational Experiments in North American Long Poems, 1961 – 2011.* Although neither the long poem nor musical notation are central interests in this work, there are points worth gleaning. As Carruthers points out, the formal organising principle of *Errata 5uite* is the stave

of five lines, adopted from musical notation. Retallack poetry runs words instead of musical notes along the lines, forming a relation between music and poetry. As we shall discover in Chapter Two, the number five figures as an organising principle in Retallack's *HTDTWW*, which performs in five parts. Five happens to number the classes of John Austin's performatives in his *HTDTWW*. The number resonates or echoes through Retallack's work.

Carruthers attributes much in this poem to the influence of music theorist John Cage on Retallack as a significant mentor. Cage's work on silence comes through as a palpable influence. Sound procedures that incorporate silences or chance, open to errors. The *error* that refracts in names of, for example, *Errata 5uite* and *Afterrimages*, is another resonance running through much of Retallack's work. Indeed, she delights in the humour that accompanies "slips." As Carruthers states: "Error is a passageway to novelty because it emerges from the faultlines between "eras"" (125).

Ecological interests in *Errata 5uite* are explored too, by Carruthers, for example, when he states: "The literary event … relates to the power of interart and inter-generic mixing, framed in ecological terms" (125). Retallack's interest in crossing genres reflects personally in her naming her phonetic alter ego Genre Tallique, about whom, more, later. Mention of ecology offers a convenient segue to Carruthers's other substantial piece, a 2016 essay published in *Contemporary Women's Writing* titled "Procedural Ecologies: Joan Retallack's "Archimedes' New Light."" The poem "Archimedes' New Light" not only appeared in *Procedural Elegies/Western Civ Cont'd* (2010); it also appeared as a contribution in *I'll Drown my Book*, a collection edited by experimental poet Caroline Bergvall and others. Although my work does not deal with Retallack's ecological interests, and this poem is later than the work principally examined here, there are valuable contributions made in Carruthers's essay, which is well-informed by the major Retallack literature sources.

Noting Retallack's oft-noted engagement with science and philosophy, Carruthers asserts: "The mean result of this is an astonishingly disjunctive, increasingly complex verbal surface that invites contradictory readings and repudiates single-point perspectives" (25). This concisely summarises salient features of her approach. The poem under review by Carruthers is named for the mathematician whose Archimedean view sees and notes all relevant contexts. Contradictions and differing discursive viewpoints both inform and confuse. In drawing attention to the poetical risks she takes, Carruthers takes note of the range of poetry with which she experiments:

> By conducting high-risk, "centrifugal" experimental operations that are not chronically ego-bound (estranging, multiplying subjectivities), not transcendent, and not merely

> representational, Retallack demonstrates a critical concern with the kinds of poetry (visual, choral, exploratory, and procedural) that ecopoetics had only begun to explore. (27 – 28)

The reference to "centrifugal" adopts that term from Retallack who quotes Gertrude Stein in support of an ideal that pulls away from a central "self" (*Procedural Elegies/Western Civ Cont'd* 113). Lynn Keller earlier used the term for her chapter title "FFFFFalling with Poetry: The Centrifugal Classroom" in *Poetry and Pedagogy* (2006), but she did so because of the many ways her ideal classroom moved out into the world (Keller, *Poetry and Pedagogy* 31). Retallack, who co-edited the book, will have been aware of that use by Keller.

In addition to her genre range, Carruthers approves her sense of fun in her experimentalism. It is such a pervasive, telling characteristic that I quote Carruthers at length to convey the detail he marshals about her punning:

> A serial punster, her work inhabits a critical erotics in search of new modes and styles of critique, suspicious of conventional discourses or disciplinary limit points. This is also necessary for criticism to make sense of new kinds of poetry; the terms as they are have been insufficient to describe these shifting poetics. Key terms in her critical lexicon, such as "complex realism," "geometries of attention," and the "return to zero" (via Cage) have garnered some attention for their vitality as conceptual and pedagogical terms. Many of Retallack's more mischievous puns, such as "know ledge," "the scarlet aitch," "differential loquations," "th'ought experiment," and "terrortories," right up to "poethics," stage dilemmas or confront logical impasses in poetic thinking, constructing a space for new logics, new patterns of thought and new configurations of meaning. (35)

Many of these terms and puns will be encountered in the course of this thesis.

Poet Jena Osman reinforces some of Carruthers's points in these terms:

> Retallack's procedural works disrupt the world of statements with worlds of inquiry. Each poem is an ecologically modelled operation powered by a quasi-systematic principle that is open and ever-changing. In such a landscape there is no closure; these poems are sites for response, investigation, contemplation and delight. (cover endorsement for *Procedural Elegies/Western Civ Cont'd*)

It is noteworthy that, along with respect for her principled and daring poetics, words like "delight" form part of balanced responses to Retallack's works. Greg Kinzer's 2006 essay "Excuses and Other Nonsense: Joan Retallack's 'How to Do Things with Words'," published in *Contemporary Literature*, references a Retallack jokes in its first sentence (62). Kinzer's essay directly addresses one of my work's central texts so I shall wait until the relevant portion of Chapter Two to introduce his insights.

I round off this review of secondary critical sources by returning briefly to Lynn Keller. In her chapter in *Poetry and Pedagogy,* she discusses Retallack's engagement with students that preface Retallack's poem "Icarus Fffffalling," collected in *Afterrimages.* The chapter includes a nuanced reading of the poem, including its format of divided page, its rhythms and its

movement “toward silence” (37). Characteristically, the poem involves intertextuality, historical sources, different languages, strong cultural concerns seasoned with humour. Keller’s commendable chapter is otherwise less central to the concerns of this work.

Other commentators offer little reference to Retallack. Jed Rasula, making short references to many poets and publications in *Syncopations* (2004), offers a paragraph on *Afterrimages* and footnotes her *How to Do Things with Words* (Rasula 217). Kathleen Fraser’s *Translating the Unspeakable*, a 2000 publication, fails to notice Retallack, and Linda Kinnahan’s *Lyric Interventions* (2004) makes only passing reference to Retallack. But Marjorie Perloff’s earlier (1996) *Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* picks up Retallack’s *Circumstantial Evidence* as one of many contemporary works “written under the sign of Wittgenstein” (Perloff 6).

Despite relatively modest critical attention, Retallack’s publications have been well reviewed and she has received several awards and honours. These include two Gertrude Stein Awards (one in Innovative American Poetry (1993), and the other in 1997), a Columbia Book Award selected by Robert Creeley for her (1993) *Errata 5uite*, an American Award in Belles-Lettres in 1996 for her book *Musicage*, and a Lannan Foundation Literary Grant in 1998. *Procedural Elegies/Western Civ Cont’d* was named “Best Book” of 2010 by Artforum International Magazine and praised by John Ashbery (back cover, *Procedural Elegies/Western Civ Cont’d*). Retallack’s reputation is secure within the discipline of experimental contemporary feminine poetics.

Moving from these comments on Retallack’s situation as a poet, and some summary of her critical reputation, I turn to themes that provide more specific background to my thesis –themes that I observe as significant for Retallack. In her critical writings, she often uses the term *geometries of attention*, explained in her essay of the same name, collected in *The Poethical Wager* (1996). That essay begins performatively by paying attention to the happy lettristic fact that *silent* and *listen* are an anagram pair (*TPW* 175). Following music theorist John Cage – also noted by Hatlen as central to her work – Retallack posits that *attention* is a requisite to noticing something as art. She asserts that Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing” is:

> full of beautiful philosophical statements, stories, ideas, surprising references;
> but its formal gaps, its recursive attention to its own emptiness, foregrounds
> structure and turns it into a template for noticing similar relationships elsewhere –
> for example, among words and silence, ideas and experience, what is and is not
> apparent in other instances of art and of course in the course of everyday life. (*TPW* 177)

She then explains the geometric part of *geometries of attention* as means by which we can notice what would otherwise not be apparent:

> This is what geometries do – they organise the vectors of our attention, establish relations between abstract directionalities, insides and outsides, enabling us to notice certain things we would not otherwise. (*TPW* 177)

Noticing what is not readily apparent involves sensibility to structures, including cultural structures – what is inside and what is outside, and how what is not apparent can be accessed. Retallack discusses further the link between geometries and structures in the latter part of that essay, promoting the task of art in revealing alterities:

> If post-modern theory has taught us anything, it is that the internal logics and internalized values of cultures frame naturalized prospects that obliterate, miniaturize or exoticize all things outside their scope. . . . Silence/Noise becomes music, voice, object of interest only with a change in ethos that can shift trajectories of noticing. In this sense it is a thoroughly poethical matter.
>
> It is not the romanticized angel of history but the very pragmatic angles of attention that should occupy us. (*TPW* 179–80)

Retallack's geometry of attention eschews the romanticised angel of history, preferring the harder anagram angles of a more multifarious geometry. As this thesis aims to show, her acute responsiveness to the lettristic offers a poethical turn-point via the geometries of the anagram.

I now turn to several kinds of geometries of attention in Retallack's work, including her vision of an experimental literary feminine, her engagement with fractals and structure, my fundamental argument about what the term *grammar* can stand for, Retallack's utilisation of proceduralism as a means of releasing reading alterities, and her engagement with *grammar* as a field for poethical performativity (I shall explain the portmanteau term *poethical* at the appropriate point).

1. Literary feminine

In 1996, in her essay ":RE:THINKING:LITERARY:FEMINISM:", Retallack listed the following as "current identifications of the [experimental] feminine":

> open, diffuse, multiple, complex, decentered, filled with silence, fragmented, incorporating difference and the other (Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, et al,); undefinable, subversive,

> transgressive, questioning, dissolving identity while promoting ethical integrity (Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler et al.); *mater*ially and contextually pragmatic, employing non-hierarchical and non-rationalist associative logics – "web-like" connective patterns (Carol Gilligan); self and other interrupted, tentative, open/interrogative (Sally McConnell-Ginet, Mary Filed Belenky, et al.); . . . marginal, metonymic, juxtapositional, destabilizing, heterogenous, discontinuous, . . . (Genre Tallique, Craig Owens, Page duBois, Janet Wolff, et al.) (*TPW* 135; emphasis and 2nd ellipsis in orig.)

In this section, I merely introduce Retallack's list of "current identifications of the feminine" and note contexts against or within which her literary feminine situates, especially feminism and her desire for cultural betterment. Items from her list above will be foregrounded where they become pertinent in this thesis. It is worth noting that her playfully constructed homophone alter ego, Genre Tallique, embodies a representation of some of these feminine qualities, especially the marginal, metonymic, juxtapositional and destabilising.

Although Retallack is a feminist writer, her term "feminine" should not be conflated with "feminist". Her scholarship in philosophy informs her feminism and her poetics, strengthening and shaping her range of engagement. Asked in 1989 about feminist critic Kristeva's distinction between feminine and masculine writing, Retallack said:

> Kristeva is an extremely masculine writer despite the illusive femininity of the French language itself. That's not entirely fair. Her titles and section headings are playful and suggestive: and then a good part of the prose reads like it was translated from a very masculine German. Like Susan Sontag, also trained in philosophy (a field dominated by masculine rationalists), Kristeva's writing is full of tension between these so-called masculine and feminine styles. ("Conversation with Peter Inman")

In this 1989 passage, Retallack focuses on gender styles in writing, perhaps working her thinking towards what became her 1996 formulation of "current identifications of the feminine". Retallack shares much in common with Sontag and Kristeva. Like them, she occupies the corner where philosophy and literature come together. In this 1989 comment, Retallack pushes against received masculine and feminist taxonomies, ascribing her own reading to the term "feminine". As subsequent chapters of this thesis show, her embrace of what might be termed the feminine features of Wittgenstein's language play resists the masculinity of J. L. Austin's didactic rules. Retallack explains to Inman, "If you look at the typical female structure, always somewhat provisional, occasional, things depending on constantly shifting contexts, then the idea of a universal principle – some sort of theoretical structure applying across the board – breaks down" ("Conversation with Peter Inman"). Typically, she immediately grounds this explanation through specific example: "And quick shifts in context. Someone enters the room and the context shifts radically – the child runs in with a bleeding knee, for instance" ("Conversation with Peter Inman").

Underpinning and thereby contextualising Retallack's vision of a literary feminine is her search, through differential literary means, for a fair culture. Her recognition of that cultural concern provides important context for her "literary feminine". In her essay "The Experimental Feminine", she addresses the relation between masculine and feminine:

> What's the difference between the unintelligible world of the Feminine and the knowable ideal of the Masculine? Counter to common wisdom, I want to assert that one (F) is a challenge, the other (M) a mystique. To the extent that the Feminine is forced into service as consolation for the loss of meaning within the emptiness of logics of "world reason," the energy of a productively conversational M-F is lost to culture. (*TPW* 96)

Conscious of feminine cultural disadvantage, what she mostly seeks, around a gender vector, is productive conversation. For a conversation to be productive, its inherent circumstances require equal power – procedural, substantive and psychological. As we shall see later, when she performs a conversation such as that between Jane Austen and J. L. Austin in her poem "How to Do Things with Words", their respective views on sense and sensibility are caught within gendered planes. Only if the grammars of the conversation alter can productive conversation begin.

Although, consonant with her swerve towards alterities, Retallack appreciates gender as a multilayered spectrum, her work by and large references gender concerns through the binary gesture implied by the M-F continuum referred to above. It does not follow that she views gender as simply bipolar, the reverse is indicated by her inclusion of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett in her feminine literary fold. In her essay "*:RE:THINKING:LITERARY:FEMINISM:*" (where she also references feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and Ann Vickery, and feminist practitioners such as Carla Harryman and Tina Darragh), she addresses the apparent oddity of her inclusion of selected male writers (*TPW* 110–44). Retallack's criteria for a "literary feminine" *depends upon* the feminine features of their writing, not the writer's sex. In this work, I adopt her practice, using the term "feminine" in accord with her denotation. I repeat that in this work the term "feminine" should not be conflated with "feminist."

I am not a feminist scholar and this study does not purport to take a position on feminist theory. My main interest is in Retallack's lettristic messing with the performativity of words, a performative practice that I identify as grammatical, adopting a fractal view of grammar where what happens inside a written lexeme can be termed a grammatical move. This performs part of her experimental feminine practice. That I happen to be a male scholar is merely coincidental.

But, as such, I am interested in Retallack's counter-intuitive classification of writings by men like Joyce within her category of "feminine" and, in this work, I repeat that I simply follow her practice. Where I delve into the theory and practice of her significant influences, I likewise follow her practice, attempting to reflect a balanced distillation of what her own works show.

That so many influences on Retallack are male – for example, Joyce, Beckett and especially John Cage – simply reflects the circumstances of her development. Retallack acknowledges their influence, and, as I shall demonstrate, her work unmistakably resonates with aspects of their styles and language interests as it does with that of Gertrude Stein. The wholehearted inclusion of male writers among her strong influences may seem surprising in relation to a feminist writer, but it is the simple fact of the matter. Where Retallack diverts their work to a matrilineal tradition, her "feminine literary" ideal, that annexation is a distinctly feminist move. Her practice focuses on style, form, adventurous writing practices, experimentalism. These are not everywhere regarded as gendered provinces, but she steers them into her own critical theory and practice, both of which can be regarded as performative, as exemplars of feminine literary traits.

As can be seen from the above quotations (*TPW, 96* and *110 – 44,* especially *135*), in Retallack's terms, men may author feminine work and some women may not do so. Touching on gendered writing in an interview with P. Inman, she mentions her desire for reduced ego in poetics, a desire also noted by Hatlen (above):

> What we want is not only the possibility of the relaxation of ego (which is very restful in Eastern forms and Western indeterminacy) but also the transformation of ego. The Romantic, tumescent ego of the Poet as visionary, prophet, charismatic, genius (all those visceral things) remains in our culture as something more like a phallus than an appendix ... ("Conversation with Peter Inman")

That passage, with its embedded references to gender – the prominence of masculine tumescence, the phallus – as features from which poetics should depart, is congruent with her focus in her "literary feminine" on traits of the writings, not the gender of the writer. In this thesis, I adopt her use of the term "literary feminine" as linked with transgressive forms rather than to the gender of the writer. My main geometry of attention follows the line of her messing with grammars. Because so much of her material touches on gender concerns, that topic has strong presence in this thesis, though it is not my focus. The field here is the transgressive performances of grammars, particularly lettristic grammars.

2. Structure and fractals

This section introduces Retallack's interest in two terms that feature prominently throughout this thesis. Her poetics must be understood in relation to many forms of structure, among them, historical, cultural and intertextual. Because the term "fractal", which is explained below, implies patternings and orderings, it carries aspects of structure. Like a Russian doll, fractals suggest things may contain similar things, and conversely, things may fit within larger related things.

Retallack's 1989 conversation with P. Inman reveals her curiosity about structure and its association with form:

> As [systems theorist] Buckminster Fuller said [in a conversation with Retallack], a structure is simply an inside and an outside. I've always been curious about the outside, which one could argue is another inside, but then there's the outside of that inside to explore . . . What frightens me is the shutting out of possibility . . . I suppose the forms I was most excited by early on in my own writing were those which by their very nature were unfinished either by historical accident, as is the case with fragments, or by temperamental accident – notes, notebooks, diaries, journals, letters . . . ("Conversation with Peter Inman")

Retallack repeatedly mentions Fuller's elegant description of structure in her essays. Her own geometry of attention turns towards structures and, within that attention, to fragments. I pay close attention to the structural implications of fragments in Chapter Four. As we shall discover, fragments, whether of intertexts or resulting from Retallack's procedural strategies, comprise an abiding feature of her work.

In her essay "Geometries of Attention", Retallack observes that mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot "noticed that complex natural forms like trees, rivers, and coastlines can be modeled with Koch and Peano curves, which in turn led him to notice that coastlines have self-similar infinite detail in finite space" (*TPW* 177). Such patterns are known as "fractals". Retallack's recognition of repetitive containments or un-containments of structures suggests the referential patterning of fractals. In her essay "Poethics of the Improbable: Rosmarie Waldrop and the Uses of Form", Retallack applies Mandelbrot's fractal patterning to her vision of cultural complexity:

> Where once we thought exclusively in terms of linear developments, . . . we now notice proliferating opportunities in fractal surfaces – the extraordinary number of detailed contact points that compose the cultural coastline. (*TPW* 83)

Cultural parameters are obviously central to her vision. Her noticing the "contact points" along "the cultural coastline" maps, in my reading, inimical positions where poethical feminine "opportunities" might engage. I draw attention to the essay's subtitle, which focuses on uses of

form. In Retallack's view, structures and forms proliferate fractally, and as we shall discover, this opens opportunities for her literary feminine to exploit.

Retallack applies Mandelbrot's discovery of repeated natural patterns at differential levels to a poetics that embraces science. In this thesis, I develop the idea that grammars can operate on differential fractal levels, allowing the lettristic level to have voice and meaning much as we expect words in sentences to have voice and meaning.

Retallack's embrace of grammars that proliferate in fractal patternings meshes with her view that structures (including texts) have an outside, and therefore open to alterities of readings. The consequent openness of her poetics aligns with Lyn Hejinian's essay "The Rejection of Closure":

> Language itself is never in a state of rest. Its syntax can be as complex as thought. And the experience of using it, which includes the experience of understanding it, either as speech or as writing, is inevitably active – both intellectually and emotionally. The progress of a line or sentence, or a series of lines or sentences, has spatial properties as well as temporal properties. The meaning of a word in its place derives both from the word's lateral reach, its contacts with its neighbours in a statement, and from its reach through and out of the text into the outer world, the matrix of its contemporary and historical reference. The very idea of reference is spatial: over here is word, over there is thing, at which the word is shooting amiable love-arrows. Getting from the beginning to the end of a statement is simple movement; following the connotative byways (on what Umberto Eco calls "inferential walks") is complex or compound movement. (*The Language of Inquiry* 50)

Like Retallack, likewise adept in spatial fieldwork, Hejinian turns away from "a 'closed text' . . . in which all the elements of the work are directed towards a single reading of it" to an "open text" that "invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies" (42–43). Retallack's sensibility of structure informs crafting work that offers reading opportunities extending beyond normative containments. As will become clearer later in this thesis, her intertexts, as fragments, suggest structural breakage, encouraging more open readings. So, too, do her own abrasions of texts. Additionally, her embrace of fractal theory means that she writes into an imagined space where texts, fragments, words, letters, and even space on the page, relate to other zones, whether larger or smaller. Thus, form and construction build on Retallack's clarity around structure and fractals.

Hejinian, too, is alive to form and construction, ideas that this thesis links to grammar and that surface in works by Retallack and her cohort. Hejinian recognises that this facet of Language poetry moves from noun to verb, from thing to activity:

> The relationship of form, or the "constructive principle," to the materials of the work (to its themes, the conceptual mass, but also to the words themselves) is the initial problem for the

> "open text," one that faces each writing anew. Can form make the primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power? Can form go even further than that and actually generate that potency, opening uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation, and turning vastness into plenitude? In my opinion, the answer is yes; that is, in fact, the function of form in art. Form is not a fixture but an activity. (47)

This important passage, the entirety of which, I would emphasise, touches on core issues for Retallack, the creative opportunities opened by poetics of form. Identifying form as active, rather than passive object, casts form as a performative zone, a zone for active poetics, for disruptive form work. As will be shown, this is a zone seized by Retallack as her performative zone, one that opens to alterities of readings, and one that challenges that policing feature that tends to associate with normative grammar.

The idea that *structure* may be experienced dynamically rather than as a fixity is fundamentally important in this thesis. That links to the idea that *grammars* and *forms* are experienced in their swerves rather than in imagined singularities or truths. Such swerves include fractal differentials in lingual and paralingual activity. In this dynamic, Retallack's forms are only apparently in place on pages; the apparent form is one of many available alterities. Conceptually, her text work floats in active alternatives. Congruent with these ideas runs Retallack's philosophical poethical valorisation of example over proposition. Examples allow the expository space to be unscored, multiple and abundantly empty. It is within this plasticity that this thesis explores the links between structure and form, form and grammar, grammar and meaning, and grammars of differential fractal levels. It does so particularly in the realm of Retallack's letter work. And because it is a fundamental term in my thesis, I need to embark on a short history of the term grammar.

3. A short history of grammar

After traversing the historically narrowing denotation of grammar, this section notes the apparently dominant position of the word as the primary language vehicle for indexical meaning through grammatical sentences. This establishes a position that my thesis will question. In this thesis, I use a broad definition of grammar. My usage extends to formal and compositional structurings, imagining the purview of writing's grammar extending sub-atomically, below its focus on placement of words (the composition of a sentence) to the sequencing of lettristic marks (the composition of words). This change of focus observes a fractal move. The pattern whereby grammar operates at the word/sentence level has a fractal counterpart, in my critical poetics argument, in the lettristic/word level.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) entry for "grammar" tells how its denotation has narrowed. In ancient times it encompassed the entire study of literature and learning in general; today it has dwindled to concern systemic rules of usage, largely about relations between words in the sentence. That earlier sense of association with a broad span of learning lingers in the naming of so-called grammar schools. In its temporal course, grammar once bore a relationship with "glamour" through the Old French word "gramarye" by association with magic, necromancy and astrology, all considered in their time proper branches of learning.

In its Greek origin, the term grammar denoted a written mark or letter. This identifiably lettristic root of the term seeded from the Greek verb "to write" (OED). Through associations of ideas, it came to reference literature, and then expanded to learning in general. The term was picked up by Latin and used in its broad sense. But the reach of the term waned as usage linked it to narrowing adjectives in constructions such as "Latin grammar" or "French grammar". Grammar was treated as a science "but a large portion of it may be viewed as consisting of rules for practice, and so forming an 'art'" (OED). In contemporary parlance, grammar is much to do with rules and forms, with ordering and systematising.

Grammar concerns organisation: its effects prescribe permissible language relationships. Its organising effects, and affects, both guide and censor. Because grammar stipulates or at least arranges how things, including ideas, are presented via language, it holds a powerful gatekeeper position. Grammar legislates, polices and judges. It may banish utterances that break its rules because an utterance unrecognised by grammar may be culturally unreadable, overruled, rendered unable to convey meaning within the grammatical system. In these ways, grammar exerts enormous power within knowledge and discourse about knowledge.

Grammar enables a language to work as a social tool for communication. Despite individual language differences, every language has its grammar (Pinker 230) This is true too for languages that are categorised as dialects or alternate languages such as African-American English, which, conveniently for my purposes, are treated in critical language studies as individual languages. Because grammar implies arrangement and taxonomy, authors are directed by grammar, restricted to words that are normative within the grammatical system, and channelled along syntagmatic paths that the grammatical system recognises. Contemporary grammarian Nikolas Gisborne lists phonology and morphology among the interests of grammarians, but syntax and semantics, which complete his list, are his major focus ("Prof. Nikolas Gisborne – What's Grammar For?"). Inevitably, a grammatical system reveals itself as a cultural construct, one that valorises the compliant and discriminates against the non-

compliant. Cultural hierarchies are supported by their grammar as an indivisible aspect of their language.

Within the cultural confines of normative grammatical uses, the pressure on language to convey indexical meaning tends to fall mostly upon the word. Thus, words seem to be the atoms of language. When I challenge that view in Chapter Three, we shall encounter James Joyce's neologism "etym", a morphemic reduction from "etymology" that suggests linkage between word and atom. Coming from a more normative approach, J. L. Austin recognises the force in a general view that words are the atoms of indexical meaning, which he glosses with this scholarly doubt: "It may justly be urged that, properly speaking, what alone has meaning is a *sentence.* . . . All the dictionary can do when we 'look up the meaning of a word' is to suggest aids to the understanding of sentences in which it occurs" ("The Meaning of a Word", *Philosophical Papers* 24). Nonetheless, when we encounter a word in a sentence, we may look up its meaning for that sentence and we shall probably think of that meaning as the meaning of the word. Thinking about how the pressure for indexical meaning marginalises experimental uses such as those of experimental poetry, we could say that the desire placed on words for indexical meaning tyrannises language.

Normatively, both writing and reading involve ascribing *meaning* to word signs. When faced with a homonym like "can", we strive, as Austin suggests above, to make sense of the word in its context. To choose from only two of many possibilities, does it mean "a vessel for holding liquids" or "to be able"? As readers, we cast about for patterns – grammatical, cultural, contextual. From dictionary or individual memory, we choose the meaning that seems best to fit the word in its context, as we understand that context. That denotation becomes our reading of that word sign on that occasion. We read writing almost constantly – newspapers, tablets, computers, public signs, books, magazines – even telephones now have reading screens. Writing seems normal to us. We are so acculturated to expect communicated, indexical meaning from writing that we approach written signs with that expectation. We read signs and attribute meaning to them. When Piglet claims that the sign on the broken board "Trespassers W" references his grandfather Trespassers William, we read it as a broken portion of the familiar sign "Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted" (Milne 30). Yet, like us, Piglet makes his meaning from a projection. When we encounter what look like written sign fragments, we fossick for meaning via patterns constructed from our reading experience.

Because language is readily imagined as a system of words, it follows that words are the building blocks of sentences. The expression "building blocks" may itself reveal the mental blockage that dissuades writers and readers from interrogating inside the word. Although I

agree that we generally look to sentences, or assembled clusters of words, for communicated meaning, a careful scholar like J. L. Austin takes pains over the words that go into sentences. The *word* has become so imbued with the status flowing from its reputation for atomic integrity that its apparent primacy resists question. Via dictionary or thesaurus, a normative writer may seek another word but rarely looks to undo a word and remake it afresh, reconstituting its componentry or introducing, into it, new markings. Like the self-evident flatness of the earth to early scholars, the *word* presents still, largely, as inarguably atomic in language. Additionally, it enjoys an exalted reputation because it associates with ineffable aspects of language, and *logos* is associated with the ineffability of God. The idea of the *word* operates as a block. Leaving aside, for the moment, poetic experiments, the "*word* block" resists interior interrogation.

Generally, in its current attention to syntagmatic rules, grammar takes little interest in the construction or composition of words. Grammatical rules are nevertheless realised in some areas that I term lettristic, for example, the placement of punctuation marks, such as the possessive apostrophe. But that sort of minor concession does not derogate from my observation that the major operation of contemporary grammar tends towards mapping the way in which *words* relate in sentences so that meaning is conveyed in accordance with cultural norms. Against this restrictive modern use of the term, I propose a new realm that recognises grammars operating *within* words. Despite the range of larger language chunks, spoken or written, this thesis proposes to begin its journey by noting the prevalent view that words comprise our primary meaningful language signs.

Although language is experienced as a system of words, we correctly describe the alphabet, from whose parts we make written words, as the alphabetical *system* because it operates as an organised whole. If we imagine words as the primary unit in written representation of speech, and if we conflate writing with speech as our imagined space of language, we tend to overlook the alphabetical system. But not Retallack, whose poetry situates on the written, rather than the spoken, side of the language register. Perhaps I should say, more accurately, that her work situates on the side of the language register where writing occurs. My distinction aims to reserve, on the writing side, spaces where language signs could be, but are not, materially written.

There is no bright line division between words that can be considered normative and those that can be considered non-normative lexemes of the Retallack kind I am interested in. Broadly though, I allocate, within the realm of normative, words like "angel" and "angle", even when noticed as an anagram pair. A reader can match each of them to an appropriate meaning, or meanings for differing contexts, by reference to a dictionary. In this context, I employ the

dictionary as metonymic of conventional uses of words. The variety of means by which different dictionaries find, qualify and suggest "meanings" is multiple and complex. In my thesis, I conflate "meaning in a conventional sense" with "dictionary meaning", without pursuing complications or glosses.

Word componentry can be observed in fractal zones intermediate between lexeme and letter. The phoneme is largely irrelevant to the concerns of this thesis, which concentrates on written language. Morphemes feature in Retallack's work. Although I focus more especially on the lettristic, her inventiveness and experimentalism involve morpheme work as well as letter work. For example, her alter ego, Genre Tallique, plays with phonic, morphemic, lexemic and lettristic. She remakes a semblance of the sound of her name, turning one syllable followed by three into two syllables followed by two. "Genre" is a normative word; "Tallique" is a neologism perhaps suggesting "Tall IQ", a gesture to accompany the Cornish meaning of "Retallack" as "high forehead". "Tallique" perhaps also suggests *Tel Quel*, a literary magazine in which Jacques Derrida published some work. Another hybrid that crosses morphemic and lettristic is *Memnoir* as title to a poetry collection. This can be analysed in several ways, but for now, I note that, if we begin with "Memoir", the additional letter not only introduces several "noir" associations that I discuss later but the "n" follows "m" alphabetically, the fourteenth and fifteenth letters of the alphabet. One could describe these as signature exemplary betrayals of Retallack's keen sensibility for the componentry of words, particularly, but not exclusively, in writing (graphemic).

By various lettristic means considered in this thesis, Retallack creates words that are non-normative, both as *words* and as *names* for words. She situates them in circumstances where reading expectations are aroused. But normative "meaning" for these creations cannot be found by recourse to any dictionary. These words, like notes from the Pied Piper, lure the reader to an other place via their differential grammar. Instead of simple reading, dialogic as that may ordinarily be, these readings will become a conversation of alterities. In my view, these complex constructions represent grammatical shifts within words.

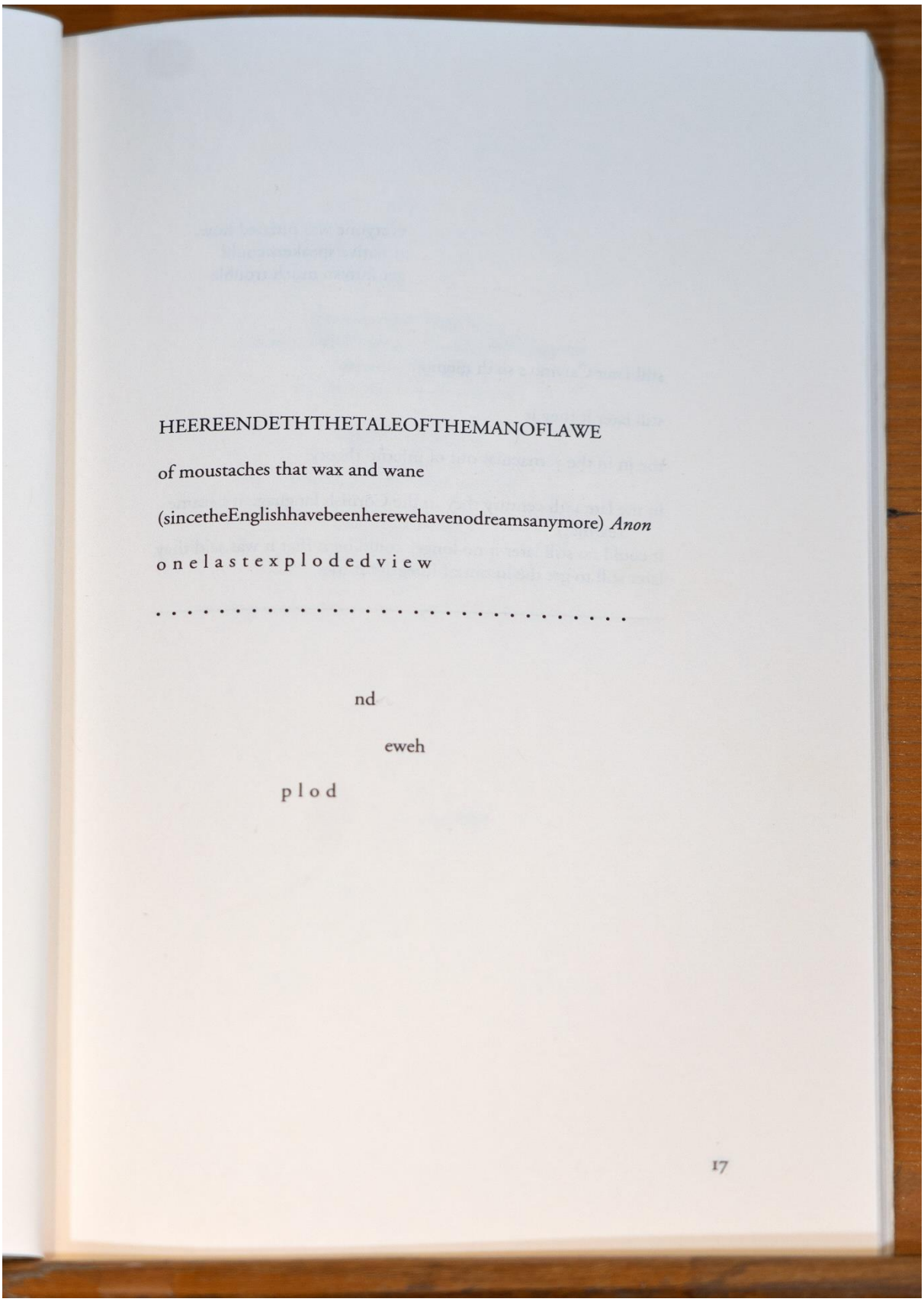
The purview of *grammar*, in this critical poetics, extends to the sub-atomic, intra-lexical realm of writing. Disturbances in the force of language at the level of the intra-lexical order, including lettristic disturbances, are fundamental disturbances. To carry the atomic conceit one step further, such disturbances touch the very heart of the *matter*. And this grammatical realm is an important site where Retallack chooses to perform her poethical interventions.

4. Proceduralism and reading alterities

The linkage between the two topics in this section is predominantly one of cause and effect. As I shall demonstrate in this section, an important part of Retallack's experimentalism typically involves altering written text by procedures that include procedures of chance. As we shall observe, her writing performance produces poetic texts that, because of their non-normativity, offer expanded alterities of reading opportunities. In large measure, those reading alterities are by-products of her methodology. I shall illustrate this with reference to three poems and one essay. The first poem is "Afterrimages", arguably the major poem in Retallack's 1995 collection of the same name. The other two are from her 1998 collection *How to Do Things with Words*. The essay is her 2007 "What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?"

The poem "Afterrimages" is informed by the terror threat of the atomic bomb. Retallack's papers that I examined witness that the extra "*r*" was not always part of the intended title. She played with several options, including "AFTERMATH" and "afterrmath". Others, namely "ALTERRIMAGES", AFTEARTHOUGHTS", "AFTER/ORS" and "AFTERMATH", survive on a prefatory page, printed in reverse as if they are showing through from the other side of the paper. Another prefatory page references the quirky fact that the countdown for the first atomic bomb text at Alamogordo was accompanied by a Tchaikovsky waltz playing from a nearby radio station on the same frequency. That a time lapse inheres in images, as in afterimages, is indexed through the agency of Genre Tallique on the prefatory page: "In fact all images are after. That is the terror they hold for us" (*Afterrimages*). And, of course, the additional terror carrying in this work is the terror, including "error", of nuclear holocaust.

Each page is divided by a horizontal midline, mostly dotted, to embody images before and after a cataclysmic event. Page 17 is set out here, as example:



Beginning with text from disparate sources on the upper portion of each page, Retallack tossed thirteen paper clips onto that text and reproduced below those letters that were revealed within the eyes of the paper clips (Vickery 171). Jena Osman used the term “bombs” to describe Retallack’s action, apt when we consider the atomic bomb context (Osman, *Poetry and*

Pedagogy 247). Like a conventionally spelled afterimage, a partial image of what was originally on view is retained. Relative positions of survivor letters (and punctuation marks where they occur, on other pages than that shown here) are faithfully reproduced. In my reading, the poem enacts the devastating loss of cultural attributes from a cataclysmic event. Loss figures in the thematics of each of the upper-page lines: the end of the tale, waning moustaches, end of dreams and the final exploded view, and proceduralism has both caused and underscored performatively these thematics of loss.

One may wonder, as I did, whether results like the emergence of "p l o d" on page 17 are produced by authorial manipulation or are merely serendipitous. My research establishes the latter. Some proof sheets I examined bear her handwritten notation "P.E." for "Printer Error". Retallack exercised lettristic rigour in scrutinising her printer's proofs for this poem. Whatever textual resonance emanates from sets of surviving letters arises from happenstance. Thus, the construction "p l o d", and gems on other pages like "oint P", "poet -O" or "top eeze" are strictly chance products of where her paper clips fell. And she carried her handwritten notation forward as a joke through the agency of her homophone alter ego, Genre Tallique. An entry in the "Selected Sources" for *Afterrimages* reads "Genre Tallique, *Glances*, Pre-Post-Eros Editions, G.V., P.E., frothcoming [?], 2000+". I cannot place "G.V." but "P.E." echoes Retallack's notation for "Printer Error". Retallack adds a question mark in square brackets after the comical "frothcoming" as if to question something, but it is unclear what.

The text of "Afterrimages" raises many questions for its readers about intertextuality, and "meaning" in respect of both upper-page text and the lower-page abraded text. These questions introduce unknowing into the reading frame, an uncanny in-definition of its parameters that proliferate reading alterities. The poem "Afterrimages" comprises page sets, each depicting text collections both before and after an event that abrades the lines at the top half of the pages. The originating text is intertextual, deriving from multiple sources. Some, like the line "of moustaches that wax and wane", I attempted to source without success. But others are identifiable from the appended "Selected Sources"; for example, the first line on page 17 derives from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales,* but in the poem the letters perform in upper case without breaks between words. All four lines in that upper section display differential presentations: upper-case letters run together, normative words, lower case run together, or inter-letter spacings. As I read it, those different modes of representative writings might represent four different, imagined cultures. What is preserved below retains fragments of three out of the original four lines. Chaucer is lost without trace. Of the original line "o n e l a s t e x p l o d e d v i e w", only "p l o d" remains. Although those four letters form a normative word,

its word meaning, as a dictionary meaning, bears no relation to the word meanings of its upper-page fragment counterpart. Thus, in relation to its antecedent, any normative meaning ascribed to that "p l o d" seems illusory. Retallack's procedure does not nurture the apparent *meaning* of the original. In isolation, the "after" portion offers no meaningful reading in the narrow, normative sense that ideas or things are represented in an organised manner.

If we leave to one side questions that arise from the sources of the upper-page intertexts, additional layers of reading alterities arise from the relations between the two groupings that appear on the page, namely from comparison of the upper-page texts against the lower-page texts. The relation between "before" and "after" is readily ascertained because the preserved page position of each letter creates a powerful visual reference. The eye runs back from the lower fragment "p l o d" up to the segment from which it derives. On that page, three portions of "after" text similarly find parents in "before" text. The visual effect is uncannily like a visual afterimage phenomenon. From the original text, discrete textual portions survive the awful event. Perhaps I should recognise the original portions plurally, rather than apprehending them, thinking of them, or thinking I know them, as one constructive mass. In the aftermath, the original clusters represent in the lower portion through their surviving fragments, if at all.

Perhaps there is a reader terror in the realisation that letter sequences, even those appearing to comprise normative words, may lack *meaning*. By *meaning* I reference any contextual communication (including writing) that can convey meaning between speaker and listener (writer and reader), that is, between members of a common speech community or common speech culture. Such a contextual communication includes a child's grunt accompanied by gesture that, in combination, a parent understands as a request for an object. It includes the cry "Objection", in court as shorthand for the sentence "I object to that question put by my opponent." Contextual understanding can render expressions such as "Mmm" or "Aha!" meaningful. In normative language usage, written or spoken, language users expect meaning to go hand in hand with language signs. Retallack's language performances on the lower-page portions of "Afterrimages" confound that narrow normative expectation.

Weighing the upper text fragments against the lower text fragments (and vice versa) offers additional reading alterities. Understanding that the happenstance atoms of the lower text fractal level are untied from normative *meaning* frees rereadings of the upper text. The marked visual of the horizontal midline on each page can be read as an event or time marker, or as a reflective line. If lettristic groupings on the lower page are understood to convey no normative *meaning* (an understanding that engages a broader sense of "meaning" relating to the making of the text), readers can review the upper-page text within the (enhanced) frame of that thought. In that

light, what normative *meaning* may or may not be carried by those upper lines reopens to wondering rereadings. This process reinforces Tallique's epigraph, "All images are after. That is the terror they hold for us" (*Afterrimages*). Moving from the lower-page lettristic fractal to the upper-page word-level fractal where relatively normative text fragments perform, the reflective line offers another range of reading alterities, namely one that draws attention to the materiality of the individual letters absent ties to normative *meaning.* The consequent reflection inhering in the form of the page reinforces Tallique's message that the upper-level text too originated elsewhere, all is intertextual, language is recycling in differences.

Pattern recognition is not the only visual effect in this work. The consequences of Retallack's methodology release her reader from meaning-driven readings to acknowledge the atomic, alphabetical nature of the material that makes writing possible. At that micro level of acknowledgement, the characteristic nature of alphabetical letters and other conventional marks of writing manifests in this experiment. The "before" section shows many letters in relation one to another. Below, "after" the event, some only of those letters remain extant. Coincidental and striking, the relationship appears at first blush to be one between letters, but that conclusion cannot stand up to scrutiny unless we admit memories of lost letters as positional guides. The abiding relation of surviving letters might be argued as solely to the page because their continued relation of relativity to other letters depends on constancy of their individual page relations.

The relation between each surviving letter and its page position is preserved after the event. But there is another important visual and psychic relationship too, that between the reader's eye and the letter. If the frame is enlarged to encompass the reader reading the page, one can say that the letter maintains its position in relation to the terrain of the page. The process of reading, noting letters on the page and determining what, if any, meaning can be obtained from them, is key to this work. That signals in the word "afterimages" from which the title deviates. Normatively spelled, the phenomenon is lettristically enacted by Retallack's process. What is retained for the eye in the lower section bears a relation of derivation from what was seen immediately before. More physiological than memory, the afterimage represents a continuation, in the mind's eye, of something seen, sensed by sight, earlier. The imperfection of retention signals via the implant that produces "err" in Retallack's title.

The lettristic view offers rich reading resonances in and of itself. By smashing the letters together, "the man of law" reveals as "the man o' flaw" with echoic subtext "man o' war", producing alterities of reading that swirl among Chaucer, Chaucer's works, law, lawyers and warmongers. Lynn Keller, like me, reads a feminist message in "man of flaw" (*THINKING*

poetry 88). In Retallack's poem, the "MANOFLAW" disappears by the blast of chance, the fall of a few paper clips, opening a consequential reading that the lower portion is a region devoid of law, an unlawful zone. Yet, what procedure is more just than casting lots, an impartial process unswayed by fear or favour? And the zone, ungrammared by normative law, coincides as the space from which "the man o' flaw" has been banished.

My second illustration of the idea that Retallack's proceduralism leads to reading alterities is her poem "Not A Cage", the third poem in her 1998 *How to Do Things with Words*. The "Procedural Note" discloses "This poem is composed from beginnings and endings of books I was culling from my library in the Fall of 1990." These fragments are escaping the "cage" of Retallack's library. But the title carries richer connotations. For Retallack, "Cage" inevitably references her mentor, John Cage.

But the expression "not a cage" is also a remark made by Wittgenstein about language. Wittgenstein, too, is a significant influence on Retallack, often referenced by her in critical and poetic work. In 1929, Wittgenstein spoke of "the tendency of all men who have ever tried to talk or write Ethics or Religion . . . to run against the boundaries of language" (qtd. in Klagge). But the following year (1930), he said, "Running against the limits of language? Language is, after all, not a cage" (qtd in Klagge). I imagine that latter revision has serendipitous Cage resonance with Retallack, but in any case, the idea that language may have fewer limits than we imagine, and consequently that alterities are more realisable, is a Retallack-friendly line of thought. Among the three pages of "Not A Cage" appear, for example, these three lines:

> Gun, Veronica wrote, the end.
>
> 'Wittgenstein'
>
> Tomorrow she would be in America. (*HTDTWW* 28)

Freed from their volumes into the aeration of double spacing and freed from the normative burdens that their former volumes placed upon them, the lines resonate in a differential language from which readers may draw multiple, including intertextual, readings.

In like procedural vein is her poem "STEINZAS IN MEDIATION", the first of the three poems in "EX POST SCRIPTO", the third (middle) section of *How to Do Things with Words.* The lettristic move that enlarges "Stanzas" to portmanteau "Steinzas" (labelling the source of Retallack's intertextuality) and the one-letter omission that extracts "mediation" from "meditation" are typical Retallack plays albeit not procedural. This poem lists first words of lines in Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation.* For example:

VI.

I If If He Namely

Often Left Come They For

Ours Made By In Made

Let But It Because They

Articles Hope Theirs Ever All

For It Just They They

They And With Getting For

. . . (Retallack, *HTDTWW* 66)

The procedure in Retallack's poem relocates words used by Stein in a quite different configuration. Retallack's lines do not comply with a normative syntax; their grammar depends on her procedure. Retallack's lines use Stein's words, or words that Stein uses, but in a form unlike Stein's. Here, Retallack crafts a fresh language, a zone of alterity, from word material earlier fashioned to a different pattern by Stein. As with other procedures I have noted, this process builds upon a differential envisioning of language, and of poetry. Consequent upon Retallack's annexation of Stein's material, that used material, the site of Retallack's installation, and its source can all be reimagined, opening to a differential version of critical reading.

Although I do not address ludics as a separate topic, Retallack's pervasive play with language constantly attends her work, encouraging playful readings that embrace alterities and therefore qualify for mention in this section. Ludics temper her practice with light, but her purpose is darkly serious. As she explains to P. Inman:

> For me the idea of play is important as a middle term between believing and doubting, ideology and dead-end skepticism. Play is the possibility which allows an intense, provisional commitment to a structure, exploring its potential, without dogma. ("Conversation with Peter Inman")

This mix of light and dark, fun but earnest, owes much to Cage's influence. Like Cage, Retallack regards her art as a different kind of expression to the ego-driven art of many poets. Like Cage, she does not seek to move her reader by displays of pathos-oriented versification. Her art performs experimentally at a metalevel of ideas; she expresses those ideas through example or illustration rather than through philosophical argumentation. Her experimental procedures produce non-normative texts, often fragmentary, that perform rather than offer syntax-aided normative *meaning*. Retallack pares or abrades language back to its atomic written

features, offering her readers the opportunity to construct their own reading experience from the fragments. Her experimentalism works with juxtapositions, jumps, disjunctives and tunnellings through found materials.

Retallack adopts the term "thought experiment" for her "schematic essay of linked propositions" in her 2007 essay "What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?"

There, she states:

> Experiment is conversation with an interrogative dynamic. Its consequential structures turn on paying attention to what happens when well-designed questions are directed to things we sense but don't really know. These things cannot be known by merely examining our own minds. (para 3)

To these ends she links aspects of alterity. In her view there should be "the shock of alterity" and "the pleasure of alterity", and she offers the challenging proposition that "we humans with all our conversational structures have yet to invite enough alterity in" (para 3). For Retallack, experimental poetry should engage in a questioning form of conversation that pursues alterities.

5. Why grammar as a field for poethical performativity?

Retallack packs poetics, ethos, ethics and aesthetics into her recurrent portmanteau construction *poethics* (*TPW* 11). Delving into the componentry of her neologism, she says, "Every poetics is a consequential form of life. Any making of forms out of language (poesis) is a practice with a discernible character (ethos)" (11). She intends the term to indicate a poetics imbued with values, "what we care about", and her consequent drive to create poetry that seeks cultural betterment stems from that intent (11). The ethical strand of *poethical* exhibits moral courage, principled politics and compassion.

The structure of Retallack's writing situates within a culture that she wishes to change. Her sensibility to cultural limitations refracts from her evident wish to upset many of them. In the frame of this thesis, those cultural issues concern gender. In Retallack's essay ":RE:THINKING:LITERARY:FEMINISM:" she references both Michel Foucault and Judith Butler among those recognising "culture as inescapably male" (*TPW* 121). And a few pages later: "We know . . . that the power to make useful meaning (OE *mænan* – to mean/to moan) of one's historical experience does not lie in accepting the outline of one's 'nature' narrated therein" (132). To the extent that she perceives gender unfairnesses, her vision apprehends the confines of the cultural structure but her imagination pushes outside it. Her probing, dicing, wagering experimentations are primed with desire to change the cultural structure.

If doing things in the same way is not working, seeking difference becomes essential. Proliferation of reading alterities through performance of poethical texts advances Retallack's chances. To this end she courts the unknown and the unpredictable because known paths operating normatively within the cultural structure are not adequately addressing the cultural changes she seeks. Only by diving into the dark can new light be found. This paradox, which can be recognised as feminine because it falls within the "subversive, transgressive and . . . non-rationalist associative logics" of the experimental feminine (*TPW* 135), encourages her to create language pieces that make no indexical sense in normative cultural reading. And difference is a cornerstone of the experimental. Or, to take one of Retallack's oft-repeated tropes, she takes a *wager*, a hazard, looking for the happy chance of difference. Accordingly, as we shall discover, she plays confidently with atoms of language, knowing she cannot predict outcomes.

Although her work is deeply, literally, lettristically privileged in its scholarship, Retallack's methodology not only cedes authorial control to procedures of chance or work whose performance encourages reading alterities, her long-standing mode often involves collaboration, thereby including other voices. In 1968, she was hired as a consultant in social philosophy for a newly formed interdisciplinary institute at the Department of Justice (*Musicage* xxi). She engaged with Cage and Buckminster Fuller to better inform her preparation for seminars. Skip to 2014 and Retallack is convening Supposium 2014 at the Museum of Modern Art's Founders Room, a workshop on ethical issues for which she devised a procedure involving card games to be undertaken in conversational groups. She employs language, but equally she invokes procedure-driven interactions, productive conversations. Typically, these entertain with a serious cultural purpose.

Having introduced *poethics* and Retallack's associated desire for cultural change that underpins her performativity, I turn to expose a linkage between forms, performativity and grammar. The term *form* principally references "shape, arrangement of parts" and "the particular character, nature, structure, or constitution of a thing, the particular mode in which a thing exists or manifests itself". It includes configuration, and style (OED). Of course, *form* embeds within *perform*, originally denoting "to carry through in due form" (OED). Current denotations include "to make, construct or execute" and "to bring about, bring to pass, cause, effect, produce (a result)", all denotations of relevance to Retallack's performativity. *Grammar* denotes "the science which analyses those distinctions in thought which it is the purpose of grammatical forms more or less completely to render in expression" (OED). That "form" constitutes a major expression of "grammar" reinforces my argument that, when Retallack messes with word forms

and other forms in which letters perform, she engages at a rule-changing level, one of grammatical import.

In her writings, Retallack is explicit about her form work but less so in connecting forms and grammar. Nonetheless, my reading of her essays suggests that she makes that connection implicitly. Even if she fails to acknowledge it patently, I contend that this linkage between forms and grammar manifests in her work, especially engaging grammars at the sub-word level, as my thesis will develop. I therefore highlight some of her passages in which these terms surface significantly, drawing *form* and *grammar* to my critical foreground. For example, highlighting the experimentalist's need to change grammars, in "Essay as Wager" she says:

> Meanwhile, grammars – which must carry on the pragmatics of everyday life – lag behind changing awarenesses and intuitions that exceed old forms. Vocabularies mutate more than grammars. That is why the avant-garde in the arts and theoretical humanities – philosophy and science – will always have work to do, work that only gradually (sometimes never) enters the common language. (*TPW* 10)

In that passage, one page before she introduces her term *poethics,* she links normative grammars with "old forms". Inferentially, new grammars, fitting for "changing awarenesses and intuitions", must find expression in new forms. Recognising the need to extend her performativity outside the cultural structure that she challenges, Retallack applies her poethical performativity to disrupt grammars, the zone of cultural rule-making.

Grammar emerges as an important focus in her essay "Poethics of the Improbable: Rosmarie Waldrop and the Uses of Form", where she addresses worthwhile writing:

> The urgent knowledge that erupts onto the page and into the form sends one into the swerving, turbulent patterns of life principles – the messiness and loveliness of ecological interdependence, synergy, exchange, chance. This is what John Cage meant by art that imitates not nature but her processes – processes that render us cheerfully and tragically inconsolable. I suspect it is precisely Beckett's refusal to be consoled (a rejection of sentimentality) that allowed him to "go on." When Waldrop says she doesn't have thoughts but that she has methods that make language think, she is referring to a similar movement away from grammars of inertia. Waldrop turns her own restlessness and anxiety of sufficiency into a navigational project, a poetics of formal choice that throw text into motion as life processes themselves. This has to do with material energies of language – vocabularies, syntaxes, juxtapositional dynamics, interpretive co-ordinates. (*TPW* 86)

For present purposes, in addition to the term "grammar", I draw attention to the associated terms "form(al)" and "methods that make language think". In this rich passage, Retallack discloses many of her own sensibilities. She, too, moves away from "grammars of inertia", adopting "a poetics of formal choice that throw text into motion as life processes themselves". She too operates via "vocabularies, syntaxes, juxtapositional dynamics [and] interpretive co-ordinates", particularly in her proceduralism. Her rhetoric imparts a vitality ("urgent

knowledge", "erupts onto the page and into the form") that reinforces her claim that "a poetics of formal choice . . . [will] throw text into motion as life processes themselves". Prominently in its title, this essay addresses "The Uses of Form", and consequently, "form" and its derivatives are loaded terms in it. Essentially, she claims these "formal" "swerves" as part of "the . . . turbulent patterns of life principles". Here, Retallack discloses her devout adherence to the rightness of her poetics, an ontological claim that imagines her proceduralism as part of a natural order of turbulence. Although the link between form and grammar is not explicitly drawn in this passage, my critical reading connects them. Accordingly, those "methods that make language think", which include, in Retallack's methodology, procedures of chance, are likewise grammatical moves, rule-breaking or rule-changing plays that mess with language structures.

In the same essay, she lauds the experimental for its capacity to provoke change, which she desires:

> The remarkable coincidence of experimental results with what one most cares about happens only when the active consciousness of the experimenter precipitates an urgency of choice, one that cannot help but affect the shape of the indeterminate elements. (*TPW* 87)

This passage expresses an odd view, namely that the experimentalist will, indeed "*cannot help but* [emphasis added] affect the shape of the indeterminate elements". Retallack's comment builds on Waldrop's having turned to collage to get away from writing poems about her mother and then finding that the resultant poems were still about her mother (*TPW* 87). The portion quoted above can be read down to mean that the experimentalist's "urgency of choice" will "affect the shape of the indeterminate elements" without any resultant guidance as to their form, but in its context, it really suggests otherwise, namely that the experimentalist's "urgency of choice" will have a "follow-through" influence on the resultant shape. What speaks strongly to me in this passage is Retallack's fervour and urgency for what she most cares about, her desire that experiment will prove effective in changing the shape of culture, whether that be around Retallack's interests in militarism or in gender unfairnesses, or otherwise.

When she speaks of "methods that make language think" (*TPW* 86), Retallack touches too on philosophy and the need to ask questions by fresh means, another way of escaping the cultural confines. In her later essay "What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?" she observes that atomic physicist Niels Bohr and philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein shared an understanding of "the extent to which our linguistic conventions are not unimpassioned habits. What we long for is implanted in our grammatical structures as much as it is in our

vocabularies. (para 12)" She noted Wittgenstein's observation "that philosophy doesn't really progress . . . because our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions" (para 11). Grammar and questions emerge as key terms in Retallack's emphasis.

As this thesis will show, Retallack's practice, in part, pulls words apart and treats lettristic marks as graphics, unbound from grammars driving for conventional meaning. Whereas orthography denotes correct or proper spelling, the way in which words are conventionally written, *dysorthography* is my term to describe that aspect of her practice in which she messes with material presentation of conventional words. Her dysorthography has the poethical aim of disturbing the language firmament to change our cultural questions so conversations can be rejigged and cultural wrongs righted. We could pun that her dysorthographic practice aims to write wrongs: seeking poethical ends, she writes what offends normative grammars. The poethical payoff involves setting the Lego pieces of language free from cultural grammars in a playfully serious performance. In this civil disobedience, *meaning* attaches to the performance.

Treating written marks of language in ways that are fundamentally lettristic draws attention to the graphic mark in its materiality rather than as a sign form burdened to produce singularity of meaning. In Chapter Four, that focus on materiality will move beyond the graphic mark to the page itself. Retallack's practice treats punctuation and diacritical marks as lettristic, equally with alphabetical letters. Retallack adopts a painterly approach to marks on the page, treating all conventional marks of writing as materiality that she can place on the page where she wills. As a graphic designer, she dismantles the sub-atoms of language and deals with them artistically on the page. Although I have not yet made much of it, her spatial sensibility – her attention to the page, fieldwork, text placement – is a notable feature of her practice, one that refracts her attention to the materiality of all the graphic marks of written language. In that practice, she treats all lettristic marks as falling within the same fractal order, a treatment that itself amounts to a grammatical and poethical move from cultural norms.

How is this thesis organised?

Even when it dips into zones of white space, the imagined journey of this thesis navigates Retallack's zones of written language signs. Zones of written language differ materially from those of spoken language, although writing can represent speech. Therefore, the journey of this thesis navigates not speech but, I repeat, zones of written language.

Specifically, I am interested in how Retallack messes with grammars at a sub-word level. Undeterred by the view that grammar concerns rules about the relations of words in a sentence,

I pursue, through focused zones, my claim that other grammars operate below the level of the word. The zones in which I suggest that intra-lexical grammars and letter grammars operate occupy only one continuum of text performance. "Intra-lexical" and "letter" merely emphasise differential characteristics. Throughout, I argue that the entire continuum of those text performances serves Retallack's ideal of a literary feminine. Chapter One, in which I contend that Retallack messes with grammars through letters, punctuation and diacritic marks (letter grammars), concentrates on poetic acts involving single letters or marks. Chapter One also serves to introduce several thinkers of importance to Retallack's practice. Chapters Two and Three extend my focus on poetic performance beyond that of the individual lettristic mark: Chapter Two exemplifies how Retallack, particularly in response to J. L. Austin's speech act theory, messes with grammars inside words (lexical ethics); Chapter Three develops that schema theoretically and analytically, reimagining the atomic structure of written language and noting the operations of Retallack's performative word grammars (intra-lexical grammars). In Chapter Four I move beyond obvious textual marks to contend that Retallack's performance marks zones of white space on the page as a representative zone of the unwritten or unread literary feminine (grammars of white space). Gertrude Stein held that a name (a proper noun, colonised by its connotations) is more limited than a pronoun, which "already ha[s] a greater possibility of being something" (*Lectures in America* 213). The feminine potential of Retallack's white space may similarly speak with a broader silence than those page parts already colonised and thereby limited by text. I shall explain that Retallack's procedural practices, her performance of visual artistry on her page, and her plays between absence and presence, also amount to grammatical performances.

Initial G'L'A'N'C'E'S'

This introductory section concludes by analysing an example from one of Joan Retallack's characteristic writing experiments. This excerpt appears in her essay "Blue Notes on the Know Ledge", collected in her 2003 book of essays, manifestos and blandishments, *The Poethical Wager*:

> E.G., or,
>
> **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**
>
> Ah **G** apostrophe the halocutionary arts! she talked **L**ike an angle **A** apos-
>
> trophe angel already turning blue from separation order in cerulean blue of
>
> blue happy blue face blue domed **S**kies.
>
> That is,

> **G**ee, excuse me but **L**ike is there any angel **A** apostrophe difference at all between the Madames B'ovary and B'utterfly in the face of all that **N** apostrophe now is and has been known in the **C** apostrophe c'anonic C'atastophe of *Il n'y avait pas de suite dans ses idées* she's incoherent! Yes No she's not and yet she was paradoxically or not enough among the first to disappear in those short wave-lengths at dusk the past tense makes her tense too blue from seeing distance he said in the turbid atmosphere of the many apostrophes between the **EEE!s** that she and he have in common and the final **S**. Her note reads: I do all workhouse I do charge razonable rate. (79)

Against the more restrained rhetoric and objective focus familiar in critical essays, this sample performs as boisterous creative writing. Its affect fits with the abundance of similar short creative pieces and quotations, including poetic extracts from colleagues, that constitute most of this essay addressing perception and knowing. The quoted portion forms part of B.17, the seventeenth part of the essay's nineteen parts. It comprises the second of three "exemplary" pieces that make up the latter half of B.17. Its neighbours are both prefaced by "Or, e.g.,". These titles frame this sample, and its two neighbours, as alternative *examples*. The essay's topic of how we can "know" addresses a broad philosophical issue. Here, although mindful of that broad issue, Retallack performs to valorise example over philosophical proposition. It is fair to add that her enactment valorises performance over exposition, performativity over persuasion. Refracting those non-normative ordering features back through the boisterously creative affect of this sample, I suggest she performs a new rhetorics of, and in, creative criticism.

The heading to the quoted portion, like those of its immediate neighbours, offers two bids: one is example; the other is the "or" of alterity. Read as a series, the three items successively offer "Or, e.g.,", "E.G., or," and (again) "Or, e.g.,". Repetitive patterns emerge, toggling, firstly between alternatives ("or"s) and examples ("e.g."s), and secondly between chiasmic inversions of those pairings. Insistent repetition, of the "E.G., or" type, amplifies the excess of "exempli gratia", "for the sake of example", in this text. The resultant anaphora emphasises that toggle. The construction "or, for example" may constitute a discursive turn to example, but the construction "for example, or" seems disjunctive. Are we in example or alternative? What kind of relationship between former and latter is conveyed? It is a puzzle. In whatever manner that may be understood (or known), a deictic towards example looms prominent in the frame of this

passage. The first of two Wittgenstein passages quoted by Retallack in this essay exemplifies this turn to example, beginning with "If, for instance, you . . ." (65). Aptly coloured, in Retallack's "Blue Notes" essay, that quotation derives from Wittgenstein's *The Blue Book*. Wittgenstein's enumerated philosophical structures, and his characteristic reliance on examples, provide a twentieth-century comparative to Retallack's indication of her own preferred approach. For Retallack to valorise example over exposition is (at least as an alterity) to propose performatively that there is no exposition, only example. There are no abstract "truths": there are instead examples, performances of meaning that happen everywhere.

Retallack's English text reaches to include other languages. Keeping company with her introduction of the lettristic Latin "E.G.", the volta upon which the passage turns comprises the short line "That is", which invokes the Latin *id est,* more usually represented lettristically as "i.e.", "that is (to say)", (itself ironic in reference to the silenced feminine voice which, as I shall explain, is a theme of the passage under review). The frame of the passage can be recognised as lettristic from heading to medial hinge. French, too, appears in the italicised clause: "*Il n'y avait pas de suite dans ses idées*". The refraction that there is no logical connection within "her" ideas may operate as Retallack's self-referential ironic comment on her own essay because it performs in a suite of items that could be read down as disconnected fragments. In this passage, the realm of reason is punctuated by the realms of multilingualism, paradox, and art in a semantic performance that celebrates the lettristic. The language reach of the text extends through time (Latin) and what might be termed foreignness (e.g. French).

The toggle between example and alterity creates a frame *within* each of the three successive passages titled in the "or/e.g." style and, as a larger frame of pattern, *between* the three successive sets of text. One pattern fits within another like Mandelbrot's fractals. Like logical philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Retallack applies what I choose to call the grammars of mathematics – the structures, rules and forms of mathematics – as a way of investigating language functions.

Retallack's aesthetic practices apply modes of thinking across silos. Referencing a philosopher like Wittgenstein accurately gestures to her broad embrace of scholarly learning. In other essays she references, for example, logician and mathematician Kurt Gödel, who, in a move that lurched mathematics from classical expectations into modern ones, posited that axioms cannot be proved within their own systemic structure, thereby placing classical logic and mathematics into a zone of undecidability (*TPW* 83, 185). Gödel's embrace of undecidability aligns with Retallack's poethical work, which is so evidently alive to philosophical, logical, mathematical and scientific concerns, yet so open to zones of unknowing, as this thesis will make clear. Her

address of Mandelbrot's geometric fractals to language is another example of her hybrid practices that refract an earnest desire, albeit playfully executed, to challenge orders of thinking and culture. This hybridisation reflects in the first quotation in "Blue Notes on the Know Ledge", deriving from Julia Kristeva: "[I]n dim light, short wave-lengths prevail over long ones; thus, before sunrise, blue is the first color to appear. Under these conditions, one perceives the color blue through the rods of the retina's periphery (the serrated margin)" (qtd. in Retallack, *TPW* 63). The blue-related tropes of "dim light", "periphery" and, most painfully, the "serrated margin" bathe Retallack's feminine in blue light while the blues play, in repeating first lines that characterise the blues, songs of oppression and woe. Retallack applies Kristeva's scientific, visually oriented material to add depth to the blues of her essay. In so doing, she annexes Kristeva's borrowing from science to make a feminine point about poetics.

The sequence of alternating letters and apostrophes that make up "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**" attracts the eye because all those clustered marks are bolded, and because they form a non-normative lexemic combination. The separation of seven upper-case letters by interspersed punctuation draws attention to each letter as an individual component of the lexeme. Encouraged by the lettristic heading "E.G.", the aggregation of nine letters, as an approximate cluster, suggests a lettristic attention in Retallack's text. This feature will become important in my thesis.

The materiality of the seven alphabetical letters in "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**" toggles among three positions: their interrupted assemblage as the identifiable word "GLANCES" that glances through a curtain of apostrophes, their status as individual alphabetical letters and their mysterious part(s) in the constructed lexeme-type form of alternating letter-mark pattern. Is the desire to run the alphabetical letters together to produce a normative "GLANCES" a desire embedded in the writing (the text), or a desire for which the reader must answer? Whether writing or reading, the construction embeds the dilemma on the page as a phenomenon necessarily occurring within the visual realm of written language. The reader sees the letters in assemblage through their punctuated zones of interruption. Those zones of interruption affect temporal reading and create reference confusion. The constructive peculiarity causes the eye to dwell, to re-view, to reconsider. Is it a word? What might it mean?

Page layout of the passage under review features arguably competing headings. Contrasting and competing with the centred, lettristic heading "E.G.", the left-justified bolded heading "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**" introduces hesitations into both temporal and reference aspects of reading. For the reader, the left-justified construction comes, literally, out of left field. The centred "E.G." competes as title with the bolded "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**". Which can better claim to frame, the centrist or the bolded left? Can they stand as co-titles? If so, what is their relative order of

importance? As with the letters and apostrophes in **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**, cultures are in conflict. Do we favour the cultures of alphabet or of punctuation, order or page position? Awash with alterities, the linear structure of the published paragraph is thereby materially interrupted by a multidimensional temporal and reference fluidity. In turn, those interruptions point up the competition between textually embedded cultures.

Retallack's sensibility to the lettristic is reinforced by what the text proceeds to do to each of the seven bolded letters. Sequentially, each letter receives attention that I choose to call parsing. To be accurate, the series of letters is approached twice: once partially, and then fully, in the letter sequence **GLASGLANCES**. (When I use the term "parse" in this context, I am extending the familiar classification of words as "parts of speech".) Here, I situate each bolded letter in a grammatical relation to its associated text for the purpose of poetics exposition. I do not suggest each letter can be explained merely as, say, a noun or a verb. For example, the bolded letter **L** reappears in the expanded sequence of each substantial paragraph as the first letter of "**L**ike". It comprises part of that word but its situation there owes something to its referential part in the sequence **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'** and it is for that relation that I grope through what I term parsing, turning to something familiar, an example for instance, to better comprehend the operation of the text. In terming it parsing, I lean on a familiar pattern or process that I concede does not relate on all fours with the patterns and behaviours of Retallack's text. We are dealing with a grammar of poetics. The text deals sequentially with each letter of **GLASGLANCES**, expanding upon the letter and reusing or repositioning it within subsequent text. That process suggests more fulsome treatment of, or at least alternatives for, relations between each letter and its companions.

Although the bolded lettristic sequence **GLASGLANCES** may initially suggest an abortive first run at the titular **GLANCES** that misses "**NCE**", the first four letters gesture subtly to Jacques Derrida's 1974 experimental book *Glas.* The French title translates portentously as "knell" or "toll". In Derrida's book, each page is divided into two columns. The left follows Hegel's philosophy; the right, Jean Genet's autobiographical writings. Derrida's notations appear among the writings in both columns, so it comprises a sort of workbook. Pursuing Retallack's four-letter gesture by dipping into Derrida's text becomes an Alice down the rabbit hole experience, one of diversion and intertextual play that becomes a familiar pattern when reading Retallack.

As we shall discover in Chapter One, language philosopher Derrida exerts an important influence on Retallack's thinking and practice, but, limiting myself here to noting Retallack's intertextual allusion within her **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'** text, I devote three paragraphs to perceivable

relations between Retallack and Derrida's *Glas*. In *Glas*, Derrida quotes a poem by Mallarmé in *Oeuvres complètes* that uses simple references to *glas* as "knell", for example, "Don't bury your gold to sound your *glas*" (qtd. in Derrida, *Glas* 151, *Glassary* 161). Later in *Glas*, Derrida quotes Georges Bataille's poem "le glas" followed by four Bataille "elaborations". I quote the original and the first of four elaborations as they appear in the English translation:

> **The glas**
>
> In my voluptuous bell [*cloche*]
>
> death's bronze dances
>
> the clapper of a prick sounds
>
> a long libidinal swing
>
> *Elaborations*
>
> **The sky [ciel]**
> 1. Love's bronze sounds
>   the red clapper of your prick
>   in the bell of my cunt. (Bataille qtd. in Derrida, *Glas* 220–21)

The eroticism of the bell's moving parts opens to four elaborations, differential readings. The sound of *le glas* is produced by the active conversation between both male and female parts; this gestures to productive conversations across genders that, as we shall discover, Retallack values. In Bataille's third "elaboration", the line "the bald clapper of the *glas*" obviously suggests the *glans*, the sensitive head of the penis. In Derrida's *Glas*, this passage sits across from Hegel's discussion of "the unity of being and self in effect as reconciliation" (221). The open page presents a genre-mixed combination of philosophy, poetry, commentary and alterities. All of these are important geometries of attention in Retallack's work. For our purposes in Retallack's writing, we note the reach of her intertextual reference via Derrida to Bataille and Mallarmé, and to Hegel and Genet.

We shall discover that Retallack's attention to words, like Derrida's, senses the lettristic possibilities, the morphemic and lexemic possibilities, that aggregates of alphabetical letters and punctuation can offer. John P. Leavey, Jr, a translator of *Glas* and the author of *Glassary*, a glossary of *Glas*, had the advantage of conferring with Derrida. Derrida's attention to aural, morphemic and lettristic features are revealed, for example, in Leavey's entry on the word *l'habitacle* ("compartment" or "cockpit") which appears in a section where Hegel discusses phallic monuments. Leavey notes that "For Derrida this word is important for its suggestive parts", quoting Derrida: "but it is the sonority 'bit' and *acle* that interest me: *bite* = phallus

(slang); ACLE = ALC, CLA, etc."; Leavey adds: "CLA recalls GL, GLA, GLAS, CLASSE, etc., all important words, concepts, sounds in *Glas*" (Leavey 180, referring to Derrida, *Glas* 255).

What, then, are "**GLASGLANCES**" in Retallack's essay? I suggest the construction gestures to alterities, both sources and readings; to intertextuality; and to Derridean glances of the *Glas* kind. By "Derridean glances of the *Glas* kind", I mean texts that cross-reference philosophy and literary works, texts that juxtapose different genres, texts that offer opportunities for readers to fashion their own reading journeys as a working exercise. As we shall discover, Retallack's "glances" operate to accumulate meanings and references. The glassy alliteration hints at viewing through a glass, the warning of a bell that tolls or signals a knell, even the homophone French word *glace* for the pleasures of ice cream. In my reading, this lettristic sensibility signals that the reader should look around, combine this with that, and look (read) beyond the text. Additionally, it signals Retallack's embrace of Derrida's deconstructive theory, encouraging her own writing as receptive to differential readings.

The construction "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**" embeds a masculine presence in Retallack's feminine writing. This written word, apostrophes and all, does not translate readily into speech; it presents a reading dilemma. If attempted, what sound or hesitation would represent the apostrophes? But the embedded word *glances* can be spoken readily. And in American pronunciation, it sounds like an English-styled plural of the Latin word *glans* (acorn). The Latin plural is "glantes", one letter different from *glances.* Representing, in *glans penis*, the sensitive and distal portion of the penis, the near homophone word *glans* hovers behind "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**". Like Stein's encoding of the clitoris in her title *Tender Buttons*, I suggest Retallack's blue feminine notes are encoded with a masculine echo. In this reading, the ejaculatory introduction "Ah **G** apostrophe the halocutionary arts!" might suggest an orgasmic excitement that explains why, on first attempt, the parsing of the word failed to last the distance. On the first attempt, after G, L and A, the text moves directly to S, before starting again. I have no doubt that Retallack's ear hears the Latin word carried within GLANCES and her sense of fun will exploit the relationship in this manner. And, of course, all that is in keeping with association with Derrida's *Glas*.

The echo of *glans* comprises part of my reading, suggesting that the blue-blown feminine notes require engagement with male sensitivity. The turn to productive conversations across gender differences distinctly aligns with Retallack's poethics. Full-blown intercourses of that kind will include instances of sexual intercourse. The cultural issue of feminine disadvantage addressed by Retallack arises in the intimate as in the political. Questions present, such as whose pleasure

is served, which gender is treated as having privileges or rights, and which is figured as bearing duties or obligations? These resonate alongside issues like the relative feminine absence in the literary canon or the disproportionate importance accorded to male speakers (oral or written). Retallack is deeply interested in performativity of language. Judith Butler's work on the performativity of gender provides congruent thinking to support Retallack's performative poethics because they challenge the status quo and create language-based forms of alterity in search of a fairer culture. Retallack, in my reading, regards pursuit of fairness as a task to be undertaken by intergender conversations. In line with that thought, noticing *glans* within **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'** does make the latter seem a more genderful (my expression) word, surprisingly enriched with combinatory possibilities. Conversations between, through, with or among genders are desirable to redress the unfairnesses. Retallack does not shrink from acknowledging, perhaps implicating, male presence within culture, even though her text deliberately and successfully foregrounds the feminine.

Retallack allocates a portion of text to each letter in the **GLASGLANCES** set. As for characters in a play script, each letter has its own parcel of words. For example, we greet or hail "**G**": "Ah **G** apostrophe [the] halo [hello] . . .". Like enumerated biblical verses, like acrostic poetry, like rosary beads, like milestones on the road to London – the sequential organisation of the text to the bolded letters **G L A S** and then **G L A N C E S** can variously compare to arithmetic, enumerative or acrostic treatments familiar to poetry (and other organised documents) over many centuries. Devices that drive form, like enumeration or acrostic, elevate intensity because that formal treatment suggests veneration. Of course, such documents correspondingly suggest logic through their organisation and sequencing. Lawyers and judges enumerate paragraphs in correspondence or judgments to develop a solemnising affect, to enact a sense of formulaic process, a gesture of completeness, a ritual to suggest logic. Ritual mitigates doubt through the comfort of repetition. In Christian tradition, the Stations of the Cross or familiar rhetoric and responses in the Eucharist operate to this end. In Te Ao Māori, the ordering of formal whaikōrero bear this grandeur of progress through ancient cultural ritual. Whaikōrero are sequentially addressed: firstly, in order, to te wharenui (meeting house), te maunga (relevant mountain), te awa (river of the local people), te papa (land of the marae) and te rangatira (chief); secondly, to the dead; and thirdly, to the living. Some orators enumerate the formal parts of their whaikōrero: Tuatahi (first), Tuarua (second), and Tuatoru (third), explicitly marking their adherence. Ezra Pound's *XXX Cantos* obtains gravitas from the progressive quality gestured by the numbering of the poems, the sense that a grand scheme is being worked through. Retallack's address to, or through, each letter in sequence echoes such cultural traditions and yet departs from them because the form that elevates these seven letters is

unprecedented, albeit linked to the kinds of organisation I mention. The arc of experimental play in this instance can be registered as relational rather than anarchic.

Such ritual around formal aspects of language often attends expressions of devotion, including religious devotion. I do not suggest Retallack's work has religious intent, but her echo of ritualistic form provokes comparison with works in which religious belief inheres. Form poetry like George Herbert's "Easter Wings", in which the words are set out on the page to resemble a pair of wings, relies on symbol to heighten or intensify the poem. Even Herbert's poem "The Church Floor", which rather stolidly evokes qualities of patience, humility and confidence by drawing them from his grounding image, exemplifies this attention to ascertainable form as a means of elevating the poetry. Retallack's dealings with her letters is much freer than those examples. Retallack opens with the seven letters, increasing them to eleven, and then using them, one by one like waypoints, she expands upon each letter. The form she employs resonates with acrostic. To organise her section with reference to letters is not in itself novel, but her performance treats the letters as more than enumerative substitutes. Through the peeps of her seven letters, her text glances into a cultural structure and finds it wanting. In that performance, her letters, individually, and in combination, afford insight.

What I term parsing pays attention not only to the letters, but also to the punctuation marks that occupy the intervals between letters. What are those apostrophes doing? Whether pictorial eyelashes of the glancing letters, curtain hooks on a rail from which to hang language, directions to pause, a series of possessives or signs of mysterious elisions, these written signs are employed in a manner foreign to most writing uses. Are they part of, or different from, the letters? Their insistent proliferation and regularity attract the reader's eye.

What, too, of the ordering of letters and punctuation marks, one against the other, in this lexemic construction? When I read, I tend to take primary note of alphabetical letters as words, and then modify meaning according to guidance from punctuation marks or diacritical marks. Thus, in my readings, punctuation generally operates at a supportive or modifying order inferior to words, or even letters. Retallack's text controverts my prejudice that tends to valorise letters over punctuation marks. This text calls each letter in the **GLASGLANCES** sequence, reproduced in bold upper case as a stand-alone alphabetical letter (even where subsumed within a word such as "**L**ike" or "**G**ee"), and then produces the full alphabetical word "apostrophe", represented by ten alphabetical letters, to denote the bolded letter's accompanying punctuation mark: "Ah **G** apostrophe . . .". Alphabetical letters and punctuation marks swap modes in this enactment: letters become words; apostrophe marks become their own words. In exchanging

their relative order, Retallack's text performs contrarily to normative taxonomy of the relative order of letters and punctuation marks.

Sequencing aside, another grammar operates within the passage under consideration, namely a form of central or "mesostic" spindle akin to forms used by Retallack's mentor, John Cage. The eleven letters that construct **GLASGLANCES** are approached sequentially in what I term parsing. In the first paragraph, only **GLA** and **S** are addressed. In paragraph two **GLANCE** and **S** are addressed one by one. Each letter is upper case and bolded. Although Retallack's form is different, being set out like prose, the spindle effect of the attention accorded those letters strongly resembles John Cage's mesostic string poems. These poems, constructed according to Cage's rules, generally present down the page with the mesostic letters in upper case in a horizontal line. Thus, the mesostic letters read vertically like a musical chord. For example, I reproduce from Retallack's *Musicage* a portion of Cage's mesostic poem "I don't want my work to be an exposure of my feelings". In this poem, Cage, like Retallack, treats the apostrophe as equivalent to an alphabetical letter, giving it its own line:

vIsual **but**
anD in ’
thing Occurs
to differeNt kinds of space
in which we’ re
edge of **The** ’
i Would like my work to
A
itself’ i thiNk
arTs (9)

Interestingly, Cage, typically addressing performance, uses a space followed by an apostrophe to signify when a breath is to be taken (*Musicage* 3). Retallack's composition around the letters **GLASGLANCES** bears genetic trace of Cage's mesostic poems.

Other writers too, release the performative labour and play of punctuation onto the page. Compare Retallack's treatment of letters and punctuation with that, for example, in e. e. cummings's 1958 poem "l(a":

l(a
le
af
fa
ll
s)
one
l
iness (*Selected Poems* 39)

This poem can be deconstructed in several ways, its alterity deriving from the poet's insight, shared with readers, that breaking the alphabetical letters and brackets apart offers alternative reading possibilities. The consequent interruption of reading produces that temporal and reference fluidity that I find in Retallack's "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**". The cummings poem lingers along the word "loneliness". The parenthesised image, "(a leaf falls)", extends the poem's affective mournfulness by a familiar trope. Even in pairs, the letters represent as lonely, often meaningless; the isolation of "one" adds to the mounting distress. Because the whole text is apprehended only by reviewing its entire structure, the retrospectivity of self-pitying loneliness is enacted.

Like Retallack, cummings employs lettristic treatments to make his poem. By breaking his string of a few words into lettristic morsels, he creates an exciting lettristic poem. The reflective chiasmus of "af/fa", the allusion to Roman numeral two from "ll", and the play between twos (pairs of letters) and ones (represented twice by one letter "l" and once by the three letters "one") – even the sorrowful suggestion via the final line "iness" that "loneliness" is a state of "i"ness, the one in the "I": all these meanings leak from cummings's lettristic line breaks in the string of four words, three of which he parcels inside parentheses. Nevertheless, for all its brilliance, his lettristic separations and placements do not venture into the greater break from normativity employed by Retallack in "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**". Whereas his parenthesis is achieved through normative use of parenthesis punctuation "( )", her apostrophes stray far from normative punctuation grammars. Although cummings's words spread from line to line, the normative words "loneliness" and "a leaf falls" emerge from normatively sequential reading of alphabetical letters. The most unusual thing cummings does is to introduce his leaf-falling image into the body of "loneliness". In that move, his step out of normativity shows his potential to rank with Retallack's difference from the normative.

Experimental writer Gertrude Stein influences Retallack's work. Lettristic awareness reflects in Gertrude Stein's puns, but she rarely deconstructs a word in the manner of Retallack. An occasion when Stein did so was in a tender note to her lover, Alice Toklas. Retallack appends a photograph of the handwritten note in her 2008 *Gertrude Stein: Selections*:

> Ir
>
> Re
>
> Sis
>
> Ti
>
> Belle (323)

This play bears similarities to cummings's, but Stein starts each line in upper case, perhaps to emphasise the return, perhaps to suggest that each line represents a new word. I wonder if she read the first line "Ir" as "I are [am]", a reading to reflect the sentiment back: "I too am irresistible/belle." Stein packages these morsels like chocolates, each piece luxuriating in single-line space/time, delicious in the mouth. Stein's loving playfulness on this occasion, despite her revelation of "Belle" in "ble", falls shy of Retallack's aberrance from normativity. Nonetheless, Stein's example offers an indicative lead because her influence is strongly recognisable throughout Retallack's work, where she is often referenced, directly or indirectly.

Poetic experiment with line and word placement is of course not confined to the twentieth century. Closer to normative grammar is Emily Dickinson's mid-nineteenth-century use of the dash to indicate a dramatic pause or turn, later echoed in the work of H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), for example, in her 1916 "Sea Gods":

> . . .
> you will curl between sand-hills –
> you will thunder along the cliff –
> break – retreat – get fresh strength –
> gather and pour weight upon the beach. (*Sea Garden* 31)

More akin to Retallack's departure from normative is some of Susan Howe's work. Take, for example, from Howe's 1990 collection *Singularities,* these two (non-consecutive) lines:

> "on a [p<suddenly . . . on a>was shot thro with a dyed→ <dyed→a soft]"
> and
> Shackles [(shackles)] as we were told the . . .[precincts] (63)

Howe's incorporation of mathematical signs and arrows, her non-normative placing (and doubling) of parentheses, all bear comparison with Retallack's work. Similar too is Caroline Bergvall's 1996 "Éclat", in which letters are omitted, and the page layout confines words in rectangular pens. This example is only a portion of a page:

> A frame at th end of
> the by the main-door
> is catching your
> attention. You may
> want to have a l k.
> Then again. The
> . . . . . . staircase. Now
> there's a. Lets go
> upstairs. (*Éclat* 21)

Bergvall, a French-Norwegian-English poet who has taught at Bard, Retallack's college, enacts textual constraint within the rectangle. That constraint extends to the loss of normatively anticipated letters, words and punctuation (e.g. the loss of apostrophe in "Lets"). Bergvall's work makes plain her sensibility to the material structure within which she confines her text.

A plain reflection from Retallack's work, too, demonstrates her sensibility to the *structures* within which her writing situates. Even if these imagined zones are pluralities, alterities, her text engages with awareness of structural implications. In Chapter One, I shall address her writing's relation to Jacques Derrida's post-structuralist theories on sign and play, especially in his essay "Différance". Retallack's uptake of possibilities for structure sign and play, and her extension of that play from alphabetical letters to punctuation and diacritical markers, persists at a high level of consistency across her writings, poetic and critical, both of which are *poethical* enterprises for her. Through that consistency, her writing has something to teach twenty-first-century critical poetics about lexical componentry as conceived and practised over the past fifty years of US poetry.

Leaving comparisons with other writers, and veering back towards the text under review, I note that "GLANCES", whether apprehended as a word or as a combination of letters, apostrophised or not, appears in other Retallack writings, not always in upper case. The word frequently accompanies Joan Retallack's homophone alter ego, "Genre Tallique", because this pun puppet contributes text from Tallique's purported work "*GLANCES*: An Unwritten Book, Pre-Post Eros Editions, frothcoming" (sic), which figures in several Retallack bibliographies, for example, in *The Poethical Wager*, *How to Do Things with Words* and *Afterrimages.* "Pre-Post Eros" suggests the adjective "preposterous" and pokes fun at taxonomies of time, the placement of one event in fine-tuned, sequential relation to another. The comical "frothcoming" deconstructs the normative "forthcoming" in a manner both playful and lettristic. That froth may be coming from or through Tallique's work connotes joyfulness.

Of course, when Tallique speaks, and she often does so authoritatively, the question arises whether the words should be read as those of the puppeteer. Is Genre Tallique merely alter ego to Retallack or is she a constructed character whose words should be read independently? I have already commented on the fluidity of Retallack's lexemic constructions, which construct portals to language and cultural alterities. Her work attunes keenly to structures. As a post-structuralist poet and critic, she performs contingency of orders in her author signature as well as in her writings. Once again, the resultant fluidity raises doubts in the regions of form and orders. This contingency regarding her author signature introduces another site of fluidity in her work, a portal for alterities of readings.

Retallack quotes from Genre Tallique on the page facing the "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**" passage under review. The quotation arises in an earlier portion of Part B.17 in the essay. Concluding an imagined conversation between feminist writer Virginia Woolf, music theorist and Retallack mentor John Cage, and Tallique, Retallack records Tallique as saying "To know, if our

knowledge is not to kill us or others, is itself the urgent necessity to unknow, to move on to the next ledge" (*TPW* 78). The seeming paradox, of wilfully moving towards unknowing, picks up on a theme broadly shared by, for example, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and music theorist John Cage, both strong influences on Retallack, that enhanced knowledge can be more profitably sought in darkness than in light. One avenue by which Retallack heads into the unpredictable darkness is via operations of chance rather than through earnest, linear design.

What I term parsing of the construction "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**" performs in mimesis of critical deconstruction. The text seems to amplify the constructed lexeme, filling in the gaps. Perhaps that is one reading of the apostrophes, as elisions of what the text proceeds to supply. However, if one work of this text may be critical deconstruction, it does not do so via normative critical rhetoric. The tone is upbeat, heightened through its exclamatory address, the initial "Ah", and the exclamation mark. The text literally apostrophises each letter, addressing it, for example, "Ah **G** apostrophe the halocutionary arts . . .". Around this play on the word and employment of "apostrophe" is mimetic play, echoes of other rhetoric or discourse.

The mimesis of critical reading is not the only mimesis at work. Expressions of the kind "**G** apostrophe" precisely model dictating a document for transcription. Within that mimesis sits the question of whether this text represents speech, in the specialised sense of material dictated for transcription, or instead represents exclusively a portion of written text – which is undoubtedly at least one of its functions. The text appears to inhabit a seam between writing and speech. Once again, a toggle between modes blurs more precise situation. That the text bridges between positions while itself sustaining positional doubt appears to best represent Retallack's choice of place, a fruitful seam to play with alterities.

Such play is exemplified by a pun morphing into portmanteau in the neologism "halocutionary", arguably an amalgam of "halo" and "illocutionary". The halo links to the first half of the anagram angel/angle; "illocutionary" comprises metonymic reference to language philosopher J. L. Austin's work on performative language. The term "illocutionary" references the intended meaning of a performative speech act. Retallack's neologisms create nodes where the text reaches out to other discourses and, consequently, picks up widening connotations. The altered words serve as conversation points where the reader enters into wondering dialogue with, and through, neologistic portals.

In my reading, the constructed lexeme "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**" raises fundamental reading questions. How is the construction to be read – and another side of that coin, what does it mean? Breaking it down, my reading perceives the normative word "glances", and guided by

my own reading practices, I want to read the apostrophes as punctuation marks to support meaning. But are they marks of elision, representing something, say, a letter, missing? Or do they perform another function, for example, indicating the possessive case? Can I read each apostrophe as equal to another or might different functions be indicated? What might an apostrophe in these circumstances signify? I propose to use the term *lettristic* to reference where Retallack's textual attention falls on any or all atomic marks of writing, namely alphabetical letters, punctuation or diacritical marks. If it qualifies as a word, and it seems to present as one, "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**" appears with non-normative usage of punctuation marks. The construction is unsettling, uncanny. That arises from pronounced attention to lettristic features, a significant marker of Retallack's work.

The broken names "B'ovary and B'utterfly" relegate those female characters to a zone of brokenness, broken by their cultural circumstances, by connotations of reproduction or fragility. The portion "utterfly" trembles to reduce "butterfly" to insect proportions one letter fewer. The portion "utter/fly", yielding two words, suggests "say 'fly'" or "flight", "run for it". It also suggests that to utter (speak) is to "fly" or that speech is a form of flight. Instead of "Mesdames" they are "Madames", with the connotation of mad women, mad dames, perhaps brothel-keepers. Although this breaking and remaking of words operates around a feminine discourse, the carnivalesque excess of polysemy reminds me most of Joyce, from whom Retallack quotes, a few pages earlier in this essay (68). The fragment "and she was paradoxically or not enough among the first to disappear in those short wave-lengths" reminds me of the arrival of "Bygmester Finnegan" in *Finnegan's Wake*: "Of the first was he to bare arms and a name" (Joyce 5). Whether my reading picks up an echo embedded by Retallack or draws from my embedded memories, Retallack's words raise the issue of women's disappearance, the invisibility of women in literature and, inexorably connected to that, in culture. This is a perception function of the blue end of the light spectrum, the trope of blue that forms the central spindle to her essay.

In the passage under review, Retallack plays the alphabetical melodics in counterpoint, much like a fugue. While she advances through the schemata G, L, A and so on, the text reveals response to the alphabetical system as a fundamental scale of attention. Thus, immediately after the text deals with "angel **A** apostrophe", it moves prominently to play the "B" notes of "B'ovary and B'utterfly", and then, following "**N**", plays "**C**". ABC plays its alphabetical accompaniment to "GLANCES". The essay topic addresses knowing. The text asks whether there is any difference between the aforesaid B's "in the face of all that **N** apostrophe now is and has been known to be known in the **C** apostrophe c'anonic C'atastophe of . . .". Perhaps the

"**C**" invokes "cunt", a gender word denigrated by phallogocentric usage, often represented as the solitary letter "c" followed by three genteel dots. By apostrophising the "c"s as she did the "B"s, Retallack challenges the authority of the literary canon by humbling, perhaps shaming, it with lower case, thereby ordering it, upon a case-based economy, even lower than "C'atastophe".

"C'atastophe" is not to be confused with the normative word "catastrophe". The strophe of the canonic C'at-word captures no "trophy" because there is no letter "r" in it. In his review of Retallack's 1995 *Afterrimages*, "The Eighteenth Letter", Randolph Healy observes of the aberrant (sic) extra "r" in that title, "Words became highly unstable, fee/free, a single mutation launching them into an entirely different semantic field." Noting the "r" in Retallack, he continues: "Freed by just one letter. Her own initial" (1). Whether the absent "r" in "C'atastophe" is personal or not, it can be read to qualify the canon as "a taste of he". Once again, playful lettristic tweaks build to support an embedded poethical argument. The argument advances by means of creative exemplar rather than philosophical rhetoric. Yet the philosophical issues are truly signalled via such creative examples.

Turning towards the final words of this polysemic text, gender unfairness shrieks through the **EEE!s**, the **E** string that, on any playing, cannot denote "ease". Music is a trope embedded in the essay title because a blue note is a note not found on the normative diatonic scale. Generally a lower note, it is more in keeping with lowbrow genres like folk music, jazz or, of course, blues. In the blues, the flat **E** is a common key. Retallack aligns the feminine with the blue note, a note that is "off key". Retallack's lettristic focus picks up that "she" and "he" both hold "e" in common. The "final **S**" references the additional lettristic burden that "he" need not carry, the "s" that contributes to language's silencing "sh" for "she". It also suggests the final straw. Finishing this performative piece, the text turns to a specific feminine "note" that "reads: I do all workhouse I do charge razonable rate". The term "workhouse" connotes marginalisation, reduced social and financial circumstances. But what of the neologism "razonable"? It can be read as a phonetic representation of its French equivalent. In English, in my reading, this portmanteau construction combines "reasonable" with "razor". Connotations of erasure, razing the record, the unlikelihood of her getting a "raise", and the blue mood of blue rays shade this constructed word. This passage brings the focus to gender unfairness, and it notes gender differences that materialise in written language as lettristic markers. On my reading, it leads most poignantly to themes of erasure, the feminine plight of being absent from notice, off the record. This builds on the earlier portions where "she talked" until she turned blue in the face (my paraphrase); the reference to the ill-fated pair B'ovary and B'utterfly; her incoherence; that

“she was . . . among the first to disappear”; and the final straw, no amount of cheap hard work will get her out of it. Her record is not raised, but razed. The feminine concern of this text is plain. The imagined voice of the feminine in this text passes from speech: “she talked **L**ike an angle”; to writing: “Her note reads . . .”. The note reads haltingly, enunciating imperfect grammar. But the sense comes clear. She is a workhorse, doing all the work around the house, existing in a sort of workhouse, underpaid, marginalised.

Chapter One: Letter grammars

> Let us never underestimate the power of a well-written letter.
>
> – Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Glances at the letter

Ordinary denotations of the noun *letter* extend beyond its position in an alphabet; the noun can also reference an epistolary document that, within a postal system, carries a message. In its original context, this chapter's epigraph references an epistolary letter, but in this thesis context, it gestures to the semantic and ludic links between the word "letter" as it bridges the fractal shift between epistle and alphabetical letter.

An epistle, composed of letters to form words, and thereby sentences that accumulate to the whole text, illustrates and incorporates a range of fractal shifts, including the atomic matter of alphabetical letters. In Chapter Three, I focus on fractal grammars, defined as grammars that repeat patterns at differential language levels. In this chapter, I consider the form in which alphabetical letters are written, and their placement, misplacement or displacement. As to displacement, this chapter's discourse eventually touches, among other relevant texts, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, Jacques Derrida's substituted letter *a* in "Différance" and Jacques Lacan's interest in letter significance. I want to investigate how we can view an alphabetical letter as literally and metaphorically writeable and openable in Retallack's work, something like how epistolary letters are treated as writeable, openable and legible.

As already noted, Retallack's practice plays with the arbitrary system of letters just as it plays within the arbitrary system of words. Moreover, Retallack extends the ordinary range of mark signification by lettristic-type uses of marks from other systems, such as punctuation and diacritics. Individual letters are signs within the alphabetical (sometimes called abecedarian) system, and within the alphabetical system, each letter signifies because it differs from the other letters. Viewed in this light, any letter of the alphabet can assume individual characteristics; letters have characteristic potentiality.

Retallack's postmodern work is far from the first to give poetic attention to individual alphabetical letters. In the field of modernist poetry, an outstanding example – and one that Retallack would certainly know – is Louis Zukofsky's long, epic poem "*A*", a sustained engagement under the sign of the first alphabetical letter. That the first letter serves as the indefinite article happily, for my purposes, shapes that work as one of a range of possible versions. Adding to what his poetry discloses, Zukofsky's collected critical essays, under the

heading *Prepositions* (1981), demonstrate his sensibility to grammar. Before his poem takes form in Part 24 as musical score and libretto, Zukofsky concludes Part 23 of his poem "*A*" with a line beginning "z-sited" ("*A*" 563). Thus, he marks a notional journey from beginning to end of the alphabet, bringing it home with his surname letter. Another modernist example of lettristic attention is e. e. cummings, whose 1958 poem "l(a" was noted with reference to Retallack's work in the introductory "Initial Glances" of this thesis. More recently, in his (2009) *Eunoia*, Christian Bök wrote five chapters, each using only one of the five vowels.

In this chapter I explore the grammatical range of meaning that one alphabetical letter can perform in a text. At heart is an endeavour to discern what a letter may represent in Retallack's practice. What does the letter mean? What shall we find when we open the letter and read its code? Before we embark on this quest, we are faced with a conundrum because, like an ouroboros, the expression "open a letter" confuses its large epistolary end and its small alphabetical end. To reference something as "letter", without more, writes it both small and large. Which am I to open here? Rather than falling into confusion, I propose to harness the alterity. In this chapter I embrace the idea contributed to the letter range by the ouroboros figure, because that posture whereby the snake appears to devour its tail adds something to both head and tail of the letter concept. This duality of reference usefully expands the semiotic range indicated by the word sign "letter". Slipping from semantics to semiotics, this enquiry into letters, their characters and meanings attends a deeper question about their semiotic nature, the part played by individual letters in semiotics, the significations that a letter can produce.

Whereas Chapter Two considers generally lettristic swerves within words in which the letters are components, this chapter focuses on individual letters themselves, whether within words or not. If words are atoms of written language, this chapter dwells mostly within the sub-atomic lettristic zone. Where appropriate, I continue to treat punctuation and diacritical marks as atoms of the lettristic order. In what follows, I will first explore Retallack's engagement with individual letters to perform experimental feminine speech acts, demonstrating how they qualify as fractal grammars for her poethics. In particular, I discuss her deployment of the letters *h, A, M* and *F* in her essay "The Scarlet Aitch", and her Oulipian procedures of constraint in two works: lipogram in "AID/I/SAPPEARANCE" and substituting *x* for vowels in a portion of *Memnoir*. Secondly, I develop what I call an allusive quilt, a loose theoretical matrix that references thinkers who influence Retallack's practice, especially relative to her grammatical performativity through individual letters and marks. I discuss how her embrace of post-structural Derridean theory, and her grappling with Lacan's psychoanalytical theory, provide additional avenues for her poethical disruption of normative grammar. Finally, this chapter

returns to individual letters to gauge the extent to which Retallack infuses them with individual character.

Individual letters in fractal grammars

The Scarlet Aitch

A rich example of Retallack's focus on the atomic (or sub-atomic) fractal language level of the alphabetical letter emerges from her focus on the letter *h*, which she engages to swerve *poetical* to *poethical*, a small but significant shift of alterity. The altered word appears prominently in the title *The Poethical Wager*. As indicated earlier in this thesis, the portmanteau construction *poethics* combines poetics, ethos, ethics and aesthetics. Demonstrating that the broad combination of sources in Retallack's neologism resonates beyond discrete literary circles, I note it was adopted in 1992 by Richard Weisberg in his *Poethics and Other Strategies of Law*, a text that counsels lawyers to seek ethical guidance from literary sources. Retallack's jump from *poetics* to *poethics* is but one letter, evidencing her interest in a literary *swerve* tethered to *atomic* features.

Retallack uses graphemes as small as an alphabetic letter in both her poethical and critical practices. The performative style of her critical essays can well be termed poethical too, as exemplified in her related essay "The Scarlet Aitch", where she focuses on the same alphabetical letter. Subtitled "Twenty-Six Notes on the Experimental Feminine", the same number of notes as there are alphabetical letters in English, her essay references Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), a novel of general and lasting reputation in a US literary context, thus arguably a site for contests about its themes, as a site from which she resituates the feminine (*TPW* 102). In Hawthorne's novel, Hester Prynne is shunned by her community because she is an adulteress. She is obliged to wear a scarlet letter *A* as a sign of the shame culturally heaped upon her. Meanwhile, the man who fathered her child remains protected by her silence, his guilt concealed partly by dint of her courage. In that novel, the gender situation of Hester Prynne is both grossly unfair and contextually believable. Hester Prynne presents as a strong, self-reliant moral force. Much of her action is admirable, while her cultural situation is cruelly judgmental. From a feminine viewpoint, what is wrong in the tale is the culture.

Retallack relieves Hester of the adulterous *A* and extends it with a spelling whose vocalised form produces the sound of the letter *h*. In Retallack's essay, the new letter is wielded to good effect. The voiceless glottal fricative *h*, whose sound is termed aspirate, displaces the *A* sign of the adulterous Hester. The substitution of a new sign enacts a cultural advance, restoring

Hester's sign with the first letter from her name. The move from upper case to lower case enacts a different cultural order, one of alterity that is "de-centered". The silent *h* is taken from Hester's name to nestle in a fresh situation where, as Retallack terms it, "aitch [has] enough texture to thicken a plot called *poethics*" (*TPW* 106). This is a clever double step: to introduce the *h* as a lower-case, feminine substitute for the upper-case *A*, and to slip it into the word *poetics.* Both steps imbue *poethics* with signs of the experimental feminine. The letter *h*, or aitch, may represent an almost silent sound, but Retallack wields it to convey a potent difference. The point is made by a swerve from one letter to another, an exchange of atomic alphabetical letters.

Representing the eighth letter as *aitch*, denoted by the OED as "the name for the letter H", demonstrates an auto-parasitical feature because the letter patently piggybacks on its own written noun sign. *Aitch* carries its own *h* on its back. This written sign of the letter neatly embodies the switch from the privileged upper-case *A*, in the lead role, primal in the alphabet, to the lower-case *h*, languishing at the tail of the word. Retallack therefore inverts *aitch* as she subverts *A.* She states:

> The concrete fact of aitch is this: *A* with an *itch* is hitched in aural marriage to the class-indexical letter *H*. This humorous phoneme has of course had a primary function in the social drama of British – and, to some extent, American – class divisions. It marks the scene of a paradigmatic intersection of language and social destiny. The Scarlet *A* marks a different sort of paradigm, where the catastrophic swerve out of one's destiny is read as female, the energetic swerve within it as male. (106)

In referring to *h* as "class-indexical" and "humorous", Retallack references cultural hierarchies that are marked by whether a person "correctly" uses the letter *h*; for example, Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield* repeatedly refers to himself as "'umble", thereby betraying his class, lower than those like David Copperfield who perform the culturally desired norm of pronunciation (Dickens). Retallack's point about *h* and *A* arising from letter substitution is effected performatively.

Moreover, the tone of this passage quoted above – typical of much of her work in *The Poethical Wager* – demonstrates more poetic play than is commonly found in the address of Anglo-American-Australasian critical essays. In academic works, the confining modifier "serious" tends to align stylistic mode to academic intent. Although her essays concern important points, Retallack tosses prim aside. Poetic play of the kind displayed in "the thickened plots" is typical of the collection (*TPW* 106). Among the connotations that Retallack draws into the "plot" are the melodramatic "the plot thickens"; the culinary reference to "thicken the pot"; the homophone gendered suggestion of "chick in the pot"; and, of course, the herbal trace of *h* to

sicken/thicken the pot/plot. Describing her essay writing as poetic play acknowledges that she is stirring the serious play work of poetry into the mix so as to disturb the gravitas normative to essay work. This performance of feminine swerve fits with her observation that *h* is "class-indexical" (106). Performing her essay as poethical form breaks a kind of class division between the seriousness of the obedient, historically masculinised academic and the seriousness of the playful, disruptive, feminine academic who eschews the telos of formalist enclosure.

The spelling of *poethical* draws attention to the *system* of alphabetisation that writing employs to represent speech acts, a system against which Retallack swerves. Retallack's poethical act, rearranging the length and shape of the word by introducing the letter *h*, operates as a systemic act, an experimental feminine performative act in the order of grammar. By disrupting a rule of spelling, even in so small a way, she performs a word that opens to differential meanings. That Retallack adopts and applies Lucretius's theory that the swerve of atoms resultants in creativity emerges both from her attention to specific detail and her congruent valorisation of example over theory. She is fully conscious that her lettristic manipulation amounts to transgressive behaviour:

> Lettristic play operates illegally, strictly on the diagonal, the glancing tangential, transgressing left-right regulations, right angles of history, institutional rights to dictate meaningful grammars. It streaks through official texts, illuminating subtexts and subliminal noises as letters swerve, collide, coagulate in the wound – the scar in scarlet – the scars of historical/etymological silences. (106)

Among what Retallack regards as at stake in lettristic play, she refers in this passage to wounding cultural divisions. Class war, already referenced above in class-indexical *h*, reappears here in "left-right regulations" and "institutional rights". Academic didactics "dictate meaningful grammars". The cultural judgment of Hester Prynne on account of her adultery depends upon the social confinement of marriage. Against an array of cultural divisions that construct circumstances of disadvantage, Retallack calls on lettristic play to transgress "on the diagonal" in feminine swerves.

The feminine is associated with many taboos, one of them being the figure of the scarlet woman, whether immoral, prostitute or simply menstruation. In the passage above, Retallack calls lettristic play in illegal aid to repulse the culture whose wounds cause scarring like the scar she reveals in scarlet. In Retallack's "The Scarlet Aitch", the colour scarlet, transposed from *The Scarlet Letter*, is more than a reference to a literary work; as a plain mark of the culturally disadvantaged feminine, it connotes an embodied instantiation of menstrual red, the feminine blood sign. Retallack speaks of "feminine strains (stains) (contagions), the thickened plots of communitarian ethics" (106). Gestures to "sickened", "clots", "blots" or "spots" of blood fit

both text and context. Frequently referenced in Gothic genre, the menstrual trope also discriminates; and this stain runs back, for example, to ritual "cleanliness" prescriptions in Leviticus 15 (*Holy Bible*). As semiotic of male anxiety, scarlet, whether blatantly streaking or silently leaking, bears its own mark of alterity, consigning the feminine to an *other* order, an alternate lesser than the masculine. The sounds associated with the letter *h* tend to ascribe lesser force to it than to other letters: it often appears as the lesser, softening partner in alphabetical pairings; for example, *c* marries with *h* into *ch,* with *p* into *ph,* or with *t* into *th.* The scarlet *h,* possibly unvoiced, is a shrewd choice for a feminine to unseat the primacy of *A,* the alphabetical alpha male. In saying the name "Hester", the *h* is almost unnoticeable, sometimes taking form in the anagram alternative "Esther". Aitch is an aspirant aspirate, seeking a fairer culture, one that Retallack symbolises in this performative lettristic switch.

Just as the unvoiced *h,* when written, can claim its eighth alphabetical place alongside seemingly stronger letters, so too can scarlet, in Retallack's essay, saturate it, by the staining power of adjective. That language has the capacity to reveal the invisible, to colour the transparent, to give voice to the aspirant, is seized by Retallack. She is conscious that words will evoke mental associations and that consequent mental associations will affect thinking and thereby influence cultural values. To farewell primary *A* as representative of gender oppression in favour of *h,* and to saturate *h* with scarlet, former stain of shame, doubly redeems an experimental feminine pathway. This performative reclamation recalls the moment in *The Vagina Monologues* when, in the performance I attended, the audience was urged to displace negative cultural connotations by uniting to shout "cunt" (Ensler 74). "Shame" attaches etymologically to "pudendum" because the Latin root denotes "that of which one ought to be ashamed". Although it can be explained that the term so arose because the feminine organs are covered, that cannot expunge the consequence that language often carries negative gender connotations that reflect prejudicially on women. Retallack's atomic displacement offers an alternative cultural reading of both *A* and scarlet, let alone *h.* The voiced *h,* the vocal *h,* requires a vowel, probably a defiant *ha* or *huh.* Retallack's transforms this apparently 'umble letter into a proud character.

Privileging the letter is also achieved by means of typography, which offers differentiated "font weights" distinguished from "regular" by means of bold, italic or both bold and italic. The upper-case *A* in *Aitch* consequently serves to elevate the *h* that might otherwise be regarded as the mere tail end of its own word name. Retallack adds further emphasis to this fortune change in the lettristic economy of *h* and *a* by asserting "A poethics of the Feminine fall (swerve), transfiguration and apotheosis of *A,* takes place (here) within a lettristic geometry of attention"

(*TPW* 106). The italicised *A* of Adultery is reinstated to its alphabetical primacy by means of the lettristic shuffle between "A poethics" and "apotheosis". As the A is re-envisioned to stand tall again, the Feminine fall transfigures, paradoxically rising from lower-case base to upper-case divine. Along with *a* and *h*, this sentence also treats the letter *f* with signifying attention. Looking closer at the lettristic attention given to "Feminine" in Retallack's sentence, we note that it, like *A*, sports in proud, upper case. On my reading, that "F" stands not only for the "Feminine" but also suggests the "Fuck" that constitutes the shamefully scarlet Adultery. Absent cultural diminution, the Feminine of the text thereby reflects proudly, unabashed.

Alternatively, we may read that idea as conveyed by the lower-case *f* in "fall". On either reading, while "Feminine" now stands tall, the cultural overlay that loaded "fall" has dwindled so it no longer marks the Feminine down; the alliterative term "Feminine fall" that combines both words, running them together, breaks lettristically through close attention to the case of their respective first letters. The device of ascribing upper case to "Feminine" and lower case to "fall" is yet another within the lettristic range; it increases the culturally imagined height/depth difference between what may be signified by those words. In my reading, Retallack privileges "Feminine" by her representational performance with upper-case *F*, and that relativity intensifies because "fall" is not treated in similar manner. In this passage, that "fall" bears the lower-case *f* neither contaminates nor diminishes the implicit relative elevation derived from the upper-case standing up of "Feminine".

Retallack's lettristic play in "The Scarlet Aitch" borrows too from the meaning of "letter" within a postal system. Suggesting that poethical play at the level of the letter sends a message, Retallack intensifies her metaphor by delving further into *A* to reinforce its rhetoric:

> The letter as letter is a charged vector of transmission, as in "to send a letter" through the chaotic geometries and postal contingencies of everyday life. Letter *A*, Messenger Angle of attention creating countless Alpha bets as it spirals through the thick medium of historical silence. (107)

Reference to the broken word "Alpha bets" introduces a level of wager arguably different from that gestured primarily by her title *The Poethical Wager*. We can hazard that the Alpha bets will be wagered in patrimony money, whereas those offering custom to the Poethical bookmaker will stake theirs in a feminine economy. Retallack hints that such an economy will be attended by Messenger Angle, which we are encouraged through joining her game to translate also as Messenger Angel. Transparently deictic of her own "geometry of attention", Retallack states, "The illuminated *A* is material sign of Hester Prynne as poethical clinamen, the experimental

feminine incarnate" (*TPW* 108). The letter *A* claims primacy as first letter of the Alphabet, that taxonomical line of sounds or word-atoms. Consequently, in a masculine alphabetical economy, it may qualify as marker for original sin in a culture that desires to practise such beliefs. But that is not the economy sought by Retallack. Negotiating her reasoning forward by means of lettristic signs, she says:

> The experience of *A*, or *F* or *M*, is always contingent, although their long histories render them anything but arbitrary. These angled marks, linguistic levers, are a function of the range of forms our cultures have played out in their sexual and familial politics. This last tends to be enacted in stereotypically stripped, oppositional gender roles, but the dynamic exchange, the folding in of new materials that gives the reinvention of forms their lively possibility, never stops. (109)

Retallack responds to the materiality of the signs *A*, *F* and *M* as "angled marks" and "linguistic levers". In so doing, she distinguishes them from, for example, curled letter signs like *C* or *G*. By responding to their individual, physically representative characters, she privileges the materiality of those letters. If words can be imagined tattooed on the skin of written language, by privileging letters, Retallack enters within the skin of language, even into its body. Thus, she moves to a more granular level, perhaps a molecular level, where her grammatical operations are arguably less visible.

What is plain from this passage is that Retallack holds redemptive hopes in the "linguistic levers". Desirable "folding in of new materials" can outstrip stereotype yet. Playing against Saussure's claim that the nature of the linguistic sign is arbitrary but meaningful, she frames the letters in contingency. In doing so, she disrupts the systemic order, swerving grammar by poethical means, by a reinvention of forms. Contingent letters are untethered from word signs; they are thus unleashed from their cultural role of supporting normative signification, thereby disrupting that orderly system from within. Letters do not behave in this manner within the normative grammar system of written language. By poethical means, Retallack operates outside the normative cultural system. In so doing, she performs via a differential grammar in a differential language, creating forms that necessarily open to differential readings.

Oulipo and pleasures of textual constraint

Retallack develops her lettristic interest in a context that includes even more licence-taking, such as Oulipo, a group that she references with approval four times in the course of her essays in *The Poethical Wager*. Lettristic attention is a preoccupation of many who associate with the Oulipo group. The group emerged in 1960, mostly in France with members from Germany and the US, taking its name from a lettristic combination of initial letters in their umbrella description "**Ou**vroir de **li**ttérature **po**tentielle", which translates as "workshop of potential

literature". The appeal of writing under artificial constraints crossed codes, attracting mathematicians as well as writers and visual artists.

For Oulipians, the challenge of composition under voluntary constraint gives expression to many such inventive, playful compositions. Take, for example, Italo Calvino's 1979 novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, which, while showcasing a variety of genres, reverts time and again to the business of reading the book, and to a variety of other never-finished forays. Whether or not it is regarded as a shaggy dog story that never reaches an end, it is constant in its return, chapter after chapter, to the pleasures of reading. In a similar vein is *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books* (French version, 1986) by Marcel Bénabou, who acts as secretary for Oulipo (Levin Becker 17, 40). David Kornacker's English translation (1996) renders the introductory "TO THE READER" in the following terms:

> First lines of books are always the most important. One cannot be too careful about them. Critical and professional readers shamelessly admit that they judge a work on its first three sentences: if they don't like those sentences, they stop reading right there and, with a sigh of relief, open up the next book.
>
> This is the treacherous cape you have just rounded, reader. Since I will no longer be able to pretend not to notice your presence, please allow me to salute you for your courage, your sense of adventure. . . . (7)

In this portion, the conceit of the work is already exposed. The author proceeds to weave his conversation with the reader around the idea of writing, or rather not writing, a book. Meanwhile, palpably, the book fills out like a balloon into which air is blown, making and unmaking itself at the same time. Every authorial gambit can be described as a supplement, a frame, or otiose digression rather than a substantive brick in book construction, yet nothing offends as outside the gestural frame of the enterprise. Daniel Levin Baker describes this work as "a lyrical, erudite inventory of the techniques at a writer's disposal for procrastinating and prevaricating: choosing a good epigraph or five, polishing the first sentence down to the bone . . ." (42). The constraint imposed here is palpably to write a book while palpably not doing so. The writing enacts a paradox. Therein lies its central ludic sense that works to seduce the reader into complicit engagement in the venture. Bénabou's narrator self-refers at every juncture, dealing with aspects of authorship and, in offering reasons why he has not completed them, addresses them. Plainly the narrator knows much about book writing and book reading; the pages swell with detail around material that it professes to discard. In this way, the book passes from aspect to aspect, ordering and building its material. The text purports a sort of non-performative language that nonetheless self-evidently performs.

Although Oulipo projects have drawn recent attention, neither textual constraint nor lettristic play is merely a recent phenomenon. In *Loeb Classical Library* series, S. Douglas Olson has translated Athenaeus's reports of Ancient Greek verses and plays in which individual letters are described or their forms acted out (qtd. in Olson 171–79). Lipogram, the deliberate avoidance of an alphabetical letter in a text, dates back to the sixth century BCE, when Lasus of Hermione composed an asigmatic hymn, one avoiding the letter sigma, possibly because its sound was considered unsuited (Athenaeus, and Heraclides of Pontus, qtd. in Campbell para 702, 309). Among Oulipo constraints, lipogram is a favourite, but many other forms of constraint, such as palindromes (in which the composition spells the same in both directions) or univocalism (in which only one vowel is used) feature. Oulipian Georges Perec demonstrates lipogram constraint in *La disparition*, his 1969 novel in which the letter *e* never appears. Gilbert Adair translated Perec's novel into English as *A Void*, successfully preserving the lipogram feature. The narrative involves a group of companions searching for "Anton Vowl", whose family name gestures to the missing vowel. Through that gesture, absence of the common vowel, letter *e*, proves to be a theme of the novel, and thus the lipogram effect in that work situates centrally and intensely through a sort of doubling effect.

Oulipian constraints may aptly be considered in relation to contemporary work by French literary theorist Roland Barthes. For example, Barthes's pleasure in Sade's texts could readily apply to the constrained practices of Oulipo:

> Sade: the pleasure of reading him clearly proceeds from certain breaks (or certain collisions): antipathetic codes (the noble and the trivial for example) come into contact. . . . As textual theory has it: the language is redistributed. Now, *such redistribution is always achieved by cutting.* Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and *another edge*, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. These two edges, *the compromise they bring about*, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic: it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so. (*The Pleasure of the Text* 6–7)

I do not suggest that Oulipian writing is in general like that of Sade, but constraints such as lipogram are achieved by cutting something out of the alphabet that is the ordinary vehicle of constructing written linguistic expression. To cut out a letter, especially one in frequent use like *e*, costs a great deal of range; many words are immediately rendered unavailable. To write under such constraint requires constant compromise, constant vigilance towards the constraint. As Barthes says later in the same work, "The text is a fetish object and *this fetish desires me*" (27). A constraint such as the avoidance of a letter adds a frisson of heightened excitation to the writing, and that excitation conveys to the reader. In these respects, the little death, even of only

one letter, creates ongoing *jouissance* in the text that arises from teasing the reader along the seam of consistent denial. The anticipation, unrelieved, builds.

In a general sense, Oulipo constraints that work off one or more alphabetical letters help to demonstrate how much power the humble alphabetical letter exerts within written language. When a letter is noticeably missing, absence of the sign troubles the text, troubles reading of the text. Indeed, such palpable loss has this troubling effect whether the letter is avoided by lipogram, excised or substituted. When mommy said not to put beans in our ears, what did the children do? The forbidden attracts. Where a range of words is prevented by constraint, readers may look outside the apparent grammar of the text. Thus, where a text is noticeably affected by lipogram, words that might otherwise have been expected may advance in a reader's mind. For example, Perec's avoidance of *e* in *La disparition* occasions absence of such relational words as "eux" (which sounds like *e*), "famille", "père" or "mère", and a reader may become aware of words or ranges of words that the lipogram refuses to disclose. In this way, the lettristic constraint paradoxically, or precisely, breaks the text open to alternate readings. Like Retallack, Perec occasionally toggles between alphabetical and numerical, referencing the missing "Vowl" as number 5 in the system of 26, for example, "To his right is a mahogany stand on which . . . 26 books normally ought to sit, but, as always, a book is missing, a book with an inscription '5', on its flap" (12).

By drawing readerly attention to an individual letter, lettristic constraints, including lipogram, draw readerly sensibility inside the word that houses the letter. Within that new fractal realm, there is much to explore. Inside the structure there revealed, individual letters loom large. Echoing normative understanding of the diachronic grammar by which a sentence is normatively formed from words, the intra-lexical realm offers diachronic understanding of the make-up of a word, letter by letter. Within the reading body of a word, letters stand tall. Matters such as letter order, case and font come to readerly notice, whereas in normative textual situations the letters are "taken as read". More so, when attention is drawn to them by lettristic constraint or other lettristic stratagem, the structural heft of alphabetical letters, generally unremarked, emerges. This proves to be the case in Retallack's lipogrammatic poem "AID/I/SAPPEARANCE", where her lettristic sensibility can fairly be associated with those aspects of Oulipo we have just considered.

In seven stages, the initial text of Retallack's poem "AID/I/SAPPEARANCE" attenuates by successive lipograms. The poem enacts a fatal process of viral destruction from AIDS. Appearing as the final (third) poem in EX POST FACTO, the second section (of five) in Retallack's 1998 *How to Do Things with Words*, the full text reads:

A I D /I/ S A P P E A R A N C E

for Stefan Fitterman

1. in contrast with the demand of continuity in the customary description
2. of nature the indivisibility of the quantum of action requires an essential
3. element of discontinuity especially apparent through the discussion of the
4. nature of light she said it’s so odd to be dying and laughed still it’s early
5. late the beauty of nature as the moon waxes turns to terror when it wanes
6. or during eclipse or when changing seasons change making certain things
7. disappear and there is no place to stand on and strangely we’re glad

AIDS

for tefn Fttermn

1. n contrt wth the emn of contnuty n the cutomry ecrpton
2. of nture the nvblty of the quntum of cton requre n eentl
3. element of contnuty epeclly pprent through the cuon of the
4. nture of lght he t o o t be yng n lughe tll t erly
5. lte the beuty of nture the moon wxe turn to terror when t wne
6. or urng eclpe or when chngng eon chnge mkng certn thng
7. pper n there no plce to tn on n trngely we’re gl

B H J C E R T

fo fn Fmn

1. n on w mn of onnuy n uomy pon
2. of nu nvly of qunum of on qu n nl
3. lmn of onnuy plly ppn oug uon of
4. nu of lg o o yng n lug ll ly
5. l uy of nu moon wx un o o wn wn
6. o ung lp o wn ngng on ng mkng n ng
7. pp n no pl o n on n ngly w gl

F G K Q U

o n mn

1. no n w m no on ny no my pon
2. o n nvly o nm o on n nl
3. lm no onny plly pp no on o
4. no l o o yn nl ll ly
5. l y o n moon wx no own wn
6. o n l pow n n no n n mn n n
7. pp n no pl o no n n nly w l

L P V

o n mn

1. no n w m no on ny no my on
2. o nny o nm o onn n
3. m no onny y no on o
4. no o o y n n y

5. y o n moon wx no own wn
6. o now n n no n n mn n n
7. n no o no n n n y w

M O W
n
1. n n n n n y n y n
2. n n y n n n n
3. n n n y y n n
4. n y n n y
5. y n n x n n n
6. n n n n n n n n n
7. n n n n n n y

N X
1. y y
2. y
3. y y
4. y y
5. y
6.
7. y

Y
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.

In this poem, stage by stage, letters in the initial constructed text are shed. Retallack explicitly discloses her methodology in the appendix “Procedural Notes”. Starting with AIDS in stage two, the letters A, I, D and S fall away. In stage three, all direct alphabetical neighbours of those dropped letters are omitted, namely B, H and J, C and E, R and T. The virus of lipogram “infection” passes from one letter to its neighbours. In this poem, the alphabet is treated as a line, not a loop: Z is not treated as neighbour to A. By stages, the remaining text is rendered more and more impermeable, unable to sustain its former normative readability. By stage seven, only the letter “y” remains, a querulous, atomic echo of “why?” The final stage reveals the bare page devoid of any surviving alphabetical letter, the former text lines marked only by numbers that stand gravely, like silent stones, representing only memories of text. Thus, Retallack constructs a graveyard for the lost letters. The barren numbered lines of the final stage of the poem constitute a zone of white space where memory mourns text no longer materially present.

The procedural method produces startling reading alterities. The dwindling wordlings of "AID/I/SAPPEARANCE" offer reading choices from gobbledegook to fascination at the metamorphosing letter clusters that were once words. Look at line 5 of B H J C E R T: "l uy of nu moon wx un o o wn wn". Or line 6 of F G K Q U: "o n l pow n n no n n mn n n". If I engage my childlike wonder, these diminutions offer language sparkles. Certainly, I relish the appearance of the "nu moon" from what was once "nature as the moon", but the working in foreignness to explore mouthed voicings of "un o o wn wn" transport me to a childlike playtime when sounds were not required to *mean*. Retallack's dismantling deconstruction reconnects her willing reader with language germs. In language terms, it is akin to exploring a Lego collection, where the smaller atoms offer greater opportunities for creativity.

The stage upon which "AID/I/SAPPEARANCE" performs is not merely one of mounting losses, from which items disappear; it is a space of generosity wherein methodology and, in part, text sources, are revealed. In addition to sharing her methodology, Retallack's "Procedural Notes" disclose that the initial text partly derives from "The Atomic Theory and the Fundamental Principles Underlying the Description of Nature" in *The Philosophical Writings of Niels Bohr*, an atomic physicist. Not all her initial text derives from that source and therefore reading occurs in the knowledge that there is a zone of unknowing. But by indicating Bohr as one source, she situates her affective poetic response to Stefan Fitterman's death in part amid scientific and philosophical discourse. This is congruent with aspects of her practice I shall address later. By engaging with that discourse, her poem turns it poethically into an avenue of alterity, a space that normative engagement would not have imagined. In congruence with Bohr's credentials as an atomic physicist, her poem is patently atomic in its lipogramatic attention to alphabetical features of written language.

Retallack's disclosure of methodology suggests a mimesis of scientific rhetoric or grammar, one where the record of an experiment explicitly sets forth its materials and process. This level of disclosure is not generally associated with normative poetry, where poetic sources, frameworks and structures are mainly realised through reading and scholarly discovery. In those cases, the reader bears the burden of making associations to sources without explicit references like those found in Retallack's work. On the other hand, disclosure of sources is not unknown among modern poets, from T. S. Eliot's footnotes in *The Waste Land* to Barrett Watten's list of sources appended to *Bad History* (1998). More normatively, Susan Howe footnotes (only) one quotation in her 1990 collection *Singularities* (63) and Lisa Samuels acknowledges, in an appendix, twenty-one sources for particular lines and translations for *Mama Mortality Corridos* (2010). Closer to Retallack's list of sources is Samuels's list of

thirteen items for “Further reading” appended to her experimental work *Tomorrowland* (2009). And Retallack’s poetic colleagues Rosmarie Waldrop and Tina Darragh offer sources. But by and large, even in experimental poetry, explicit referencing of sources to the extent Retallack provides is rare.

Retallack’s list of twenty-one authors in her “Selected Bibliography” in *How to Do Things with Words* further situates these fifteen substantial poems among the philosophical and cultural concerns arising from those listed works. The authors include novelist Jane Austen, mathematician James R. Newman, poet Rainer Maria Rilke, language philosophers J. L. Austin and John Searle, and the ubiquitous but fictional Genre Tallique. The bibliography implies that the work will range from play to serious; it suggests play will ensue with serious intent. The appendices tender Retallack’s philosophical, poethical frame to her reader, inclusively. The implication that the poems may be more fully understood within an intertextual importation of more than twenty other works may daunt, but the reader cannot complain of being held at arm’s length. To the extent that these poems construct conversations, Retallack offers the reader a place as intelligent co-conversationalist. She equips her imagined reader for intelligent engagement.

Nonetheless, she does not give her reader enough to remove mystery. Although I cannot identify sources other than Bohr for the initial seven-line text, scientific rhetoric is interrupted by the non-scientific fragment “she said it’s so odd to be dying and laughed”. The thoughts about “an essential quality of discontinuity” and, later, “change making certain things disappear” amalgamate into a hybrid text where fragments, perhaps atoms themselves, collide to create a collage in which the polar attractions of continuity and telos jostle. The reader knows from where one portion of the text emanates but knows neither the sources of other portions, nor their number. Although containing scientific discourse, the initial text is jargon-free and there are no difficult words. In my view, the initial text offers a reading in which its words, phrases and fragments of language offer an overture to the deconstruction that follows. Much like an overture, important themes such as disappearance, echoed in the title, are introduced. The initial text offers an affective soaking in the music that feeds into the poem.

Lipogram restraint suggests close, even fetishist, attention to the lettristic componentry of words. Beyond the poem “AID/I/SAPPEARANCE”, the insistent repetition of Retallack’s practice with, for example, portmanteau words and similar manipulations, suggests aesthetic neurosis and eroticism in her own relationship with language. Turning again to the poem quoted above, Retallack’s aesthetic neurosis in faithfully sequencing the viral destruction of her initial

text would satisfy Roland Barthes's plea for texts of pleasure: "thus every writer's motto reads: *mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic am I*" (*The Pleasure of the Text* 6).

Exchanging vowels for x

My third example of Retallack's forms of lettristic play features vowel substitution, introduced and described in *Memnoir* in this passage:

> some may see at this point which is not an Archimedean
>
> point the necessity to invent a game in which all vowels
>
> are serially replaced with x mxgxcxlly txrnxng prxmxtxrx
>
> txrrxr xntx pxlxtxblx pxst-pxst xrxny xtc. (9)

I read (or reconstruct) the gamed words as "a magically turning premature terror into palatable post-post-irony etc.". Whereas in Chapter Two I shall address certain word features in this passage, I focus here on a lettristic feature, namely the feminine "terror" embedded in the game whereby each vowel is silenced by *x* substitution. Such games have been played before, for example in1850, when Edgar Allan Poe played the game of vowel substitution in his short story "X-ing a Paragrab" (sic), where a newspaper editor used *x* to stand for the letter *o*, which had been stolen by his rival. To substitute *x* for missing letters can be regarded as an Oulipean play or a kind of lipogrammatic device. The alphabetical letter *x* has many symbolic uses, for example, a kiss (OED). Retallack's game could be kissing the vowels goodbye.

On first reading, the substitution seems simple fun, offering a pleasurable reading challenge. But later, reflecting on other resonances within *Memnoir*, I feel disquiet because what initially seems like frolic later imports a differential representation between those who have voice and those who have been silenced. Etymologically, the term "vowel" associates closely with "voice". The Old French root *vouel* derives from the Latin root that gives us *vocal* (OED). The first meaning for *vowel* attributed by OED is "a sound produced by the vibrations of the vocal cords; a letter or character representing such a sound". The OED entry cites Sweet's 1892 *Primer of Phonetics*: "A vowel may be defined as a voice (voiced breath) modified by some definite configuration of the super-glottal passages, but without audible friction (which would make it a consonant)." To excise all means of *voice* can be to perform a savage act.

My successive readings reflect the capacity of this performance to sink in. The voicelessness lurking in this passage proves less palatable, evoking terror on later (post-post) reading. In the uneasy aporia of knowing it as game and knowing it as violence, a richer, nuanced reading emerges. The surface of the writing figures in a blanket of *x*, but each *x* represents an

individual, suppressed vowel. Successive glances discover the hidden alphabetical voices within the text. Retallack's writing constraint pressures language to draw what is buried up to the surface. That *x* marks the spot where treasure is imaginatively buried could be child's play. In this case, her performance marks the burial sites of feminine voices.

In Chapter Two, I argue that the text of *Memnoir* evokes chromosome references in the letter *x*, particularly in relation to *xy* coordinates in the context of pervasive gender themes. The female chromosome set is XX. Although the letter *y* that distinguishes the male chromosome set XY is not obviously affected by Retallack's vowel substitution, we can remember that the male chromosome set carries *x* as an intrinsic part of its make-up. Only the X chromosome performs in both male and female presentations. Thus, any genetic implication by operation of *x* inevitably affects the male too. In congruence with her desire to encourage productive gender conversations, the *y* sign that distinguishes the male chromosome set is not adversely affected in the game substitution.

But *xy* coordinates are not the only mapping plot in play here. Substitution of *x* for vowels implicates vowel–consonant axes too. Referential shifts produced by Retallack's excision and substitution game offer alterities of readings that engage gender issues. These can be understood both as grammatical and, appropriately in this gender context, genetic, because it concerns the formation of gender roles. Perhaps we might think the privileged consonants tend to masculine paradigms and the adversely affected vowels tend to feminine. Employing consonant *x* to obscure vowels would congruently enact masculine suppression of the feminine voice. On one reading, the *xy* axis where masculine and feminine can converse (and plot against each other) seems even more generously disposed to the *x*, the chromosome shared by both. But, if read as a paradigm shift from *xy* coordinates to vowel–consonant coordinates, it becomes clear that the vowels are suppressed, represented only by consonant *x*. Retallack's excision and substitution game imagines a contest between vowels and consonants.

This referential shift is one of grammar and, metaphorically, one of epigenetics: grammar, because the *x* substitution concerns form and meaning; epigenetics because a new product is formed from the alphabetical germs. Accordingly, Retallack's text performs an epigenetic shift of alterity from *xy* axes to those of vowel–consonant. Utilising a cross-silo move, like Retallack makes when applying Mandelbrot's fractals to language, metaphorically marrying genetics to grammar, amounts to a fractal remove into a differently grammared zone. A chromosomal hermeneutic offers a gendered reading in which what may appear an operation of equality – by excessive use of the *x* chromosome that is common to male and female – produces substantial inequality when experienced from the viewpoint of suppressed feminine vocality.

Not all points can be covered; the text observes this "is not an Archimedean point" – a point of independent overview where all relevant features are exposed. In my reading, that statement of lack gestures to desire for all knowledge and the capacity to fix on objective truth. Repeatedly, Retallack's texts disclose what Vickery expresses as her "yearning to have *both* (order and chaos, . . .) rather than *either/or*. . ." (167). Intellectually, Retallack acknowledges that conditions will not allow singular didactics, but her desire to know the answer disrupts the surface of her poethics.

In this case of vowel substitution by *x*, the text impels the reader precipitately into the game. Only a sketchy description is provided before text changes from normative presentation. Invention of the game is described as a "necessity", but only for "some" whose vision at that point leads them to begin it. What of the others, whose viewpoints are not voiced, those who did not invent the game, nor saw a necessity to do so? The passage plunges precipitately into the game play before the sentence finishes, before the reader can draw breath.

Theoretical matrix: Grammatical performances of individual letters and marks

> "I wrote a letter to my love and on the way I dropped it.
>
> One of you has picked it up and put it in your pocket."
>
> Children's song/game

An allusive quilt

The first part of this chapter discussed Retallack's lettristic treatments of alphabetical letters such as *h* (in "The Scarlet Aitch") and *x* (substituting for vowels to enact stifling of the feminine voice), and her congruent lettristic devices such as lipogram. In this middle portion, I want to consider a theoretical matrix relevant to her work with individual letters and other marks of writing. Here, too, primary focus bears on the lettristic fractal level, namely on individual marks rather than on words. Because lettristic marks are generally "taken as read" within a word or a piece of text, they tend to be overlooked as individuals, but nonetheless, they prove capable of performing important grammatical functions. The theoretical matrix developed in this section supports the proposition that simple written marks bear fundamental importance in language. The structure of words depends on alphabetical assemblages in often unexamined plain sight.

Drawn allusively from both Retallack's critical and her poethical writings, this matrix reveals disparate influencers whose thinking contributes to theoretical underpinnings of what a letter can become, thinkers whose ideas have shaped Retallack's own thoughts and practice. They

include Buckminster Fuller, John Cage, Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida, Edgar Allan Poe, Jacques Lacan and Stéphane Mallarmé. Despite their several identifications with quite differing hermeneutic approaches, Retallack's practice draws from each of them, whether by adoption or opposition. Engagement with the word sign "letter" attends many of those connections. This middle portion of the chapter layers disparate materials together to quilt scholarly background and theoretical depth in my thesis. In differing ways, these influences bear on her lettristic practice of using written marks to perform a new cultural poethics. In this section, important influences on other aspects of Retallack's practice, including Stein, Wittgenstein, Austin, Joyce and Beckett, are not so central because their influences are less potent in her thinking about individual letter (and mark) work than those listed above. I note again that the predominance of males among Retallack's influences simply reflects her personal history, and her own acknowledgements. This should not divert from the importance of her ongoing contemporary discourse with fellow feminist experimentalists, noted in the introductory section of this work.

This middle portion of this chapter does not build in a linear fashion. Rather, each segment intersects with the others, contributing to a supportive theoretical quilt. The material is necessarily tailored to the proportionate needs of this thesis. I shall draw the matrix together discursively at the conclusion of this portion and then, moving to the last section of this chapter, discuss the production of character in an individual letter or mark.

Buckminster Fuller: Structure

While still in her twenties, Retallack was employed by US President Johnson's Justice Department to consult in social philosophy. Her activity in civil rights and anti-war movements in Washington, DC, "working with a theater and film group sponsored by the Institute for Policy Studies", drew attention to her as a person of "'alternative' experience" who "might bring a fresh perspective" (Retallack, *Musicage* xxi). She was already acquainted with John Cage, who became her mentor and friend (xv). In her new social justice role, she interviewed systems theorist Buckminster Fuller, a mentor of Cage (xxi). She clearly enjoyed Fuller's energising presence, recording that "Buckminster Fuller arrived in Washington wearing three wrist-watches and sprinted about like a 73-year-old, turbocharged elf" (xxiii).

On that occasion in 1968, Fuller told Retallack, "The simplest definition of a structure is just this: it is an inside and an outside" (xli). The elegance of that definition made a lasting impression on Retallack. Although the record of that conversation is lost to her because, once Nixon came to power, the project was shelved and she was not permitted a copy of her work,

she quotes Fuller's words from memory in *Musicage* (1996) and quotes or references it three times in *The Poethical Wager* (2003). There, in "The Experimental Feminine", she offers a simplified version: "A structure is simply an inside and an outside" (97). She terms it "minimalist" in reference to understanding "contesting binaries" such as found around "Masculine-Feminine" (99). She references it again in "Uncaged Words" (225). In "Geometries of Attention" she references Fuller in the context of discussing Cage's discoveries about "minimal and permeable . . . disciplined process or structure" (178). On this record, Fuller's simple definition of structure retains its force in Retallack's geometries of attention.

John Cage: A spring of fresh water

Retallack's relationship with her beloved mentor, Cage, was always enthusiastic. In *Musicage* she records, for example, how Cage plied her with retsina wine at his favourite Greek restaurant in New York over a lunch in 1968 that was supposed to be about her Justice Department project. The next day "the whole experience [was] a blurred and fragmented memory" (xxiii). Against that, the detail and extent of her record reveals her pleasure about their lack of reserve when together.

Her *Musicage* record of their first meeting, in the fall of 1965, extends over more than four pages (xvi–xx). Aged about twenty-four years, she attended a dance performance featuring Merce Cunningham, Cage's partner. "When the performance was over, literally shaking with excitement and fright, I went backstage, where I came upon Merce Cunningham. I told him that this had been the most stunning, puzzling experience of dance and music" (xvii). Learning that rehearsals were open to the public, she returned the next afternoon and recognised Cage from the performance the day before. He approached her and, in the course of their conversation, said "he had recently published a book . . . called *Silence*". He "hoped I would find it interesting, but he was *sure* I would be interested in the *I Ching*. . . . He said to get the Bollingen, Wilhelm/Baynes edition with the essay on synchronicity by Jung" (xviii). She adopted Cage's recommendations with alacrity. "I ordered *Silence* the next morning and bought a copy of the *I Ching*" (*Musicage* xviii). She met Cage again the next day. Cage told her "the art he valued was not separated from the rest of life" (xix). She goes on:

> This conversation was for me like a spring of fresh water opening up in the midst of centuries of conceptual rubble. Similar to my encounter with Wittgenstein's work on the heels of Hegel and Heidegger, a few years before. Though I had been reading Gertrude Stein and Pound, and had loved as a teenager "living in" the porous and mysterious, nonlinear structure of *The Waste Land*, I still revered crystalline logic and the transcendence theories of art that pervaded the academy in the guise of "the sublime." Even Wittgenstein, I later realised, had retained this etherealized view of art despite his rejection of metaphysics. It wasn't until I read John Dewey's *Art as Experience* that I discovered a spiritually rich, aesthetic pragmatics of everyday life that

> corresponded to Wittgenstein's use theory of meaning – meaning as "form of life" – and Cage's imitation of nature's processes. (xx)

Well-read Retallack's youthful engagement with Cage as mentor resounds in her narrative. Her instant pursuit and study of sources recommended by Cage fixes the importance for her of that relationship. And one of those sources was Jung.

Carl Jung: Letters and apostrophes

Influential psychoanalyst Carl Jung died in 1961. Amidst her narrative about meeting Cage, Retallack quotes the following passage from Carl Jung's introduction to the *I Ching*:

> The causal point of view tells us a dramatic story about how D came into existence: it took its origin from C, which existed before D, and C in its turn had a father, B, etc. The synchronistic view on the other hand tries to produce an equally meaningful picture of coincidence. How does it happen that A', B', C', D', etc., appear all in the same moment and in the same place? It happens in the first place because the physical events A' and B' are of the same quality as the psychic events C' and D', and further because all are the exponents of one and the same momentary situation. The situation is assumed to represent a legible or understandable picture. (Jung, qtd in *Musicage* xix)

This passage, so prominently quoted as a product of Cage's direction to her, is patently significant to Retallack's work. Jung's attachment of a mark like an apostrophe after alphabetical letters adopts the symbolic notation used for prime numbers, differentiating one version of the letter from its fellow, for example, "D" from "D'". Jung's notation precisely echoes Retallack's construction "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**". In both cases, the letters are individuated, accorded individual recognition. Jung treats all the apostrophised (or marked) letters as of the same order because, whereas in diachronic or genetic order those without apostrophes can be figured as fathers and sons, where they coincide in a synchronic series, the physical events A' and B' equate to the psychic events C' and D'.

By virtue of the similarity of her **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'** notation to that of the passage she prominently quotes from Jung, it can be inferred that Retallack is alive to alphabetical (or lettristic) characters both as material or physical events and as psychic events. The letters perform materially on the page; they are part of a set, the alphabetical system, which can itself be figured as a progression or hierarchy from A to Z. It can be argued that letters have a psychic equivalence in lettristic operations as the atomic material of words. The graphemic formation of letters inheres in the formation of words. Via visual functions, the brain recognises letters and

thereby words formed by letters. And words, or other meaningful signs, lead to the semiotic junction where sign makes sense. In quoting the passage by Jung, Retallack discloses her interest in the semiotic functions of letters and punctuation marks.

Given the coincidence of form, and the contextual enthusiasm of her discovery of Jung, it seems permissible to suggest a nexus between Jung's letter treatments with apostrophe and her "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**". In Jung's paragraph, he differentiates, for example, the letter "D" from "D'" by introducing the apostrophe mark. The unapostrophised "D" represents the genetic or diachronic letter, the letter that looks back to its father. The apostrophised "D'" represents the synchronic letter, associated with the physical and the psychic. On one available reading, Retallack's text parses each alphabetical letter and subsequent apostrophe as a set. But other readings are possible. For example, the apostrophe mark may be leader in such a set, it may instead be read as representing a superior order to the alphabetical, or the punctuation mark may be read independently of the alphabetical order.

As we shall discover, Retallack shows interest in psychoanalytic theorists, although she resists those aspects of their theories that are anti-feminine. Her work suggests interesting relations between text performing on the surface of the page, and meanings that may be discovered by interrogation of that text. I do not suggest that Jung's scholarship exerts a large influence on Retallack, but within my theoretical matrix, the portion of Jung's text that Retallack quotes links back to her first thrilling meeting with Cage. It also links forward, to her echo of Jung's form of marking differences between diachronic and synchronic systems of letters.

Sigmund Freud: Uncanny

In his 1919 essay "The Uncanny", Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, notes the unsettling feature of doubling or ambivalence that can occur in word denotations. The English word "uncanny" stands for Freud's German word "unheimlich", meaning "unhomely". One might reasonably expect that 'heimlich" or "homely" would prove its antonym. Freud examines usage in ten languages to compare the range of denotations for their equivalents of "unheimlich". From English, he offers these examples: uncomfortable, uneasy, gloomy, dismal, uncanny, ghastly; (of a house) haunted; (of a man) a repulsive fellow. He quotes more than a page of denotations of the German "heimlich". In brief, he establishes that "homely" not only means the comforting senses of "familiar", "native", and "belonging to the home", but also much more uncomfortable senses such as "concealed", "behind someone's back", "deceitful and malicious towards cruel masters". In short, "homely" can also mean much the same as "unhomely". Freud comments:

> Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*. (Freud, "The Uncanny" 421)

Freud's example occurs in a word intimately connected to home. His example "brings home" the lesson that normative words have the duplicitous capacity to seem one thing and act otherwise. It is unsettling that a word may speak against itself. This unsettling characteristic is described as *uncanny*. The idea of a word speaking and the idea of a word speaking against itself can both be described as uncanny. In both cases, the word seems to behave out of order.

In his essay, Freud goes on to offer a psychoanalytic reading of Hoffman's short story "The Sandman". Having established the uncanny propensity of words to displace their primary meanings for an opposite, he explores doubling as a feature of the uncanny: "reflections in mirrors, with shadows, guardian spirits, with the belief in the soul and the fear of death" (425). With reference to "The Sandman", he adds to kinds of uncanny doubling doubts about whether a body is animate or inanimate, and uncertainty about the true identity of a person. For example, in "The Sandman", the protagonist mistakes a doll for a real woman; also there is confusion about whether a lawyer, an optician and the mythical Sandman may all be the same personage. Describing these as "forms of disturbance in the ego", Freud attributes the sensation to:

> a harking-back to particular phases in the evolution of the self-regarding feeling, a regression to a time when the ego was not yet sharply differentiated from the external world and from other persons. . . .
>
> [R]ecurrence of the same situations, things and events, will perhaps not appeal to everyone as a source of uncanny feeling. From what I have observed, this phenomenon does undoubtedly, subject to certain conditions and combined with certain circumstances, awake an uncanny feeling, which recalls the sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams. (426)

In Freud's psychoanalytical exposition, the uncanny involves both doubling and regression. He observes that a child's desire that its doll come alive or imagination that it does so is not troubling to the child, but later in life the idea of a doll becoming animate takes on a more troubling aspect. In the context of discussing the development of the ego in relation to experiences of "doubling", Freud approves, as an example of uncanny, "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive" (421–26).

Within the frame of Freud's theory, the ego's desire for things to behave according to their order will inevitably be troubled by Retallack's practice of sometimes treating alphabetical letters or other written marks as characters, performers, whose operations behave like and unlike normative words. Although I posit that performances of letters or marks operate at a differential fractal level from full words, there is a degree of crossover. From the construction

"**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**", individual letters begin to act as words, and apostrophe marks begin to interchange their representations with the word "apostrophe", as discussed in my concluding introductory section, "Initial G'L'A'N'C'E'S'". On page 10 of Retallack's poem "Afterrimages", introduced in my introductory section on proceduralism and reading alterities, the isolated letter "P" in the fragment "oint P" (abraded from "at this point Paul") seems ambiguous as to its order: letter or word. Likewise, either letter or bracket mark in "s[" on page 21 creates similar uncanny concern about whether the lettristic elements are holding within their normative order.

Jacques Derrida: Différance and différence – the pharmakon effect

The work of Algerian-French philosopher Jacques Derrida affords theoretical depth relevant to appreciating Retallack's lettristic practice. In particular, Derrida's ideas refracting through his invented word *différance* (famously altered by only one letter from the normative "différence") go a long way towards explaining how Retallack's lettristic practice amounts to a fundamental challenge to language structures. Accordingly, this section, although summary, requires sufficient coverage.

Retallack acknowledges and therefore approves Derrida's writing forms as feminine forms:

> Think of Derrida's self-interruptions, his flirtatious insinuations, his coy ironies, his outrageous feints, his calculatedly playful exclamations and interrogatives. He teases out . . . as potent a mix of charm and venom as Bette Davis. Ironically, indeed, in this "masquerade" he performs something like Judith Butler's parodic, subversive function. (*TPW* 138)

Nicholas Royle's *Jacques Derrida* (2003) sets out to explain Derrida's critical ideas and their impact. Published the year before Derrida's death, a front-matter page in the book uncannily records Derrida's commendation: "Excellent, strong, clear and original." Thus, it is with Derrida's inferential approval that Royle claims:

> more than any other contemporary writer or thinker, Derrida's texts have described and transformed the ways in which we think about the nature of language, speech and writing, life and death, culture, ethics, politics, religion, literature and philosophy. (8)

Royle claims that Derrida "has a longstanding interest in what is known as 'speech act theory.' This interest could be said to pervade everything he has said or written . . ." (21–22). Although Derrida noted the distinction between constative and performative speech acts, his interest was directed to "experiences of failure, weakness, the improper or supposedly excluded or 'inappropriate.' . . . If it is a necessary possibility that a performative can fail, there is no performative that is not haunted by this failure, this disturbance or perversion" (Royle 29). Unsurprisingly, Derrida's views encountered fierce opposition from speech act theory followers of J. L. Austin such as US philosopher John Searle. Shoshana Felman discusses Searle's attack

on Derrida, and English philosophers' attack on psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, in a chapter portion of *The Literary Speech Act* called "Theoretical Coincidences or the Missed Encounters Between Languages". In both instances, Felman finds that there were fundamental misunderstandings on both sides: in other words, they talked past one another.

Already, we can pick out aspects of Derrida's thinking that connect to Retallack's interests, speech act theory and feminine forms of writing among them. But in the present context of individual lettristic significance, I turn to Derrida's explication of his ideas via his construction *différance,* removed by a displacement of only one vowel from its normatively spelled homophone *différence.* Derrida set out his argument in his 1968 essay "Différance". The essay stands as an important repository of themes that pervade Retallack's work, particularly themes of time, space and alterity.

In order to understand "Différance" fully, it is necessary to understand that the verb "to differ" in French carries a sense of temporal deferment as well as that of material distinction between one thing and another. Thus, differential time accompanies the idea of spatial difference. Within this semantic tie reposes the idea that a spatial thing may differ from time to time. Derrida draws attention to the singular lettristic difference that, by substitution, creates his newly spelled word *différance*. Emphasising with upper case, he states, "I SHALL SPEAK, THEN, OF A LETTER – the first one. . . .", namely the letter *a.* He reiterates that *différance* is neither a *word* nor a *concept.* Teasingly, he concedes it may merely seem a spelling mistake. Nonetheless, although the words sound the same in French (and thus obliterate any distinction in parole), *différance* exhibits a graphemic difference from *différence.* The differential affects written text. He proceeds to argue that the *différance* (with an *a*) belongs neither to the voice nor to writing but to a space *between* speech and writing. This unsettling thought exemplifies his liminal thinking around structure that made Derrida's theories impermeable to some who were committed to studying what we might think of as definite objects or occurrences rather than interstices. And Derrida takes it further, suggesting that *différance* can never be exposed; it has no existence: it cannot be reduced to ontology or theology.

At this apparently unpromising juncture, he turns again to the meanings of "differ". As noted above, one involves the temporal; the other involves the sense of not being identical. A different thing occupies a different space. Noting that the suffix *-ance* is neither active nor passive, he questions how *différance* as temporalising and *différance* as spacing are conjoined. Having raised this troubling, interstitial, semantic query, he turns to "the problem with signs and writing". A sign stands for a thing. In normative linguistic reference, the sign can only make sense if the thing exists, if the thing has presence. A sign defers the presence of the thing

it represents. The sign is not the original; it is both secondary and provisional. Derrida refers to the sign as provisional with respect to the missing original, "in view of which the sign would serve as a movement of mediation" (284).

Turning then to Saussure, he notes the correlative qualities of arbitrary and differential in the language sign system. In that sign system a signifier represents or stands for a signified. But the signified, which is an ideal concept, is never actually present: "Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences" (285). He proceeds to interpolate *différance* (with an *a*) to signify "the movement of play that 'produces' these différences" (with an *e*) (286). He describes *différance* as "the structured and differing origin of différences" (286).

At this point, Derrida introduces the idea of the "trace". And he invokes other terms for this concept, namely "supplement" and "*pharmakon*". In a 1967 essay, *Plato's Pharmacy*, Derrida notes that the word *pharmakon* can mean "remedy", "recipe", "poison", "drug" or "philter". However termed, emergence of the trace or supplement or *pharmakon* triggers deconstruction of the text. After referring to passages by Heidegger, Nietzsche, Freud and Hegel, he explores the effect of *différance* on the idea of written language as opposed to speech, and its effect on the ideas of Being and presence. In effect, the newly spelled word (with an *a*) raises questions everywhere; it undoes certainties; it suggests a differential way of approaching philosophical problems: "The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces and refers beyond itself" (295). *Différance* produces effects even if it has no discernible presence. It has no discernible presence because it exists outside the closed system, but it bears a relationship as a trace through which the system will transform in movement.

I interpolate here that Derrida's ideas move from a strong sense of the structure that represents the closed system. We can usefully tie this "post-structural" thinking to the same clarity of imagining structure that Buckminster Fuller imparted to Retallack in Washington, DC, in 1968, the year of Derrida's essay. Structuralism denotes theories of language and culture that draw from a systematised foundation, one that promotes norms and normativity (Rivkin and Ryan 53–55; Culler, "The Linguistic Foundation" 56–58). Because Derrida shows how structures normatively implicated by text can be broken, opening the text to different (non-normative) readings, his thinking is sometimes termed post-structural. Via detection of the "trace", the purported structure (or closed system) undoes. What came to be called "deconstruction" occurs when one reading departs from another, supplants its predecessor, each reading depending upon an appreciation of a closed system or structure implied by a particular textual reading.

In his essay "Différance", Derrida establishes a questioning presence, represented by his titular word. His argument builds on the uncertainty that inheres in a system dependent upon signs that stand in place of absent conceptual signifieds. The trick of it is that he starts with a change of only one lower-case letter, a *literal* deviation that could pass for a spelling mistake, and one that makes no speech change, that is, it does not affect the way the word is pronounced. The changed word invades the realm of written language rather than the allied field of speech. By means of such a tiny signification, he undoes presumed certainties and demonstrates how structures can produce alterities.

It can be argued that Derrida's *a* in *différance* has individual character. If so, it is a shadowy affair, a ghostly non-appearance sensed from its haunting effects, albeit on language generally, rather than performative substance on stage. Captured within the tomb of its enclosing word, the letter *a* can, at best, claim only a "noises off" performativity, disembodied. Derrida holds that "*différance* . . . does not exist. . . . it has neither existence nor essence" (282). I interpolate that Derrida is here addressing the idea represented by the inked word, the inked word does exist, and it is the inked letter whose performance Retallack is interested in. Returning to Derrida, if *différance* cannot claim corporeality, then neither, it follows, can an internal letter. Perhaps this approach is too logical, too bound within a structure that *différance* undoes. Like Hamlet's father's ghost, *a* might be permitted some representation, but not as a living character.

Barbara Johnson, who translated some of Derrida's works in *Dissemination,* explains the process of deconstruction in her essay "Writing". She illustrates by explaining her deconstructive reading of a seventeenth-century metaphysical religious poem by Edward Taylor. The poem sets up an opposition between the presence of God on one hand and writing on the other. On Johnson's reading of the poem, "the speaker tries to order God to take his place as the writer". She adds:

> writing is called upon as a necessary remedy for *différance*, but at the same time it *is* the very *différance* for which a remedy must be sought. In Derrida's analysis of writing, this logic is called the logic of the *supplement.* In French, the word *supplement* means both an "addition" and a "substitute." To say that "A is a *supplement*" to B" is thus to say something ambiguous. Addition and substitution are not exactly contradictory, but neither can they be combined in the traditional language of identity. In the poem, the inscriptions, images, and even spectacles function as *supplements:* they are at once additions and substitutes simultaneously bridging and widening the gap between God and the speaker. (345)

In his essay *Plato's Pharmacy*, first published in *Tel Quel*, no. 32, Winter 1967, the year before "Différance", Derrida challenged the view, expressed by Plato's Socrates in *The Phaedrus*, that speech is superior to writing. Phaedrus reads a prepared speech, looking for approval from Socrates for his skill. Socrates begins his critique of Phaedrus's reliance on writing by

recounting a legend wherein Theuth, the inventor of numbers, arithmetic and letters, promoted letters on the basis they "will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories; for it is the elixir of memory and wisdom . . .". But King Thamus countered that "this invention will produce forgetfulness . . . because they will not practice their memory. . . . You have invented an elixir not of memory but of remembering." Socrates adds to that argument that "written words are of [no] use except to remind him who knows the matter about which they are written", with which Phaedrus perhaps too readily agrees. Socrates compares writing with paintings of a living being, pointing out that "if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence". Socrates, adamantly opposed to the artifice of the Sophists, is concerned that rhetoric should be used to convey truth, that the speaker should be present in the moment and occasion, alive to the nuances of speaker, audience and subject matter. Although writing may be promoted as a *pharmakon* or medicine or elixir, in *The Phaedrus,* Socrates figures the *pharmakon* of writing more as a poison.

Retallack's lettristic performance applies Derridean theory for her poethical ends. In her introduction to *The Supposium*, its title a play on Plato's *Symposium*, Retallack says "I've come to think of [Socrates] as Plato's feminine alter-ego" (1). Retallack refers to "the feminine swerve that the sudden appearance of poet-philosopher-priestess Diotima of Mantinea represents", noting that she "excels in arguing: not surprisingly, in the Socratic manner that – wily, seductive, relentless – can address matters of utmost gravitas by means of playful thought experiments" (1–2). One might add that Derrida, too, displays these properties, lauded by Retallack. In *Plato's Pharmacy*, Derrida notes the range of meanings for *pharmakon*. Like Freud's *unheimlich*/*heimlich*, the word bears opposing denotations, from "remedy" to "poison". Casting outside the closed structure of *The Phaedrus*, Derrida sets up other figurations of the *pharmakon* in other Platonic writings, namely the dialogues the *Protagoras*, the *Philebus*, the *Timaeus* and Plato's *Republic.* By incorporating these supplementary Platonic texts, he creates a differential structure within which *The Phaedrus* sits. Derrida notes dissonance in Plato's writings on this topic. Indeed, Plato seems more agitated by the Sophists than by writing in and of itself. Writing seems to be a supplement to his real concern. Derrida also notes writing's ability to transcend death. A written record does not expire with its maker. The son will succeed the father. In addition to other denotations for the *pharmakon*, from this essay we can add "surrogate", "counterspell", "exorcism" and "antidote".

Towards the end of *Plato's Pharmacy*, Derrida states*:*

> If the *pharmakon* is "ambivalent," it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness,

> speech/writing etc.). It is on the basis of this play or movement that the opposites are stopped by Plato. The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) différence. It is the différance of différence. It holds in reserve, in its undecided shadow and vigil, the opposites and the differends that the process of discrimination will come to carve out. Contradictions and pairs of opposites are lifted from the bottom of this diacritical, differing, deferring, reserve. (446)

These conclusions anticipate his later conclusions in "Différance". There, his pithy statement that "It [the *pharmakon*] is the différance of différence" demonstrates its function to be neither thing nor action, more a circumstance of language. I suggest it is interesting to ponder whether the *pharmakon* can be termed as noun-like or verb-like, thing or action (process), because in the case of the word *différance*, the function of one letter produces profound changes to the word and, through it, to language itself. Although it can be observed only in writing, Derrida argues that its possibility introduces a fear that haunts oral language too. Language itself is thereby brought into question: texts unravel. This profundity of effect, an effect that haunts language, operates at the grammatical level even as it originates from the movement of one alphabetical letter within a word.

Royle suggests that "it is . . . perhaps helpful to think of Derrida's work in terms of the *mark*, rather than of 'text' or 'writing' in the traditional, narrow senses of these words" (68). Although Royle goes on to exemplify this with reference to a wink (as in "I wink at someone while listening to my favourite music") (68), written marks such as apostrophe marks, circumflex and the like undoubtedly qualify.

Edgar Allan Poe: Pursuit of the letter

Early nineteenth-century US writer Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter" (1884) enters this chapter because psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan undertook a close reading of it in an important seminar in 1955. Although Poe died before Freud's birth, his story fits uncannily with psychoanalytic theory because its purloined letter traces a symbolic path of signification, and indeed "letter" and "glances" figure in Lacan's reading. Poe's story concerns an epistolary letter, but I shall explain why it should also stand for an alphabetical letter. My semantic leap from one sort of glance to another is not unlike the foundational arguments of, for example, Freud, Derrida and Lacan.

I focus on two scenes in the story, which is set in France. The first occurs in the Queen's chamber. She is reading a letter which, if it came to the notice of the King, would be ruinous for her and for the entire State. When the King and Minister D- surprise her, she puts the letter face down on a table in plain view. The crafty Minister, noting her confusion, places a similar-

looking letter of his own in its place and purloins hers. Powerless to protest, she falls under the Minister's power.

The second scene occurs in the Minister's apartment. Detective Dupin has been commissioned after the Police have made exhaustive, fruitless searches of the Minister's apartment. Wearing green, sight-obscuring spectacles, he visits the Minister. As he expects, Dupin sees the letter in plain view in a card rack:

> At length my eyes, in going the circuit of the room, fell upon a trumpery filigree card-rack of pasteboard, that hung dangling by a dirty blue ribbon from a little brass knob just beneath the middle of the mantel-piece. In this rack, which had three or four compartments, were five or six visiting cards and a solitary letter. This last was much soiled and crumpled. It was nearly torn in two, across the middle . . .(263)

Dupin later returns and he too substitutes a facsimile for the letter. The Minister has therefore been duped by the duping Dupin, believing the original letter remains in his possession. But Dupin, who had a score to settle with the Minister, has left a stinging note in his facsimile for the Minister to find in due course. Dupin compares the situation to a game in which a player seeks a place name on a map. The player concentrates on the tiny type and therefore fails to see the large letters, like those that name a country, so spread out that they are unobserved. As with the map puzzle, Dupin wins because he can see the big picture, the sign so obvious it is unseen by others.

Repeating patterns that occur in the story align it with psychoanalytical theory. For example, in the first paragraph of the story, the number three is advanced, foreshadowing triangles. Dupin resides on the third floor, 33 Rue Dunot. Freudian scholarship divides the psyche into three parts: conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious; psychoanalysts deal in the three realms of id, ego and superego. The letter, like any signifier, acts arbitrarily within its system. Although Poe's letter initially signifies excitement for the Queen, it moves to signify ruin for her and power for the Minister. Its recovery moves its signification yet again along its chain or path, signifying redemption for the Queen who is now free from threat by the King or Minister. In a psychoanalytical reading, its recovery signifies doom for the Minister, a kind of castration or nakedness of which he is yet unaware.

Displacements figure in the story. In the Queen's chamber, the text observes of the Minister: "His lynx eye immediately perceives the paper, recognises the handwriting of the address, observes the confusion of the personage addressed, and fathoms her secret" (251). The homophone that ties "lynx" with displaced "links" offers the dream path to understanding the passage, and the story. Links between characters are key. Patterns that are clearly visible, and therefore not noticed, attract the attention of psychoanalytical readers like Lacan. The letter is

displaced from its proper order, concealed in plain view. Dupin finds darkness illuminating; he obscures his vision when he hunts for the letter. These traits foreshadow Wittgenstein's paradoxical approach exemplified by his tale of the fly in the bottle.

This paradox of openness, that what is available to view remains hidden because the seeker fails to detect it, engages with Retallack's letter work. Remember that her insertion of an additional *r* in *Afterrimages* escaped Healy's reading at first:

> I must have been more than half way through . . . Afterrimages . . . before I noticed the second "r" in the middle of the title. What a shock! A displaced letter in the middle of an established order. Words become highly unstable, fee/free, a single mutation launching them into an entirely different semantic field. (Healy 1)

Healy's invocation of Derrida's *différance* is unmistakable. But Healy's sentence "A displaced letter in the middle of an established order" also plays to Poe's (epistolary) letter, and its fit with a psychoanalyst's need to recognise displaced symbols. It takes a blind eye to see what is in plain view. As Healy notes, the displacement challenges the entire established order. Similarly, in Poe's story, the highest temporal order, the order of the State, is at risk, the desired relation between King and Queen. The grammatical disturbance in *Afterrimages* has all the effects noted by Healy, displacing words "into an entirely different semantic field". The whole complex field of lettering is added to again, on top of the piles of Aitches and prime capitals already so evident in Retallack.

Jacques Lacan's seminar on "The Purloined Letter": Significant glances

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan read Baudelaire's French translation of Poe's story under the title *La lettre volée,* but his close reading often prefers the original English text to clarify features smudged in translation. For Lacan, the story illustrates the symbolic chain of the signifier. He is concerned to disclose the symbolic nature of that chain of displacements. He accords his 1955 seminar prominence by placing it first in his 1966 collection *Écrits.*

Lacan pays special attention to the triangular pattern of glances surrounding each occasion when Poe's letter is purloined:

> It is . . . the intersubjectivity by which the two actions are motivated that I wish to highlight, as well as the three terms with which that intersubjectivity structures them.
>
> These terms derive their privileged status from the fact that they correspond both to the three logical moments through which decision is precipitated and to the three places which this decision assigns to the subjects that it separates out.

> The decision is reached in the moment of a glance. For the maneuvers which follow, however stealthily that moment is prolonged in them, add nothing to it, no more than their deferral of the opportunity in the second scene disrupts the unity of that moment.
>
> This glance presupposes two others, which it assembles to provide a view of the opening left in their fallacious complementarity, anticipating there the plunder afforded by that uncovering. . . . The first is based on a glance that sees nothing: the King and then the police. The second is based on a glance which sees that the first sees nothing and deceives itself into thereby believing to be covered by what it hides: the Queen, and then the Minister. The third is based on a glance which sees that the first two glances leave what must be hidden uncovered to whomever would seize it: the Minister, and finally Dupin. (Lacan 9–10)

Lacan's exposition is rooted in visual sense. Even time he measures in "glances": "a glance's time". The patterns of glances range through the non-seeing, the deluded seeing and the knowing seeing. The knowing glance provides the opportunity to "purloin" the signifier.

Lacan describes the purloined letter of Poe's story as "a pure signifier". We never learn the contents of the letter. Although the tale presents as an apparent detective mystery, there is no mystery about the identity of the purloiner. Lacan's description is apt. The plot simply follows the itinerary of the signifier from one place to another, eventually returning to the Queen by another route. Lacan interprets the Queen's concealing the letter from the King as an overarching figure of repression of the signifier, which stands in place of the signified, in order that the person entitled to know its meaning cannot discover it. Symbolic displacement is Lacan's chief interest, particularly the displacement that conceals the signifier in plain view. He offers the helpful illustration of a library book that has been misplaced in the library. It remains in plain view but cannot be recognised for what it is because it is not where we expect to locate it.

Lacan seeks to establish that language signs can be displaced to the symbolic order, an important feature for psychoanalysis. Claiming that "the materiality of the signifier" will "not admit partition", Lacan states, "Cut a letter in small pieces, and it remains the letter it is." In other words, the meaning reposes within the sign even if the sign has been tampered with. So, Lacan avers, "Language delivers its judgment to whoever knows how to hear it." If we apply this thought to Retallack's abraded words in "Afterrimages", Lacan's linkage reflects in those relationships perceived between the upper-page originals and the lower-page remnants. Because he undertakes a psychoanalytical reading, Lacan characterises the "purloined letter" as symbolic. Within the frame of his reading he cannot do otherwise. This can be distinguished from Retallack's procedure in, for example, *Afterrimages*, that opens letters to the possibility of becoming something fresh even though an alternative reading that refers back to their originating positions remains viable.

Lacan clarifies that he uses "letter" in a sense that encompasses all meanings that associate with that word sign:

> But as for the letter itself, whether we take it in the sense of a typographical element, of an epistle, or of what constitutes a man of letters – we commonly say that what people say must be understood to the letter (à la lettre), that a letter (une lettre) awaits you at the post office, or even that you are well versed in letters (que vous avez des lettres) – never that there is (some amount of) letter (de la lettre) anywhere, whatever the context, even to designate late mail. (17)

Lacan's inclusion of "typographical element" keeps the alphabetical letter in play within the scheme of his seminar. Exemplifying, he relates that James Joyce once wrote a spoof letter to himself as "A litter to Mr Joyce". Lacan notes, "[W]e are quite simply dealing with a letter which has been *detoured*, one whose trajectory has been *prolonged* (this is literally the English word in the title) . . ." (21). And: "Here then, the letter's singularity, reduced to its simplest expression, is 'simple and odd', as we are told on the very first page of the story; and the letter is, as the title indicates, the *true subject* of the tale" (21). In my reading, given his inclusion of "typographical element" within the letter range, an epistolary letter can stand for, or be displaced by, an alphabetical letter: we are dealing complexly with letters diverted from their paths of normative cultural placement.

Lacan: The Instance of the Letter

Lacan reflected on similarities between the structures of language and the Unconscious in his 1957 essay "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud". Pointedly referencing the word sign "letter", his essay begins:

> As my title suggests, beyond this "speech," what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language. . . .
>
> But how are we to take this "letter" here? Quite simply, literally [*à la lettre*].
>
> By "letter," I designate that material support that concrete discourse borrows from language. (447)

Later in this essay, Lacan explicitly acknowledges the bits and pieces that make up language, whether the phonemes of speech or "mobile structures which, in a jumble of lower-case Didots or Garamonds, render validly present what we call the 'letter,' namely, the essentially localized structure of the signifier" (450). Didot and Garamond are font styles. While plainly acknowledging alphabetical letters, Lacan continues to use the term "letter" to refer to any "essentially localized structure of the signifier" (450).

Where Retallack presents non-normative graphemic constructions that perform as words, she treats them as graphemic signifiers, for example, her portmanteau term "halocutionary" (*TPW* 79) and the stubs "nd" and "eweh" in "Afterrimages" (17). And that title word employs one

letter to trouble the desire for meaning just as Derrida does with *différance.* Interestingly, in the context of psychoanalytical theorists, the excess letter sign of *r* posted by Retallack is received by Healy and returned to her: "Her own initial. I couldn't stop thinking about it. As if a letter could make any difference, xx xy. The individual as catalyst, or intruder. Yet, when spoken, the stowaway is inaudible" (Healy 1). This passage, including the last sentence, intertextually gestures, knowingly or not, to powers of *différance.*

The lettristic construction of a written representation of a signifier is not a prime focus of Lacan's essay. His interest is in symbols, however those symbols are formed. He notes that a property of a signifier is "that of combining according to the laws of a closed order, . . . the topological substratum of which the term . . . signifying chain, gives an approximate idea: rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings" (451). Lacan's immersion in language structure forces him to acknowledge that its structure builds from the chain of letters that constitute a signifier word, and then on to a chain of transactions whereby the signifier seeks to merge its desire in its search for the signified. For my purposes, I note firstly the spread in his use of the term "letter", and his passing acknowledgement of the part alphabetical letters play as a "topological substratum" at a lower order in the signifying chain. Implicitly, he recognises those orders that Retallack references as fractal patterns.

The extent to which Lacan's interest here embeds in language imbues his essay overall. He constructs an algorithm, S/s, to represent the structure between signifier and signified. S represents the signifier, s the signified. Lacan explicitly describes their "primordial position . . . as distinct orders separated by a barrier resisting signification" (448). Like Retallack's meaningful treatment of, for example, the apostrophes in "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**", Lacan treats the barrier that lies between his *S* and his *s* as an operative part of his algorithm.

Lacan illustrates difficulties in negotiating the path from the order of Signifier to the order of signified. One such illustration is the amusing story about a little boy and a little girl who are on a train that pulls into a station. They look out their respective windows at signs on the platform. Misunderstanding the purpose of the lavatory signs, the boy says, "We're at Ladies!" "Idiot!" replies his sister, "Can't you see we're at Gentlemen". Each child reads what they see as a sign within the system of railway destination signs, whereas their proper import lies within a gendered lavatory system. Lacan's point is that a sign can only be read meaningfully within its appropriate systemic context.

By contrast, Retallack employs this sort of confusion to diffuse available readings, offering alterities. By way of example, if we read Retallack's poem "Afterrimages" within a system,

frame or structure that includes the horror of atomic destruction via an atomic bomb, the stubs "nd" and so on (appearing on the photographed page in my introductory section on proceduralism, and to be discussed again in Chapter Three in relation to non-normative words) can be read as remnants. But those lettristic survivors can also be read as word signs presented for reading, whether derived historically or fresh written, whether understood as partial remnants or otherwise. Whenever text was written, reading occurs in the later present. Retallack's textual grammar challenges her reader to cross the partition from past to present; to let go of the past, perhaps with regret, certainly with an appreciation of loss, and to embrace alterities of language through which present reading can offer entry.

Lacan observes how the search for significance from a signifier follows processes of metonymy and metaphor (which latter term, of course, contains the former). These processes lead to exchanges of one thing for another, or one aspect of a thing for another, one signifier for another signifier. He claims that in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "every page deals with what I call the letter of the discourse, in its texture, its usage, its immanence in the matter in question . . ." (455). Although the image of a signifier may have no value in terms of signification, the image nevertheless carries meaning. In Lacan's terms, the image constitutes an "ideogram" that "is a letter". He asserts that the topography of the unconscious is defined by the algorithm S/s. And the unconscious is no more able to traverse a chain of signification than the conscious mind. Essentially, Lacan advises psychoanalysts to accept the material on offer, which is the image of the signifier, and work with that. As he puts it, "that is what we must resign ourselves to. The unconscious is neither primordial nor instinctual; what it knows about the elementary is no more than the elements of the signifier" (459).

Derrida: The Purveyor of Truth

Lacan regarded the itinerary of the signifier as one that properly returns to the sender in reverse form. Derrida's essay "The Purveyor of Truth" severely criticises Lacan's reading of Poe's story. Derrida states, "Lacan leads us back to the truth, but this truth does not get lost. He returns the letter and shows that it returns itself to its proper place by way of a proper trajectory, and, as he expressly mentions, this destination is what interests him" (57). Although Derrida does not appear to take issue with Freudian theory about the phallus and the anxiety concerning maternal castration, he dismisses the psychoanalytic approach of Lacan and Marie Bonaparte (who wrote a psychoanalytical study of Poe) as "naïve semanticism and naïve psycho-biographicism" (45). Dismissing telos-driven theory, Derrida holds that the signifier can continue to move. What is important to emphasise here is that Retallack's practice, even in the

details of her use of individual letters or marks, participates in alterities of readings in a Derridean manner.

Whereas Austin and others approached language within carefully controlled parameters, as this thesis will discuss in Chapters Two and Three, Derrida accepted fluidity. That a text should shift from one apparent meaning to a chain of others caused him no distress. For Derrida, a natural function of language offers differing meanings from reading to reading, from occasion to occasion, and from reader to reader. His approach might be considered congruent with those scientists who embraced relativity and quantum physics, and certainly congruent with Lucretius's view that atoms swerve, resulting in creative change. And his approach may also be considered congruent with Wittgenstein's later regard for the play of language, that meaning requires cultural and contextual comprehension, not merely understanding of something that is mechanically representational, where x will always mean x (or y).

Retallack and Lacan: Feminism confronts psychoanalysis

Although Lacan is not specifically referenced in "Blue Notes on the Know Ledge", the site for the "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**" discussed in my "Initial Glances", Retallack references him on six occasions in *The Poethical Wager*. She wrestles with psychoanalytical theorists in the portion of her essay ":RE:THINKING:LITERARY:FEMINISM:" in a section headed "FRENCH FREUD FEMINISM?" (127). The portion begins with a long quotation from Genre Tallique, who, in this context, we might tentatively consider an auto-displaced sign of Retallack herself. Playing with Tallique's presence, Retallack says, "The use of this quote is not intended to bolster what follows with authority. (Who is Genre Tallique anyway!?)" (127). For my critical purposes, I draw attention to how Retallack's discussion moves to the "glance", reinforced by another reference to Tallique's "GLANCES: An Unwritten Book" (133). The word *glances* is a charged trope in her work, just as "geometries of attention" or "poethics" are charged terms. By "charged", I mean they attract my critical attention because they are so oft repeated and pervasive in Retallack's writings that they appear central within her own lexical referencing. From proximate association with Lacan, and because of the charged nature of this term in her work, I suggest that Lacan's reference to the glances in Poe's story haunts this passage.

But first, let me enlarge on the rhetorical path taken by Retallack in this portion. Understandably framing the centrality of male paradigms in Freudian theory as sexual violence, she describes it as "something akin to emotional clitorectomy" (128). She opines that "the symbolic is not the only logical or associative order of meaning". Echoing Lacan's words in "The Instance of the Letter", she says, "There is metonymy, as well as metaphor" and adds to

those terms, “complex dynamic systems and fluidly interactive models, as well as equivalences” (129). While acknowledging Freud’s ability as a prose stylist, Retallack urges, her force delivered with characteristic, ironic humour, that “[t]he phallus, like the romantic genius and strong poet and symbolic logic it props up, has got to go; the penis may get on quite well without it” (129). We might say that in spite of all the maleness in her reference sets, in her education, her own desire is to set up a displacement that will signify on feminine terms. She appreciates that Freud’s narrative satisfies Aristotle’s rhetoric of persuasion, appealing to the three zones of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos.* And that Judith Butler recognises the “intelligibility” of Lacan’s prose (129). Scorning the psychoanalytical school as the “Hegelian-Freudian-Lacanian logomotive”, she searches for alternatives (131). At this point, she pinpoints grammar as a realm of the conflict:

> Don’t we have to consider that to replicate this particular psychoanalytic model in feminist theory is to perpetuate an exclusionary and suffocating grammar in which to make sense, to be authoritative or intelligible, is to underwrite one’s subjugation to a system whose very grounding is scorn for the feminine? (130)

Referencing Foucault and Butler, Retallack determines, in effect, that a fair, feminine alternative cannot be found within already set cultural tracks:

> To move from the simple harmonics of moans (whether of pain or *jouissance*) to a polyphony of exploratory means, from narrative therapy to linguistic experiment, from a picture to a use theory of meaning is to open meaning to radical revision in the act of multiple language games and new forms of life. (132)

Retallack’s feminism acknowledges the moans (both kinds) and moves alliteratively from moans to means of change that “open meaning” through performance (enactments) “of multiple language games”, in another word, alterities. An underlying trope in this passage is that of birthing. The moans give birth to a “new form of life” via a process of radical revision and “the act of multiple language games”. In this context, “open meaning” bears a bodily interpretation, unmistakably feminine as to gender.

As she moves towards the end of this portion of her essay, Retallack quotes again from Genre Tallique:

> Gender/genre is pure experiment. Every boundary construction is a gamble, a dare, a hypothetical with consequences. That most have chosen to repeat old experiments does not logically negate the possibility of new forms. . . .
>
> There are energetic experimental traditions in our culture. It’s in their direction our lucky glance falls. Glance, yes. I refuse the word “gaze.” The gaze turns self and other to stone. The glance is light in the gossamer breeze of chance, *un coup de dés,* inviting the unexpected. Genre Tallique, *GLANCES, An Unwritten Book* (133; ellipsis in orig.)

In this passage, I draw attention to the rhetoric around "glance", which, in part, I trace back to Lacan's essay on Poe. In my reading, despite her feminine rejection of psychoanalysis throughout her essay, Retallack's rhetoric discloses the trace of her attentive reading of Lacan. In my view, the coincidence and proximity of his glances (regarding Poe's story) and those shared between Genre Tallique and Retallack suggest a diachronic event. In short, I suggest she purloins Lacan's glances (obtained from Poe), turns them inside out and delivers a feminine reading.

The distinction between "gaze" and "glance" holds significance for a feminine viewpoint. The gaze that turns "other to stone" is surely the gaze of Medusa. But Medea figures in this passage too. In *Memnoir,* Retallack refers more than once to an Archimedean point, which is a point from which an objective view of the problem and its component parts can be seen – or glanced at. The lettristic recognition and inclusion of Medea as a figure within that point is developed. An Archimedean point will necessarily include a feminine viewpoint. The Archimedean viewpoint is greater than the knowing glance in Poe's story and, from a feminine perspective, the discovery of Medea within that viewpoint installs a concealed feminist/feminine critique of the presumption of that all-knowing gaze.

Stéphane Mallarmé

French poet Stéphane Mallarmé's late nineteenth-century poem/book *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard* is an important forerunner of modernist fieldwork. Johanna Drucker, in *The Visible Word* (1994), adjudges that it "stands as the single most striking precedent for avant-garde experiment with the visual form of poetic language" (50). The title translates into English as *A Roll of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance.* In Retallack's passage above (*TPW* 133) attributed to Genre Tallique concerning "gamble", "chance" and "glance", the italicised French words flag Retallack's association with Mallarmé's poem. The expression *un coup de dés*, a roll of the dice, reinforces "chance". As to form, in his preface Mallarmé excuses his departure from the normative requirement that a poem be positioned "centered, about a third of the page. I don't disregard this method, merely disperse it." By adopting his French words, Retallack signals her intent to follow his step, in breaking formal (or grammatical) rules, to make her wager and embrace the field of chance. The rhyme of "chance" and "glance" suggests a relationship between those words that draws powerfully and illogically (because illogic, for Retallack, can express the literary feminine) from semantic form.

Quilting the theoretical matrix

Under the rubric of this chapter's focus on Retallack's work with individual letters, those sources I assemble engage in different ways, as explained above, section by section. True to my quilting image, they do not sew together on the same seam, nor are the pieces uniform, one with another. But they fit in the same quilt because of their various qualities of relevance to her experimental feminine literary work. What is relevant is not the evident lumpiness of the quilt but how each piece fits to Retallack.

Her desire for order, acknowledged and apparent in her work, provides an appreciative field for Fuller's simple definition of structure as an inside and an outside. Her embrace of that feature is instinctive and rational. Structural awareness carries into her appreciation of Derrida's liminal *différance* which she echoes and exploits. The resultant discovery of liminal spaces that yield new grammars dances around Cage's practice, challenging accepted rules and forms. Mallarmé's "*un coup de dés*" throws her the metaphor of wager/chance that aligns with her swerve to alterities. Her 2003 *The Poethical Wager* begins with the introductory "Essay as Wager". Her 2018 *The Supposium* is subtitled "The Wager" and her introduction is titled "The Wager". The trope of wager forms up as an abiding image in her work.

It may well have been that early flush of enthusiasm about meeting Cage that caused Jung's introductory comments to the *I Ching* to resound so strongly with her. Her prominent detailing of Jung's words, and the coincidence of form with her "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**", suggests, and I put it no stronger than that, an allusive relationship. To a similar gestural standard, I suggest Lacan's focus on *glances* (from Poe's "The Purloined Letter") steals into her palette. Mirroring Freud's philological approach, Lacan elevates the letter. He addresses the convenient example of Poe's story, but makes plain that he engages with the sign "letter" throughout its range, epistolary to alphabetical, even offering the materialising metonymy of fonts to represent letters. One way or another, those whose works are referenced in this middle section of this chapter contribute to Retallack's employment of the letter or mark on the page as a tool to develop new grammars.

Character production in a letter or mark

It is one thing to posit that a written letter or mark can produce a grammatical shift such as Derrida's *a* achieves in *différance*: it is a step further to suggest that a letter or mark can fill with character, which is what I propose in this section. And although we might say that philosopher Derrida showed a way for a solitary letter to exert impact, when it comes to filling a letter with character, Retallack's learned company consists mostly of poets, as I shall

exemplify in this introduction to this final Chapter One section. Arthur Rimbaud attributed character to individual vowels in his 1871 sonnet "Voyelles", which Christian Bök, another letter-focused North American poet, quotes in French and then translates loosely into English in *Eunoia* (2009). For example, "I, the bruises, the blood spat from lips of damsels / who must laugh in scorn or shame, both intoxicants" (85). Bök's poetry collection celebrates vowels in an Oulipo manner. He begins with five univocal chapters; that is, in each chapter only one vowel is used. The blurb on the back of the book suggests that a "unique personality for each vowel soon emerges: A is courtly, E is elegiac, I is lyrical, O is jocular, U is obscene." The second part of the book quotes Rimbaud's poem "Voyelles", offers an English version "Vowels", followed by Bök's "Phonemes", "Veils" and "Vocables", before attending to near vowels H and W.

Another poet whose work displays long-standing attention to the lettristic (including punctuation marks) is Retallack's associate P. Inman, who self-identifies with the lettristic "P." for "Peter". The title poem in Inman's 1988 *Red Shift* is dedicated to Joan Retallack. Like her *Errata 5uite*, it reflects a mimesis of musical score, formed in five lines on the central page. Inman's poem features forward-slash breaks between words or word groupings. As critic, Retallack states that "Inman reacquaints us with a full-blown apprehension of language – a luxury we can't or don't permit ourselves when semantics predominates" (Cover endorsement, *Red Shift*). Each of the three poems in that collection features different fieldwork; for example, text emplacements in "waver" observe a zigzag format. Inman's attention to punctuation continues into his 1999 *at. least.*, in which, following the title's example, each word is followed by a full stop.

Inman's 1979 *Platin* features curiously non-normative or altered words or phrases like "quine of cray. if oplar" (#2) and "tettle,yleve. frime uvio,lace.aphticked" (#10), in which his ludics play with spacing as well as lettered words. His 1986 *Think of One* features some pages divided by a horizontal line, similar to Retallack's "Afterrimages", but in Inman's poem "nimr", the upper and lower page each address an individual letter, as on this upper-page example that addresses "F":

F: stilt own glare of reasoner
liner tragg islander apart after all
an average about class
speag blacker
one's off sauk slate to eye
quoieb particular (14)

The lower page addresses "I"; the recto page addresses "G" and "H", and so on. Although several letters feature in the prominent framing position, Inman does not address the entire alphabet: page combinations of "F" and "I", and "G" and "H", predominate. Inman's lettristic

attentiveness is marked throughout. Susan Howe describes this collection as work in which "space is fractured, the action is interrupted, the situation tense" (Cover endorsement). But, in my reading, probably because of its focus on words, character in individual letters does not emerge from the obtuse phrasal relations and guttural energy of this work beyond the formal elevation of lettristic address apparent in the portion quoted above (14). Although Inman's work provides a contemporary comparative with Retallack's, and his lettristic work displays vigour, its character production in individual letters only enters the borders of territory inhabited by Retallack in, for example, "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**", which I revisit below.

Another useful contemporary comparative with Retallack's lettristic character production is English poet Tom Raworth's work, particularly in attention to punctuation marks. Raworth, who spent considerable time in the US, wrote increasingly disjunctive poetry. In his 1996 *Catacoustics,* the long titular poem contains several authorial illustrations. One of them resembles a modified exclamation mark that sports a comma at its foot instead of the normative full stop (Raworth 325). The mark is prominently oversized in relation to the poem's font. Although Retallack is inventive and painterly in fieldwork, her alphabetical marks, punctuation and diacritical marks are typographically normative, even if not always normatively emplaced. Her range typically employs normative letters and marks. In the main, her tools comprise dismantling words, forming new words, font size, italics, bolding, spacing, field zoning (by lines or formations of text) and field emplacements. Despite this modest range of tools, her lettristic attention, down to individual letters, is considerably more marked than that of Raworth or Inman. Her "letter-smithing" (my term) is advanced, varied and prominent.

Successive G'L'A'N'C'E'S'

The argument of this final chapter section suggests that Retallack's letter (and mark) work produces more characterful examples; that her letter work elevates lettristic items more fulsomely from supportive roles in normative grammars to leading roles in new fractal productions. This section illustrates Retallack's character productions from the letters and apostrophe marks in "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**", and from the letter *h* in "The Scarlet Aitch" and *poethics*.

For convenience, I set out again the relevant text portion from "Blue Notes on the Know Ledge" which I analysed at the end of my introductory "Initial G'L'A'N'C'E'S'":

E.G., or,

G’L’A’N’C’E’S’

> Ah **G** apostrophe the halocutionary arts! she talked **L**ike an angle **A** apostrophe angel already turning blue from separation order in cerulean blue of blue happy blue face blue domed **S**kies.
> That is,
> **G**ee, excuse me but **L**ike is there any angel **A** apostrophe difference at all between the Madames B’ovary and B’utterfly in the face of all that **N** apostrophe now is and has been known in the **C** apostrophe
> c’anonic C’atastophe of *Il n’y avait pas de suite dans ses idées* she’s incoherent! Yes No she’s not and yet she was paradoxically or not enough among the first to disappear in those short wave-lengths at dusk the past tense makes her tense too blue from seeing distance he said in the turbid atmosphere of the many apostrophes between the **EEE!s** that she and he have in common and the final **S**. Her note reads: I do all workhouse I do charge razonable rate. (*TPW* 79)

Upper-case letters, particularly when bolded, generally suggest importance, perhaps a heading or notice. Public notices displayed to provide information or guidance, like the “LADIES” sign that figures in Lacan’s joke about the two children in the railway carriage, appear typically in upper case, and are casually referred to simply as “signs”. By being bolded and upper case, the letter-forms **G**, **L, A, N, C, EEE!s** and **S** stand out as important signs in this text. Congruent with that observation is that other upper-case items like the “B” in “B’utterfly” are not bolded and therefore inferentially of a lesser order.

For apostrophe marks to follow each letter seems odd, distinctly non-normative. The sprinkle or seeding of apostrophes has the effect of stretching the glances. On the page, they present as prolonged glances, lingering glances. The visual nature of glances extends through visual means, namely the upper-case (followed by bold) prominence and the spreading of the word by non-normative emplacements of punctuation marks. The frame of the word lengthens; it takes more space. And then it spreads further through two substantial paragraphs. A visual sense of reflection doubles with an opportunity for mental reflection, simply in consequence of the word’s swollen body. Although the term “apostrophe” derives from Greek “turning away”, for poetry and drama, in an uncanny heimlich/unheimlich manner, it generally means turning towards an addressee. Consequently, Retallack’s lexical construction suggests glances both to, and away from, a person or thing.

As indicated in my introductory “Initial G’L’A’N’C’E’S’”, I am unable to read this lexical construction without seeing a materiality of eyebrows or eyelashes in the apostrophes. That leads me to read the letters as individual eyes, each glancing out from the text. At me. The direct appeal of those eyes acts like an interpellation engaging the reader, not as an Althusserian

ideological feature, rather more a Barthes-like engagement with the pleasure of the refreshing difference of this lexical event. The conclusion of "Blue Notes on the Know Ledge" observes:

> In this *what's wrong* picture the eyes are not first-person pronouns, the eyes can acknowledge the distance of an other without ravishing her, the eyes give onto flight and passage as well as reflection, the eyes do not seek the saturated spectrum of the sublime. The eyes caress what they cannot create. The eyes caress what they cannot touch or hold. (*TPW* 80)

Visual sense pervades this portion of text. The eyes, organs of glances, see affectively. The action of glancing, alternative to gazing, reveals as an ethical field. In this respect, Retallack's glances differ from the code-cracking eyes of Poe's story. Her G'L'A'N'C'E'S' turn towards a different field, one in which a masculinity like that of the self-satisfied Dupin has been displaced by a feminine register of alterity. The eyes of Retallack's text make statements as they glance. They should not ravish; they should acknowledge distance. This can be read as a glance that respects personhood. The glances of these eyes are trained "onto flight and passage" but "do not seek" escape into a dream-world of the sublime. The sublime is revealed as a spectrum, "saturated". The sublime has been overdone. Desires should be pursued rather than sublimated to that spectrum. And finally, the text turns to vision's partner senses. Eyes can do their bit, but they can only caress; they cannot create, touch or hold. The desire to create, touch or hold emanates through the surface of these textual eyes.

The use of an apostrophe to mark the possessive case adds another layer to the signals emitted by this construction. The serried letters might be read as a telescope of relationships, a Russian doll or stacking toy, one thing leading to, or fitting with, or within, its neighbour. On this reading, each possessive possesses the next letter, characterising each apostrophised letter as one of a linked series, links in a chain. The chain of displacements can also fairly reference successive displacements like those of Poe's purloined letter. Such a reading mirrors that part of Derridean deconstruction of a text whereby one reading is displaced through agency of the trace (or *pharmakon*) by another reading. And Lacan, too, promotes a chain of signification where the signifier pursues its desired signified from stage to stage, continually unsatisfied at each remove.

One page earlier, in the "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**" text, Retallack parses the letters and apostrophes in this precise order: **G'LA'S GLA'N'C'E'S**. As noted in my introductory "Initial G'L'A'N'C'E'S'", the first parsing deals with GLAS in one paragraph; the second deals with GLANCES in another paragraph. The ordering of these two parsing paragraphs suggests that the first (**GLAS**) gestures to Derrida (through his work *Glas*), and the second (**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**), via the links I suggest with psychoanalysts Jung and Lacan, gestures to them, and possibly to Cage associations. Derrida disputed Lacan's reading of Poe's story. It is

possible that some interest in the psychoanalytic structure of desire seeps through Retallack's letter work, notwithstanding her frustration with the engendered difficulties that feminine approaches must always experience about the phallogocentric basis of psychoanalytical theories.

In the course of parsing the **GLASGLANCES** letters and attendant apostrophe marks, Retallack's text reflects relationships of *apostrophe.* These relationships build and play upon marks and words in the text that invoke *apostrophe.* As indicated earlier, the essential *relationship* invoked by *apostrophe* is marked where the text "turns away" to address a person or thing, present or not (OED). The apostrophe mark itself embodies a typographical version of the commonly more abstract Lucretian swerve. Turning away figures, too, in normative uses of an apostrophe mark to indicate possession, or elision. The possessive apostrophe mark indicates a relationship between two nouns, the former of which is *marked* as holding property in the other, for example, Joan's car. The apostrophe mark employed for elision indicates a relationship between extant text and the missing portion, its place *marked*, for example, 'umble, where the mark stands in place of the absent letter *h.* In Chapter Three, I discuss Sabine Golz's essay "Apostrophe's Double", in which she suggests the apparatus of apostrophe can be read as a "turn of aversion" by the addressee (29). Whether *apostrophe* denotes an address to a muse or other, or a mark of punctuation, certain similarities of relationship are invoked by, or around, the text. In this context, I include the punctuation mark as a recognisable part of the text. Here, Retallack breaks down conventions that treat the poetic figure of apostrophe as different from the apostrophe mark.

Keeping that apostrophe relationship in mind, note how Retallack's text neatly apostrophises the apostrophe mark against its alphabetical word "other". For example, in the course of expanding upon the lexeme **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**, she exchanges the apostrophe *marks* for the *word* "apostrophe": "Ah, **G** apostrophe the halocutionary arts! She talked **L**ike an angle **A** apostrophe angel . . ." In this representative portion, bolded *letters* **G** and **A** are followed by the *word* "apostrophe". Thus, in place of the earlier apostrophe mark stands the corresponding word, followed by additional text. Retallack's text *turns from* lettristic mark to word. In my reading, the text turns from one mode of addressing the apostrophe (*mark*) to another (*word*). That each "apostrophe" is comparable can be inferred by their following their associated, bolded letter, checkable against the scheme word **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'** and addressed in letter sequence.

Mirroring the exchange whereby an apostrophe *mark* is represented by the *word* "apostrophe", each of the seven letters of **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'** is also represented by chunks of text. To revisit

the example, **G** comes to stand for "the halocutionary arts!" And so, too, can the apostrophe marks be described as standing in relations of "apostrophe": firstly, punctuation mark to alphabetical word and, then again, punctuation mark to the sum of alphabetical letter plus additional text. In this manner, the whole chunk of text quoted above represents the leading word "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**" (including its apostrophe marks) in a relation to the ensuing text that can likewise be termed "apostrophe" (*TPW* 79). The text enacts alterities of apostrophe, relations whereby one item "turns away" to address its "other". This pattern builds through fractal level, from letter and mark, to word, to chunks of text; and the apostrophic pattern can be seen to operate in the relations between the leading word and the ensuing couple of paragraphs. This apostrophic pattern provides a differential reading of the apostrophe marks from that suggested by comparison with Jung's discourse about diachronic and synchronic order (quoted earlier in this chapter). Retallack's treatment of letter–apostrophe pairings elevates the apostrophe marks beyond that of mere prime markers.

Arguably, in this passage the punctuation may stand equal to alphabetical letters. Not only does the text elevate the apostrophe mark to its equivalent word representation, it uses the word "apostrophe" seven times (counting "C'atastophe" in that total but not the assonant "atmosphere"). The number of apostrophe marks spread through the initial G'L'A'N'C'E'S' is equalled by the appearances of the equivalent word. Numerical equivalence suggests, in my reading, a more general equivalence. The marks call for their names. Conversely, the full words represent their lettristic marks in the parsed readings presented by the text. One form is not privileged above the other. Thus, all marks are accorded embodied atomic equivalency in their potential.

We should also note here that the Greek "turn away" of apostrophe is sympathetic with the *clinamen*, the atomic swerve. Retallack uses poetic punctuation play as a tool to deconstruct GLANCES in a way that addresses the absence of a literary Feminine. Her introduction of a sequence of apostrophe marks swerves the word out of its normative path. As subject, GLANCES is deft and apt. Glances are more than sidelong, fleeting looks; they can be physical blows. The word carries "lances". Such connotations of *glances* suggest that inattention and attack are stances that feminine literature endures from the canon. Irony pervades Retallack's performative segment. The French sentence *Il n'y avait pas de suite dans ses idées* appears to condemn feminine literature for irrationality, a lack of logical linearity, and adjudges that "she's incoherent!" Such irony performs an alterity of rhetoric, leading the reader to scoff at the italicised scoffer and embrace literary openness to different readings, unconstructed by phallogocentric anxieties.

The parsings, already discussed in my "Initial G'L'A'N'C'E'S'", of the constructed, apostrophised word "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**", obviously celebrate individual letters. In this section, I revisit that parsing feature to consider how the attention they get develops character in them as individual letters. From first parsing to the second, "**G** apostrophe" transposes to "**G**ee, excuse me but". The parsings speak in different voices, performing genre swerving. The first is more "high-flown", with mimetic traces of a canonic ode. The grand flourish of "Ah, **G** apostrophe the halocutionary arts!" mimics the address of "high" English poetic tradition, congruent with Shelley's address to "O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being" (723) or Donne's "Busye old foole, unruly Sunne" (10). The second parsing sounds more like a mélange of US casual poetic diction and prose-dominant language forms. The cadence or speech music of "**G**ee, excuse me but **L**ike is there any angel **A**postrophe difference at all between . . ." exhibits the modern hesitator usage of "like", in mimesis of a contemporary US voice, enquiring and then continuing in prose-dominant stream of consciousness. The words "is there any angel **A**postrophe difference" illustrate contemporary speech in mimesis of those expressions in which an expletive is referenced obliquely like in "Jesus H Christ" or "any Mother Effing difference".

Turning to situations in which an apostrophe marks an elision, it operates as a signifier, standing for the absent matter of the elision. The construction can also read to figure the apostrophe as an Angel, a being who watches over the speaker and the punctuation mark. Considering this passage in the large, Retallack's text, while unpacking or developing the letters **G**, **L**, **A** and so on (through what I term "parsing"), harnesses two fractal levels, lettristic and word, to perform genre swerves at a word level.

Here, focusing on the individual letters in the passage under review, the angle represented in the material representation of **L** is noted in the text before being combined with the angular **A** to turn, as any angle must, but in this case into an angel. In the second parsing, **A**, standing for an angel, leads alphabetically to B. The text moves alphabetically to the unfortunate B histories of Bovary and Butterfly, neatly picking out the outline of ovary as a defining characteristic nesting within the lettristic materiality of the former, and sharing that trait with the latter. Both B's are doomed by gender. And, immediately following this point, the text stammers over the letter **N** as it tries to negotiate its way towards the catastrophe that the canon represents: "in the face of all that **N** apostrophe now is and has been known . . ." Note the production of lettristically stammered alliteration in "napostrophe nowis nown". Here, the apostrophe marks a hesitation as the choked voice struggles to enunciate.

The materiality of "**EEE!s**" adds to my argument that the materiality of the construction G'L'A'N'C'E'S' performs eyes. As the text notes, there are "many apostrophes between the **EEE!s**". The reader's eye, encountering EEE!s can readily substitute a Y for the middle E. The run of capital E's are those that, as the text also notes, "she and he have in common". Once again, Retallack's text turns the reader to the letter. Both pronouns "she" and "he" have the letter *e* in common. That they share *h* too is passed over in this passage, presumably because its business arises from the letters in *glances*, a word with no repeated letters.

The "final **S**" brings the reader to the note about workhouse work. In my reading, the "final **S**" can read as the ordure of service, the shitwork that acculturation tasks to women. But it can also reference Molly Bloom's final "yes" in Joyce's *Ulysses*, particularly given Retallack's repeated interest in Joyce. That reading introduces a myriad of nuances into this passage, itself part of a commentary on the "Blue Notes" that the cultural silos of knowledge emit about the ordered place of the Feminine. Joyce ascribes the final word to Molly – indeed, the final forty pages. But is the final word one of submission or one whereby Molly gives expression to her own desire, where she expresses the materiality of her own sexuality? This is the kind of hermeneutic from which Retallack does not shy; nor does she prescribe an answer. The effect here is one of performance, creating and furthering conversations that are capable of productive cultural outcomes.

Seeking location in the present tense also figures in this G'L'A'N'C'E'S' passage: "the past tense makes her tense too blue". For the literary Feminine, the past holds too many unsatisfactory memories. The continuously unrolling seam of present tense, with all its practical possibilities, is the time in which to assert presence. This theme of time, dealing with the past, memory, and negotiating a way forward untrammelled by handicaps of the past, becomes a theme in *Memnoir*, a theme upon which I shall touch in Chapter Four.

It seems clear that Retallack packs a great deal into her *glances*. Not just the word, but the individual letters, her introduced punctuation marks, her poetic treatments of them – like the parsing discussed above – enable them to explode as individuals, each bearing characters of their own. In the democratic economy of her practice, punctuation and diacritical marks can assume the same level of performativity and character as alphabetical letters. Whether we follow discrete textual connotations including intertextuality, enlarge the reading frame (as we should) to incorporate the multiplicity of *glances* from her other works or those of Genre Tallique, or consider the potential for psychoanalytical readings by linking allusively to Lacan or Jung, the chains of available readings expand towards multiple alterities. In the course of this work, her elevation of lettristic marks, alphabetical and otherwise, amounts to individuated

characterisation. Apostrophe marks transform into full words. Letters set out on journeys accompanied by strengthened apostrophes and, in their turn, turn into semantic wonders. “Ah, **G** apostrophe the halocutionary arts!” takes **G**’s reader down a rabbit hole for delivery to angelic imaginings of Austin’s speech act theory. Apostrophes enter the tales of Madame Bovary and Madame Butterfly, introducing the “apostrophe difference” via the direction-altering “angle **A**” of “angel **A**”.

These performances undertaken by letters and marks comprise fractal movements, disruptive and disorderly swerves. The development of character in letters and marks enacts a new grammatical order. Retallack’s poethics acts as a conduit to alterities of languages born of feminine literary forms.

Opening the letter aitch

This chapter, which began by detailing Retallack’s attention to the letter *aitch,* concludes by examining how she fills that letter with character. Her lettristic characterisation can be better understood against the comparable fractal field whereby words fill with character within the word sign system. Bearing in mind that a sign has meaning within its system, Saussure noted that we mentally associate a word concept in response to hearing the sound or seeing the shape of the word (69, 70). In his view, “language is form and not substance” (71). When, in English, we hear or read “dog”, we each mentally produce our “dog” concept. French readers do likewise with “chien”. In that mental production we may combine our senses, whether visual, aural, of smell, of taste or of touch.

The embodied forms of alphabetical letters within the alphabetical system represent via a visual image, the shape of the letter, whether upper or lower case. The letter sometimes known as *aitch* is represented by the respective case signs *h* or *H*. We may visualise a font style or size, a colour. Perhaps we may mentally or physically rehearse the way the sound is produced by bodily means such as by lips, teeth, tongue, palate, diaphragm and so on. We may recall the way the letter appears or sounds in one or more words or sound contexts. Just as with words, an alphabetical letter may carry individualised associations for different people; for example, my niece Jaya, herself a twin, invented the term “J-twins” to link us through our common first initial, coining a letter association that she and I share. But for most, I suggest the predominant mental association of a letter is the shape of the mark that represents it. This feature matters at a keener pitch in poetry such as Retallack’s, which works pointedly at the level of emplacement and accompanied letter. One could term this lettristic precision, but it is well to unpack it to

reveal the importance of situation too. The precise mirroring of page relativity between letters in the upper- and lower-page portions in "Afterrimages" offers a prime example.

The upper-case letter *aitch* is graphemically represented by two full-height vertical lines above the baseline, joined by a horizontal crossbar at their middles: *H*. The symbol representing the lower-case *h* also sits entirely above the baseline. A vertical line forms its left side, and an arch issues from that vertical line at mid-height, descending to the baseline. Upper-case *H* resembles a rugby football goalpost. Lower-case *h* resembles a chair in profile. The letter is the eighth letter of the Roman alphabet. In its Greek and Roman origins, it represented a sound that was the Semitic *Hheth* or *Kheth*, a laryngeal or guttural spirant – but when the Roman alphabet was applied to the Germanic languages, the letter was used to represent the simple aspirate or breath sound (OED). The OED states of *H* that:

> Its power is now that of a simple aspiration or breathing, with just sufficient narrowing of the glottis to be audible before a vowel. It is also used to form consonantal digraphs (*sh*, *th*, etc.) with simple sounds; and it is often silent, or merely lengthens a preceding vowel.

Diminishing terms figure in this definition – "simple", "just sufficient" and "merely" – further diluting the denotation that casts *aitch* as a feeble letter representing a feeble sound, a sound whose locution has little force. How could such a sound, one of little locutionary force, produce much illocutionary force of the kind discussed by Austin? Nonetheless, despite the OED's observations that suggest *aitch* is a lesser sound than other consonants, we remind ourselves that the sound of simple breathing is an essential sign of life. The representation of breath is a proof of life. The sound of breath is a sign of presence. A person whose breath can be heard is inferentially close by. Through *aitch*, the body of the feminine is evoked performatively.

The letter may be framed as the silent aitch but Retallack's essay "The Scarlet Aitch" colours it in, emblazons it and flags it as a banner of the Experimental Feminine. As noted earlier, the essay is subtitled "Twenty-Six Notes on the Experimental Feminine". The number of notes in the score equals the number of letters in the alphabet, but the essay picks out *aitch* as its champion.

It serves my purpose to observe the swerve embedded in the essay's constructed bookends: after title and subtitle, the essay is prefaced by two quotations, the second of which carries a swerving echo into the essay's concluding paragraph. The first prefatory quotation is by a male writer, D. W. Winnicott, whose book *Playing and Reality* sets up an interesting opposition against Retallack's thrust. Particularly because the twenty-six notes of her essay, by subtitle, address "the Experimental Feminine", Winnicott's paragraph casts an ironic foreground:

> The dissociation defense was giving way to an acceptance of bisexuality as a quality of the unit or total self. I saw that I was dealing with what could be called a *pure female element*. At first it surprised me that I could reach this only by looking at the material presented by a male patient. (qtd. in *TPW* 102)

The inherent exemplification of male arrogation, interpreting the female from solely male data, is further condemned by diminishing the female to *element* only. The rhetoric that imagines breath and pairing as less than guttural and solo work (as the OED definition of *H* seems to do), and images woman as less than man notwithstanding the comparative sizes of those nouns, one of which contains the other, may not be noticed by a male gaze that figures woman as a mere thing for his comfort modelled from a man's rib.

Against the gaze of the straw man represented by Winnicott stands the second prefatory quotation, striking a glance from Genre Tallique's *GLANCES: An Unwritten Book*:

> Chance is always a relative term. The swerve out of one system enters the logic of another. Can't you see, Alice, as long as cultures and their artefacts are identified by internally consistent logics, as long as identity itself is identified as an internally consistent logic, the feminine will be the constant clinamen. (*TPW* 102)

In this passage, Retallack pulls rhyming partners "chance" and "glance" together because the purported source of the passage addressing chance, logic and cross-systemic swerves is "GLANCES". We can usefully cross-reference this passage to Retallack's Mallarmé reference and "our lucky glance" in ":RE:THINKING:LITERARY:FEMINISM:" (*TPW* 133) mentioned earlier in this chapter where repetitions of "glance" and repeated references to gambling and luck evoke the rhyming partner "chance". Indirect referencing amounts to another kind of "glance".

In the passage quoted above (*TPW* 102), Retallack signals a powerful tool for subversive cultural poethics, the swerve that transposes from one system into another. In her poethics, the feminine is, to borrow from Winnicott, the *element* that can be relied upon to perform the swerving function. As envisioned by Retallack, the site of the *clinamen* is not feminised in a gendered system; it is shared by any writers who are willing to take the chance. Tallique adds: "chance is always a relative term" (102), so the principle of chance leads to connections, interfaces, commonalities. The literary of this Feminine will inevitably affect culture.

Completing the gender swerve that bookends "The Scarlet Aitch", Retallack echoes the reliable Genre Tallique's address to Alice in the final paragraph:

> Can't you see, Alice, as long as all that complicates systems, thickens plots, diverges from invested trajectories and story lines is persistently feared and devalued, the Feminine will be the constant clinamen? (*TPW* 109)

Here, Alice, the imagined addressee apostrophised in an implied Wonderland, is deictically addressed in person, intimately first name, by the author. The "Can't you see, Alice" addresser transposes from Tallique to Retallack, neatly bookending the essay. Although Lacan might argue that the sign of Tallique has returned to the author Retallack, Alice represents an alternative *A*, a feminised version of the primary letter. We can remember that the upper-case graphemes for A and H constitute three similar strokes, the only difference being that H opens at the top whereas A closes. Atomic detail is important in Retallack's work because it bears semiotic intent. Here, "Feminine", albeit in the midst of the concluding sentence, is raised to upper-case *F*, in contrast with the starting quotation, but consistent with the subtitle of the essay, *Twenty-Six Notes on the Experimental Feminine.* In that sign, the essay asserts the establishment of the Feminine as the complicator, the agency of chance, the clinamen of literature, and thereby culture.

Having attributed to her alter ego, Genre Tallique, the notional book GLANCES: *An Unwritten Book*, Retallack raises the issue of phallogocentricism and mentions Lacan in the second of her twenty-six notes in "The Scarlet Aitch". (*TPW* 102). Pursuant to my earlier analysis, Lacan's glances and those of Retallack, apostrophised or otherwise, are subliminally related. The phallogocentric glance may be spoken if not spelled "glans", although Retallack does not force that pun into print. Her words are "Phallogocentrism, the latest term for a double-ended rationalist telos: What's not coming from the Father must be heading toward Him. . . . This is a dream from which we can awaken" (*TPW* 102). Like Derrida, Retallack does not accept that the signifier is represented by the phallus, nor that the signifier must be heading towards the Masculine end.

In that essay, Retallack invests the letter *aitch* with the spirit or breath of the Experimental Feminine through the character of Hester Prynne. This is done by opposing *aitch* against the cultural dominance of *A* as representative of the cultural phallogocentric. The letter *A* can be termed predominant from its primacy as first letter in the alphabet. In Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the alphabetical sign, washed in the colour of blood, becomes the sign of gendered cultural tyranny. Recall that Hester herself enters into lettrified revolt, embroidering her Shame letter *A* into gorgeous threaded forms. Acting as a Feminine Dupin, Retallack, too, seizes the sign and exchanges it for, changes it into, an *aitch*.

Thus, the sign of tyranny becomes the sign of Hester – the sign of breath and presence, the sign of feminine staunchness and unashamed motherhood. In the economy of the new sign, the scope to breathe freely, uncondemned by the community, is desirable. The letter *aitch*, when purloined by Retallack, takes on a new hue. Perhaps it might be more apt to say that the hue

scarlet takes on a new signification. It becomes a sign of joy. The letter can laugh as the sign of "haha". In the course of her essay "The Scarlet Aitch", Retallack develops the alphabetical letter into a characterful presence, one that performs individually as integral part of her poethics.

I do not overlook the OED observation that *aitch* is "often silent". Retallack picks up this aspect of the letter and, again, turns it to support the Experimental Feminine, which according to her description (previously quoted) includes silences. In this essay she references John Cage, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gertrude Stein, Nicole Brossard, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Carla Harryman as artists whose works involve not only words but "the spaces between them". She adds:

> What I want to suggest, after Judith Butler, is that to make really productive and useful gender/genre trouble is not to repeat old forms with a difference (parodic or not) but to open up radical explorations into silence – the currently unintelligible into which some sense of our future may be detected. (*TPW* 126)

In the essay, Retallack also references letters A, F and M as gender-laden alphabetical signs. She suggests that "their long histories render them anything but arbitrary". Notwithstanding that comment, and the added burden of M that it "tends to be enacted in stereotypically stripped, oppositional gender roles", she holds that "the dynamic exchange, the folding in of new materials that gives the reinvention of forms their lively possibility, never stops" (*TPW* 109).

The prominence of forms in that extract signals Retallack's interest in grammars, whose concern is forms and conformity. In that context, the embodiment of letters emerges as a radical practice linking Retallack with her times, investing character in the materiality of letters.

Chapter Two: Lexical ethics

> Forget grammar and think about potatoes. Grammar after all
>
> has to do with why they were presented.
>
> – Gertrude Stein, *How to Write*

How to do experimental feminine speech act things with words

Potatoes, grammar and why?

When Stein, an important forerunner for experimentalist Retallack, urges us to "[f]orget grammar and think about potatoes", she earths the discourse, directing attention to the potato-like materiality of language. Thinking of potatoes presented for eating, we can experience the materiality of written language quite simply as material sign-objects presented for reading. Like potatoes, we can present the sign-objects of written language in any practicable manner we wish. The grammar of presentation is always open, a matter of choice.

In normative rule-bound grammar, the form of word presentation in a text is regulated by grammar's prescriptions. But, in addition to gesturing to the "present" of potatoes, the "present tense" and consequent hereness, Stein ties *grammar* to the *presentation* of potatoes. She thereby breaches the normative opposition between matter and form, tying *matter* to the *form* of presentation. Her trope treats words like potatoes, lumps of matter available for presentation. On this basic material view, what is in the body of a written word? Simply, letters and spaces. And sometimes punctuation or diacritical marks.

The geometry of Stein's attention to grammar in the passage above swerves to Stein's textual *why*, the reason that underlies the presentation of words in a text. Why are words in a text presented in such and such a manner? Stein gestures to the idea that grammar affects language making. She recognises that grammar shapes making and thereby forms meaning. Grammar thereby imposes cultural norms; its rules ensure that meanings form up within culturally readable patternings. Representing the field of grammar as a material thing, Stein directs her gaze to its imagined material edge, stating, "On the edge of grammar is why they make things" (*How to Write* 109). Again, she raises the *why* question. New grammar can give writing a fresh edge. Where grammar is imagined as a material, creative realm, its edge exposes to view and the entire grammar field is susceptible to makerly manipulation. Implicitly, she orders grammar as tool of her writing, not as restraint. In the quoted sentences, Stein's swerve of grammatical apprehension moves from the more usual approaches, the *what*, *how*, or even *where*, of grammar, to its *why*.

In order to better appreciate the significant contribution Stein's work brings to the principal text for this chapter, Retallack's poem "How to Do Things with Words", it is worth investigating the importance of Stein's voice in Retallack's frame of the literary feminine. Retallack prefaces her poem with two quotations, which I shall discuss later in this chapter, the second sourced from Stein's *How to Write*. Retallack frequently references or alludes to Stein, whose practice illuminates Retallack's own. She has considerable scholarship in Stein studies; for example, she edited and wrote the 80-page introduction for *Gertrude Stein: Selections* (2008). Addressing Stein's experimental 1914 poetry volume, *Tender Buttons*, Retallack says:

> Is performance always in some sense erotic? What does an eros of language mean? In part, it's about pleasure in the words as fondled objects of poesis, radiant in their everyday connotations, not needing to point to transcendent meaning. But the performance of language is always a performance of a particular kind of desire – a desire to touch others, to know and be known through words. When I read *Tender Buttons*, I'm reminded of Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*: "Language is a skin. I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words." (*Gertrude Stein: Selections* 36)

Retallack here reveals her own delight in fondling words through poesis, feeling them as bodily, finger substitutes, agents of touch. Valorising "everyday connotations", she recognises the value in the quotidian, potato-quality of words and, in that context, she reminds us that these small bodies trigger desire, specifically "a desire to touch others".

The first section of Stein's *How to Write* is named "Saving the Sentence", an ambiguous header hinging on three available meanings of *saving*: the verb of salvation or preservation, or the preposition of exception. Stein's titular play is in the order of grammatical play. Early in the section appears the following paragraph:

> How are how do you do to be discriminated. There is a mistake in a witness. Fog is wet when there is land and it is white. Fog is wet when there is land and it is white. (15)

On my reading we are introduced, "how do you do", to a concept of discrimination although it is not obvious on the surface of the writing who or what is affected. The paragraph then visits the near homonyms "witness", "wet[ness]" and "white[ness]". Fog obscures, intensifying the atmosphere of obscurity in the text. What then of the trio of "witness", "wetness" and "whiteness?" The mis-take in *witness* is that it lacks both *h* and *e* that *whiteness* carries. The *miss*-take *in* witness is elision, letter by letter, of the male pronoun, *he*. I am reminded of cryptic

crossword clues. The expression *how do you do* can signify an awkward or embarrassing state of things, as in, “Here’s a fine how d’you do.” On my reading, Stein encrypts signals that an important subject of this paragraph is gendered discrimination. For current purposes, I draw attention to Stein’s atomic, lettristic site of practice. The pronouned male *he* is suppressed, one letter at a time, and only revealed when the miss-take is unravelled. Mistake hints at the feminine Miss: Stein’s cryptic device enacts at a lettristic level, at the internal grammar of a word.

A pronounced trait of Stein’s work is her deep understanding of grammar – an understanding that she exploits non-normatively. Stein split the sentence, unleashing a new grammar, a poetic strategy that Retallack admires not only through scholarship but in furthering that line into the lettristic componentry of words. When Stein reiterates “I am a grammarian”, she makes a claim that is valid for her grammatical acuity, and invalid in relation to normative rules of grammar, those prescribing how words are conventionally sequenced in order to access normative meanings (*How to Write* 105). Stein’s performance is not bounded by the grammar rules that bind J. L. Austin, whose work I shall shortly introduce.

Stein’s poem “Sacred Emily” demonstrates a different kind of writing swerve. Against William Shakespeare’s lines in *Romeo and Juliet* “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet” (2.2), Stein famously states, “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” (“Sacred Emily”). In a dictionary, a noun is denoted with reference to another noun. Stein both satisfies and confounds this expectation by defining Rose in a chain of roses, defining the word by reiteration. The language falls away from expectation. This simple tug of the grammatical rug fundamentally unsettles, enabling the reader to notice the respective singularities of the named woman and the named flower, and the democratic sense that each naming coins a different rose, even though the name is spelled and spoken alike.

Intra-lexical grammars

Although this chapter is very much about the *what* and *how* of Retallack’s lexical and intra-lexical grammars, Retallack’s *why* (and here I particularly focus on her poethical desire for more productive gender conversations) is always implicated in her writing strategies, something to be borne in mind while we glance in the *what* and *how* directions. Whereas Chapter One concerned lettristic devices focusing on individual letters, this chapter will demonstrate how Retallack interferes lettristically with the internal grammar of words, an intra-lexical practice affecting representations of whole words.

In this chapter, Retallack's letter work is analysed to help us understand her word and grammar work. At the level of the lettristic, I treat punctuation and diacritical marks as if they were letters too, thus gathering her non-normative placements of such marks within my critical purview. We can compare the reach of Retallack's grammar work against that of Stein. Although Retallack says that Stein's "literary experiments were consciously framed investigations into the evocative powers of grammatical innovation" (*Gertrude Stein: Selections* 9), Stein's engagement with grammar scarcely engages in an intra-lexical zone. Retallack's practice extends Stein's material imprint on grammar, interfering with the materiality of written language within the bodies of individual words.

My claim of fractal grammars, although emerging freshly in this thesis, does not lack prior scholarly approach. Marjorie Perloff came close in her chapter "Grammar in Use" where she examined grammatical interests of Gertrude Stein and the visual work of Filippo Marinetti, "the impresario of Futurism" (Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder* 100), in light of Wittgenstein's recognition that grammar must accommodate the plasticity of language use. As we have noted, Wittgenstein and Stein are substantial influences on Retallack. But although Stein used fragments of language, for example sentences of one word or few words, and Marinetti deployed individual alphabetical letters in visual performative practice, Perloff stops short of projecting her ideas into the realm of the alphabetical or punctuational (97). Even when engaging directly with page examples from *Afterrimages* in her chapter "Afterimages: Revolution of the (Visible) Word" in *Experimental – Visual – Concrete* (1996), Perloff concentrates on polysemic "phonemic and morphemic after-echoes" (341) without noting the grammar moves inhering in Retallack's practice. This thesis advances beyond that threshold.

Analysing the example of Retallack's multiple inventions in word and letter componentry gives us some insight into the granular level of linguistic innovation in contemporary experimental poetries. Retallack's word alterations include anagram, lipogram, portmanteau constructions, certain other lettristic changes, and insertion of non-normative marks. Breaking or remaking words releases polysemy and produces alterities of connotations. Consequently, words and their meanings swerve out of linear expectations. Among other consequences, these swerves disrupt normative grammatical expectations. These syntagmatic changes to componentry within a word alter the significations or meanings of the "re-named" word.

Experimental feminine speech acts as second wave feminism

Second wave feminism has been described as the "resurgence of feminism and the women's liberation movement from the late 1960s, chiefly in North America and Europe" (Andermahr et

al. 238). *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* observes that "In this second wave, feminists pushed beyond the early quest for political rights to fight for greater equality across the board, e.g., in education, the workplace, and at home" (McAfee). Retallack's rewriting of history and philosophy involves repositioning the feminine, not only as equal to masculine, but also by marking and valorising feminine modes such as those noted earlier associating with her literary feminine.

Retallack's practice partakes in a broad move away from an atmosphere of austerity that marked the 1980s to one of ambient poetics experimentation, seeking to review, reinterpret and re-understand history, literature, philosophy and other important cultural fields. Her practice includes satirical echo of masculine modes and radical disruption of the graphemic means through which writing represents. As will become clear, her practice handles letters and words with such regard for their materiality that it can fairly be termed a bodily practice, the word or letter as a bodily representation. Her review and reinterpretation of writing re-understands history, literature and philosophy. This is achieved through lexical and lettristic attention to their grammatical modes in experimental speech acts of feminine performativity.

Exemplary, theoretical and analytical movements of Chapters Two and Three

Just as Chapter One noted Retallack's appreciation of the materiality of letters, Chapters Two and Three build on her similar appreciation of the bodily nature of words. In this regard, she aligns with Stein's vision that language portions can be treated bodily, like potatoes. This chapter and Chapter Three categorise Retallack's alterations of the internal grammar of words as experimental feminine speech acts in three movements: exemplary, theoretical and analytical. Firstly, by way of extended example, I show in this chapter how her intra-lexical practices are experimental feminine speech acts that play against J. L. Austin's performative speech act theory. Austin's theory represents the kind of historically masculine taxonomy of knowledge that represses both experimental and feminine literary expression. In addition, I pay attention to her engagement with philosophy, another important realm where her practice challenges cultural norms. In the course of that first movement I discuss how her lettristic curiosity about words works for her poethical desire to subvert culturally normative paths to meaning.

In the first part of Chapter Three, in the theoretical movement, I demonstrate that her creation of non-normative lexemes composed of lettristic signs (alphabetical, punctuation and diacritical) constitutes a *fractal* shift into new grammars. My discourse about new grammars builds on a differential reading of the term *grammar* and an important trope about atoms of

language. As backgrounds for Retallack's own atomic formulations, I track her glance swerving from Greek philosopher Epicurus to James Joyce, each of whom share her interest in atoms. My theory connects atoms to new grammars. These new, intra-lexical grammars operate at differential levels, largely unreadable or unread within cultural norms of language. That disruptive cultural aim of Retallack's practice harks back to the poethical *why* of her intra-lexical grammatical operations, enriching with detailed examples the *why* point picked from Stein's text at the beginning of this chapter.

In the latter part of Chapter Three, Retallack's word grammars are analysed in light of both the performativity exemplified in the first movement and the theoretical basis established in the second movement. The intra-lexical zone, as a sub-atomic fractal zone, furnishes Retallack's practice with the opportunity to perform experimental feminine speech acts. Six specific operations of her intra-lexical practice of performing non-normative words are discussed.

Showing how grammar operates within words may fly in the face of narrowed representations of what grammar does, but my argument is based on examining the history and reach of the term *grammar*, and on observing patterns that intra-lexical relations share with syntagmatic relations that are inarguably grammatical, both historically and contemporarily. Considered theoretically, our tendency to store knowledge in taxonomical silos can be viewed as another instance of grammar whereby items of knowledge are accorded rightful relational place. I could suggest that the proper size of the grammatical envelope is larger than current poetics generally remembers, but it may fit my fractal argument better to say that the current grammatical envelope holds unexplored pockets where patterns repeat.

Exemplary: Performance and performativity

When Retallack adopted the title *How to Do Things With Words* (1998), copying the name of J. L. Austin's 1962 book on speech act theory, she did more than strike a cheeky attitude to Austin's theory, more than take a name, and more than herald her own poetic performativity. In the simple words of that title she announced her plain intention to *do things* with words as one might do things with the materiality of potatoes. Her entire oeuvre, poetic and critical, demonstrates a similar and persistent fascination with words and their componentry. That demonstration emerges from her continual messing with words, manipulating them like Lego pieces, pulling them apart and re-forming them in different ways. This play is always serious in its cultural implications.

"How to Do Things with Words" also serves as title to the poem that sits right in the middle of the book. That titular poem constructs a conversation between J. L. Austin and the nineteenth-

century novelist Jane Austen. Before encountering that Retallack work in detail, it is necessary to review something about J. L. Austin's performative speech act theory, and why he excepted poetic forms from its reach.

J. L. Austin's speech act theory

In 1955, J. L. Austin, professor in philosophy of language at Oxford University, delivered the William James lectures at Harvard University. He pointed out a class of utterances that performed a function simply by the utterance. Austin died at age 48 in February 1960, and the lectures were published posthumously in 1962 by his former colleagues. Although his speech act theory gained less influence in Europe, where the field was captured more by post-structuralists such as Jacques Derrida, it attracted great interest from language philosophers throughout the UK and US, gaining adherents such as US language philosopher John Searle.

A language philosopher focuses much upon language in terms of whether a proposition is true or false. As Austin noted, a constative statement like "the cat is on the mat" is susceptible to debate about its truth. The philosophical debate can contest on a variety of sites. What comprises a cat, or a mat; is the cat real; and is their relative spatial relationship accurately represented by the preposition *on*? Or the topic can interrogate detail from which we might examine more closely what a cat is, or where a cat may be, like Austin's language quoted in Retallack's poem "Where, and what exactly, is the surface of a cat?" Although Austin's jocular question is quoted from *Sense and Sensibilia*, which was published posthumously in 1962, the material was constructed by G. J. Warnock from Austin's lectures going back to 1947. It is characteristic of a constative utterance that its topic can be subject to interrogation about truth. But, although Austin's paired question about position and exact description of a cat's surface may offer semantic delights for the philosopher, and although momentum differs from cat surface, as Austin well knew, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (1927) posits that one cannot measure, with certainty, both the position and the momentum of a thing. Although Austin's question is in jest, the reflection that Austin's general approach sought to pin things down, to get to a reliable truth, is accurate.

In his work on speech act theory, Austin identified a feature of language hitherto unremarked. In brief, he distinguished from constative speech acts what he termed performative speech acts. Constative speech acts make statements about which it can be argued that the statement is true or false, whereas a performative speech act actually performs a particular social function by the saying of the words in the appropriate context. His philosophical engagement in questions about truth affects his sphere of interest in the operations of language.

In his work, Austin emphasised using what he termed ordinary language, thereby restricting himself to relatively stable material. He investigated ordinary language use to throw light on philosophical endeavours. Less radical and certainly less philosophical than Wittgenstein, who came to regard many philosophical questions as unhelpfully directed, Austin analysed the functioning of ordinary speech in order to clarify matters pertinent to his philosophical interests. Congruently, Austin exercises scholarly precision in his apprehension of an utterance. For example, he does not conflate a speech act with what that speech act represents. A constative speech act that "the cat is on the mat" *represents* a statement, whereas the statement *represents* some state of affairs (*HTDTWW* 1). The speech act itself is not, in Austin's scholarship, a state of affairs; it is a statement about some state of affairs.

Some examples furnish a ready path to understanding what Austin means by a performative speech act. A simple example is a wager on the happening of a future event, say the outcome of a race later that day. One cannot argue with the assertion *I wager ten dollars that Phar Lap will win* because it is not a constative utterance. The wager is performed contemporaneously with the act of speaking the words. Naming a ship provides another example: *I name this ship the Marie Celeste.* Again, the words perform the act. When a person, having the authority to do so, says the words intentionally in the appropriate circumstances, the vessel is thereby named.

Austin posited five categories of performative speech acts. For present purposes I shall simply mention each category and offer brief illustrations in order to establish a general characteristic for that category. He named his categories verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives and expositives:

- Verdictives appraise, assess or "find" something through verbs like *acquit* or *value*.
- Exercitives decide that something is to be so, such as to compel or forbid something. Examples include *warn* and *announce*.
- Commissives commit the speaker to a course of action like *promise* or *wager*.
- Behabitives, a name that Austin confessed is "a shocker", include the notion of reaction to other peoples' behaviour and fortunes and of attitudes and expressions of attitudes to someone's past conduct or imminent conduct. Examples are *apologise* and *defy*. When we say "I apologise" the words constitute an apology; when we say "I defy you" the words are reckoned as defiance.
- Expositives are used in expounding views, conducting arguments, clarifying usages and references. Examples are *affirm* and *concede*. (*HTDTWW* 151–63)

Austin gave this overview of the categories:

> To sum up, we may say that the verdictive is an exercise of judgment, the exercitive is an assertion of influence or exercising of power, the commissive is an assuming of an obligation or declaring of an intention, the behabitive is the adopting of an attitude, and the expositive is the clarifying of reasons, arguments, and communications. (*HTDTWW* 163)

Performative speech acts comprise significant social events. They require a particular relationship between speaker and listener: often there is a hierarchical aspect to the performance; solemnity is often implied. Even in the case of the expositive, the cultural convention accompanying argumentation implies good faith by participants within the "rules of the game". The engaged hierarchies extend beyond grammars expressed through conventionally observed relationships, such as that between officiant and marital couple. They extend to relationships ordered by grammars of conventional rules to which the parties are expected to be bound. Convention, and necessarily the following of it, plays a large part in Austin's theory of performative speech acts. Within its frame, speakers and words are expected to behave normatively.

Two important glosses affect the success of a performative utterance: the *felicity* of its circumstances and its *force*. Each of these glosses turns upon the human players, such as whether the performer has authority to undertake the particular function. The *felicity* or *happiness* of an apparent performative speech act depends upon the circumstances being reliable and plain. Austin argued that performative speech acts could not be true or false; they could only be happy or unhappy: that is, felicitous or infelicitous. At issue is whether the speech act performs according to its form. Was the boat truly named? Has the marriage been made? A promise to marry uttered by an actor in a play will not have the performative marrying force of the same form of words in what Austin terms "felicitous" or "happy" circumstances. If the speech act is said in a play, or if the person is not the one authorised to perform the act, or if it is the wrong boat or the wrong couple, then the apparent performative fails, and it is *infelicitous*. A felicitous or happy performative speech act requires the appropriate and complete invocation of certain words by appropriate persons within an accepted conventional practice, and the subsequent conduct of the parties must be congruent (*HTDTWW* 14, 15). As a general rule, incomplete or inadequate utterances will not produce meaning in the outcome sense desired by Austin. Properly speaking, his theory perhaps implies that words are only atoms of speech, finding sensible expression, expression that conveys meaning, only within complete speech acts. Completion and "happy" context are vitally important.

The *force* of the utterance demonstrates how it is to be taken. Factors engaged include mood, tone of voice, cadence or utterance, adverbs, connecting phrases, accompaniments such as

winks, and the circumstances of the utterance. Consider the varying strengths of these examples: “I apologise” is a performative speech act; “I am sorry” might be to similar effect but equally might be mere report of a subjective state; whereas “I repent” reports a state of mind without constituting a performative speech act at all (*HTDTWW* 73–79). Austin excludes a great deal of linguistic behaviour by means of his alliterative qualifiers *felicity* and *force.*

In speech act theory, Austin uses the tripartite set of terms *locutionary, illocutionary* and *perlocutionary*. *Locutionary* refers to a speech act; *illocutionary* refers to the intended force of a speech act; and *perlocutionary* refers to the response to a speech act, what is produced by the speech act. He provides this simple example:

> Locution.
>
> He said to me “Shoot her!” meaning by “shoot” shoot and referring by “her” to *her*.
>
> Illocution.
>
> He urged (or advised, ordered &c.) me to shoot her.
>
> Perlocution.
>
> He got me to (or made me, &c.) shoot her. (*HTDTWW* 101)

The gender implications of his example are unmistakable. Austin imagines a man urging another person to shoot a woman. We can infer that Austin thought this was funny, a comic turn in the male-dominated academia of 1955. Or worse, we might imagine that the humour gives expression to an unconscious desire to shoot a woman: a Freudian slip through the slippery medium of humour. Retallack’s remix of Austin’s tone in her *How to Do Things with Words* can be read as an effort to render it into palatable feminine tone, to detoxify the potential of lexical play.

Performative speech act theory’s rejection of poetic utterances

Austin restricts the scope of subject utterances to those in plain, ordinary language. Plain speech might mask insincerity, but Austin excludes irony or any other feature that would compromise reliability as material from which to illustrate his theory. He states:

> [A] performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar way to any and every utterance – a sea change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use – ways that fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued under ordinary circumstances. (*HTDTWW* 22)

Retallack's *How to Do Things with Words* erupts responsively from the realm that Austin terms "parasitic", "fall[ing] under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language". "Etiolation" references the process of blanching from lack of light, giving a pale or sickly hue, growing into stalks, straw (OED). Austin's judgment harshly condemns poetic uses. His metaphor situates *language* as the host tenor, *parasitic poetics* as the vehicle. Although he partially redeems the poetic with reference to intelligibility, the connotations of parasitic, potentially ranging from benign symbiosis to bloodsucking sponger, are not pretty.

One can readily take issue with Austin's dismissiveness in ruling that, for example, poetic language falls outside "normal use". Apt substitutes for the limited range of language he considers for performative speech act theory might be terms like "bland" or "simple". But his rhetoric goes beyond what is necessary to define his terms for scientific purposes; he goes further, framing artistic uses as "etiolations of language". This connotes a process of decay, one that renders language pallid or lifeless. And this from a scholar whose every written page utilises figures of speech to enliven his prose and illustrate his points. Is this merely an excess of Austin's comic play or does he, like Plato, distrust poetics? Why Austin excludes poetic uses from analytical consideration is understandable given the strictures of his theory, but not why he, so adept in rhetoric and metaphor, turns such heavy metaphorical guns on those uses. His over-insistence draws attention to his anxiety, perhaps indicative of a more general, perhaps masculine, anxiety that desires tight grammatical reins on language use.

Austin pressures his language laboratory to be under control. He places emphasis on plain ordinary language, treating normative usage as a grounding, reliable feature. In studious analysis and taxonomy, he cannot admit disruptive language elements. Yet he continually jests. Austin's written language performs a stylish erudition couched in scholarly humour. For example:

> Suppose, for example, I see a vessel on the stocks, walk up and smash the bottle hung at the stem, proclaim "I name this ship the *Mr. Stalin*" and for good measure kick away the chocks: but the trouble is, I was not the person chosen to name it (whether or not – an additional complication – *Mr. Stalin* was the destined name; perhaps in a way it is even more of a shame if it was). We can all agree
>
> (1) that the ship was not thereby named;
>
> (2) that it is an infernal shame. (*HTDTWW* 23)

An illustrative comic footnote states: "Naming babies is even more difficult; we might have the wrong name and the wrong cleric – that is, someone entitled to name babies but not intended to name *this* one" (*HTDTWW* 23). Comic turns such as his gratuitous note "(2) that it is an infernal shame" pervade his texts. His continual jesting amounts to "self-subverting humour", according

to Shoshana Felman, who adjudges that "Austin is deemed to be caught red-handed defending 'seriousness,' what is considered normal" as opposed to "parasitism", the "unseriousness" of poetry, play or joking . . ." (123). From that pertinent observation she moves neatly to unravel Austin's text in a deconstructive analysis. In her acknowledged appreciation of Austin's theoretical clarity, humour and writing, and in her eventual challenge to his theory, Felman aligns with Retallack's nuanced, intelligent, feminine stance.

Let us examine more closely the metaphor Austin employs in claiming that poetic uses of language are parasitic. In doing so, let us remain alert to the words *language* and *use*; and the consequently imagined relationship between the doer (or speaker/user) and those collections of words we term *language*. To describe poetic use of language as parasitic employs a "figure of speech", to wit, a metaphor. In the relevant passage, Austin figures language as a living body, a host capable of sustaining a parasite that feeds off it. Whether the relationship between poetic use and its host, language, is symbiotic, merely dependent, or perhaps even unwelcome, there is an inherent suggestion that poetic uses sap the resources of the host. Austin's context suggests, to use his term, an "infelicitous" relationship. Although bodily images are gestured, there is no generative delight such as might attend an image of mother and embryo, or mother and suckling child.

Nevertheless, Austin's parasite image discloses his sense, however unconscious, that language enjoys some form of life and, therefore, may be capable of agency. The relation between doer (speaker/writer) and language emerges again, *with* us, in a challenging opposition. Note that punctilious Austin, in his work *How to Do Things with Words*, chooses the preposition *with* to connect the verb "do" to his metonymic representative of performative language, "words". The preposition *with* has broad application. When I play chess *with* a friend, I may be playing against them. And perhaps Austin unwittingly discloses an anxiety that when we do creative things *with* words, we sap his imagined *body* of *language*. On the evidence of his own words, he seems uncomfortable about it.

Retallack's pervasive engagement with philosophy

As a language philosopher, Austin occupies a specialised situation within philosophy generally. Retallack's interest in philosophy extends beyond performative speech act theory. Vickery draws attention to Retallack's training in philosophy:

> Retallack studied under the aegis of G. E. M. Anscombe, known not only for her own influential book, *Intention*, but also for her definitive translation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations.* Like J. L. Austin, Elizabeth Anscombe advocated a pragmatic approach to language, one that removes humor and poetry from the philosophical engagement. Retallack was deeply attracted to the certainty that Anscombe's theories held, as well as the almost

> crystalline structure that theories of the sublime offered to art. Yet at the same time, she was discovering an enjoyment in performance, particularly the act of writing poetry and its attendant free-fall through language and genre. This yearning to have *both* (order and chaos, theory and praxis, desire and enjoyment) rather than *either/or* becomes apparent in all of Retallack's future ventures. (167–68)

Critic Greg Kinzer from the University of Utah, in his essay "Excuses and Other Nonsense: Joan Retallack's 'How to Do Things with Words'", notes that Anscombe was a former colleague of J. L. Austin (67). Through Anscombe, Retallack can claim a relationship at one remove from both Austin and Wittgenstein. Noting Retallack's "yearning to have *both* (order and chaos, theory and praxis, desire and enjoyment)", Vickery reveals an aporia evidencing in Retallack's *How to Do Things with Words.* Retallack's relationship with Austin's writing, masculine though it is, is somewhat complicated. Like Felman, Retallack's moth can be tempted by Austin's flame. Retallack too, writes humorously at times, and not all Austin's humour is sexist. Her writing sometimes models Austin-like precision; like him she is acutely aware of the meanings that can emanate from representation of a word; like him she is fascinated by eternal questions such as the nature of truth. True, her approach mocks the imagined singularity in which Austin's constative utterances operate – either true or false – but their energies in that broad field contain much overlap, coincidence in their geometries of attention. Retallack's "The Reinvention of Truth" (2007) contains the passage "but then there it is all safely tucked into a grammatical past", another gesture to the quintessential importance of grammar within her geometries of attention. That gesture also references Retallack's desire to overwrite the grammatical past, writing one that fits the feminine present. Indeed, much of Retallack's poetry work performs critical functions every bit as much as her overt writings, and her "How to Do Things with Words" is a prime example, setting J. L. Austin's language in conversational juxtaposition with that of Jane Austen. Thus, in Retallack's work, poetry functions as criticism.

In his essay "Joan Retallack: A Philosopher among the Poets, a Poet among the Philosophers" (2003), Burton Hatlen thoroughly reviews work produced by Retallack in the 1990s. As the essay title signposts, Hatlen notes that Retallack positions her poetics in relation to philosophy, especially those of Wittgenstein and John Dewey. Extending the range of her important philosophical influences to Cage, Hatlen says:

> Cage's work has represented to Retallack, I would propose, a model of how a radical artistic praxis can complete twentieth century philosophy's attempt to liberate us from metaphysics. This dialectic of theory and praxis, in which both become modes of critique, has energized Joan Retallack's work, both as theorist and as poet. And because she has engaged herself with this dialectic specifically as a woman writer, Retallack has also "gone beyond" Cage himself in one important respect. In her theoretical work, she has explored the specifically patriarchal implications of a monovocal discursive practice that claims to offer a picture of an objective

> world, and in her poetry, she has invented a way of writing and living that claims to be not simply the negative face of patriarchy but an alternative to it. (348–49)

Hatlen positions her "among the practitioners of what Marjorie Perloff has called the 'poetics of indeterminacy' – including . . . John Cage, whom Perloff sees as a major figure within this tradition" (353). To those influences, Hatlen appropriately footnotes Retallack's own inclusion of Joyce and Beckett (353). Hatlen proposes that "Retallack's poetry looks in two directions, simultaneously calling into question the claim of the twentieth-century poem to find Truth in the image and the claim of philosophy to find Truth in reflective discourse" (357).

Hatlen's insights align with and support my thesis emphases. His observations about "the specifically patriarchal implications of a monovocal discursive practice" (349) realise in a specific example when, in her *How to Do Things with Words*, Retallack targets J. L. Austin's "famous little 1962 book of the same name". Noting the "male tradition" of philosophy, Hatlen recognises the "specifically feminist edge" in Retallack's *How to Do Things with Words*:

> But if Austin sets out to explain, philosophically, how we can do things with words, not merely describe the world but change it, Retallack instead proposes actually to do things with words, to give us an array of examples of words doing something. And inevitably, in putting words to work, making them do things, Retallack also unmasks a philosophical discourse, including Austin's, that claims to be neutral, a description of how we act within the world, rather than itself an action that affects others. In *How to Do Things with Words*, moreover, this critique assumes a specifically feminist edge. The philosophical tradition is overwhelmingly a male tradition . . . Austin's attempt to develop a systematic description of "speech acts" has patriarchal overtones: he wants to master and control the field of language. Retallack, in contrast, wants to open up new possibilities in language, and in the context of the philosophical tradition, her invitation to forgo the quest for analytic understanding and instead join her in playing the language game becomes a political act. (369)

Hatlen concludes that, in Retallack's work, "[t]he real questions . . . turn out to be not metaphysical but ethical, and Retallack's poetry, like the work of her mentors, wants to carry us to the point where we can ask these questions" (374).

Greg Kinzer notes, too, the organisational orderliness of Retallack's *How to Do Things with Words*, its structure around five sections, and its engagement from section to section with philosophers and scientists:

> The contents of the book as a whole are arranged into "chapters" whose titles suggest the stages of an argument: EX POST ANIMO, EX POST FACTO, EX POST SCRIPTO, EX POST LOGO, EX POST FIX. Each engages in some way with particular philosophers and scientists: John Searle, Niels Bohr, James R. Newman, Jean-Paul Sartre, and of course J. L. Austin. Retallack's work shows an explicit porousness to the discourses of biological science, linguistics, analytical philosophy, and Continental philosophy, as well as to other intellectual forms such as charts, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and thought experiments. (71)

Again, Vickery's shrewd observation of Retallack's "yearning to have both (order and chaos. . .)" (167) is borne out by these precise organisational structures.

Intra-lexical experimental feminine speech acts

Having established the relevant background, I move to the promised examples. Considering Retallack's book *How to Do Things with Words* as my main source, and drawing particularly upon her poem of the same name, I shall now discuss five categories that emerge as important experimental feminine speech acts she performs:

1. Non-normative lexemes (that sometimes treat punctuation and diacritical marks like alphabetical letters)
2. Intertextuality that affects the senses (nonsense in sense)
3. Concealed or disguised words
4. Experimental feminine *X*
5. Critique of grammar rules as tautology of control

These categories bear no correlation to J. L. Austin's five categories of speech acts. They comprise a critical swerve to categories that will help this thesis unpack Retallack's work and understand how she negotiates speech acts as a feminine terrain.

1. Non-normative lexemes

Retallack's poem "How to Do Things with Words" begins with two non-normative lexemes, "ŏm'aj" and "ô'stens", and ends with another, "(fÜŒ)". Apart from a section of text in the disguising font Wingdings, discussed under the third subheading of this section, the rest of the poem displays normative words. Inevitably, the contrast draws attention to the non-normative lexemes, each composed of alphabetical letters, punctuation and diacritical marks.

The poem situates nearly in the middle of her 1998 book of the same name. Each of its five sections contains three poems. This is the third poem of the third section, EX POST SCRIPTO. The poem is organised into six pages of text body preceded by a title page. The title page displays the following introductory line and then quotations from Jane Austen and J. L. Austin:

> ŏm'aj to the ô'stens, Jane and J. L.
>
> For of course every body differed, and every body
>
> was astonished at the opinion of the others. JANE AUSTEN, *Sense and Sensibility*
>
> Where and what exactly is the surface of a cat? J. L. AUSTIN, *Sense and Sensibilia*

The text introduces two honoured persons with the words "ŏm'aj to the ô'stens, Jane and J. L." Although introduced as a couple, or pair, of "ô'stens", they are respectively distinguished because the woman is given her first name; the man is treated more distantly with initials. Although Retallack merely records their publication names, by doing so she performatively

displays that embodied difference that follows a cultural practice (grammar). The first unusually marked word suggests a phonetic kind of representation of "homage"; the second similarly represents their ostensible family name.

Although "the ô'stens" are introduced as a pair, that relationship is constructed largely because their family names are homophones. The first attributed quotation on the title page derives from Jane, early nineteenth-century writer Jane Austen, whose first published novel was *Sense and Sensibility.* The subsequent quotation is from J. L., namely J. L. Austin, the mid-twentieth-century linguistic philosopher, author of a book of philosophical essays called *Sense and Sensibilia.* Accordingly, they are also paired by similarly named book titles.

Hatlen recognises that taking Austin's title to "the founding text of speech-act theory, signals Retallack's engagement with the philosophical tradition", but he opines that she "by no means intends to repudiate this tradition: the title poem of the volume declares itself to be an "ŏm'aj to the ô'stens, Jane and J. L."" (369). Contrary to Hatlen's plain reading of "homage", I gloss it with a measure of irony, at least as far as J. L. Austin is concerned. Retallack's text exposes rhetoric that tends to position Austin as occasionally ridiculous, for example, by the prominent quotation about the surface of a cat. When, on the fourth page of the poem she quotes Austin – "to find out what . . . a real colour is we just need to be normal . . ." – she inferentially twits his masculine comfortableness in feeling "normal".

Similarly, in her essay "Blue Notes on the Know Ledge", Retallack uses Austin's own words to demonstrate his assumption of gender privilege in language:

> Even on a semantic level, the words we claim to know well enough to tag with definitions and add to dictionaries are inextricably linked to value. As J. L. Austin wrote in his 1956 essay, "A Plea for Excuses": "Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men *[sic]* have found *worth* drawing, and the connexions they have found *worth* marking, in the lifetimes of many generations.
>
> (*TPW* 72; emphasis in orig.)

There, too, Retallack draws attention to Austin's casual default to an asserted male privilege to attribute value. Retallack makes the point that the value tagged to words is dictated by masculine-dominated culture.

Returning to the construction "ŏm'aj", the first syllable might elevate the gesture, offering worshipful deference "to the ô'stens" if the Sanskrit invocation "om" of the Hindu supreme deity is detected and the word is read as "om-age", perhaps godliness. But, apprehending the word as an unfamiliar rendition of the more familiar "homage", the narration speaks with a seemingly French accent, failing to aspirate the aitch in her "homage". And when we adjust for

French accent, we can imagine an alternative reading, namely “homme-age”, a French portmanteau (sic) combining “homme” (man) and “homage”. Again, like the differential addresses of the pair, “Jane and J. L.”, the text gestures again to a gendered deference that valorises masculine difference.

Dropping the aitch in “ŏm’aj” exposes the *o*, thereby suggesting an ostensible visual relationship between “ŏm’aj” and the echoed lower-case *o* in “ô’stens”. The placements of apostrophes that auto-interrupt “ŏm’aj” and “ô’stens” are non-normative in English words. The lexemic constructions do not suggest possessives. Why are those words broken, like those in “**G’L’A’N’C’E’S’**”, by apostrophe? What could those apostrophes be doing? If they are marks of elision, what is missing, what is not apparent on the face of the text? And what of the different diacritical marks above each *o*? That the first seems a caron, the second a circumflex, suggests they indicate voiced and unvoiced, or tonal variation. No ready reader guide attaches meaning to these marks in what present as lexemes. The diacritical marks arguably gesture, firstly, to voice and unvoice, and secondly to a system of unfamiliar word marking. In other words, those marks suggest a foreign culture of word writing, an etymological alterity, a differential grammatical culture, and perhaps a gestured opposition between voice and silence.

The intra-lexical dynamism of this poem encourages readings that extend it. The construction “ŏm’aj”, if read as Dutch “oma j”, translates as “grandma j”, thereby gesturing to a relationship of family and heritage with the Jane of the pair. Or the lettristic collection might perform an anagram shuffle to reveal “jo’am” (Jo’ [I] am), a near suggestion of poet “Joan”, suggesting an alliterate trio of literate J’s: Jane, John and Joan. In the poem, Retallack’s authorial presence can be sensed amid the constructed conversation. On my reading, a tentative connotation for “ô’stens” suggests yet another language, an Irish patronymic, here represented in lower case, incorporating the rapid-fire machine gun known as the Sten gun. Or, perhaps, a plural variant of “son of a gun” or other reference to “the ô’stens” as “guns” in the admiring sense of “great guns”. Already, we begin to experience this textual space as an unsettling region where linguistic and systemic differences are in play.

The third non-normative lexeme appears on the final page of the poem. Like each of the poem’s six pages, it begins with text directly quoted from J. L. Austin, separated from the lower portion of the page by a continuous line. The lower portion contains two lines distinctly separated by white space. The text reads:

Yet we, that is, even philosophers, set some limits to the amount of nonsense that we are prepared to admit we talk: so that it was natural to go on to ask, as a second stage, whether many apparent pseudo-statements really set out to be 'statements' at all.

(death I think she said is no parenthesis)

(fÜŒ) (*HTDTWW* 92)

My research uncovers that the line about death is a variation upon the last line from modernist e. e. cummings's poem "since feeling is first":

since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;
wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world
my blood approves,
and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom
lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
-the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says
we are for each other: then
laugh leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph
and death i think is no parenthesis (99)

Running a well-worn theme of passion and male seduction like Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress", cummings's poem valorises feeling over grammar, "Spring" passion over wisdom. One of its charms is that, despite its apparent disavowal of grammar, it displays a knowing grasp on syntax, let alone the pun-gestured tax on sin. Confident reference to paragraphs and parentheses suggests a gloss, across its surface, that true wisdom inhabits the passion of one who knows grammars and punctuation but holds them secondary. If, as the poem says, life is "not a paragraph", it fails to direct whether life extends to a longer text, or shrinks to a sentence (with consequent double entendre about penal servitude). Retallack's reference (and subversion) of cummings's poem can be read as addressing feeling or sensibility in conjunction with grammatical frames, playing the grammar against the human feelings, particularly the feelings of women represented by Jane Austen's performing words.

A parenthesis is a portion inserted into a passage with which it has not necessarily any grammatical connexion (OED). Retallack subverts the cummings final line to a feminine voice

by inserting “she said”. The insertion enacts the speaking up of the feminine voice. In my reading, that produces a change of dominant grammar from masculine voice to feminine. The driving force alters in consequence. The inserted words produce additional doubts into the reading, for example, between “And death, I think”, she said, “is no parenthesis” and “And death”, I think she said, “is no parenthesis.” Retallack realises the “arms” of the embracing parenthesis by introducing the normative punctuation, holding her extra-grammatical segment at arm’s length from the other text.

However we may read the “death – parenthesis” line, Retallack’s last word in her poem sits in defiant parenthesis. The parenthetically embraced lexeme “(fÜŒ)” melds unusual companions. The first of its three letters is normative but the umlaut on the upper-case “Ü” suggests a long *U*, a voiced *oo*. The archaic Œ suggests its extended *ee* sound. Putting it together, my reading produces the interjection “phooey”. This seems a congruent and feelingly dismissive response to J. L. Austin’s masculine-gendered expressions and theory, burying it summarily in parenthesis. In the context of cummings’s line, the parenthesis introduces a sense of death, that the feminine comment is buried and therefore unable to vocalise. Following cummings, Retallack’s placement of her neologism suggests that feeling is not only first but also last.

The three lexemes discussed thus far in this subsection are constructed of non-normative jointings of alphabetical, punctuation and diacritical componentry. Their consequent alterities represent new languages, albeit constructed from relatively familiar components. My reading engagements with these words has produced several strands of wondering meaning. Other readers may find further strands of alterities. Unquestionably, these lexemes fall within Retallack’s identifications of the feminine quoted earlier, and especially “open, diffuse, . . . complex, decentered, fragmented, . . . undefinable, subversive, transgressive, . . . nonhierarchical, . . . marginal, . . . destabilizing, discontinuous” (*TPW* 135). According to her own identifications, these constitute experimental feminine speech acts. Using means that were always open, namely the construction of words from normative components in non-normative assemblage, she does things with words that fly in the face of Austin’s philosophical tradition. As with her employment of apostrophes in “**G’L’A’N’C’E’S’**”, the use of punctuation and diacritical marks in these three words elevates the marks to the same level as alphabetical marks. This amounts to a significant non-hierarchical feminine action within an experimental practice, and is the kind of performance *detail* this thesis seeks to unpack.

Certainly also in more normative aspects of her practice, Retallack performs experimental feminine speech acts. Portmanteau words whose meanings are elusive of normative grammars, including those prominent as titles like *Afterrimages* and *Memnoir*, are good examples. In her

essay “Blue Notes on the Know Ledge”, her portmanteau neologism “halocutionary” crowns Austin’s *illocutionary*, the intended force of an utterance, with angelic halo, replacing something “ill” with something holy, and thereby hallowing the illocutionary (*TPW* 79). The breath of “ha” casts an angelic ring around the “il” of “illocutionary” and “il” is also French for the male pronoun. The beginning of “halocutionary” suggests both the greeting “hello” and the angelic “halo”, combining their allusions with part of another word. For that additional ingredient, I favour “illocutionary” but I also sense “executionary”. Inevitably, the polysemy of portmanteau words burgeons where multiple root words can be heard. In plain words “executionary” involves carrying out an action, namely doing something. Retallack’s portmanteau practice readily exemplifies her performativity, using words, doing things with words. Arguably, if language is to swerve towards a new culture it requires new words.

In *Afterrimages*, Retallack does unseen things with words too. When she operates her procedure to select letters or lettristic sets for the lower page, white spaces between words are likewise captured. For example, on page 10, where “oint P” derives from “at this point Paul”, a space between words is captured and therefore represented on the lower part of the page. It follows from her procedure that where few letters transpose down the page, the paper clips in those occasions generally fell to encircle spaces. A more fulsome reading will imagine those spaces too as represented in the lower portion of the page. But, except for instances like the space in “oint P.”, we cannot know which spaces were notionally “saved”. The space observed in “oint P” is visible only because of surrounding text. Other spaces that might be noted on the lower page are now unmarked, unsignalled because their former relation to, perhaps dependence on, text has vanished, leaving them essentially invisible. In Retallack’s oeuvre, this class of white space might be considered the silent, silenced feminine. Thus, along with time issues noted above, Retallack scores sound issues, both legible as materialising the text beyond metaphysics of abstract reference.

In *Afterrimages* and “How to Do Things with Words”, Retallack performs lettristic moves, thereby translating her writing operation to a different grammatical level than the sentence level, where normative words are the usual material. Operating, in part, at an alphabetical lettristic level within words, she draws attention to the performance of individual marks on the page, including punctuation or diacritical marks. These bodily representations of writing’s materiality are legible as feminine writing moves. Retallack’s pursuit of new forms for writing words seeks transformative interstices or otherwise enlarges the grammatical envelope. The *how* and *what* of her performative dyslexia (what I call dysorthography) is driven by the *why* of her poethics, her desire to jog writing in order to change culture. Yet her performance utilises

the familiar, but often overlooked, componentry of words: alphabetical, punctuation and diacritical marks addressed via differential grammars.

2. *Intertextuality that affects the senses (nonsense in sense)*

For readers of Retallack's poem "How to Do Things with Words", even before beginning its internal text, her title page references a chain of works from Aristotle to Jane Austen to J. L. Austin. Jane's family name is spelled with an *e*; J. L.'s with an *i.* In defaulting to Jane's *e* to construct their common family name "the ô'stens", Retallack goes with Jane, a decidedly feminine move. Both of "the ô'stens" had classical education, so they will each have been familiar with Aristotle's *On Sense and Sensibilia*, the first essay of his *Parva Naturalia.* That essay treats with the five senses in humans and animals. In J. L. Austin's book *How to Do Things with Words,* he posited five categories of performative speech acts. The pattern of five categories links from Aristotle through to Retallack's poetry collection, which also is formed of five sections. Here we see another example of inhabiting prior forms and changing them from the inside, as it were, rather than an experimentalism that throws out old forms.

Through quotations, the title page directly references those similarly titled works of "the ô'stens". In turn, the names of those works give a strong albeit silent intertextual nod to Aristotle's work on human and animal senses. The intertextual event is reinforced by the play on homophonic names of book titles and authors. A later link in this dialogic text chain was forged when J. L Austin himself poetically performed an ostensible relationship with Jane Austen by playing off their homophonic names and by assuming a book title similar to hers, passing the package off as a jocular frame for his philosophical work. Retallack is not the first to employ Jane Austen's texts in challenge to J. L. Austin's theory – that occurred in Mary Louise Pratt's (1977) book *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*, a scholarly text that will have been known to Retallack. In Pratt's challenge to J. L. Austin's separating poetic language from other language uses, she notably examines text from Jane Austen, creating another branch of this intertextual chain (94, 96, 166–71). And, of course, the latest link, joining both branches of that intertextual chain, is performed by Retallack's twist. Following Pratt, she sets Jane Austen in opposition to J. L. Austin, and she displaces the signifier of J. L. Austin's book on performative speech act theory, annexing the title of his book *How to Do Things with Words* for her poetry collection and for its nearly central poem. Those links of opposition and nomination provide a zone of association that affect our reading of the poem, notwithstanding the discursive and cultural differences of the texts associating along that chain. That zone of association operates like a textual body through which Retallack retexts Austen back to her feminine textuality from Austin's appropriation. Thus, consequent upon the

allusions of *sense, sensibilia* and *ostensible*, Retallack's poem demonstrates, or performs, text where bodily representation and feelings are ostensibly engaged. What I want to emphasise is that this turn performs a feminine speech act function.

The opening quotations pertinently demonstrate discursive gulfs that differentiate the two texts, Jane's from J. L's. Jane's text speaks of body – her topic, human. J. L's speaks of surface – his topic, beastly (cat). Jane acknowledges the individuality pertaining to the various bodies denoted within the collective noun *everybody*. J. L.'s question implies that an indefinitely articled cat will have only one definitely articled surface. Jane acknowledges differences of opinion; J. L. invites a singularity of answer. We can wager that discourse between "the ô'stens" is likely to be challenging.

The textual body through which Retallack retexts Austen's appropriation of Austin is further complicated by the tumble of French intonation, English language, Dutch, Irish, a dash of phonetics, and intertextuality reaching through 2,300 years from Lucretius's time. Defining "retexting" in his *Affective Literacies* (2011), Mark Amsler associates the term with Latin roots meaning "both 'to unravel' and 'to reweave, retie'" (xxiii). He further notes retexting "as potentially displacing, deconstructive, transgressive practices which produce new texts and *hyperliteracy*", the latter term referencing "a virtual network of discourses . . . " (xxiii). Conversation between "the ô'stens" must occur in that confluence of linguistic and historical diversity. Their discursive differences pull, not only across a century and a half of stylistic shifts, but also across cultural genre gulfs between her novels and his philosophical texts. The works of "the ô'stens" themselves treat with quite different concerns. The manners and fortunes of women within the gentrified families of Jane's novels offer unlikely companionship with J. L.'s Oxonian particularity. In *Sense and Sensibilia* he picks apart muddled reasoning caused by loose expressions. She may be regarded as a perceptive observer of humanity whereas his controlled linguistic acuity produces doubts about inferences we draw from sense-perception.

The gesture to *ostensible* in relation to "the ô'stens" and the *Sense and Sensibility/Sensibilia* set suggests, in accordance with the OED denotation of *ostensible*, that something is shown, exhibited or presented to view. The word *ostend*, now rare, but preserved in place names in Belgium and New Zealand, means to stretch out before one's face, expose to view (OED). On my reading, the text also gestures to *sensible*, precisely and paradoxically because it seems so obviously missing from the Austin/Austen/ô'stens/ostensible/sense/sensibility set, notwithstanding that it is unmaterialised in the text. So, too, is the related common expression *common sense* because *sense* is a root component in the latter related words. Several concepts present through the terms *sense*, *sensibilia* and *ostensible*. They include the five bodily senses,

the cerebral sense of reason and the moderating balance of common sense, which implies being sensible in the sense of exercising judicious good sense or reason.

Despite the apparent commonality of their engagements under the sign of *sense*, their sensibilities attune to different frequencies. The *sense* sought by Jane's signifier may be a different signified than that denoted by J. L.'s *sense.* Opportunities for multiplicity of meaning, added freedoms of reference and intertext abound. Thus, the figurative senses in which "the ô'stens" present as a "couple" might fairly extend to the mechanical system in which *couple* denotes a pair of forces, equal in magnitude, oppositely directed and displaced by a perpendicular distance. The torque produced by a mechanical *couple* may turn figuratively akin to those produced firstly by Retallack's constructed conversation between "the ô'stens", and secondly between that constructed pair and the reader. Thus, the torque in Retallack's text is exponential: it opens rather than forecloses.

Retallack sets out to showcase feminine sense, including serious "nonsense", within her oeuvre because, as she puts it, "nonrationalist associative logics and web-like connective patterns" feature among her identifying characteristics of her experimental feminine (*TPW* 135). She commences this feminine work at the outset by setting Gertrude Stein against J. L. Austin. Retallack's *How to Do Things with Words* is prefaced by these two quotations:

> *It is time then to make a fresh start on the problem.*
> *We want to reconsider more generally the senses in which to say something may be to do something.*
> J. L. AUSTIN,
> *How to Do Things with Words*
>
> *She likes it very much she likes it too much to say so.*
> GERTRUDE STEIN,
> "A Vocabulary of Thinking", *How to Write*

Both Austin and Stein gesture to the "how to" self-help genre. This symmetry of source names resembles the later echo of "sense and sensibility" titles that frame Retallack's own "How to . . ." poem. The self-help genre aimed at the lay reader playfully underlies both Stein's and Austin's titles. Neither of their "How to" books aim at lay readers, although Stein's may be termed in part demonstrative and Austin's expositive. But although reading Retallack's constructed conversation between "the ô'stens" requires some sophistication, she patently gets straight down to word doing as Hatlen noted in a passage already quoted (Hatlen 369). Rather than talking about her poethical concerns, her practice does the preaching.

Through the opening Austin sentence, a problem, "the problem", is immediately introduced, and the timely need "to make a fresh start". Then "the senses" are referenced; saying and doing

are linked. Reflecting back from the poem "How to Do Things with Words", the book's opening quotations seem ironic or at least wry. The poem mounts a challenge to J. L. Austin's linguistic philosophical theory that labels certain speech acts as "performative". Accordingly, it is ironic that his own words are turned on him when his philosophical performance proves part of the taxonomical problem. Like a magician who borrows a customer's watch for a trick, roles are switched as the customer's anxious behaviour incorporates in the magician's performance: Retallack plays a little trick and establishes her credentials as a "performer" from the first line. She is also urging a fresh start to the feminine issue, which is a far cry from the issue Austin addresses. Of course, she has already taken Austin's title as her own. This too raises doubts about the provenance of the first line. Whether it is his line or now hers, she is making a fresh start from it.

My study emphasises the experimental feminine. Following on from the introductory Austin quotation, Stein's words offer a wry comment on reading feminine silence. Just because a woman is silent does not necessarily mean she is content. Conversely, and plainly, a woman may enjoy doing something so much that the thrill of performance consumes the experience so she cannot talk about it. Writing might be one such activity. Stein acknowledges the affect in doing. Against Austin's cerebral pose, Stein acknowledges senses of feeling. Amid Retallack's procedural experimental feminine practices, affect occurs, but this may involve experiencing the doing rather than analysing it.

Embodied attention forms an important feature in queer theory, which suggests it as a fruitful hermeneutic for Retallack's work. Bergvall's rectangle-constrained text in *Éclat* (1996), noted in my introductory "Initial G'L'A'N'C'E'S'", readily attracts queer readings. Bergvall's work may well be acknowledged via Retallack's "Here's Looking at You Francis Bacon" in her *How to Do Things with Words* (1998), which likewise features text in rectangles so that words are forced into non-normative line breaks. But, I repeat, my study emphasises the experimental feminine. In the context of the experimental feminine, to celebrate the effect of the body of words upon the body of the reader or writer, as Retallack does, amounts to a feminine literary move. Her use of words performs experimental second wave feminine functions that rewire and rewrite words. The way in which she captures words, like *sense* in the context discussed above, and re-releases them, amounts to a re-ignition of meanings.

This phenomenon occurs too in Stein's work, where in a distinctly feminine language move, she weaves nonsense into sense and vice versa. Stein's voice often runs back and forth, seemingly tentative, worrying away at fragments, for example, in this piece, from "ORANGE IN", a segment of *Tender Buttons*:

> A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since when since
> a no since when since, a no since, a no since when since, a no since, a no, a no
> since a no since, a no since, a no since. (38)

Here, Stein's text performs multiple inclinations that veer from the conventional. Seemingly about *since*, this passage also plays to near homonym *sense*. When I attend to the chain of sounds *sensed* in this passage, the text suggests an underlying *nonsense* in *notions*. The prosodic resonance also suggests *nuisance* and *no sense*. Its execution frees expectations that chain words to contained dictionary meaning. Moreover, in repeatedly denying *since*, the text refutes implications of subsequence, implicitly reiterating the present.

Stein's written speech act around "a no since" celebrates a language form that breaks moulds. Her method may be termed painterly, words (representing sounds) painted on a page or, when read aloud, on a soundscape. The syntax is distinctively non-normative, relatively impermeable to the sort of normative grammatical analysis undertaken by J. L. Austin. Stein's passage presents in the mode of poetry, which Austin excludes from his "ordinary language use" work. The passage also gestures to alternative rationality. *Since* can denote what is given, what is "taken as read", and thereby operates as a building block in reasoning: *since* this, then that. But the reiterated "no since" resoundingly turns away from that path. Although Stein's sustained pressure on "a no since when" satisfies normative grammatical rules, her anaphoric excess produces non-normative written language, more suggestive of speech in which the speaker is reflecting in the course of speech. Stein's adherence to normative grammars while stretching their application makes a useful comparator to Retallack's experimental literary feminine, in which she changes "old" forms from within.

In order to imbue the normative-looking words *sense* and *problem* with feminine performativity, in her poem "How to Do Things with Words" Retallack offsets the Austin name against the Austen name. A bolded procedural note categorically identifies: "**All words in Univers 57 Condensed font are J. L. Austin's.**" Less certainly, only "*Some words in italics are Jane Austen's*." The bolded emphasis of Austin words advertise their "condensed universe" that distinguishes them materially (by font) from potentially (but uncertainly) Austen words. Here, again, Retallack locates the perceivable with the opaque, the organised with the unknowable. The way in which these differentiated texts play within the poem's constructed discourse can be exemplified by replicating the text and format of the second page of the poem:

> **We shall consider a simplified model of a situation in which we use language for talking about the world.**
> ---
> Sometimes but not always *I establish myself I get settled*
> *I make do I eat meat before, during, or after the carnival*
> *I get married I discloseI reveal I take my hat off to –*
> Abrupt intersection in all sentences of the form **p is true** or of the form "what interests me is *x*" or for example one might be moved to ask just what is the Greek word for unnailing i.e. removal i.e. quite specifically removal of Christ from the cross there will always be many other specialized vocabularies that could at any moment fall into place the act of looking always more accidental than it seems [and] all that language claimed and reclaimed for refracting Alice the claim to know but/with/inherently [inherited?] romantic intentions

Line breaks are precisely as set out above. The text sits in the top part of the page, leaving most of the lower half blank. Some fragments in unbolded font also sound like J. L. Austin. Whether lifted from his works or not, Retallack offers substantial portions in imitation of his voice, for example, "or of the form 'what interests me is *x*' or for example". In many ways, her style echoes his: she too is interested in the philosophical quest, her language can be legally precise and her pertness with language sometimes mirrors his. Shoshana Felman, who analysed Austin's theory in relation to Molière's *Don Juan,* felt perhaps a similar degree of attraction to his promise (that of an Oxford Don), even as she deconstructed his theory. She confessed:

> I had better declare at once that I am *seduced* by Austin. I like not only the openness that I find in his theory, but the theory's potential for scandal; I like not only what he says but what he "*does* with words." (73)

In *The Literary Speech Act*, Felman stresses Austin's facility with humour. Her book, subtitled *Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, examines performative speech act features in Molière's *Don Juan.* She argues that promises, which Austin categorises among performative speech acts, create the essence of seduction in *Don Juan,* and that the true scandal in *Don Juan* is non-performance of those promises.

In her poem "How to Do Things with Words", Retallack offers critical challenge to Austin and his rhetoric via feminine figures; for example, she inserts Alice as a feminine figure glanced in the poem's second page, quoted above. Alice, as representative wondering woman in Wonderland, was Retallack's (and Tallique's) addressee throughout her essay "The Scarlet Aitch" (*TPW* 102). Here, "refracting Alice" can represent desire to enter a fresher realm where logic and language operate playfully. In my reading, a feminine move is also gestured in the line break of "vo/cabularies", which, although arguably normative, and creating no non-normative word, does break a word to do with speech and writing that the page layout does not

seem to require. Responding to thematics of the poem, my reading infers it as deliberate, performing an unusual disjunctive break that harks back to constrictions on feminine voice.

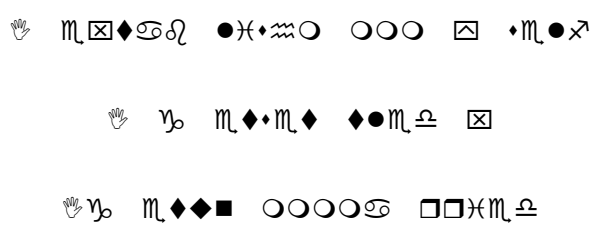
Jane Austen's words about getting established, getting settled, eating and so on, plainly invoke quotidian materiality, both social and physical. Austin's superior scholarly voice speaks down, reducing the world's language to a simplified model, a "condensed universe". Heading another page of the poem, Retallack quotes Austin distinguishing the term "precisely" from "exactly". "If I measure a banana with a ruler, I may find it to be precisely 5 5/8 inches long. If I measure my ruler with bananas, I may find it to be exactly six bananas long, though I can't claim any great precision for my method of measurement" (90). Although Austin illustrates a nice point of linguistic and ontological difference, the contrasting realm of Jane Austen's discourse seems more grounded, more important in an everyday experiential sense. One can form a view that the concerns of Jane Austen's discourse deal with matters of more ordinary sense, perhaps common sense, by and large.

The *problem* with a hierarchy that orders banana measuring above matters of marriage, being settled or being believed is exposed in Retallack's poem as a cultural problem of poethical concern. In setting up a frame to expose these discursive dissonances, Retallack's speech acts offer alterities of meaning to the normatively appearing words "sense" and "problem". There is also a ripple effect, whereby, because she creates non-normative words like "(fÜŒ)", the apparent normality of other words in the text come under question. Accordingly, reading opportunities for alterities open up. Once again, all of these practices can be considered experimental feminine speech acts. They divert language history and challenge cultural hierarchies.

3. Concealed or disguised words; the experimental feminine X

Wingdings affords one performative means by which the feminine voice can represent as silenced. On page four of Retallack's poem "How to Do Things with Words", a portion of text is rendered in Wingdings font. The latter part of page 90 of the poem presents in this form:

HERE A PAUSE TO CONSIDER A
THEORY OF FUNCTIONS OF A REAL VARIABLE



in all sentences of the form **p is true** note that one/might/in
fact hear words like dude or fuck even where not precisely
inserted abrupt argyle sock in the eye of or of the form of
the upstreaming salmon the open hydrant and what inter-
ests one is *x* or is perhaps to keep it to only to a low roar or
perhaps a subtitled statement such as I reveal I disclose I
take my hat off to such a statement the *x* in the expression
of not wanting *x* to end up where there once started out

What is disguised within Wingdings font are these three lines, which I transpose to more normative font:

I extab lishm mmm y self

I g etset tled x

Ig etun mmmma rried

Adjusting for the stammering "*m*", the letters can re-form as normative words to read "I extablish myself; I get settled; I get unmarried." In the first line, *x* seems to substitute for a normative *s*. The word may be read as veering, perhaps in portmanteau, from "extricate" to "establish". "Extablish" may be the opposite of "establish", a departure from establishment, a cultural departure or disjunct. The Wingdings text shadows expressions from page 88 potentially attributable to Jane Austen. On page 90, an isolated *x* ends the second line, perhaps negating or marking the statement "I get settled". In Retallack's line, "unmarried" counters Austen's "married". Like Stein's "no sense" that carries "sense", Retallack's negatives assert simultaneous difference – married and unmarried, establish and extablish – opposites co-exist. So too, opaque and normative fonts co-exist: lower down page 90, in normal font, "I reveal", "I disclose", "I take my hat off to" echo italicised expressions from page 88.

The text-nominated interest in *x* operates its own code in the poem. In my reading "the *x* in the expression" is an axis, a turning point, an exit point, a point of refusal and escape from oppression. Among other possible readings, "extablish" suggests a differential form of "establish". The *x* that ends the second line might be a full stop, or a point of departure from the patterns of cultural establishment and getting settled. The difficulty of departing from the

cultural norm embodies in the stammering, mumbling or humming "mmm". In this segment, an important manifesto of cultural departure performs without exposition within an unusual font.

Wingdings affords a performative means by which the feminine voice can represent in silenced voice. The assonant word "wing-ding" associates with a spasm, simulated by a drug user (OED). Wikipedia associates the font term with "dingbat", a term of disparagement suggesting craziness. Retallack's "Procedural Notes" draw attention to two fonts in this poem, respectively associated with Jane or J. L. But her deliberately un-noted use of the font Wingdings is code for the associations of the term as well as its effects of masking text, stifling voice. Additionally, her unheralded use of Wingdings enacts freedom to speak in whatever manner she chooses, a freedom of textual usage. In either reading, she embodies the feminine voice of rising opposition to oppression within a stifling form.

Both deferral and excision are means that can dismiss a voice. Deferral and "ex" or "x" gestures inhabit Retallack's *How to Do Things with Words*. That all five section headings of the book take the form "EX POST . . ." suggests a time after marker: after life (or inspiration) (ANIMO), after the event (FACTO), after writing/prescription (SCRIPTO), after word / afterwards / after the word (LOGO), and after correction, or taking note of a mapping position (or after a narcotic dose) (FIX). The past gestured by "POST" suggests an ongoing deferral, an after-after. "EX POST" can reference a tax on export, and gestures to "exposit", setting forth ideas or strategies; it might suggest departure (ex), or messages from the post or from postings. As a fragment of "expostulate" it gestures to demand or remonstration, advancing a viewpoint. The term "POST", in opposition to "ante", references a subsequent phase, as in "postmodern". Therefore, EX POST might suggest a departure from such a named movement.

The accumulating force of the series in "EX POST" form suggests a lot has been put behind or let go; in other words, we are moving on. I have already mentioned the concealed *x* within the Wingdings portion of the poem, perhaps as a coordinate, perhaps as a spot marker or otherwise. Between EX POST and EXPOSIT is a missing, first person pronoun "I". The reiterations of the EX POST form can therefore suggest the question: where am I? In the context of the collection and its central poem this may be a feminine question, a question about the place for feeling sensibility in the constructed logical realm of the language philosopher. And poignantly, a place where the feminine personhood of "I" is missing.

Retallack employs a similar mix of post-post timing and the cipher *x* in this portion on page 9 of *Memnoir*:

> some may see at this point which is not an Archimedean
>
> point the necessity to invent a game in which all vowels
>
> are serially replaced with x mxgxcxlly txrnxing prxmxtxrx
>
> txrrxr xntx pxlxtxblx pxst-pxst xrxny xtc.

When I transpose the *x* words to "a magically turning premature terror into palatable post-post irony", I note the grammar is not necessarily normative, depending on whether either "magically" or "turning" should be taken as gerund, or "terror" is the effective noun. Compare this example of Retallack's play involving post-post timing with her playful bibliographic reference to "Genre Tallique, *Glances, An Unwritten Book*, Pre-Post-Eros Editions, frothcoming" in *How to Do Things with Words*. The jest, preposterous or not, questions when in time to position an event. It seems to matter less to Retallack that her word plays are postmodern than that they comprise current speech acts, experimental and feminine, directed at the *why* of poethics.

The letter *x* signifies not only a replacement, a trace of another reading; it also represents departure, the EX of EXIT. In my reading, particularly in *Memnoir*, where *x* and *y* coordinates figure, it also gestures to graphic plotting or tracing a (feminine) course. Additionally, in my reading, the *X* gestures to the doubled female chromosome, distinguished lettristically from the *XY* male chromosome. Among its other significations, an *x* or EX marks a feminine turning away from the masculine hegemony represented by, among others, J. L. Austin's rhetoric and methodology.

The algebraic *x* can stand for whatever is ascribed to it. Within the democracy of her oeuvre, Retallack demonstrates that sole alphabetical letters can operate as words. The letters *x* and *y* each appear in the Wingdings portion. The letter *x* appears in lieu of or, I suggest, as a word, on pages 87, 88 and 90. The letter *a* similarly appears on page 87. On page 91, she quotes J. L. Austin, "many vocables that could be inserted here in place of I or T in form S", displaying his use of letters as word substitutes. And the philosophical expression "p is true" is quoted from Austin on pages 87, 88 and 90. Austin's constative concerns focus around that expression. Her geometry of attention plots the constative truth in *p* against the gendered chromosomal coordinates of *x* and *y*, and plots the adequacy of Austin against the performance of Jane Austen.

4. Critique of grammar rules as tautology of control

Retallack is sensible of the prescriptive feature of normative grammar rules. Those rules operate to guide reliable language meanings but do so at the cost of obedience to the cultural normalcy

that inheres in those rules. For Retallack, that cultural normalcy preserves masculine privilege. Normative writing performs those grammar rules and thereby consolidates that privilege. Retallack's lettristic alertness leads her to non-normative word doing as a significant site of grammatical disobedience.

The tautologous circularity through rule and performance, each reinforcing the other, is one Retallack aims to break. Austin's theory and his philosophical voice represent a high point of normative grammar compliance. His work involves close adherence to usage, definition and tight control over language he calls normal so that his theories can work reliably. His taxonomies speak of performative language while restricting performativity within narrow types. In his normative practice, rules perform their own legitimacy. His work situates inside that box.

The first poem in *How to Do Things with Words* is "The Woman in the Chinese Room". It references a "thought experiment" by American philosopher John Searle, a student of Austin's and an adherent of Austin's performative speech act theory. Retallack cites Searle's book *Mind, Brains and Science* (1984) in her bibliography. Addressing artificial intelligence, Searle posits a monolingual English speaker locked in a room with Chinese input, a computer program and the skill to produce Chinese outputs. The outputs falsely suggest that Chinese script has been understood and responded to. In ascribing feminine gender to the person who is locked away, whose comprehension is doubted even when seemingly performing adequately according to normative prescriptions, Retallack performs an ironical experimental feminine speech act. Retallack continues to use the term "thought experiment" for her own language interventions, for example, in the subtitle to her 2018 book *The Supposium: Thought Experiments and Poethical Play in Difficult Times*. The term "thought experiment" reminds us of philosopher Schrödinger's "thought experiment" about the cat in the box. Outsiders postulate whether the cat is dead or alive. In some scenarios the cat may be regarded as both dead and alive, an outcome satisfactory to some theoreticians.

Retallack volunteers the gender of "The Woman in The Chinese Room" to cloak her in representative characteristics: trapped, treated as less than human (like a cat), neither alive nor dead. In the words of the poem, "there are few if any signs if she exists at all she is the content of a thought experiment begun in a man's mind this is nothing knew and perhaps more complicated" (*HTDTWW* 16). The poem performs a variety of differential non-normative pieces spanning several literary alterities. Some appear to be word games; one page of words seems congruent with word choice by chance procedures. At its affective centre, this poem asks a question about the place of the woman. It is diverse, wildly profuse and full of alterities. And it

closely associates with serious philosophical discourse, overlaid by Retallack's poethical remove of that discourse to link it to the feminine question levelled at prevailing cultural values: what (and where) is the woman's place?

Retallack begins her book *How to Do Things with Words* by quoting other writers, a powerful sign that the contents are somehow shaped in relation to the quoted words; they provide an allusive steer to readings. It is almost as if the author adopts the quoted words, popping them into her own mouth and reissuing them, whether plainly or ironically. From the outset, utilising Austin's words, Retallack posits a problem. Indeed, *the* problem: how do words act? A "fresh start' is required to consider that question. In the first three words, "It is time", the present is firmly invoked. The second sentence from Austin uses first person plural: "We" can embrace the reader as it embraces Retallack. Thus interpellated, we might consider ourselves committed to the topic that, although attributed to Austin, is published by Retallack and therefore of her voice too. The idea of doing by saying is clearly stated. It is a ready leap to infer that Retallack, through intertextual use of Austin's words, palpably doing things with his words, here announces her intention *to do* something about "the problem" *by saying* something.

But what to make of Stein's words about the woman who "likes it too much to say so"? The quotation comes from the middle of *Finally George/A Vocabulary of Thinking*, the penultimate section of *How to Write* (324). The short quotation exhibits an excess of "liking it" to the point where "she" cannot "say so". On one reading, the sentence is ironic in both Stein's context and Retallack's. In her poem, Retallack takes it further. Despite Stein's words that the pronominated "she" cannot say anything, Retallack intends to say something, like it or not. In doing so, she advances the grammar move from normative words within sentences to messing with the material make-up of words, getting inside the word. In the case of "The Woman in the Chinese Room", she reveals the woman, brings her linguistically out of the box, confounding the structure imposed by Searle.

Chapter Three: Intra-lexical grammars

> I like anything that a word can do. And words do do all
>
> they do and then they can do what they never do do.
>
> – Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*

Theoretical: New fractal grammars

The first movement of this chapter argues that Retallack's non-normative lexemes composed of lettristic marks (alphabetical, punctuation and diacritical) perform atomic shifts into new, fractal grammars. The term "fractal" references scales where patterns repeat their features in differential levels. The pivotal term "atom" assumes moment around the relative positions of words and lettristic marks. Whether imagined as atoms of language, atoms of grammar or agents of meaning, those relationships are developed through the following sections. New, feminine grammars performing through the swerves of lettristic atoms will be shown to bypass masculine cultural paradigms, thereby releasing alterities of reading and knowing. The level to which this practice breaks language down extends, as we shall see, even to words that are unnamable.

Grammar and form in a literary feminine

In this section, I emphasise that *form* operates as an expression of *grammar*. "Form" denotes appearance, genre or behaviour (OED). Quoting from a purported work of her own alter ego, Genre Tallique, and thereby embodying the multiple, transgressive and dissolving identity features of the literary feminine, Retallack commences a portion of her essay ":RE:THINKING:LITERARY:FEMINISM:" in these words:

> What can "feminist" writing possibly mean? Images of the female as persons, strong or weak, admirable and despicable occur in the writing of both men and women. These images, pictures, vignettes, no matter how "progressive" the narrative in which they are embedded, cannot be said to constitute either feminine or feminist writing. Only form – stylistic enactment (aesthetic behavior) – can be feminine. What society has called feminine forms have always been available to both men and women in art as well as life. Feminist writing occurs only when female writers use feminine forms. . . . At precisely that moment of enactment, feminism as polemic disappears: the female writer has entered the world of the living.
>
> Genre Tallique, GLANCES: *An Unwritten Book* (*TPW* 127)

(Perhaps Genre Tallique, through her apparent, nominal association with genre of uncertain provenance, performs a form of general attack on privileged, that is, non-feminine, genre.) For its importance to my arguments, I emphasise the force of Retallack's observation that "[o]nly form – stylistic enactment (aesthetic behavior) – can be feminine". Here, only a few pages before she lists the "current identifications of the [experimental] feminine", which I replicated in my introductory "Initial Glances" under the heading "Literary feminine", Retallack pins the important term *feminine* to another significant term, *form*. Retallack argues for a feminine form, a feminine hermeneutic to supplant the historical masculine voice. Inferentially, this introduces a back story of rules or grammars because their province encompasses that of *form*. Accordingly, Retallack's lettristic messing within words operates essentially in the zone of the *formal* and therefore within the province of *grammar*. Thus, when she abrades "and" to "nd" in "Afterrimages", creates the lexeme "ŏm'aj" or virally reduces a line of text to "1. n n n n n y n y n" in "AID/I/SAPPEARANCE", by altering their forms she interferes with the form of words at a level that, on a fractal view, must be considered one of grammar.

In Retallack's imagined literary world, the male paradigm, whose trace curtails and guides the predominant cultural "world reason", marginalises the feminine, discounts the feminine as "unintelligible" and denigrates the feminine "into service as consolation for the loss of meaning" as she expresses in "The Experimental Feminine" (*TPW* 96). Only via a new grammar can ways be found to avoid the confines of the present culture. Retallack's references to *form* and *meaning* connect to *grammar* inevitably because normative language obtains indexical semantic meaning through formal adherence to cultural grammatical dictates. By disrupting forms, she disrupts grammar.

In her practice, Retallack opposes an experimental literary feminine against what, in her essay ":RE:THINKING:LITERARY:FEMINISM:", she terms a "masculine cultural paradigm" (*TPW* 138). She perceives that certain traits of traditional philosophy and science fall within that paradigm. One such trait is the tendency, running counter to the literary feminine, to organise knowledge within prescriptive taxonomical structures. Those structures impose organisational grammars through which understanding knowledge is culturally mediated. Retallack challenges means of addressing knowledge that result in hermetic silos. The resultant containment of knowledge limits how questions can be asked and where answers may be found, and consequently restricts pathways to new knowledges. Although her own practice is often closely structured, such as the organisation of *How to Do Things with Words* into five "EX POST" sections, Retallack embraces procedures of chance, for example, by tossing paper clips to select text lettristically for "Afterrimages". She mediates this paradox between order and chaos

around experimental feminism. Her fervour for experimental speech acts as exemplary feminine work is expressed in her 2007 essay "What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need it?": "The chaotic inter-connectedness of things . . . leads to the pragmatic necessity of ingenious experimentation as wager on the possibility of a viable, even pleasurable future together in this world with all those others" (par. 43). In her view, experimentation is a "pragmatic necessity" upon whose outcome hangs "the possibility of a viable . . . future together in this world . . .". Hence her practice seeks to rejig the means of discourse, even down to the lettristic make-up of words themselves.

Her lettristic word work transposes Gertrude Stein's experimentalism into fresh fractal territory. Retallack approves Stein's character description as "quintessentially experimental because it . . . create[s] an experience . . . using materials absent nineteenth century literary devices" ("What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need it?" par. 17). Linking Stein's vision of language with that of Wittgenstein, Retallack says, "Her belief in the consequences of linguistic form – that language is actually a way of living in the sensory specificity of one's world – is similar to Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of language as a form of life" (*Gertrude Stein: Selections* 75). Once again, the term *form*, repeated and pivotal in Retallack's sentence, emerges as a Retallack focus in this comparison, linking to the grammatical feature so strong in both Stein's practice and Wittgenstein's philosophical interest. Stein famously makes the claim "I am a grammarian" (*How to Write* 110). But, although adept with puns and word sequencings that create grammatical slippages, and although sensible to the alphabetical composition of words, Stein does not markedly use non-normative lexemes; she uses normative words in experimental ways. Retallack takes that grammatical play into the lettristic zone as an experimental feminine move. Where she creates non-normative words, whether portmanteau like "poethical" or fragmented stubs like "nd", Retallack employs normative lettristic marks experimentally. I repeat, this practice addresses form.

Formal sensibility about allusions of normative words can also be recognised in Retallack's work, for example, in her analysis of the literary feminine yield of "coastline". When evaluating "coastline" against "horizon" as a trope for "a threshold of possibility", Retallack perceives superior formal allusions in the fractal alterities of "coastline" (*TPW* 14). Either word denotes a visually apprehended boundary, a formal feature of note to an artist interested in structural features, but "coastline" yields two features, especially attractive to Retallack: connection to Mandelbrot's work, and the proliferate, formal, fractal patterning he discovered in coastlines: that they "have self-similar infinite detail in finite space" (*TPW* 178). Retallack discloses her

admiration of Mandelbrot by referencing him seven times in *The Poethical Wager*. Explaining her preference for "coastline" she says:

> Imagining a cultural coastline (complex, dynamic) rather than time's horizon (dare I say it? – linear, static) thrusts the thought experiment into the distinctly contemporary moment of a fractal poetics. If art can be conceived as having a fractal relation to life, then I think the infamous art vs. life gap is closed because it's no longer needed to account for mirror-image representational symmetries. (*TPW* 15)

Her choice between those two normative words demonstrates gender sensibility, choosing the "complex, dynamic" coastline which we can associate with feminine, against the arguably masculine qualities of "linear, static" horizon. Her argumentation in this passage is most interesting. She posits that art might bear a relation to life (and art) similar to those fractal geometric relations observed in nature by Mandelbrot. Her terms marry scientific with artistic and imaginative discourses. By terming her activity a "thought experiment", she suggests a scientific structured approach to consider potential outcomes. She applies a geometric filter to suggest that a scientific route of apprehension might explain an artistic problem. Thus, she crosses discursive silos, mixing terms like "fractal", "horizon", "coastline" and "symmetries". Her repetition of "fractal" reinforces its importance. Her image choice of "coastline" over "horizon" ties back to cultural agency. Preferring the ecology and variegation of "coastline", and rebuffing the colonial and imperialist teleology of "horizon" is a legibly feminist language move, one that demonstrates her attention to the valences of words. A few pages before casting her lot with "coastline", she discloses that "meaningful cultural agency is what's always at stake" (5).

The formal correlation of fractal patterning between macro and micro greatly interests Retallack, who applies it to lettristic and poethical work. She adopts the phenomenon of geometric fractal patterning, and riffs off that scientific observation to valorise an imagined, infinitely differenced, cultural coastline over a static timeline horizon. The patterning, whereby one natural (coast)line bears "self-similar infinite detail" to others, larger and smaller, mirrors my argument that *grammars* can be discovered at the sub-word level. Grammar is a form of language, one generally recognised in standardisation. It follows that variations of that form, and challenges to standardised forms, operate at a grammatical level. Grammar is a language condition at every point. We should therefore not be surprised that what applies for *grammar* at the word-in-sentence level, can be found reflected at a lower level, the letter-in-word lettristic level. Such a view is consonant with the array of alterities that accompany Retallack's vision of an experimental literary feminine.

Swerving atoms of language

This section considers which feature most qualifies as atoms of language: words or lettristic marks. The word has an entrenched pedigree, associated with conventional understanding of grammar. This section begins by noting the swerve of atoms, a feature of abiding importance to Retallack. Although it is a word discovered in the fragment of another word, Joyce's "etym", which we shall shortly meet, seems to bolster the word's claim to primacy but his interest, shared with Retallack, in the plasticity of words, especially through portmanteau – the allusive reach of neologisms – suggests that a lower fractal order may be in play. After discussing similarities between Retallack and Joyce in non-normative, inventive word play, the focus turns briefly to Beckett's *Unnamable* and thence to foreignness in language. That broad discursive arc completed, this section concentrates on its ultimate claim that lettristic marks are the atoms of written language in a new fractal grammar.

In *The Poethical Wager*, Retallack begins her introductory "Essay as Wager" with "Life is subject to swerves . . . they afford opportunities to usefully rethink habits of thought" (1). As her essay continues, we learn that the term "swerves" links to third century BCE Epicurean theory about the behaviour of atoms, the smallest particles into which matter could be reduced. Epicurus posited the theory of the *clinamen* or swerve whereby atoms fall unpredictably. Retallack introduces the theory on page 2, proceeding to quote from Lucretius's poem "De Rerum Natura":

> While the first bodies are being carried downwards by their own weight in a straight line through the void, at times quite uncertain and [in] uncertain places, they swerve a little from their course, just so much as you might call a change of motion. For if they were not apt to incline, all would fall downwards like raindrops through the profound void, no collision would take place and no blow would be caused amongst the first beginnings: thus nature would never have produced anything. (*TPW* 2)

By so prominently quoting Lucretius, Retallack promotes an important consequential relationship: atomic swerves are necessary for creativity. The second paragraph of her essay feeds towards this by asking "How can one frame a poetics of the swerve, a constructive preoccupation with what are unpredictable forms of change? One might begin by stating this: what they all have in common is an unsettling transfiguration of once-familiar terrain" (*TPW* 1). She then moves to introduce her term "poethics", itself a word altered by the atomic *clinamen* of the letter *h*.

Retallack claims Stein, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett among heritage partners of her "experimental feminine tradition" (*TPW* 135). And indeed Joyce employs Lucretius's key word *swerve* in the opening words of *Finnegan's Wake*: "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from

swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs" (3). In Merchant's Quay, Dublin, the River Liffey does run by the Church of the Immaculate Conception, colloquially known as Adam and Eve's, and the shore does bend round the bay across to where Howth Castle stands proud to the view of any observer, but these literarily famous words, significant in their introductory prominence, evoke, as Joyce intended, multiple allusions.

Demonstrating that his *Finnegan's Wake* swerve aligns with Lucretius, Joyce reimagines the Epicurean atom as *etym*, a punning stub of "etymology":

> The abnihilisation of the etym by the grisning of the grosning of the grinder of the grunder of the first lord of Hurtreford expolodotonates through Parsuralia with an ivanmorinthorrorumble fragoromboassity amidwhiches general uttermosts confussion are perceivable moletons skaping with mulicules while coventry plumpkins fairlygosmotherthemselves in the Landaunelegants of Pinkadindy. Similar scenatas are projectilised from Hullulullu, Bawlawayo, empyreal Raum and mordern Atems. They were precisely the twelves of clocks, noon minutes, none seconds. At someseat of Oldanelang's Konguerrig, by dawnybreak in Aira. (353)

In English, "grund" is an archaic word for "grind", but "grund" is also a German word meaning "ground" or "reason". Along with fragments of grizzling and groaning, greying and grossening (here suggesting its antonym of "ground", although perhaps the ground-up mash of etymology may seem "gross" in the sense of "rude" or "monstrous", where "monstrous" like "gross" exemplifies the capacity of a word to bear oppositional meanings), Joyce grinds etymology to produce the irreducible etym. His performative (written) speech act recognises the etym as a lexemic construct, one that swerves from the normative, gesturing to a path which Retallack pursues.

Sean Braune suggests that, at the time of writing *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce knew of the potential of an atomic bomb (Braune 170). It is difficult to explain the congruity of Joyce's references otherwise. The paradoxical link whereby a small *etym* can "explodotonate" causing "uttermost confussion" fit, both as to method and power, with the atomic bomb. In addition to the punned *etym,* unlocking alphabetical letters from their host words and resituating them are common to both Retallack and Joyce. Like Retallack's *Afterrimages* with its extra "r", Joyce's portmanteau "confussion" sits one letter from both "concussion" and "confusion". Interrogating Joyce's portmanteau "abnihilisation" for its roots yields "abnegation" and "annihilation", with an

introductory doff of the cap to the alphabetical system through "ab", which comprise the first two *etyms*.

Braune explores the intentional links in atomic interest between Joyce and Lucretius, noting:

> The "etym" is the "imaginary unit for the true source of a word in historic terms," but it can also be a letter, or the letter itself. *The letter is the indivisible unit of writing.* Therefore, the etyms collected on a page create "clusters" of singularities, monadic units or "words," which in turn, over time, suggest an etymology. The surprise "exception" of the constraint of the written form is the clinamen or the swerve created by the collisions of etyms, which when placed in patterns or poetic constructs mimic historical structures of prose and narrative to create plot, genre and meaning. Therefore, the collisions of the etyms create the clinamen of narrative or plot. (137; emphasis added)

Braune's analysis supports my argument that lettristic swerves are atomic swerves that can fundamentally disrupt the linearity of writing. The constraints of writing are redone by the collisions of swerving *etyms*. This should also be recognised as an experimental feminine grammatical remove, taking the writing into fresh readings and new cultures, and representing a significant part of Retallack's practice. Braune observes that:

> the puns and portmanteau constructs of Joyce can be considered a deviation of the clinamen (where the clinamen is considered the lettristic mark). (177)

Retallack too performs through puns and portmanteau constructs. And, again like Joyce, she treats language at a lettristic, atomic level. That atomic or lettristic perception provides opportunities to enact a range of performance at that atomic level. But she goes further, applying the same performative strategy to punctuation marks, treating them as if they were of the same grammatical order as letters, as, for example, in "**G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**". She takes a similar experimental feminine grammatical move when she introduces a numerical sign into *Errata 5uite*.

It is fruitful to explore further the word echoes of Joyce's voice in Retallack's practice. Compare Joyce's deviant lettristic practices, messing with the internal composition of words, with those of Retallack, for example, in this passage from her "Blue Notes on the Know Ledge":

> What is the metaphysics of the ontology of the physics of the neuro-physiology of the epistemology of blue? How many ways could I you s/he they we reshuffle the order of these
>
> fun-house nouns? Blue-tipped blue light distance signifiling past slide rules blue shift. A Western poetics of blue (*Is* pink the navy blue of India?) is blind sighted at an intersection
>
> of the optics of blue (peripheral vision and distance) the paradoxical psychology of blue
>
> (religious hope and historical sadness) the epistemology of blue (peripheral vision and cognitive distance). Linea, punctus, circulus, sanctus, sanctus. . . . . blue. (*TPW* 63; ellipsis in orig.)

Not only is her rich word play reminiscent of Joyce, but so too is her engagement with theory, philosophy and science. In explosive production of polysemy, too, Joyce's attentiveness to words can fairly be regarded as swerving in accord with Retallack's practice. Consider this passage, in the mimesis of invocative prayer, from *Finnegan's Wake*:

> In the name of Annah the Allmaziful, the Everliving, the Bringer of Plurabilities, haloed be her eve, her singtime sung, her rill be rung, unhemmed as it is uneven. (104)

From Annah's eve to her uneve(n), this sentence tips many expectations. The name of Allah is reconfigured, gesturing alike to womanhood and coin of small change (anna as one-sixteenth part of a rupee), leading perhaps across gender expectations to Eve; Annah's ineffability is fazed by the maze, and a sense of amaze in which all is crazily full or perhaps paradoxically or equally lost; words from the Christian Lord's Prayer rend down to tailoring terms: "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The word "unhemmed" cries out for a three-syllable reading to echo "in heaven", itself to be echoed by the mischievous "uneven".

Those tailoring terms fabricate a Lucretian state of creative unevenness. Joycean unevenness melds well with Retallack's attention to the patterned unevenness posited in Mandelbrot's fractal geometry. Joyce's riff, patterning off the Lord's Prayer, swerves its repeat on a scale different from the original. It is a remove. A similar resonance occurs where *Finnegan's Wake*'s feminine, figured in the form of Dublin's River Liffey, played through the character of Anna Livia Plurabelle, appears in the above passage as "Annah, . . . the Bringer of Plurabilities". The "Bringer of Plurabilities" bears the unmistakable characteristic of that which swerves, that which offers bounteous alterities. Retallack employs Joycean features to cause swerves in language, namely punning, neologism, naming and portmanteau.

As Retallack does in her poetry, Joyce is capable of adapting page layout to add a visual edge to his word work; for example, in the conversation Joyce constructs about Dublin's Liffey, mother of all rivers, the mimetic voice of gossiping washerwomen is set out on the page as if flowing from a source:

> O
> Tell me all about
> Anna Livia! I want to hear all
> about Anna Livia. Well, you know Anna Livia? Yes, of course,
> we all know Anna Livia. Tell me all. Tell me now. You'll die
> when you hear. Well, you know, when the old cheb went futt
> and did what you know. Yes, I know, go on. (*Finnegan's Wake* 196)

Here, Joyce melds word and image in non-normative presentation, a free play of words generally permitted by literary modernism, exemplified by, say, Lewis Carroll's snaking, diminishing mouse tail (28) or Guillaume Apollinaire's five streaming lines of rain in "Il pleut"

(219). Whether we read the "O" as urethral, vaginal or otherwise, the cascading, broadening flow from Anna Livia Plurabelle, source to sea, realises a semiotic of fecund ontology. Birth to death, she bears all narratives, and she bears all narratives away. The concluding passage of her section babbles on in this sleepy fashion:

> Night night! Telmetale of stem or stone. Beside the rivering waters of, hitherandthithering waters of. Night! (216)

Narratives that promise Telos, "tell us" bedtime tales, the Babylon of Psalm 137 beside which "we wept for Zion", and Night, all figure strongly within the babbling-on, all-gathering stream of Anna Livia Plurabelle, the powerful feminine of *Finnegan's Wake.* We can loosely compare Joyce's Anna Livia flow visual with, say, Retallack's horizontal page division in "Afterrimages", which reinforces the "before" and "after" aspect of that poem.

When it comes to creating neologisms, particularly punning portmanteau constructions, Retallack's non-normativity bears similarity to Joyce's, although he rarely employs punctuation or diacritical marks as she does. This is most marked in their common attention to bodily word fragments, morphemic and lettristic. In *Finnegan's Wake*, the lettristic "HCE" references a major paternal character, Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, also known as "Here Comes Everybody". Retallack dedicates her book *Musicage* "to HC(W)E". Whoever she may mean, she must have been aware of the centrality of Joyce's HCE to his work. Joyce's play, like hers, extends across languages. Words like his "Telmetale", "etym" or "expolodotonates" are non-normative.

Some words are non-normative to the point they may be considered unnamable. In her essay ":RE:THINKING:LITERARY:FEMINISM:", Retallack quotes this passage from Samuel Beckett's *How It Is* (another title beginning with *How*, like Stein's *How to Write* or Austin's or Retallack's *How to Do Things with Words*) as exemplar of experimental feminine:

> you will have a little voice it will be barely audible you will whisper in his ear you will have a little life you will whisper it in his ear it will be different quite different quite a different music you'll see a little like Pim a little life music but in your mouth it will be new to you . . . (24)

How It Is was published in French in 1961, in English in 1964. It was preceded by Beckett's *The Unnamable* (French version, 1953; English, 1958), in which the narrator protagonist, an arguably male voice, seems unsure about his existence and purpose. Unsure whether he can "go on", he continues, driven by a need to continue his narrative. Like Stein, Beckett uses mostly simple normative words, but he interpolates the occasional arcane word. His pattern of simple words offset by the occasional arcane word resembles Retallack's pattern in "How to Do

Things with Words" where her few non-normative words stand out in starker relief because of the preponderance of lexical normativity.

Beckett's title, *The Unnamable*, gestures to an issue related to Retallack's move in creating her hybrid neologisms whose forms create problems with reader recognition. That is another way of saying those words are difficult to tie to reliable meanings. On this approach, a word like "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'" might be considered an unnamable word, foreign to normativity.

Although issues of "foreign" and "exile" commonly arise in relation to Stein, Joyce and Beckett, Retallack, too, whose work often features languages other than English, has some overseas experience. Despite periodic teaching commitments with Al-Quds University, which took her for periods of about a week at a time to their campus in the Palestinian West Bank, Retallack has remained based in the Northeastern US. By contrast, her modernist literary forebears Stein, Joyce and Beckett left their homes, each choosing France, home to a "foreign" language, to create their later work; scholarship often emphasises their exile, both from country of birth and from the English language. Of Joyce and Beckett, Retallack says they were "fleeing their patrimony – the law (the grammar) of the Irish father – for the exile of the (m)other tongue . . ." (*TPW* 136). I emphasise that she denotes the patrimony from which they fled as "the grammar". Odd, too, that "patrimony" fails so dismally to partner with "matrimony". The latter, through the root of "*matr-em* – mother", links the idea of "marriage" with an expectation, perhaps attendant sign, of "maternity" (OED). My observation recognises this example of unequal gender operation embedded in those two words whose rhyme belies their inequality. Significantly, Retallack links "exile" to passage from patrimony to a maternal, and thereby feminine, otherness. Her trope tips on its head the sentimental association of mother with home. She figures the "(m)other tongue" as metonymy of a foreign place, a place of exile. In turn, I stress that she links the law of patrimony with "the grammar", indicating that the remove is one from "the" culturally imposed grammar to an other grammar. The "(m)other tongue" operates on differential forms, new rules. It enables alterities. In the cases of Joyce, Beckett and Stein, the "(m)other tongue" spoke in new forms, new Englishes. For them, the patrimonial mother tongue translated into a (m)other tongue.

Having completed the arc from Lucretius and the swerve of atoms, through Joyce's "etym", word plays of Retallack and Joyce, the possibility of "unnamable" words, and foreignness, this section lines up on its ultimate goal, to establish that lettristic marks rather than words are the atoms of written language. The word *atom* denotes the smallest divisible particle of matter. It was once thought that chemical atoms represented the smallest reduction of matter. Discovery of sub-atomic particles extended scientific theory, but the term "atomic" still endures as

metaphor for an indivisible unit. Whether the *word* should retain its privileged position as the atomic matter of *grammar* is ripe for closer enquiry.

In modern usage, the term *grammar* generally denotes rules governing how words relate or should relate syntagmatically in order to produce meaning. Most will correlate *grammar* with rules of syntax, with normatively mandated forms of usage. Grammar applies to both oral and written language, but visually represented grammatical rules, such as those relating to punctuation or the configuration of letters or words, apply only to written language. Instances of writing can be imagined ranging from a series of books to a one-word message. The longest can be imagined in a series of reducing portions such as chapters or sections, then paragraphs and sentences, and finally, words. But *the word* need not be the final word in that series.

The *word* seems the atomic unit of language even though it is made up of recognisable components. Leaving aside the necessary graphemics of written words, their componentry is perhaps more recognisable because of writing's material endurance compared with the fleeting passage of spoken language. Only writing in water comes close to the transitory fluidity of speech. Even short-lived whiteboard wordage displays longer than its spoken equivalent. When a word divides, it can separate into morphemes and phonemes or, in writing, into syllables and letters.

Because language is a social tool for communication, a great deal of pressure bears on *the word* to fulfil our desire for communication of meaning. An industry of scholarship responds to that desire. Linguists, philosophers, lexicographers and etymologists all play their parts. A plethora of dictionaries based on various principles – historical, current usage, arcane usage, specialist, dialect, to name a few – corroborate the desire to correlate utterance, written or oral, with meaning. That meaning is an important concomitant of language draws attention to the *word*, where the first step of meaning is generally thought to repose, rather than to the components into which a word can be broken.

I interpolate that formal linguistics breaks words (lexemes) into graphemes, phonemes and morphemes. In my introductory "Initial Glances", I noted that phonemes are of little relevance in this thesis, which largely deals with written language. Obviously, I emphasise Retallack's graphemic (lettristic) emphasis. In my "Initial Glances", I touched on her morphemic work, especially evident in the allusive reach of her portmanteau lexemes. Is she dealing principally with words (lexemes) or letters (graphemes)? In this chapter and Chapter Two, my attention, firstly to lexemes, and then turning to the intra-lexical, necessarily extends through the range from grapheme, through morpheme to lexeme. But the register of formal linguistics distracts

my thesis from its major focus on Retallack's envisioning of, and practice in, the componentry of words with a lettristic skew. In my thesis, she reads, in words, their possibilities, not merely morphemic (although she certainly gets that) but from their componentry multifariously. By this, I mean she recognises, in addition to semantic possibilities from taking or adding morphemes, lettristic possibilities by rearrangements like anagram or smashing words together in long, lettristic runs like "sincetheEngishhavebeenherewehavenodreamsanymore" (*Afterrimages* 17). True, words, normative words, comprise the bulk of her work, but many significant aspects of her practice free the lettristic or other fragmentary parts of words (not limited to morphemes) to participate. My word investigations have a wholly different set of aims regarding the actions of language than the register of formal linguistics. In order to capture that important edge, I generally prefer, in this work, the terminology of words and letters to the limiting formal range of graphemes, morphemes and lexemes.

For similar lack of fit with my thesis focus, I discard comparing Retallack's work with Ezra Pound's theory, propounded in his essay "How to Read", that "there are 'three kinds of poetry'" (25). Pound starts with the premise that "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (23). Given the breadth of his views, it is unlikely that "meaning" in his premise is restricted to meaning of an indexical, semantic nature. Retallack's poethical language is charged with performativity; its meaning derives from that characteristic, not from a "linear, static" (to apply her terms for dismissal of "horizon") relationship between word and dictionary meaning. Pound's "three 'kinds of poetry'" comprise melopoeia (where "some musical property . . . directs the bearing or trend" of the word's meaning), phanopoeia (which casts "images upon the visual imagination") and logopoeia (where context, habits of usage or otherwise add to words "the dance of the intellect") (25). As with the register of formal linguistics discussed above, Pound's theory can begin a discussion with Retallack's work – logopoeia is particularly evident – but the overlap, although interesting, diverts from the path of my thesis in its pursuit of her lettristic and proceduralist, experimental path that disrupts fractal grammars.

I return to my discussion of words in relation to meaning. Dictionaries define words through other words. The monolithic shadow cast by the dictionary industry itself suggests that meaning reposes primarily in words. As J. L. Austin indicates, a dictionary offers differing meanings for usages in differing contexts (*Philosophical Papers* 24). The differentials of those contexts derive mainly from associations set up by phrasal or sentence contexts in which the word is used. For writers, *grammar* guides towards normative syntagmatic combinations that will carry a desired meaning. Conversely, for readers, *grammar* offers, in part, a hermeneutic tool to

interpret what a word means in its particular context. Within the frame of most language users, the word bears the primary burden of conveying meaning.

Are *words*, that is, normative words that readily attach to meaning in a conventional sense, or are *lettristic marks*, the true atoms of written language? They seem to inhabit different orders. Conventionally, lettristic marks are not generally regarded as more than the building blocks of words. In and of itself, an alphabetical letter or an apostrophe mark (other than "I" or "A") offers no stable semantic meaning within conventional writing. An exception occurs where the lettristic mark itself is topical, for example, dealing with the syntactic effect of inserting an apostrophe. In conventional use, an apostrophe mark signifies ownership or elision. Another exception occurs where a letter is used as a word conventionally, for example, when we speak of the properties of *x*. Otherwise, conventionally, lettristic marks operate as components of written language only when used or assembled in conventionally understood ways.

I have already demonstrated that Retallack's practice involves acute sensibility to the lettristic componentry of words. This opens her to lettristic play, like portmanteau, common in her work. But when she creates lexemes like "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'", "ŏm'aj", or "eweh", the looked-for link between word and meaning is challenged. However comfortable with non-normative poetic constructions readers may be, they will struggle to attribute a meaning, or even a range of meanings, in a conventional semantic, indexical sense, to such words. Works containing such words call for alternative kinds of readings. In my argument, this kind of writing involves a change of grammars, alterities beyond normative convention.

As this thesis considered, the letter-group "eweh" can be explained in relation to her procedure in "Afterrimages" as the remnant of a longer set of letters from above on the page. (*Afterrimages* 17). In that context, "eweh" represents something, a fragment. To begin with, it represents both the remnant of another piece and the process, whether known or unknown as to detail, of fragmentation. That sort of explanation can be enlarged by considering the spread of the entire poem. But none of that substitutes for a normative relationship between a word and a conventional path to meaning. Whatever level of understanding of "eweh" readers may glean, they cannot claim to *know* "eweh" in the same way they could claim to *know* a conventional word like "angel". In this example, Retallack's sequence of letters on the page invites, or even demands, conversation between her reader and her text.

Non-normative introduction of punctuation marks, as in "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'", or punctuation and diacritical marks, as in "ŏm'aj", add layers of complication. Such words sit in a perplexing relation with Ferdinand de Saussure's theory that the word sign involves a relationship,

implicitly a meaningful relationship, between signifier and signified. Saussure imagined the word as a sign system comprising two parts: a word concept (the idea associated with the word) and a sound image. In writing, the written word stands in part for the sound image. The resultant understanding of the linguistic sign involves those two related parts, known as the signified and the signifier. Whether oral or written, the signifier is arbitrary: one language may reference the signified by the signifier "tree", another may call it "arbor".

In my introductory "Initial Glances", I noted J. L. Austin's observation that meaning is found in a sentence rather than in a word and we "look up the meaning of a word" in a dictionary "to suggest aids to the understanding of sentences in which it occurs" (*Philosophical Papers* 24). A glance through the OED discloses many words whose entry continues for columns, and many whose entry runs to pages. The entry for the word "word" runs across eight pages in twenty-one columns. The entry for the word "name" runs to thirteen columns. This dearth of singularity produces an inherent range of play in word meaning. From one iteration to another, the same-seeming word may strike different bells, different shades of meanings. Where the word is general in scope, it admits greater play. These slippages occur around the dynamics of the lingual sign situation, for example, between the two parts of the Saussurean split between signifier and signified, a split I shall shortly address.

Even the Saussurean path from normative word sign to meaning can prove fuzzy. Mismatch of word concept can occur between writer and reader as, for example, one person's idea of a leaf may differ from that of another (Nietzsche 263). And then there are poetic, literary or playful uses where, as J. L. Austin noted, words do not mean what they would in a "felicitous" context. A promise to marry someone in a play *means* something very different from use of the same words at a ceremony with families in attendance in expectation of a genuine marriage (Austin, *HTDTWW* 22). Understanding context is crucial if we are to understand what is meant. Even with ordinary words, the journey from word to meaning is fraught with pitfalls, potholes and false trails.

Any such journey involving the written word begins with graphics. In part, Retallack's sensibility to individual lettristic marks expresses in graphics such as font (style, size, bolded, italicised). Moving from letter to the entire page, her fieldwork also reflects her visual artistry. For example, her reference to Mallarmé's "*Un coup de dés*" reminds us of her interest in visuals (Retallack, *TPW* 133). Johanna Drucker's extensive work in the graphics of typography offers an allied strand of interest in visuals, but Retallack's interest, although responsive to typographic expressiveness as a tool for her letter work, focuses more closely on the letters as letters rather than as individual pictorials. She is more interested in letters as fragments of

words, as componentry of a language practice that flows through letters. Thus, even where an isolated letter appears in "Afterrimages", its main import, in her practice, derives from its potentiality in the conversations through which letters can form words rather than as an isolate.

To better understand Retallack's practice, the nature of the link between parts of the Saussurean word sign is worth pursuit through theoretical aspects touching on psychology, and then psychoanalysis, and thence to the figure of desire within which one part of the word sign pursues its "other". Beginning that narrative, Saussure described that link as "phonic" (bodily) and "psychological" (mental):

> A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas; but the pairing of a certain number of acoustical signs with as many cuts made from the mass of thought engenders a system of values; and this system serves as the effective link between the phonic and psychological elements within each sign. (70)

In his subsequent paragraph, Saussure addresses confusion and nascent differences where ideas or sounds are similar. But throughout, his schema holds to the link between signifier and signified. Retallack works predominantly in the field of written language and that comprises the sphere of this thesis. Transposing Saussure's observations from parole to writing, I note that Retallack's practice, in lexemes like "eweh", confounds the operation of language as posited by Saussure. The "pairing" falters or fails. Reading as knowledge within normative cultural expectations is frustrated. In my view, Retallack does this in order to move language performativity to a different cultural level via a lettristic avenue.

Nevertheless, Saussure's theory is relevant to Retallack's non-normative words. So too is its projection by the psychoanalytical school, for example, Jacques Lacan. In Chapter One, I expanded on Retallack's interest in Lacan's theory, an interest partly indicated by Retallack's repeated use of the word "GLANCES" and variations of that word, a key word in Lacan's reading of Poe's "The Purloined Letter". For the psychoanalytical school, the *word* figures in the structure of desire (Lacan, "The Instance of the Letter"). The psychoanalytical connection can then be imagined as a series of displacements through which the signifier seeks its vision of the signified, much like Frankenstein's monster pursuing his maker across the frozen wastes. The psychoanalytical school's imagining of the *word* is similarly saturated with longing. And once again, it is the signifying part of the *word* itself that figures as the questing agent, the one seeking a satisfactory other with which it may merge. Put another way, the name searches for its proper owner, the one it desires to merge with, although it can never attain satisfaction. If I marry this idea back with the idea of word as atom, there is a lot of psychoanalytical whizzing going on at a sub-atomic level.

These theories about the word, Saussurean or psychoanalytical, generally apply to words, that is, normative words. But there seems resistance to adventuring *into* the word. What cultural normativity seems to require at the borders of written language is a normative succession of letters so the word can be recognised. Retallack's practice takes issue, presenting her constructed lexemes as words, perhaps stateless words, seeking admission.

Grammars of knowledge

The constraint visited upon language by normative grammar finds its echo in the organising grammars of knowledge. An insistent practice regarding knowledge observes a grammar of taxonomy. I call it "grammar" because taxonomy constructs formal structures that contain and situate knowledge. Although designed to assist knowledge, the structure limits knowledge by excluding what lies outside and is therefore unseen, and by prescribing how linkages can be made within the structure.

At its heart, Retallack's poetic and critical work embodies dissatisfaction with delimiting grammatical strictures imposed on knowledge by our taxonomical insistence or habit or practice. An example is the way our "knowledge" of gender is skewed by culturally imposed grammatical strictures. The import of gender is affected by rules about roles. Taxonomy bears upon these matters. Against this habit, Retallack opposes her poethical performance. Her experimental literary feminine figures in opposition to the taxonomical habit.

The taxonomical habit was questioned by forward-thinking scientists and philosophers before it received marked attention from poets. US experimental poetry in the period 1970 to 2000 responded to ideas propounded by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and scientist David Bohm. Wittgenstein's understandings that context and cultural understanding underpin meaning, and that comprehension involves understanding the language game that is in play, resonated with poets who were newly accepting uncertainties as a social and scientific circumstance. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, first propounded in 1927, had its effect. This was reinforced by Bohm's *Causality and Chance in Modern Physics* (1951), which states that every thing has "a degree of relative autonomy", "not identical with any other thing in the universe, however similar those things may be". Moreover, that "no such thing can even remain identical with itself as time passes . . .". These circumstances of alterities, contextualities and differences accorded with the circumstances in which poets imagined their world. A link between theorists, including scientific theorists, and poets reflects in experimental poetry from at least 1970 onwards. Thus, as Lisa Samuels records, Leslie Scalapino began her 1988 long poem *way*:

> with a long epigraph from David Bohm's *Causality and Chance in Modern Physics*, put in, Scalapino explains, after the book was finished, as a kind of illuminating foreword. Bohm's words set up an intersection of quantum physics with artistic methodology, forecasting how much Scalapino's book is involved with the dynamic indeterminacy of identity and perception that characterizes particle physics. ("If Meaning" 184)

Bohm expresses concern about the hubris in taxonomy. In the first chapter of his 1980 book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, addressing "fragmentation and wholeness", Bohm draws attention to the human pattern of compartmentalising knowledge, organising it into ever smaller specialty areas. He examines the meaning underpinning the word "theory" to question any generalised sense of completion from such taxonomies, observing that:

> [T]he word 'theory' derives from the Greek 'theoria' which has the same root as 'theatre,' in a word meaning 'to view' or 'to make a spectacle.' Thus, it might be said that a theory is primarily a form of *insight*, i.e. a way of looking at the world, and not a form of knowledge of how the world is. (4)

This distinction between the provisional insights of theory and the desired assurance of knowledge contributes an important frame for Retallack's work. Her work valorises and enacts the humility of experimenting towards insight as against compliantly observing a rigid and authoritarian taxonomy that resists questioning.

As Bohm notes, theory that has at one time been taken as certain knowledge gets overtaken, displaced by new theory. For example, the atomic theory proposed by Democritus over 2,000 years ago was obliged to yield to quantum theory. Bohm explains:

> The notion of an atomic path has only a limited domain of applicability. In a more detailed description the atom is, in many ways, seen to behave as much like a wave as a particle. It can perhaps best be regarded as a poorly defined cloud, dependent for its particular form on the whole environment, including the observing instrument. (9)

In summarising a foolhardy consequence of our fragmentary approach to knowledge, Bohm, albeit in sexist language, adjudges:

> what should be said is that wholeness is what is real, and that fragmentation is the response of this whole to man's action. . . . So what is needed is for man to give attention to his habit of fragmentary thought, to be aware of it, and to bring it to an end. . . .
>
> For this to happen, however, it is crucial that man be aware of the activity of his thought *as such*; i.e. as a form of insight, a way of looking, rather than a 'true copy of reality as it is.' (7)

In this work, Bohm opens radical questions about the manner of our knowing. He suggests that the habit of compartmentalising theories leads to error and that, by substitution of theory for reality, the habit stultifies progressive discourse.

Retallack's practice attunes to Bohm's questioning as it attunes to Ludwig Wittgenstein's earlier challenge to traditional philosophical methodology. Decades before Bohm, Wittgenstein

posited that classical methodologies of philosophy fail to answer the questions they pose because those questions direct attention towards sites that consistently prove unfruitful. Consequently, no substantial progress has been made on apparently important questions. Retallack, whose scholarship is steeped in philosophy as well as literature, references the Greek traditions through, for example, her references to Aristotle or Epicurus. Retallack manages issues that concern her in forms different than the paths of Greek philosophy. For example, instead of writing an essay about speech act theory, she inaugurates and joins a conversation between two primary participants, "the ô'stens". Thus, in that practice, exemplified by her poem "How to Do Things with Words" she explores issues of truth, a literary feminine, and sensibility through conversation, not didactic argument. Rather than pinning *p* to one constative truth, her poem opens alterities. By performing in this way, she switches from any normative approach. She changes the rules of engagement, changes the grammar. In doing so, she heeds Wittgenstein's tale of the fly in a bottle. Attracted in by a sweet liquid, the fly cannot escape because, once inside, it is attracted to a light at the other end of the bottle. The light is well away from the open neck; the only exit is in the dark. Wittgenstein observes:

> If you want to let [the fly] out, you'd have to surround this by something dark. As long as there is light there, the fly can never do it.
>
> If I'm puzzled philosophically, I immediately darken all that which seems to me light, and try frantically to think of something entirely different. The point is, you can't get out as long as you are fascinated. The only thing to do is to go to an example where nothing fascinates me. (qtd. in Klagge)

Retallack's practice, as earlier noted, valorises example over didactic statement. And her non-normative words perform examples or instances where she sets atoms of written language off on voyages to seek a passage through the cultural taxonomy to some fairer expression.

In Bohm's view, we err by imposing delimiting grammatical strictures on knowledge. As he notes, we organise knowledge as a way of trying to understand our circumstances. Taxonomy necessarily implies order and rules. The grammatical order stipulates how knowledge is stored. Taxonomy of knowledge occurs at the level of the grammatical order. That order determines what stacks top tier, what follows next, and what next. The grammar determines which features are significant, and consequently how items within the taxonomical structure relate one to another. The grammatical ordering, in turn, delimits how meaning and significance are retrieved. The grammar of taxonomy controls how knowledge is imagined, approached or understood.

The grammatical order of knowledge forms its *how* as opposed to its *what*. Nonetheless, as Retallack realises, the *how* inherently affects the *what*. Just as one taxonomical grammar will

prevent certain connexions from being made, the adoption of another grammar may open to new knowledge possibilities. That is why, in my view, Retallack's work most profoundly engages the (formal) *how* of language rather than the *what.* It follows therefore that, as her site of performative engagement with aspects of knowledge, she chooses rules and classifying processes rather than a debate constrained by specifics. This is her strategy when addressing performative speech act theory through her poetry collection *How to Do Things With Words,* and particularly in the poem of the same name. By changing the rules of engagement, she resituates the discourse on a grammatical plane, a poetic platform upon which she forces a differential grammar to perform. *How* leads into the realm of grammar.

Analytical: Operations of Retallack's word grammars

A grammarian's view

The second movement of this chapter builds upon the first movement's theory of fractal grammars, to analyse six characteristic operations performed by Retallack's experimental feminine speech acts. My thesis lies outside the realm of specialised grammar. It concerns Retallack's messing with words, her lettristic attentions and her associated attentiveness to materiality of graphemic production. But because I assert that her practice amounts to grammatical novelties, it is fitting to correlate briefly my thesis concerns to that specialised study.

Grammarian Nikolas Gisborne claims that "grammar is the combinatory system of language. It involves phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. There are complex interactions between those subdomains, and no agreement on what the architecture of grammar should look like" ("Prof. Nikolas Gisborne – What's Grammar For?"). His 2010 book *The Event Structure of Perception Verbs* discusses grammatical challenges in verbs pertaining to the five bodily senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. These verbs are within the interest range of Aristotle, Jane Austen, J. L. Austin and, in her poem "How to Do Things with Words", Retallack.

Gisborne is a proponent of word grammar semantics, one of several differing analytical approaches that describe how words relate within a sentence. He observes that "nobody would deny that perception verbs generally are massively polysemous" (having multiple meanings) (119). For example, he notes three physical perception senses of "see": attaining understanding, forming an image and the bundle whose central sense is that of physically seeing a thing. The simple physical sense of seeing is prototypical, the other two meanings inheriting from that

meaning (140). And "see" associates with "realise", "know" and "understand" (141). He notes that "sublexemes are nodes where bundles of information are held" (139).

What I draw from Gisborne are these propositions. Firstly, semantics and the make-up of words, including morpholexical and sublexemic, are properly within the range of *grammar*. Secondly, what flows from semantics affects other areas of grammatical concern. Gisborne's focus concerns the senses, an area central to Retallack's poem "How to Do Things with Words". The thesis focus here is shown to be in a context of normative grammatical study that complements it. Although Retallack is not a grammarian in the strict disciplinary sense, her appreciation of the polysemic potential lying within the make-up of words is no less than Gisborne's, and she too takes particular note of perception verbs in "How to Do Things with Words".

Non-normative words

A viable poetic construction like "*afterrimages*" with an additional *r*, when once recognised by a reader as deliberate difference, cannot thereafter be discounted as misspelling. This was Randolph Healy's experience, as noted in my "Initial Glances". The difference piqued his interest and influenced his reading (Healy 1). With its additional *r*, it presents as a new sort of sign, a puzzle.

Portmanteau constructions generate considerable polysemy, as exemplified by *Memnoir*, the title to Retallack's book first published in 2002 by Randolph Healy's Wild Honey Press, then in 2004 by The Post-Apollo Press. The title combines portmanteau elements from memoir, noir (black), Feminine combined with a Masculine M, film noir, and more. Mem is a stub of memory, a partial recall. Mem is also distortion of the French Madame, a variant of Ma'am. Like Mem in Memsahib. Mem as a character bears an unmistakably female name. Then again, the link between Mem and Fem prompts an echoic recall of Men. Mem is Fem with a male component, a Feminine that shares prosody with masculine. From such a busy portmanteau name, we can guess that *Memnoir* will have something to do with alterity: light and dark, feminine and masculine, black and white, past and present, original and copy, complete and fragmentary. A film, like film noir, reproduces action. *Film* is an agent of a kind of continuous present, because, with its connotative fragility, it brings to the viewing surface completed action from the past, but the experience of viewing the film is a present experience for the viewer. The present gift of the past opens fresh for the viewer, whether that viewer is the mother or the child the mother has taken to the film, according to *Memnoir*'s poetic record.

Thus, those two examples of portmanteau exemplify the polysemy Retallack can produce from jointing words together. Portmanteau words like "*afterrimages*" or "*Memnoir*", constructed from recognisable fragments, even though some fragments may be contestable, qualify in this following section as non-normative words. Even more so are those odder words constructed from combinations of letters and punctuation or diacritical marks like "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'", "ŏm'aj", "ô'stens" or "fÜŒ". I also include fragments like "nd" or "eweh" that do not amount to normative words.

With my grammatical focus firmly in mind, and having noted the kinds of words I treat as non-normative for the purposes of this thesis, I proceed to identify and summarise five operations of Retallack's non-normative word work.

1. *Challenging the male myth*

In messing with the word, Retallack challenges heavy cultural icons. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (*Holy Bible,* John 1,1). These portentous words inexorably associate the word that denotes *word* with the Christian deity. Well before the Christian era, in the "Book of Genesis", even before creation of the woman as "an helpmeet" for him, the man is figured naming all the animals, "and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was its name" (*Holy Bible,* Gen. 2.19). Each creature was referenced by a naming word that represented it. To name a person or thing enacts dominion over it, like when a parent names a child. In *How to Write,* Stein exposed a culture of phallogocentric patronymic tradition. In the section "Finally George", the name George is frequently reiterated as a first name and family name for men until it emerges as a family name cloaking women, "Mary George" and "Jenny George" (296). Meanwhile, forty-three pages after being introduced as "A plain girl let it be Susan. Finally George", Susan reappears in "Susan could be a color" (273, 317). Unlike the male surname that would "finally" get her, Susan's name washes out in Stein's ironic, performative feminist text. The Genesis myth strongly implies the right to name as a masculine prerogative, a point explored by Dale Spender in her feminist critique *Man Made Language* (166). Spender observes in Chapter 1 and Chapter 6. "The Politics of Naming", that although male superiority is a myth, male power has enabled men to construct the myth, and to have it accepted (7 - 51, 163 - 190).

Earlier I quoted this passage (which, for convenience, I repeat) in which Retallack, italicising Austin's casual sexism, indicates male domination of word values:

> Even on a semantic level, the words we claim to know well enough to tag with definitions and add to dictionaries are inextricably linked to value. As J. L. Austin wrote in his 1956 essay, "A Plea for Excuses": "Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men *[sic]* have

> found *worth* drawing, and the connexions they have found *worth* marking, in the lifetimes of many generations. (*TPW* 72; emphasis in orig.)

Her creation of non-normative words performs against mythic patrimony. But how do those non-normative words perform? In what forms do they operate grammatically?

2. Iconic embodiment

Retallack's non-normative words are errant, unknown to dictionaries because they are of unprecedented and one-off usage. Their constitution arises from novel assemblage of normative lettristic pieces. In that constitution they represent difference, alterity, foreignness. We can term them dysorthographic. In their aberrance, they may seem unreadable, words of no signification. They could be considered nonsense words. But, instead of listing these features as condemnation, they amount to notable characteristics. In texts of feminine linguistic oppression, they represent, at least, iconic embodiment, a body of language that does not need to be mimetic, not a mirror but a body.

Whether they stand for something new or stand in a fresh way, an aporia between style and stance, Retallack's non-normative words stand as totems, avoiding the limiting language traps of definition and meaning that hamper normative words. They stand apart, their individual differentiations drawing attention, curiosity, maybe worship as objects of fetish. Lexemic constructions like "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'", "ŏm'aj", "ô'stens", "fÜŒ", "nd", or "eweh" – non-normatives made from normative parts, like a sphinx or centaur – represent imaginary paths unlimited by their component parts. In so doing, they represent a fresh way for language to manifest in enhanced freedom, new configurations of old materials that construct keys to unlock exits from language's maze and then pass through. These iconic lexemes bridge between thing, example and process, particularly reading process. Thus, they move through the grammatical positions of noun to verb, pronoun to adverb.

The shape of the body of text can suggest iconic embodiment. Yra van Dijk, in her essay "Reading the Form" categorised five functions of "blanks" in modern poetry: metapoetical, iconic, metaphysical, liminal and temporal. "Blanks" figure, of course, as the other of text apparent on the page, and therefore register in relation to text marks. Most of Van Dijk's functions bear some interest for Chapter Four of my thesis and I shall reference them there as they arise, but her iconic category is relevant here because she draws attention to shaped poems and Retallack's work draws attention to its shaped characteristics, whether the result of proceduralism or by design. For example, both proceduralism and design affect how text shapes on the page in "Afterrimages". Proceduralism (throwing paper clips) selects what text from the upper page is replicated on the lower page, thereby determining the quantity and placement of

text on the lower page; the page layout itself is driven by the mid-page division that separates above from below, marked by design.

In Van Dijk's reading, the iconic encompasses poems crafted as shapes, like George Herbert's seventeenth-century "Easter Wings" and the poetic dismantling of words and punctuation in work by e. e. cummings. Van Dijk reads an iconic aspect into the presentation of Emily Dickinson's poems:

> Fragmentary and sunk away in the white of the page . . .
>
> The lack of closure is enforced and figured in the material aspect of the poem, the stripes that break the rhythm and give the verses a stuttering. . . .
>
> From a larger perspective one could interpret the amount of white surrounding Dickinson's work as ambivalence about speaking at all. . . . We could interpret the blanks around her poems as iconic, but also as metapoetical. (414; ellipses in orig.)

Discussing white space at the end of lines in a poem by John Ashbery, Van Dijk states:

> The placement of the words in the verse lines helps to express the tension between surface and depth. That tension is explored in the poem, deconstructing the hierarchy in which depth is more meaningful than surface. It is the postmodern stance which Marjorie Perloff described as a presentation that is more important than representation and in which "surface is preferred to depth, *process* to *structure*." (410)

Thinking of Van Dijk's category, we can read Retallack's enactment of dying cells in "AID/I/SAPPEARANCE" as iconic. In this case, bridging the opposition between form and structure suggested by Perloff, form conflates with methodology; one inextricably weaves with the other. The process coins a succession of iconic losses until every alphabetical trace of the beloved "I" of the title disappears through attrition. In "AID/I/SAPPEARANCE", process and structure are not at odds; the structure is driven by, and therefore fits with, the enacted process.

3. Merging reader with signifier

As earlier indicated, Saussure is an important theorist for Retallack, and for my thesis. If we adopt Saussure's imagining of the word as the combination of signifier and signified, a written form of word provides the graphemic prompt. Like a harrier leader, the author places words (graphemes) and the reader pursues the signified from the written clue. Saussure confidently assumes a successful chase, a short leap, from signifier to signified. The word "tree" is a reliable pointer to the combination of trunk, branches and leaves. But what of the clue "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'", or "ô'stens"? Such a word may prove no more than a label for lost goods, the name for a signifier lacking ability to find its signified.

Retallack's non-normative words partake in texts that contain mostly normative words. True, the Wingdings portion of the poem "How to Do Things with Words" hides its words but, once

translated and revealed, those words in themselves prove relatively normative. Their Wingdings garb makes them appear odder than they are. The odd introductory words "ŏm'aj to the ô'stens, Jane and J. L." invite my translation or transposition "homage to the Austens, Jane and J. L." Similarly, the alphabetical portion of "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'" invites me to begin my relationship with that word from the starting point of the normative "glances". The words perform in the company of normative words. That normative and non-normative words cohabit within the same text raises cultural questions about difference, treatment and discrimination.

Pursuing those questions, if I imagine visiting a realm where people – recognisable people – went about their business among other beings, broadly like humans but, say, with glittering skin, and with eyes along their arms, I would be inclined to observe whether their behaviour differed from that of normative people. Similarly, in their texts, Retallack's non-normative words perform formally as words. They occupy recognisable word places within text. To that extent, they cohabit democratically: internally where an apostrophe mark can stand shoulder to shoulder with an alphabetical letter, and externally alongside normative words as operative equals within normative sentences. Lettristic difference apart, the non-normative words do not discriminate against the normative. But their presence throws the normative words into question. If all the words in the text operate in a system of differences, how can the system tolerate those not presently recognised?

The extent of difference presented by Retallack's non-normative words, their range of apparent divergence, poses a problem in categorisation. The unfamiliar differences are undoubtedly differences in word composition from unusual sequences of graphemes. They represent a new level of difference. Consequently, texts containing such words require readings that distinguish between signs within a system of arbitrary differences extending beyond normative differences. This involves a differential grammar.

By speaking of "my relationship with that word", I disclose that I am drawn into conversation with it. It represents a new acquaintance, one whose character I attempt to draw. I bring my preconceptions, what I imagine as my learning, and I observe the word's behaviours. Picking up the signifier's name, presumably a new word because I do not recognise the assemblage of lettristic components, I start my search for a signifier. Here, I bridge from Saussure territory into Lacan territory because my desiring search for a signified to satisfy my reading of this word name is complex. Moreover, my unfamiliarity with the unusual grapheme, which I take to be the name of the signifier, draws me to merge with that signifier. As reader, I join with it in its search for its signified. In this action, I too am doing things *with* words, joining the *word*, or

its graphemic sign, to seek its meaning, the lure of a satisfactory joinder of signifier with signified.

Although words like "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'", "ŏm'aj to the ô'stens, Jane and J. L." or "nd" may seem like authorial pranks or graphemic representations of authorial secrecy, they operate equally in reverse direction to engage reader agency more fully than any other word in the text. Like Stein's pronouns, Retallack's non-normative words "have a greater possibility of being something" (Stein, *Lectures in America* 213–14). Rather than spoon-feeding the reader, this authorial practice invites the reader to help prepare the word dish. While acknowledging that not all writerly text is experimental feminine writing, this effect of enhancing reader agency holds true for Retallack's non-normative words.

The resultant potentiality in Retallack's oeuvre is that such words present an analytic imperative to a reader. The reader must determine in what manner to read the presented form of language. In Chapter Four I shall discuss textual indicators in *Memnoir* that raise the question of whether the text refers backwards or forwards. Pronouns have this potentiality too: anaphoric, pointing back; or cataphoric, pointing ahead. The sequential operation of writing first, reading second, shadows the Saussurean operation of signifier first, signified second. The materialisation of a signifier suggests the existence of a satisfactory signified. In these words, Retallack prompts a differential reading experience. I characterise my beginning reading of "glances" for "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'" as banal. If the signified for "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'" is to be located, it must surely be differentiated from such banal beginnings. The differences between "glances" and "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'" resist conflation.

In other Retallack texts, the "glances" within her apostrophised word appears multiple times. Sometimes it is simply "glances", sometimes it is the non-apostrophised upper-case title to Tallique's book "GLANCES". From the apostrophised word, the alphabetic letters sing their siren song, luring my reading away from the apostrophe marks. But those marks are the distinctive feature in the word. And there is one after each letter; an alternation of letter – mark – letter – mark. Is this mere graphemic choreography, a verandah filigree, or something that removes the word to another grammar? When I refer to merging the reader with signifier, I suggest that, even more than offering encouragement of reader response, Retallack's text draws the reader in by its lure of mystique and the directed energies of reading detailed above.

4. Aversion in feminine writing: Indexical consciousness

Let me (again) revisit the apostrophe marks in "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'". In addition to its application as sign of ownership or mark of elision, the apostrophe is an important metapoetical device. In

Chapter One, I noted how Retallack's "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'" invokes both uses of "apostrophe" and I conflate them here. Sabine Golz, in her 2018 essay "Apostrophe's Double", explores the effects of the "apparatus" of the apostrophe. In the commonly understood "turning away", the author turns from primary audience to address a secondary audience. Golz designates that turn an "unsavoury interpellation" because of the consequent "hierarchizing distinction" between the "privileged audience (judge)" and the secondary addressee (29).

Golz takes issue with Jonathan Culler's limited view of apostrophe in his 2001 *The Pursuit of Signs*. Countering the author's "turning away", she identifies another turn, one where the addressee exercises agency:

> This other turn—not towards the "muse," but away from the apostrophic apparatus—is the "double" of apostrophe. This turn away or "aversion" is to my mind absolutely crucial for understanding the radically different choices underlying the poetics of women writing and reading (in) Western literary traditions. Yet it has overwhelmingly not been theorized at all, with the result that vast formations in our poetic geography have remained entirely unreadable. (Golz 29)

Her argument is both structural and feminine. In a section headed "The Split Scene of Reading" she contrasts these two interpellations, the lure of the cultural norm against the agency that turns its back on the apparatus, in effect, on the normative cultural uses of language:

> As actual readers, we encounter the rhetorical constructions with which language confronts us, and we have choices to make. We face two different interpellations: one authorizing, the other discrediting and silencing; one promises the support of the apparatus and carries the invitation to speak in its name with a voice amplified by the apparatus. The other carries no promise at all. In confronting these and deciding how to respond, we decide how to relate to that apparatus as a whole. And we also decide which one of two differently constructed reading subjects we become. (30)

Having identified this opportunity for reader choice, which she terms "indexical consciousness", she turns to the experience of those who turn their back on the "unsavoury interpellation":

> Those who . . . find themselves interpellated without any such lures, promises, and invitations, but targeted, discredited, and de-subjectivized by this (or any other such) apparatus, will have a different experience. They will find language time and again unusable, at cross-purposes with their own experience and needs. . . . They . . . will have a strong incentive to break with the discipline of that apparatus, to turn away from it, and to turn on it with a sharpened critical eye. (30)

That this reader choice has fundamental import for the whole apparatus of reason, order and language, Golz elucidates:

> The "circuit of communication" is not just troped upon, but indeed disrupted, as Culler writes in the revised version of his essay. To the first subject, the apparatus is the foundation of reason and order, and language "contains" whatever the speaker placed there. For the second to even fully come into being, the entire apparatus must be brought into critical perspective, and then

> radically dissolved and dismissed. Significance is not "in" the text, but created in this moment of actualization. (31)

Golz locates agency in the individual reader at the time and place of reading:

> What changes is the arrow of attribution, the place where we locate agency. Significance is no longer assumed to inhere in the text, a "content" that was "intended" by the author, enshrined in language. Instead, significance is enacted by the decision to repeat, to actualize. (45)

Golz notes the authorial power exercised by the apparatus of apostrophe, and counters it though her theory that recognises the power a reader can exercise to "turn away" from the interpellating power of the text in favour of a reader-chosen direction. In Culler's description, the deictics of apostrophe indicate the new textual direction the reader must follow. In Golz's critical response, not only can a person indicated by apostrophe turn away, but the reader, once conscious of the indexical urge of the text, can also choose to turn away. Retallack's non-normative words offer reader opportunities for Golz's type of apostrophic double turn. They turn palpably away from the normative apparatus, offering portals that might lead to alterities. In their errant constitutions, they offer no guarantee, there is ample room for reader movement. They are hazards of language, wagers placed on alterities. They empower the site of reading from one driven by authorial knowledge to one offering to readerly process.

5. Naïve complexity

Words like "eweh" or "nd" remind me of a young child's voiced experiments, sounds unburdened by referential imperatives. The graphemic assemblage "ŏm'aj" resembles a dreamy collection, a collage of symbols not required to mean anything, simply a graphemic design reminiscent of phonetic aids to pronunciation. They need not be a puzzle for a reader to unravel. They may simply exist, enjoying their individuality. Their performance opportunities constitute ontological meaning enough, escaping metaphysics that police social control of language, attempting to limit it. Toleration of such words in a text disrupts the axis of knowing and not knowing. Words like "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'", "ŏm'aj", "ô'stens" or "fÜŒ" have a crafted appearance. Yet they are not knowable in the easy referential dictionary sense of, say, "angel". If I cannot know "ŏm'aj", can I be certain I know the Austinian fragment "p is true"? Lacking knowledge of one word leads to doubt about the entire text and, in that doubt, imagined knowledge of normative words founders.

All those non-normative words enjoy characteristics of Retallack's experimental literary feminine (*TPW* 135). They are subversive, dissolving identity, non-hierarchical and non-rationalist, and perhaps, in their readings, tentative. "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'" and "ŏm'aj" are self-interrupted. They are all diffuse in the senses of "confused, distracted, perplexed, indistinct,

vague, obscure, doubtful, uncertain" (OED). If I abandon my acculturated desire for pre-decided meaning, these words can figure exactly like non-representational contemporary art. In her book *On the Style Site: Art, Sociality and Media Culture* (2007), Ina Blom imagines a "style site" as one "that marks the changing historical conditions for the very formation of social identities" (19). In essence, she suggests that in a style site, an artistic production presents stylistic phenomena as objects of articulation in their own right. The way an art object is presented and interacted with becomes its meaning, and she notes that "because style is the locus of repression it is also the place for the undoing of this repression" (16). Blom's themes of artistic sites about formation of social identities with a view to undoing repression fit well with Retallack's graphemic work, where images on a page operate similarly to visual art. Retallack's page sites wager for poethic wins consequent upon their performativity and reader engagement.

Pursuing their correlation with visual art, and building on that context, Retallack's non-normative words attract attention to their materiality. In the pause of reading surprise, attention falls on the unusual construction. This attention to the irregular offers an opportunity to appreciate the stuff of which words are made. In other words, attention to the parts of the word draw me to note the Lego pieces, the lettristic componentry of writing. And, as I enlarge upon in Chapter Four, it offers an opportunity to appreciate that often overlooked materiality of the page itself upon which the writing performs.

Fresh presentations of lexical "potatoes"

Retallack's messing with words, her morpholexical dysorthography, effects changes in the semantic area of grammar. Whereas normative grammar aids readability by requiring cultural cohesion, even down to the need for words to be attributed conventional meaning, Retallack's neologisms deliberately flout conformity, expand ideas about readability. Some do so prominently, for example, as book titles, like *Afterrimages.* Some do so with complexity beyond spelling by non-normative combinations of letters and marks.

To say they effect changes at a grammatical level means more than merely noting their odd appearances. By flouting the rules yet still partaking in text, they place all normative words in question. They introduce a fundamental doubt about knowing, including knowing what a word or text means. They provide effective vehicles for challenging the iconic myth that asserts male domination of language, a myth that implicates masculine-dominated religious structures too.

Among their subversive challenges to the apparatus of language, they invite the reader to merge with the signifier; conversely, they offer agencies of readership choice. Readership of written language operates in the sense realm of vision, real or imagined. Retallack's neologisms offer

reader choice of reading into unknown dimensions of language represented by these words. This aligns with Golz's "double apostrophe" of feminine readership agency. Most radically, the words draw readership over a threshold of naïve complexity into non-referential language, a new fractal level made available via Retallack's lettristic messing with words.

In Chapter Two, I made much of Retallack's poethics in their plays against J. L. Austin's performative language theory. To characterise Retallack's messing with words as frivolous or missing her mark would be to misread her work. Her messing with words is deliberate and scholarly, as well as pleasurable. Although her practice utilises procedures of chance, her poethic laboratory betrays interesting taxonomies of her own construction, as in the careful structure of her *How to Do Things with Words* with its formal framing, its introductory steering quotations, its five parts, each of three poems. This paradox should not surprise, if only because Retallack believes in fractal patterns. That her disruptive performance should convey in vehicles resembling patterns of the challenged apparatus may always be predictable. Nonetheless, her messing with words creates new forms that represent disquieting feminine performance at novel grammatical levels. By these means her words open language so it has the possibility to escape, and remake the energies in, its limitations.

Chapter Four: Grammars of unwritten feminine text

(Cough)

– John Cage, "For a Speaker", *Silence*

Poethical qualities of unwritten feminine text

In this chapter, I contend that Retallack's works imagine bodies of unwritten feminine text as companion to her hard text. By "hard text" I mean the alphabetical and other typographical marks appearing on Retallack's pages. Unwritten feminine text differs from hard text only in that its potentials are suggested upon, beneath or beyond the material page. We can usefully figure Retallack's hard text as iceberg tips, jumping-off points in the search for unwritten feminine text. Her own characteristic swerves depart continually via the hard text on the page, sometimes splitting in polysemic directions. The unseen portion of this metaphorical iceberg is nonetheless iceberg matter. We can characterise that iceberg leap into the unknown as a psychological move from the conscious towards the unconscious. From the material realm of hard text, the iceberg depths constitute a kind of underworld.

The dicey situation of shady, shaded, wounded Eurydice, referenced several times in *Memnoir* (2004), gestures to the body of unwritten feminine text: situated in an underworld, not readily retrieved into material light. "They called Eurydice. She was new among the shades and came with steps halting from her wound" (Retallack, *Memnoir* 27). Without setting the bar too high, but remembering the failure of Orpheus to free Eurydice, I imagine a reader capable of completing the quest, trekking from Retallack's hard text to retrieve or read unwritten text. That reader will be sensible to the ethical geometries of Retallack's attention, poethical geometries ascertainable from her hard text. For example, in *Memnoir* those geometries attend to the disadvantaged plight of women in current-cultured gender conversations, and the need to rejig our memories in order to more helpfully inform the moving present. If Orpheus seeks to retrieve unwritten feminine text to which Retallack's hard text gestures, perhaps he should be engendered differentially. Woven into the material of *Memnoir* is the idea that looking back, where that merely reprints cultural imprints, with the memory that one expects to see, leads to repeated error.

As this chapter develops, I explore four locations where I contend Retallack's feminine text can be observed. The first is, of course, her hard text, coupled with the material page layout on which the hard text performs. But the other three are, to differing degrees, unwritten on her page. The second comprises other texts, overt intertexts patently referenced by Retallack's hard

text. The third is texts emerging in the interstices between hard text, whether gestured to by Retallack's hard text or imagined by the reader. And the fourth is the unwritten feminine texts, which shall be the main prize of this chapter. This last group may be imagined on, or off, the page.

The implications of fragments, earlier noted, remain a constant presence. The word *fragment* derives from a French verb meaning "to break". To refer to a thing as *fragment* inherently recognises its fractured characteristics; it was once part of a larger thing, whether whole or not. The current of metonymy inevitably draws attention to the body, of which the hard text presence is a broken part. We might imagine the remnant that once joined to the present hard text; we may imagine the whole body, absent save for the present fragment. This play between fragment and whole can be likened to the play between speech (or sound) and silence, the play between physical presence and absence. The same relation can exist between hard text and that to which hard text gestures, in this case, by fragment.

Retallack's own hard text compositions involve fragments of other texts, intertextual fragments. To those, we can add fragments referenced by her hard text, implied through her hard text, or imagined by her reader. That is, the reach of the text includes those fragments that readers themselves bring to the conversation. The resultant range of unwritten feminine text is no creature of normative cultural dictates. In line with fractal patterns recognisable from my earlier chapters, I shall show that unwritten feminine text necessarily indicates differential grammars.

As cited in my introductory "Initial Glances", among "current identifications of the feminine" Retallack lists the following, which for convenience I repeat:

> open, diffuse, multiple, complex, decentered, filled with silence, fragmented, incorporating difference and the other . . . undefinable, subversive, transgressive, questioning, dissolving identity while promoting ethical integrity . . . *mater*ially and contextually pragmatic, employing nonhierarchical and nonrationalist associative logics – "web-like" connective patterns . . . self and other interrupted, tentative, open/interrogative . . . marginal, metonymic, juxtapositional, destabilizing, heterogeneous, discontinuous, . . . (*TPW* 135; emphasis and last ellipsis in orig.)

In the full text from which this portion is taken, Retallack acknowledges critics whose ideas contributed to her list. The list discloses some of the geometries of attention in Retallack's own works. Without valorising any of the listed qualities above others, this chapter will focus on two: *marginal* and *filled with silence*.

Examining the span from hard text to unwritten feminine text through the lens of those two qualities, it becomes apparent that they are not mutually exclusive: they overlap and harmonise. Thus, when I turn to *marginal*, pertinent observations about *filled with silence* arise and vice versa. In addition, Retallack's polysemic swerves constantly jog my attempts to focus on one

aspect at a time, a recurrent challenge in this thesis. Although works like *Afterrimages* and *How to Do Things with Words* provide similarly persuasive material, because of its consistent and substantial margins on each page, I have chosen *Memnoir* as my primary reference work for this chapter.

Marginal

1. Hard text references to margins

Following Retallack's insistent practice in *Memnoir*, I begin my discussion of this quality from an example, the hard text on page 33 of the 38-page collection:

> is there any way to staunch the flood toward the smarmy
> margins I once want(ed) to demonstrate this to be the
> case but my margins (were) much too wide to contain
> the proof herein is a thought that enters the space left
> vacant the figure crossing the vacant lot the ungendered
> silhouette intersecting a collector's fact e.g a South
> American beetle that glows with so much light you can
> read by it in the dark (33)

The word *margins* not only repeats in this passage; it is reinforced by assonance ("smarmy margins") and description ("much too wide"). Margins are further implicated in "the space left vacant", "the vacant lot" and, I suggest, in the indistinct shade of "the ungendered silhouette". Retallack's text overtly imagines thoughts entering those margins. This passage imports scientific or philosophical rhetoric to do with demonstrating, that is, showing, a state of affairs "to be the case", but the imagined site of "a thought" veers – from that portion of page space allocated for demonstration of proof into the "much too wide" margins that the narrator owns via the possessive pronoun "my". Whether or not the narrator's wide margins are the same as "the smarmy margins" is exquisitely indistinct, ambiguous. The text expresses a self-critical reflection on the capaciousness of the "much too wide" margins; the implied judgement is that they ought to be smaller. But despite that enacted cringe, the text turns to "the vacant lot" and observes "the ungendered silhouette intersecting a collector's fact", exemplified in the beetle by whose light you can read in the dark.

The word "vacant" is also repeated. There is "the space left vacant" and "the vacant lot". The latter could refer to a piece of land or to a group of people characterised as "the vacant lot",

possibly those who remain unfulfilled in their thinking. “Lot” also indicates chance and gambling. The text suggests that the answer may lie in tropes rather than logic because it is “the figure” that crosses the vacancy and leads to the example in the beetle.

The tale of beetle and light might well suggest Wittgenstein’s fly in the bottle, attracted in by sweetness and, because then attracted to conventional light at the base, unable to find the bottle’s mouth that opens in darkness. Retallack’s South American beetle provides the vehicle to import, by gesture, Wittgenstein’s text, a real text elsewhere, not represented in hard text on Retallack’s page. Given Retallack’s characteristic immersion in (or familiarity with) Wittgenstein’s text, we might say the Wittgenstein text enters Retallack’s text via the allusive margins. It obtains a presence in her text, albeit unwritten there.

A curious feature of the South American beetle is its autogenic illumination. In the context of *Memnoir*’s interest in the marginalised state of the literary feminine, the beetle offers an example of hope. Retallack’s text suggests you can read by the light of a beetle rather than flounder in the dark. The feminine, languishing “in the dark”, can read and be read by its own glowing light. In my reading, this gestures less strongly to my Kindle than to my eager childhood reading, under the bedclothes by torchlight. Reading in the dark is a forbidden, and therefore enhanced, pleasure, infringing the dictates of prevailing cultural power. Maria Damon’s 1993 *Dark End of The Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry*, an influential text published only a decade before *Memnoir*, contends that social outsiders produce the true vanguard of American poetry. Whether Damon’s “dark” and “margins” are those that emerge on Retallack’s page, congruently *Memnoir* imagines the feminine as culturally marginalised, the feminine voice stifled by the hegemony of masculine power. Feminist bell hooks is another influential writer to use the trope of “margin” to similar effect, in her *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), published twenty years before *Memnoir*. Desires for the literary feminine to be read despite the blanketing dark, and for thoughts to enter the marginal spaces, emanate from Retallack’s text.

Retallack’s constructed text on page 33 valorises the margins as a great space in which to think. Drawing attention to those margins, the text itself presents on a page where the prose portions occupy roughly the middle portion of each page, commencing from about two-fifths of the way down from the top of the page, the consistent format throughout *Memnoir*. Throughout that volume, the margins are substantial. In context, this text seeks zones, material spaces, where thoughts compatible with a literary feminine can be explored. It recommends the margins as a material zone apt for that sort of thinking. In keeping with Retallack’s liberal view of the

literary feminine, those who enter the thinking margins can be ambiguously "ungendered". Literary feminine thinking need not exclude masculine thinkers.

2. Patterns that gesture to margins

My argument that the hard text of *Memnoir* directs the reader to the margins is reinforced through this further passage:

> PRESENT TENSES
>
> start with a yellow pad a yellow #2 pencil a summer song
>
> an orange rabbit a rare breeze a yellow song a summer
>
> rabbit a zebra finch etc. bring books next time what is it
>
> that you're expecting these circular semantics to say to
>
> run in circles the word exceedingly so interesting here in
>
> these circular ruins this offset press offset print this
>
> sagittal section this dorsal fin this anterior view widening
>
> circumference this widening cross-reference will this
>
> inference make anyone eligible for parole (21)

Among other available readings, I draw attention to the burgeoning play of circulating patterns of colour and object, giving on to circling references and widening circumferences. The rhetoric suggests movement of attentions outwards, circling and observing. There are also gestures to pathology, a halving by sagittal section, observations of mammalian dorsal fin, anterior view. The suggested geometries of attention arc out and in and around. Following its gestures to broadening and deepening views, the text wonders "will this inference make anyone eligible for parole". "Parole" references both speech and early release from incarceration. "Eligible" raises the idea of choice, but by whose choice will release be engendered? Whom does the reader, or the text, imagine possesses that power?

Similarly to word play in other Retallack works, the proximity of the words "eligible" and "parole" brings "illegible" into play too, in my reading. My introduction of "illegible" into the reading, although provoked by triggers in the text to which I respond, constitutes an unwritten item produced through my act of reading. Thus, written language multiplies with parole "langue". Both writing and speech are in play. Regarding both forms of language, the broad direction of the passage suggests patternings, and circling out, observing. The page 21 text recommends looking beyond the regular, moving to the "offset", and pursuing the "circular semantics" to excess: "the word exceedingly so interesting". This latter phrase can be read to

draw attention to, and comment upon, the word “exceedingly” or, alternatively, to comment on the capacity of “the word” to hold more than limited denotation might suggest. In the spill of feminine poethics, the word can hold more than its seeming capacity. Reductive dissection of a passage down to its components will not yield the excess that poethical readings can produce. Among other things, this passage suggests that meaningful language can be found by searching beyond what is patently on the page or in speech. This passage adds to other gestures to look beyond obvious hard text. Page 21 is headed “PRESENT TENSES”. In addition to the imperative – present (your) tenses – the heading references multiple versions of being in the present, of being present.

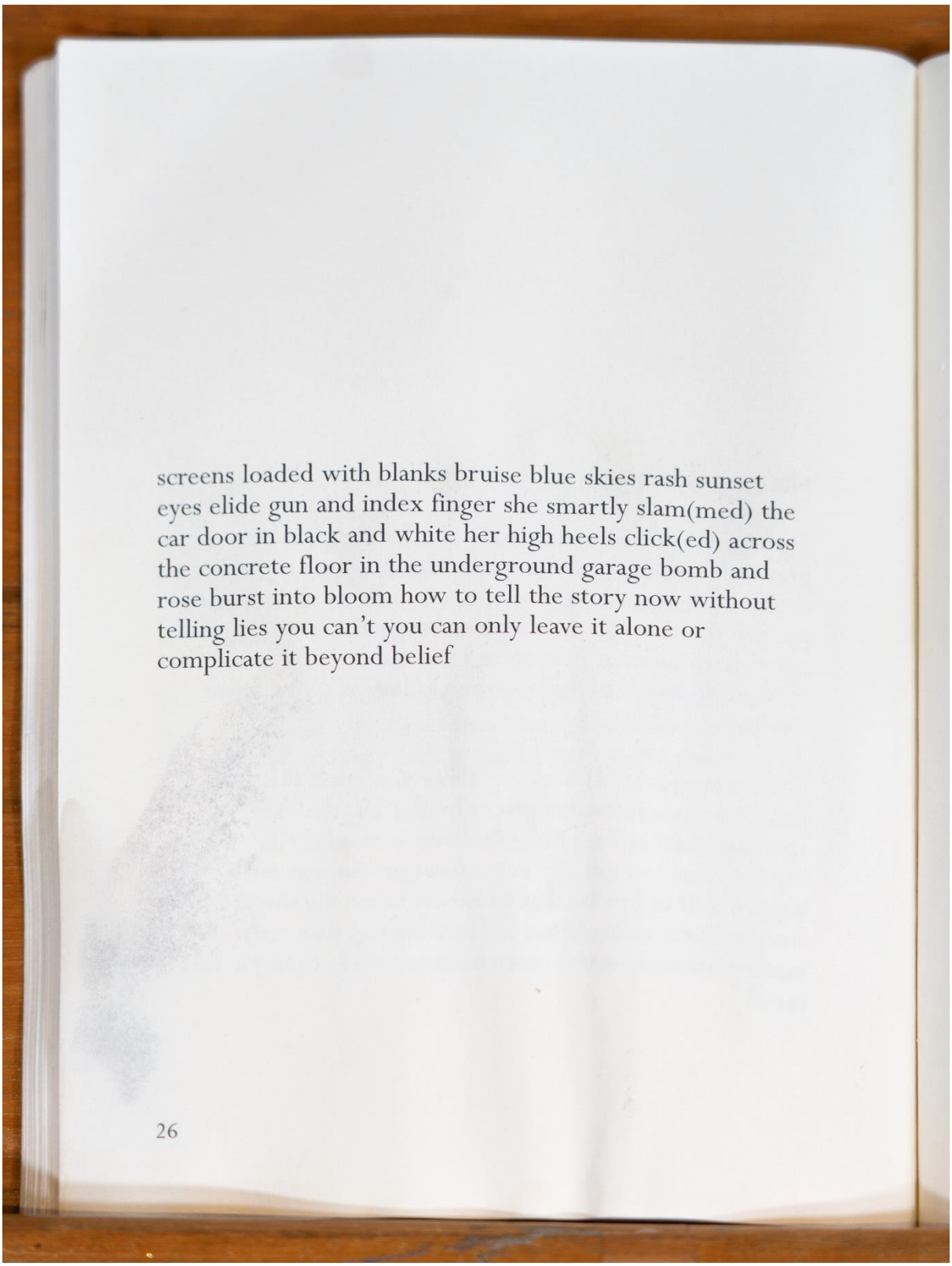
The final page of *Memnoir* drives home this theme through describing the opening of a present. That final page is headed “PRESENT TENSE”, the letters of which offer “pre-sent” (the pre-sent as that which has already been sent). The last five letters of “present” shuffle anagramatically to produce “tense”. Among lettristic associations, we can obtain flickers of “pre-tense” (that which precedes tense), “pretence”, “pre-sentence” and “presentiment”. The title is ambiguous as to whether it references a manner of writing in the present time or describes a manner of presentation, a tense presentation. Excitement builds through euphoric anaphora: “surprises surprise surprise guess what’s inside” as the present becomes “your prize” and, the text now speaking directly to the reader, you “watch your prize as it flies out of your hand into the air” (38). This direct address reinforces the themes of being present, of being in the present tense, being open to the unexpected, prizing the present, and looking beyond the zones of control. These passages are yet another example of the cross-sounding, cross-referencing that makes this reading proliferative, with also-heard alternative words spinning out at many points.

The general absence of full stops is another means by which the text of *Memnoir* is opened. Apart from the opening page’s dialogue between Mem and Noir (which is replicated later in this chapter), and the normative punctuation of “i.e.” and “e.g.”, there are no full stops in *Memnoir* except for rare instances where they comprise part of a quotation, such as the quoted text on page 7 from *Don Quixote*. Thus, the final words “it flies out of your hand into the air” are unstopped by punctuation. Freed by absence of punctuation and encouraged by textual prompt, the text can be imagined flying off the open page. The trope whereby “your prize . . . flies out of your hand into the air” combines with other gestures in the text that, in my reading, direct the reading gaze to look for meaning beyond the confines of hard text, and beyond the confines of the material page that carries that hard text.

Directing reading attention to, or beyond, the margins ties with Retallack's interest in fractals, whose essential feature is their recurrent patterning in differential scales. The tracing of a minute section of coastline produces a pattern similar to a distant view of the coastline. This is a capacity of fragments too. To signify larger scales through fractals illuminates Retallack's use of language fragments. She trusts their power to convey some essence beyond their apparent broken partiality. Applying her visual sensibility to the business of patterning, we can read the page 21 passage (above) in a new light, one that, like the final page (38), directs the reading gaze beyond the limits of hard text.

3. Margin materiality attracts attention to white spaces on the page

To aid my further discussion of the margins in *Memnoir*, I exhibit the entirety of page 26:



screens loaded with blanks bruise blue skies rash sunset
eyes elide gun and index finger she smartly slam(med) the
car door in black and white her high heels click(ed) across
the concrete floor in the underground garage bomb and
rose burst into bloom how to tell the story now without
telling lies you can't you can only leave it alone or
complicate it beyond belief

26

Does this writing demonstrate the quality *marginal*? My question begs another, namely, what *boundary* marks the terrain of this writing? In other words, what imagined space do we reference when we describe the contents of page 26 as writing? In physical dimensions, the hard text on page 26 occupies only about one-fifth of the page, the margins above and below each about twice that volume. Devoid of punctuation, the only non-alphabetical marks are the parentheses to mark indications that swerve from present tense and the page number at bottom left. The isolated, and therefore prominent, page number reminds us that this page ties to others in the collection in an apparently ordered numerical system and recto–verso order. On the composition of this page, the extent of white space looms.

On this, as on every page in *Memnoir*, white space is valorised, if value reflects in volume, in bibliographic real estate. Page 26 is verso, facing recto page 27. The first line of each page aligns, suggesting a sense of order. Inferentially, hard text has its allotted page position. Page 27 comprises two paragraphs, divided by a line of white space. Although that format produces less white space at the foot of page 27 than is the case for page 26, page 27 still has more than one-fifth of that lower page in white space. On neither page do the side margins seem of non-normative proportions. Returning to the spatial experience of page 26, the island of hard text sits amid much white space. The white spaces above and below are of comparable volume. They could comprise a chamber within which the hard text sits in isolation, "loaded with blanks". Without even thinking about the possibility of unwritten feminine text, the volumes of white space, above and below, display a recognisable compositional pattern. Whether reading from top or bottom, the proportions of white space to hard text is 2:1:2. In aggregate, white space to hard text is proportionately 4:1.

The approximate symmetry of the two predominant white spaces on the page gives rise to questions about their relationship to each other. We might imagine them as reflective, Narcissus and his face refracting through the hard text mirror. We might give them mass and, by imagining values, discover whether they are in balance or unequal across the fulcrum of hard text. What values, what hermeneutic measure, should we choose? (A sideways glance at page 27 will show us that these proportions differ, page to page.) Should the value attributed to hard text differ from that attributed to weighing white space, and if so, how; why? Might the white spaces pull in different directions like a couple, producing torque that will make the hard text spin? Do they parenthesise the hard text? We might give them voice and call them echoes. But as they remain silent under our interrogation, doubt might creep in, and we might wonder whether they might be quite different spaces, one white from another white. My reiterations of "might" reflect mounting anxieties concerning these exercises that launch into unknowns.

Through the mere appearance of white spaces, risks inhering in alterities rise to the surface of the page.

Although “screens”, the first word on page 26, may suggest a page, it references an object that is not present. What is represented is absent. And the screens are not merely blank screens; they are “loaded with blanks”, suggesting non-lethal firearms, ammunition. The passage runs on as if a stream of consciousness, producing polysemic readings. For example, “blue” can be the colour of “bruise” and the aspirational colour of “blue skies”, which is a figure for imagining what one desires. Are “sunset eyes” red? The pairing “eyes elide” suggests “eyes eyelid” and “eyes slide” through my slip readings of Retallack’s proliferative diction. Violence is prevalent through the “blanks”, “bruise”, “gun and index finger” and “bomb . . . burst”; yet “bomb and rose” combine strangely through zeugma to “burst in bloom”. Eurydice appears through the “underground” reference. The question “how to tell the story now without telling lies” is thematic in *Memnoir*, particularly with its insistence on the “now” of present time. The text eschews a narrative that will complicate it “beyond belief”. In my reading, the story desired in *Memnoir* is the plain narrative of the literary feminine, a story that proves impossible to enunciate in current cultural conditions. It cannot be told within the confines of hard text alone.

Against the polysemic confusion of what I suggest reads as associative stream of consciousness on page 26, the page number offers a trope of order. The numerical stream of association refers back as much as it runs forth. This Janus-like flow of direction is true also, for some words, for example, “blue” refers both back to “bruise” and forward to “skies”. Similarly, a reader might mentally cluster associative words already read earlier, for example, those suggesting violence or weaponry. On a broader frame, referring beyond the textual limits of this page, “underground” associates with Eurydice who appears on facing page 27, and other pages in the book. In the play of order and disorder, page layout too suggests order, particularly the approximately centralised and uniform placement of hard text. However disparate the connotations produced by the written words, they have patently been swept together tidily in the centre of the page, a normative placement mark of valorisation not dependent on volume or codical constraints.

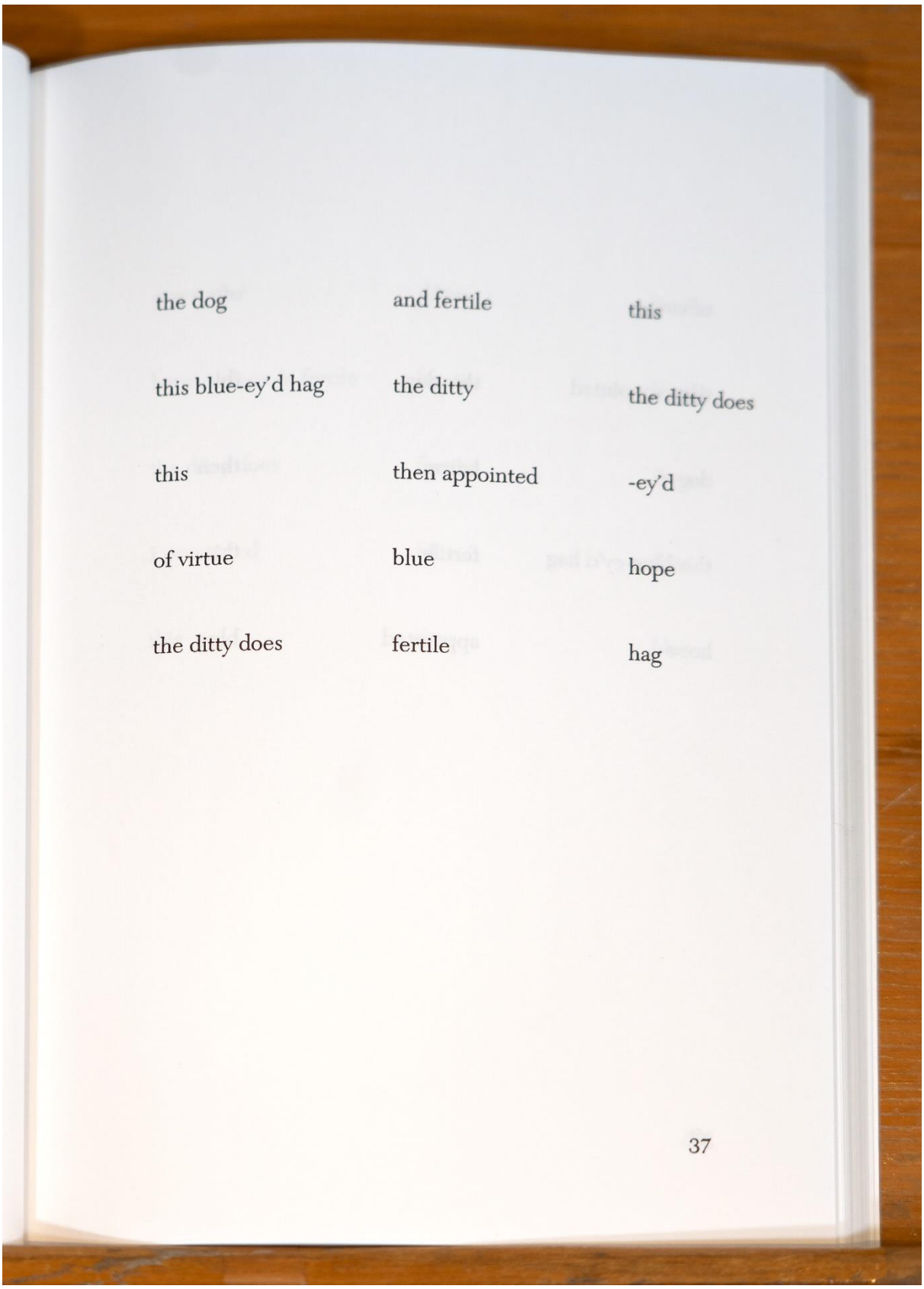
The text of the entire work references, or gestures to, a variety of stories, including, for example, Medea, Eurydice, Don Quixote and movie references. The hard text on page 26 flicks up alphabetical word prompts like a conjuror or a psychoanalyst. Readers may experience confusion or construct their own narrative from the combined swerves of the prompts and a reader’s idiosyncratic responses through associative readings. Because of the necessarily proliferating nature of this text, much of the reading is marginal; that is, the text sends its reader

to the margins. The hard text operates as a jumping-off point for multiple differential reading swerves. Thus, the desired story is not a singularity, but a span of many alterities produced by conversations between text and reader.

4. Page materiality as a site for unwritten feminine text

Building from Retallack's special attention to the margins – whether through direct hard text references, patterns that direct the reading gaze to margins, or the further swerve of the reading gaze towards the material page – there is a case for recognising sites for unwritten feminine text in the page generally, that is, in addition to those peripheral zones that fall within a narrow imagining of "margins". The imagined edginess of unwritten feminine text cannot be contained within narrowed or peripheral margins alone. For example, just as conventional peripheral margins may generally exist unnoticed, normative spaces between letters or words offer a marginality that should be interrogated. In order to explain this site of marginality better, I turn to examples.

The chunky presentation of hard text on *Memnoir* pages, such as page 26 figured above, can be distinguished from porous or fragmented hard text such as in the title to "BE ING & NO TH' ING NESS" in *How to Do Things with Words* (125). Another example of porous or fragmented hard text is from "Shakespeare Was a Woman" in *How to Do Things with Words* (37), figured below:



the dog
this blue-ey'd hag
this
of virtue
the ditty does

and fertile
the ditty
then appointed
blue
fertile

this
the ditty does
-ey'd
hope
hag

37

Despite their general orderliness, in features such as listing, both examples demonstrate a freer hand with hard text placement than that performed in *Memnoir*. In addition to margins, there are interstices between words and between letters. Such fieldwork necessarily produces a page with more varied zones of white space. Unlike examples where non-normative spaces occur between words or letters, the hard text in *Memnoir* performs visually as apparently regular prose poetry, that is, paragraphed clumps of words without early return at line ends. Lower case is the enacted default preference; there is little punctuation except what derives from sources.

There are other ways in which to imagine relations between page and text. As an aside, considering an alternative approach that could be developed elsewhere, McCaffery and bpNichol note French poet Pierre Garnier's concept of *spatialisme*:

> Garnier employs the term *spatialisme* to describe his own particular type of lettristic composition. Garnier developed a theory of the letter as self-sufficing entity existing and operating within an open space or field: the page. This application of a spatial metaphor alters radically the physics of his page. In his own texts autonomous letters (as objects) occupy a gravitational region, with syntactic emphasis falling on the *interval* between the letter objects. The page becomes not only container but definer of the lettristic configuration and becomes additionally a profoundly active space. (McCaffery 65)

One could consider this approach to the porous performances of Retallack's work in, for example, those noted above in *How to Do Things with Words* or *Afterrimages.* Retallack's own visual practice sits among multiple practices employed by conceptual visualist poets such as those showcased in the collection *I'll Drown my Book* (Bergvall and others), to which Retallack was among the contributors.

In earlier chapters, my pursuit of Retallack's poethical work has drawn through lettristic marks, whether alphabetical, punctuation or diacritical, to the breakable componentry of written words. The as-yet-uncompleted journey of attention has descended through the "foreground" materiality of the word towards the "background" materiality of the page. On this journey, I have paid attention to Retallack's visual effects, including "'[f]ield work,' where words and lines are distributed irregularly on the page", which Hejinian notes "are obvious examples of works in which the order of reading is not imposed in advance. Any reading of these works . . . is an improvisation" (44). In part, Retallack enacts her sensibility to the materiality of text on the page through those visuals. By paying that attention she draws attention to each mark on the page. Whether upper or lower case, italicised or bold, of whatever sized font, however spaced or placed in relation to other marks, she imprints the performance of each individual mark on the printed page. As we have already gathered, *Afterrimages* affords ample examples of her attention to the visual. In that work, the visual represents not only one of the physical senses through which we approach knowing (namely, through being shown), it also operates, through performance of the alterities between one viewing and another, as a trope for slippages, loss and

renewal; each of those tropes is claimable within Retallack's rubric of feminine poethics. In her works generally, Retallack's close attention to the materiality of hard text inexorably draws attention to the material page on which the text performs. In noticing her so doing, we glean, unsurprisingly, that her primary frame of attention is the page. The materiality of the page provides an important frame for her staged, hard text poethical constructions. To step beyond hard text to interpret activations of the unwritten page takes up an implicit challenge in Retallack's work to seek unpredictable manifestations of the literary feminine.

Naming the phenomena of unwritten feminine text

Having addressed performances that bear the quality *marginal*, and before I move on to address those clustering within the quality *filled with silence*, I pause to interpolate why I choose the collective term "unwritten feminine text" to refer to such performances, wherever imagined. I have delayed doing so until this point because exposure to material already covered in this chapter enables the consequences of my focus to be more readily understood. The competition represents in alternatives "blank space", "white space" and "soft text", terms that shall become clear in the course of this discussion. I do not contend that in all writings, page spaces generally, whether marginal or otherwise, comprise zones for what I call unwritten feminine text. Although it may well operate in respect of other feminine writers, my contention is specific to Retallack's mature work, particularly in *Afterrimages*, *How to Do Things with Words* and *Memnoir*. These works create expectations that the literary feminine can be sensed, not only in various swerves from hard text, but also in and around that text. I am also arguing that some performance zones of the literary feminine lurk beyond hard text, namely in the margins, in the interstices between hard text, and even beneath or beyond the materiality of the page.

Some critics, for example, Ron Silliman, refer to significant absences of hard text as "blank space". By "significant absences" I reference such "absences", for want of a better word, that can be plumbed for meaning, whether explicit or gestured. Silliman begins to understand the potential of "blank space" that occurs in the interstices between words or sentences as akin to, but exceeding, that of an alphabetical letter, or at least that is where his imagining begins:

> The new sentence is a decidedly contextual object. Its effects occur as much between, as within, sentences. Thus it reveals that the blank space, between words or sentences, is much more than the 27th letter of the alphabet. It is beginning to explore and articulate just what those hidden capacities might be. (92)

In congruence with her essay title "Reading the Form: The Function of Typographic Blanks in Modern Poetry", Yra van Dijk is another to use the terms "blank" and "blank space". For

example, she refers to “the ambiguity of the blank space, both inside and outside the text” (Dijk 411). Others, like Perloff, substitute “white” for “blank”, preferring the term “white space”. For example, in the course of describing Stein’s developing use, in her later work, of “page design”, Perloff comments in the chapter “Grammar in Use”, “Lineated passages alternate with conventional paragraphs, sentences are often set off and surrounded by white space . . . and repeated units are arranged in a column” (*Wittgenstein’s Ladder* 111).

Of course, it is true that in all written texts, spaces occur that are indeed blank, but these are not texts performing or suggesting Retallack’s imagined literary feminine. The term “blank”, particularly when juxtaposed almost redundantly with “space”, suggests a void, a dull placidity, a barren vacancy, not itself a site of pregnancy even though it may gape with capacity for creative investment. Such images are at odds with the directions of Retallack’s energies. Compared with those connotations, the term “white space” suggests a greater liveliness of potentiality, an entrée into colour or light. Moreover, through metonymy, “white space”, in its reference to the material colour characteristic of many pages, references pages in general.

But “white” can connote race, inviting unhelpful readings stained by the trace of acculturated privilege, and it suggests the kind of black/white yes/no either/or fixed opposition from which Retallack’s work veers. Like the legal paradigm in which “he” is deemed to stand also for “she”, “white” casts the page within a limiting characteristic, suggesting a baseline rightness in whiteness that inferentially appears to denigrate pages of different hue. The inadequacy of the paradigm of black text on white page reveals itself when applied to a palimpsest work such as Tom Phillips’s *A Humument,* a source acknowledged by Retallack in *Memnoir.* In *A Humument,* most of the hard text of the original Victorian novel *A Human Document* is erased to reveal, through the constructed joinder of remaining fragments, an entirely new narrative. This text play is aptly signalled from the outset by the truncation of the original title to produce the neologism “Humument”. Phillips’s portmanteau turns what derived from “human” to suggest “exhume”, “humus” and “humour”. The original Victorian novel was indeed black on white, but Phillips’s transformation illustrates each page. Rainbow might better describe the palette of his pages. And beyond questions of colour, my final reserve about the term “white space” arises because it tends to overlook imagined text spaces that occur beyond the limitations of a page frame.

Stéphane Mallarmé uses the French word “blancs”, a term that gestures to both “blank” and “white”, to reference the space where no text appears. In the preface to *Un coup de Dés n’abolira le Hasard,* he notes their importance (I quote from English translation of the volume containing both French and English versions): “The ‘white spaces,’ in effect, assume

importance, are the first that strike our eyes . . .". Mallarmé describes the normative "blancs" that surround a poem "as an encompassing silence" before he breaks with that tradition to represent "a musical score" on his pages.

But, having expressed dissatisfaction with both "blank" and "white" as modifiers in English, I suggest that the noun "space" is similarly hampered in expressing what I seek to convey. The OED entries for "space" betray its inherent vagueness with references, both to "lapse" and to distances between material points of time or objects. When a space is measured between things, the principal materiality lies in the things;8 the space depends upon their relative positions. When a typographical space is observed, the gap usually serves simple visual ease by separating words or paragraphs. These meanings tend to align with "blank". They may aid reading, but they do not add expectations of interpretable meaning.

Retallack's hard text feeds her reader's desire for meaning. That much of her material is fragmentary, that the sources may be unidentifiable by her reader and that procedural strategies create their own complexities and idiosyncrasies of remove, none of these features, nor their accumulating effect, will deter readers from seeking, and finding, meaning in their readings. When we revert to the trope of materiality, valid questions arise about the reach and frame of her text. Apart from any other consideration, I draw attention to her pervasive return to the literary feminine. It provides at least one significant frame around which the energies of her work can aggregate.

In the first part of this chapter, building from materiality of hard text and page, I have examined Retallack's work for traces of a literary feminine in four sites. As noted above, in addition to hard text on the page, they arise in the interstices between hard text, in the margins, and beneath or beyond the materiality of the page. Each site yields promise. Some feminine text can be extrapolated from hard text. Some can be "read" through gestures emanating from hard text. Some is collectable from what is missing or omitted from fragments. And some can be described as semiotic vapour, the sensed presence of text whose materiality cannot be pinned. But a common feature in all is that the text, to which I refer here, is unwritten on the page that Retallack presents. What I seek is to recognise a form of literary feminine, the realisation of strong tides within her work.

Lisa Samuels makes a plausible case for "soft text' in her essay "Soft Text and the Open Line". She describes soft text as the pervasive lingual sense we experience in non-inscribed and non-spoken lingual activity. Samuels offers examples of non-normative spacings amounting to "field work" (to quote Hejinian, above), noting the meanings that tend to arise from interstices

between words. The range of her "soft text" is representable, to some extent, in relation to writing and inner speech, and she repeatedly observes that, once fixed within written text, even as manifestation within her examples, it loses its characteristic as soft text and becomes "hard text". The range within Retallack's work, wherein I contend the literary feminine, in part, arises, includes what Samuels calls "soft text" but also extends beyond it. My range includes, at its harder end, some text that can be discovered in writing, albeit off the initial page of reference, arguably soft text, but at its softer reaches, my range includes unwritten "text" that cannot be harnessed as writing, what I have referred to as vapour. Accordingly, I cannot apply Samuels's term because to do so accurately would exclude a portion or portions of the range to which I refer.

Because the text I address is a range of unwritten feminine text, I wondered about simply calling it "feminine text", but that would not distinguish it from the multiple kinds of feminine text represented in conventional hard text in these works. The portmanteau "femtext" or even, (to borrow J. L. Austin's auto-criticism of his term "behabitives") its "shocker" truncation "fext", crossed my mind, not least because a portmanteau construction fits Retallack studies, and the latter suggests qualities of "vexed" and "fixed" (where the fixing means a form of cultural remediation, not a limiting, foot nailed to the floor form of fixing). In the end, though, I have moved from the inelegant to the longer, plainer term "unwritten feminine text", to distinguish it from hard text on the presenting page. Despite expressing shortcomings with the term, I continue to use "white space" to denote zones of potentiality in sentences where "unwritten feminine text" seems awkward, but nonetheless, the unwritten feminine text to which I refer in this chapter is indeed a kind of text, a kind of meaningful speaking, even when the speaking is reduced to a whisper or vapour. I seek a term that suggests, like Wittgenstein's story about the fly in the bottle, a need to read even into those places where no reading seems possible.

Filled with silence

In the earlier part of this chapter, I dealt with one of the indicators of the experimental literary feminine, namely *marginal*, which I considered under four headings. I now turn to the quality *filled with silence*, which I consider under seven headings. The proliferate nature of Retallack's work can be described as constellative, bursting into related clusters such as these that cross-referential modules represent.

1. A paradoxical quality

Inhering in the description *filled with silence* is the idea that the imagined space of experimental feminine has a capacity to be filled. Retallack imagines that space to fill with a silence that is characteristic of the experimental feminine. Thus, the quality *filled with silence* associates absence of speech with feminine writing. She reinforces this relationship in her essay "The Experimental Feminine". Addressing, among other topics, knowing and unknowing, speaking and silence, Retallack writes:

> The Feminine has been invidiously understood as weak, indeterminate, contingent, fuzzy thinking. At least until it came to be selectively valued – in computer technology and the complex sciences. In literature, to work in acknowledgement of the limits of logics, to break through to less intelligible forms, had been an act of poethical courage. The investigative methods of Stein, Woolf, Joyce, Beckett, Pound, Cage, Oulipeans and Language poets are dedicated to expanding the fields of linguistic projects. Ironically, it's been particularly dangerous for women to work in the territory of the Feminine, insofar as it can be called distracted, interrupted, cluttered, out of control. The question hovers in the culture: Does a woman do this only because she is so incapacitated by gendered life circumstances that she can do nothing else? . . . The fundamental fact is that the Feminine chaos of the juggled life or the exploding novel or the experimental essay or *the Feminine silence* of the minimalist experimental work, meditatively finding its way, is always bounded by patterns of dual-gendered human interest. (*TPW* 94–95; emphasis added)

Those writers she lists in the passage above, in their varied ways, considered silence as part of the human and artistic fields of play. In Chapter Three I noted that Stein silenced the feminine marker Susan for forty-two pages in *How to Write*. The letter *h* that Retallack plucks from Hester Prynne, in substitution for the emasculating Masculine *A*, is a relatively silent letter, and therefore apt, on her construction, to represent a feminine silence, the letter that translates poetics into *poethics*.

The relations between speech and silence are important geometries of attention for Retallack. They compare with the relations between utterance and gagging, or writing and prevention from writing, where the muffled or absent partner, the axis of disadvantage, associates with the feminine. Although writing represents speech, silence inheres in writing. We may choose to read text aloud, but vocal reading, in Western contexts since the nineteenth century, is no longer treated as a necessary performance. The librarian's default is silence. Books open to silence.

When we interrogate the expression *filled with silence*, we must concede that the referenced silence can fill. This silence is no void; its imagined properties include mass, sufficient to fill the literary feminine. And the situation of this filling silence is not the sole preserve of margins or other white spaces. Retallack posits that the literary feminine, absent qualification, will exhibit this characteristic, *filled with silence*. Thus, concomitantly, the projects of hard feminine text too will be filled with silence.

A poet may elect to remain silent because what can be said on a topic is unsayable. Grounded in the fundamental opposition between speech and silence, the metapoetic comprises Van Dijk's first-listed function of typographical blanks. Unsurprisingly, Beckett is one source cited by Van Dijk who refers to "the ambiguity of the blank space, both inside and outside the text". Another example is the poetry of Paul Celan addressing the Holocaust:

> The first "tension" underlying Celan's poetry occurs at the most elementary level: that of language itself. German had become unfit after "das was geschah," "that which happened," as he describes the Holocaust in guarded terms. In spite of everything the language itself still exists, Celan says, but it should transcend its own lack of an answer, its own falling silent. (Dijk 410)

Van Dijk describes Celan's poem as one that "stammers", "falling silent" (410). These are poetic enactments at a metapoetical level. Texts are, of course, read against cultural expectations of genre, form, and relationship between the text's parts. *Memnoir* has a strong theme of rewriting history so that history's narrative might be apprehended differently, more fairly. This approach presages feminist intersectionality, contemporary work to re-vision and relearn historicity of feminine situation so the future can more helpfully be imagined.

2. Silent performances

While unwritten feminine text can be imagined as filling space on the page *with silence,* it can equally be imagined as a silent performance. I do not mean that writing is silent, but that if we imagine unwritten feminine text existing unseen on the page, it is metaphorically "silent" in contrast with the "speaking" of hard text apparent on the page. Retallack's understanding of the operations and significance of silence is influenced by Beckett and Cage, two important practitioners whose performances are steeped in silence. In their different ways, both centralise silence. Cage was her significant mentor, and his abiding influence affects her practice. Their shared interests include visual arts, music, composition and procedures of chance. As I noted in my introductory "Initial Glances", in her essay "Poethics of the Improbable: Rosmarie Waldrop and the Uses of Form", Retallack references both Beckett and Cage as she emphasises the importance of processes, forms and the need to move away from unhelpful "grammars of inertia" (*TPW* 86).

Because of their long respective engagements with performative silence, Beckett and Cage each qualify for special attention in this discussion of the literary feminine quality *filled with silence,* and how Retallack apprehends and performs that quality. In differing ways, they explore the deeper resonances of silence. Examining what they contribute, knowing that Retallack has already listened carefully to them, offers enriched understanding of the nature and significance of the term. The relations of silence to speech broadly fit with the relations of absences (for

example, white space) to hard text. What we learn about silence can relate to white space on the page or any other space where we imagine unwritten feminine text may be represented.

Beckett attunes to the performative and psychological necessities of silence; he regards silence as necessary. That silence is the companion other of speech he demonstrates in this portion from *The Unnamable*:

> So it is I who speak, all alone, since I can't do otherwise. No, I am speechless. Talking of speaking, what if I went silent? What would happen to me then? Worse than what is happening? But fie these are questions again. That is typical. I know no more questions and they keep pouring out of my mouth. I think I know what it is, it's to prevent the discourse from coming to an end, this futile discourse which is not credited to me and brings me not a syllable nearer silence. (301)

Typically, the Unnamable advances his speaking journey in continual aporia, desiring but loathing speech, and desiring but fearing silence. The association of speech as a sign of present life competes with the anxiety that silence is a sign of death. The Unnamable enacts the necessary linguistic human function, to express oneself, performing a narrative obligation. We can compare this urgency to tell one's story with the desire running through *Memnoir,* less anxiously expressed, but nonetheless insistent, for the feminine story to be told.

In Beckett's work, the impulse, or perhaps compulsion, is resisted but nonetheless obeyed. Silence is invoked to the very end of the novel, which finishes with this passage:

> I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. (*The Unnamable* 407)

In this and the previously quoted passage, the interaction between silence and speech develops an insistence in which each flips around the other, a comical but deeply philosophical sort of rotating yin and yang. The yes/no, either/or aporia juggles apparent opposites until a mesmerising relationship seems to appear. Speaking about silence seems nonsense, but the diction weaves them into an inextricable relationship. The ongoing speaking vaporises direct or complex discourse in favour of speech as a body that continues to word-breathe, even to pant. The Unnamable continues consciously both in silence and in speech. Despite his averment "I can't go on", he plainly goes on. Engagement with language presents as a primal duty. Yet, even with the imperative to perform language, engagement with silence is also treasured, like a vow to be kept. The struggle between silence and speech works out through the medium of print, an ambiguous medium because it operates as a silent representation of speech:

> I keep silence, that's all that counts, if that counts, I have forgotten if that is supposed to count. And now it is taken away from me again. Silence, yes, but what silence! For it is all very fine to keep silence, but one has also to consider the kind of silence one keeps. I listened. One might as well speak and be done with it. (Beckett, *The Unnamable* 302–03)

The idea that silence has kinds raises it from a noun denoting absence to a positive condition of being. To similar effect, broadly, Retallack develops an expectancy in the unwritten portions of her page (and beyond) for unwritten feminine text to fill in silent performance. Her silent performance is not like Beckett's performance, but the point I make is that her practice attunes to his, that they relate on a spectrum of silent performance.

That competition between silence and speech arises similarly in Beckett's *How It Is*, where the need for silence contests with the need to break silence: "life then without callers present formulation no caller this time no stories but mine no silence but the silence I must break when I can bear it no more it's with that I have to last" (8). Silence is both a provision – "it's with what I have to last" – and an unbearable condition to be suffered. The narrator of *How It Is* exists in silence as in speech, in packets of both, and it seems that, for the narrator, speech exhibits a weakness, but for the reader, experience of the narrator's presence depends upon speech. Paradoxically, some of the speech concerns that silence. Speaking of silence may seem problematic but the dilemma presents as fundamental to the narrative. Similarly, in Retallack's work, white page space may speak of the realm beyond writing, yet a realm without which writing could not manage to express. The white space tells of interval, of thinking, of knowledge, of formulating expression; all these occur within the space from which writing issues. Retallack herself says, "The white space always seems to me to be possibility-open, uncharted territory. Allowing the units of language to breathe more fully, or in a less impacted way" ("A Conversation", 365). Her idea, deeply rooted in her practice, that units of language breathe ties with my comments about Beckett's comparable practice concerning silence, and its effect on the breathing patterns of his prose.

Silence can be the companion other of the breathing, speaking mouth. Without the relief of silences or white spaces, speech or writing is placed under almost unbearable pressure, for example, in Beckett's *Not I*, where the sole voice is physically represented only by the mouth through which pressured speech issues throughout the performance. The insistence of the ever-present mouth draws attention to the component parts of that physical orifice: lips, teeth, gums, tongue. The flexing of the lips and the soft, meaty motions of the tongue that necessarily accompany speech become grotesque and repulsive. The performance produces, at least in me, a desire for respite in some periods of silence. Playing at the other end of the silence–speech

spectrum is Beckett's short *Breath*, which simply features two cries separated by a breath, representing a bleak view of the life span.

Already spare with punctuation, Beckett abandoned punctuation in *How It Is*, although the work is ordered at a broader grammatical level into sections and paragraphs. Removal of the mark-bodies of punctuation aerates the body of the page. Consequently, the performative stage of the page presents more performative *space* – there are only space and words on stage, the furnishings of punctuation marks gone. The narrator (whom I read as a male voice) discusses the resultant pressure in Section 2, drawing attention to the absence of punctuation, which means the respite of pauses that they offered has been removed, exposing him to the unrestrained pressure of words. He has been tormenting his companion Pim by scratching, stabbing and beating:

> unbroken no paragraphs no commas not a second for reflection with the nail of the index until it falls and the worn bleeding back passim it was near the end like yesterday vast stretch of time (Beckett, *How It Is* 60)

Pressured speech allows no space for reflection. Consequently, the narrator's brutish aggression continues unabated, incapable of diversion. His longing for silence emerges in the phrase "not a second for reflection". With her emphasis on philosophy, ethics, history and intellectual processes, Retallack values contemplative process. Yet, some of her experimental text runs words together, such as "(sincetheEnglishhavebeenherewehavenodreamsanymore)" (*Afterrimages* 17). Beckett's tortured characters crave silence; Retallack is more successful in practising and performing zones of silence. Some of her hard text suggests that the feminine witnesses have been silenced. But her gestures to the margins and white spaces perform as a feminine zone of silent witness. On her pages, white space bridges anger and hope, disappointment and courage.

Beckett's attention to the performative imperatives of silence emerge in his minutely detailed stage directions. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, pauses between actions are precisely stipulated, for example, "*Finally he . . . goes with all the speed he can muster backstage into darkness. Ten seconds. Loud pop of cork. Fifteen seconds. He comes back*" (Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays* 56). Beckett understood the importance of silence to frame up actions and words, and to provide space in which speech and action could resonate. In a radio play, sound is the necessary medium. In *Embers*, a radio play, Beckett stipulates the modulations of sea sounds and the noise of Henry's boots on shingle, for example:

> HENRY: On. [*Sea. Voice louder.*] On! [*He moves on. Boots on shingle. As he goes.*] Stop. [*Boots on shingle. As he goes, louder.*] Stop! [*He halts. Sea a little louder.*] Down. [*Sea. Voice*

> *louder*.] Down! [*Slither of shingle as he sits. Sea, still faint, audible throughout what follows whenever pause indicated.*] (*Collected Shorter Plays* 93)

The short play ends with Henry, paradoxically, speaking the words "Not a sound" (104). Beckett's aural directions create atmosphere of vast loneliness amid pauses that develop poignancy as protagonist Henry revisits painful memories, failing to complete the narratives he begins. The title *Embers* references "remembers" in fragmentary gesture similar to how *Memnoir* gestures to "memoir".

Steeped in Beckett's work, Retallack translates to her page the dramatic tension between speech and silence. This plays out in her compositions where text points to zones of white space, marginal or otherwise. Once sensed as zones of unwritten feminine text, the white spaces gain enhanced performative stature. Formally different, they diverge grammatically from zones of normative text that can never be feminine text. Few would suggest that Beckett's texts are normative, even though, like Stein's non-normative works, they are accepted into the literary mainstream. Retallack persuasively situates Beckett's work as an exemplar of her experimental literary feminine (*TPW* 135). He finds paradoxical means of expressing silence through almost incessant speech. Retallack's hard text, although different in mode from Beckett's, performs too as distinctively feminine text. Through it, she fosters awareness of hidden text, unwritten or unreadable text, suppressed or imagined writings that clamour for recognition and expression.

In her essay "Uncaged Words", Retallack explores poethical strategies that untether words from meanings in pursuit of a poethics that frankly admit chaos. She speaks of "dormant possibilities of language, particularly when it intersects with the unstructured mess, the overlaying chaos we all know/forget so well" (*TPW* 226). She quotes Beckett as saying, "To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now" (*TPW* 226). And then Retallack touches on silence:

> The moment of zero is a pause or gasp for breath, the caesura, before/after the old order/ing system overtakes and closes down limitless space-time. It is the rest stop, the silence, between negative and positive integers of past and future. Given the force of our now (compellingly theorized) contemporaneous past, we may well need an active time-zero to experience any present at all. This is important because without a vital present it's hard to see how the future can be anything other than a thing of the past. (*TPW* 226)

One reading of white space in *Memnoir* is its function to represent the "gasp for breath", an opportunity when the reader may recalibrate historicity in order to experience the present afresh – so the future can swerve for the better. Retallack's sensibility to the potential of white space's silent realm to provide the form that can represent unwritten feminine voice grows, in significant part, from what she has assimilated from Beckett. She shares his fascination with the

deathly tense, albeit symbiotic, relationship between sound and silence. In Retallack's work, that relationship figures between hard text and white space.

Retallack's essay "Uncaged Words" comprises one of four Cage-related essays clustered at the end of *The Poethical Wager*. Cage articulates both symbiosis and tension between voice (or noise) and silence. Playing with paradox, one of his significant publications comprising a collection of his important writings is named *Silence*. "What we require is silence, but what silence requires is that I go on talking" (Cage 109). Comedians exploit this seam; a long silence creates tension that releases in audience laughter; if the silence continues the tension tends to reduce, but then builds up again.

In his famous musical composition "4′33″", named for the duration of its first performance, Cage's score directs the players to not play their instruments. Accordingly, the audience hears the sounds that would otherwise have been background noise. Just as his friend Marcel Duchamp's postmodern presentation of a urinal as his sculpture *Fountain* (1917) provokes questions about the nature of art works, Cage's postmodern musical piece raises questions about the nature of music and musical performance.

In congruence with Duchamp's radical no-frills vision of what art might include, Cage describes the kind of music he imagines as "organization of sound" (3). He explains:

> For in this new music nothing takes place but sounds: those that are notated and those that are not. Those that are not notated appear in the written music as silences, opening the doors of the music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment. This openness exists in the fields of modern sculpture and architecture. The glass houses of Mies van der Rohe reflect their environment, presenting to the eye images of clouds, trees, or grass, according to the situation. (7, 8)

Some of Cage's material in *Silence* demonstrates "field work" including zones of white space. For example, the text of "Composition as Process" is set out in columns, each line is allocated one second and some long spaces are observed so that the reader will not speak for the notated one second lines of silence (18). His 1959 "Lecture on Nothing" stipulates:

> *There are four measures in each line and twelve lines in each unit of the rhythmic structure. There are forty-eight such units, each having forty-eight measures. The whole is divided into five large parts, in the proportion 7, 6, 14, 14, 7. The forty-eight measures of each unit are likewise so divided. The text is printed in four columns to facilitate a rhythmic reading. Each line is read across the page from left to right, not down the columns in sequence. This should not be done in an artificial manner (which might result from an attempt to be too strictly faithful to the position of the words on the page), but with the rubato which one uses in everyday speech.* (109)

Observing his spaces, the lecture commences as set out below:

> "I am here , and there is nothing to say .
> If among you are
> those who wish to get somewhere , " (109)

Cage's script notations are as pernickety as Beckett's stage directions. Both afford weight to silence as to sound although Beckett's characters often do so by speaking about it rather than observing it. In Cage's scores and Beckett's scripts, visual and aural senses are important, although those senses interrelate differently. The fieldwork of Cage's scores represents how the sounds and the silences are to be delivered. The spaces are notations of silent periods of varying length. Beckett's scripts stipulate the sounds or silences that accompany the visual staged production. In both cases, visual and aural are imagined by the artist in a kind of harmony. Retallack's work, too, combines visual with aural. In 1994, poet and critic Ann Lauterbach, commenting on the script of *Afterrimages* for Wesleyan University Press, remarked, "The work is beautiful and interesting on the page; but I would be very glad to also hear it; she has clearly paid close attention to both the visual and aural dimensions of the work".

As with the work of Beckett and Cage, Retallack's work discloses continual emphasis on the binary of speech and silence, as independent, and interrelated, sites of artistic interest. Fieldwork, introducing non-normative spaces between words, features in varying formats most obviously in *Afterrimages* and *How to Do Things with Words.* The blurb on the back cover of *Afterrimages* begins: "Joan Retallack offers a book of forms, like the medieval *Book of Hours*, designed to draw readers into a meditative experience of time, space, language, the many humors of chance and design, as they leave their traces on the page." In Retallack's work, hard text and white space gesture to each other as spaces for a harmony of feminine text, some written (spoken), some unwritten (silent).

Cage influences Retallack's work with silence in another way, too, namely by encouraging compositional procedures that distance the artist from the work. Do such procedures silence the artist? Like sound and silence the answer is yes and no. Both Cage and Retallack aim to detach their work from personal emotions. Yet, affect seeps through. For example, I experience in "AID/I/SAPPEARANCE", emotions of helplessness and sorrow. The individuality of the maker finds many subtle ways of influencing the product.

Retallack admits that the artist's trace remains. Referring to "the emotionally charged character of experiment", she quotes fellow poet Rosmarie Waldrop from Waldrop's 1990 essay "Alarms and Excursions":

> In the early stages of my reading all the poems were about my mother and my relation to her. Rereading them a bit later, I decided to get out of this obsession.
>
> This is when I started making collages. I would take a novel and decide to take one or two words from every page. The poems were still about my mother. So I realized that you don't have to worry about the contents: your preoccupation will get into the poem no matter what. (*TPW* 87)

Retallack then comments on Waldrop's admission:

> The remarkable coincidence of experimental results with what one most cares about happens only when the active consciousness of the experimenter precipitates an urgency of choice, one that cannot help but affect the shape of the indeterminate elements. (*TPW* 87)

This view, shared by Waldrop and Retallack, that authorial shape survives proceduralism, reinforces Lisa Samuels's observation about Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, that, through the underlying structure of its proceduralism, Hejinian's text carries aspects of the personal. For example, Hejinian selected her age in years as procedural parameters for her successive versions of *My Life*: 37 sections and 37 sentences when she was 37, and then 45 sections and 45 sentences when she attained 45 years. Samuels terms this phenomenon "motivated proceduralism" ("Eight Justifications" 107–09). To similar effect, Retallack selected thirteen paper clips to sprinkle the upper portions of text in *Afterrimages* as a means of selecting text for the lower portions, in part because 13 was the date of her birth and in part "because the number . . . has "dicey" associations in Western culture (Vickery 171). Samuels's comment about Hejinian can apply to Retallack: "Her proceduralism is thus at least *doubly motivated* – by the personal and the literary – in a kind of arithmetics of autobiography" ("Eight Justifications" 107).

Text may well represent marks of authorial control, whereas white space may represent paginated zones where the author's mark is absent, in other words, where the author has not prescribed an ordered text. The play between order and disorder is a notable feature linking Retallack's practice with that of Cage. They share in paradox, a performative desire to closely control while permitting silences or white space, and operations of chance. Cage addressed this in "Indeterminacy", Part II of his "Composition as Process". His written record of the lecture presents in visual sympathy with its intended effect, as he explains, in italics: "*The excessively small type . . . is an attempt to emphasize the intentionally pontifical character of this lecture.*" The lecture begins:

> In [J. S. Bach's] *The Art of the Fugue*, structure, which is the division of the whole into parts; method, which is the note-to-note procedure; and form, which is the expressive content, the morphology of the continuity, are all determined. Frequency and duration characteristics of the material are also determined. Timbre and amplitude characteristics of the material, by not being

> given, are indeterminate. This indeterminacy brings about the possibility of a unique overtone structure and decibel range for each performance of *The Art of the Fugue*. . . .
>
> The function of the performer, in the case of *The Art of the Fugue*, is comparable to that of someone filling in color where outlines are given. (Cage 35)

Cage then expands upon different approaches to colouring inside outlines: organised or not organised, arbitrarily following one's ego, with reference to dreams, Indian mental practice, and others, through to "employing some operation exterior to his mind: tables of random numbers, following the scientific interest in probability; or chance operations, identifying there with no matter what eventuality" (35). In his own practice he often used the *I Ching* as a basis for chance determinations of process. Retallack too, often adopts chance procedures. And Retallack's zones of practice address structure and form: those areas where Cage regards Bach's fugues as being fixed are less fixed in her work, but her avoidance of ego means that timbre and amplitude, areas of individual performance in Bach's fugues, are less available in her works.

Enlarging performance possibilities of, for example, Bach's fugues, by means of the indeterminates of timbre and amplitude demonstrates the play between order and disorder. The disorder that may be imagined within white spaces represents a zone of feminine literary potential. Tina Darragh, close poet associate of Retallack, shares her interest in random functions, noting:

> I am consoled by the existence of the random function as an ordering principle. We think of "random" as "helter-skelter", but as a programming concept it is used to define parameters within which the direction of diversity is productive. (*a(gain)*^{2}*st the odds*)

Darragh straddles the dichotomy of random and order with an embrace of alterity. Her paradoxical description of the random function as an ordering principle fits well with Retallack's practice, where, despite, or even through, her chance procedures, poethical outcomes are produced that are pleasing, both artistically and ethically.

In "Error message", Darragh develops her embrace of alterity by finding a structure for it in the "blank" or gaps on the page:

> I use the word "numbness" instead of "alienation" because there is a sense of "other" and "turning away from" in "alienation" that I don't want to include here. "Numbness" corresponds more to "blank", the _____ that

> many of us have used in our writing. I've always liked the "blank" because it suggests that the inarticulate void is not a mass of random particles per se, but some sort of structure of them – a hidden narrative. This question comes to mind: how do the hidden narratives inform the conscious ones that we work to do or undo? It's not really a matter of filling in the "blank", for that would be merely an extension of the conscious narrative instead of a redefinition.
>
> My guess is that the blank operates one one – a gap, an error, a defective measure, if you will, of the conscious narrative at hand. The mistake illuminates. What does this then cause? Ultimately, I think that the blank throws open the nature of cause itself, and the relationship of cause and effect. For, if language isn't experienced as both an active and a defective process, then one is (by default) either passively the defective cause of what is wrong or passively the defective effect. Either way, the possibility of worlded activity is severely limited, and hopelessness literally can "hold" sway.
>
> I wouldn't like to predict the number of forms that "error messages" could take, but the notion of a "measuring blank" is one that continues to prompt me and makes me want to prompt back. (*a(gain)*^{2}*st the odds*)

Darragh's paradoxical assertion that "the mistake illuminates" arises in the context of her discussion about the structure of "the inarticulate void", "a hidden narrative". These ideas raise questions of ordering, a fresh way of perceiving how a "blank" can be a creative agent through language. Darragh's "error messages" echo Retallack's own interest in "her/err/errors", as refracted, for example, in Retallack's titles that embed "err", like *Errata 5uite* and *Afterrimages.* Darragh's "error messages" fit with Retallack's imagining of the quality *filled with silence*. Darragh valorises the ability of the space to "prompt" in a manner that "makes [her] want to prompt back". These are conversational modes, grammars of communication through error. Darragh's remarks are also much in sympathy with Wittgenstein's fly in the bottle. The unwritten spaces on Retallack's pages comprise zones of differential opportunities, zones where her jouissance of errors can hazard in earnest for passage to acculturate a more productive gender conversation. Drawing from a line in which we can sense the influence of Beckett and, even more comparably, Cage, Retallack's spaces on the page represent their possibilities of filling with silent performances of unwritten feminine text.

3. A tale longing to be told

An intertextual paragraph lifted entirely from *Don Quixote* realises a desire embodied throughout the text of *Memnoir* for a feminine voice to break the cultural spell that holds her in thrall and begin "the story of her life":

> While the curate was saying this, the lass in boy's clothing stood as if spell-bound, looking first at one and then at another, without moving her lips or saying a word, like a rustic villager who is suddenly shown some curious thing that he has never seen before . . . she gave a deep sigh and broke her silence at last. . . . Doing her best to restrain her tears, she began the story of her life, in a calm, clear voice. (Retallack, *Memnoir* 7)

The lass's narrative nevertheless remains *marginalised* because the woman is not identified in Retallack's extract, nor is any detail of her story recorded – merely a report of her having begun it. But it does enact a beginning point.

Consistent with page composition throughout *Memnoir*, this hard text situates midway down the page with twice its expanse of white space both above and below. In my reading, Retallack diverts this passage from a classic text to speak to the expression, long overdue, of a feminine literary voice. Whether the curate has cured the spell that bound her, "the lass in boy's clothing", a feminine masquerading in a masculine role, sighs and speaks. This passage channels desire for the unspoken, and therefore unheard, voice to emerge from its silence. The "story of her life" has never been told before, so here its telling begins.

If we cue in Retallack's interests in visuals and the materiality of text, even through to the materiality of the page, which she approaches with a painterly intent, it is arguable that, beyond the intertextual summoning of *Don Quixote*, the circumstances of this page gesture to a previously unspoken voice. *Don Quixote* carries connotations of delusional madness, impossible imaginings, romantic questing, tilting at windmills and the like. Given a feminine reading, Don Quixote drives against the phallocentric windmills whose blades turn with the cultural force of the unseen wind, a force deemed natural. And readers tend to feel sympathy for the old gentleman, deranged though he seems. His story is a noble one, albeit mad. Within this context, "the lass in boy's clothing" "began the story of her life, in a calm, clear voice". Her voice employs a different use of air pressure from that which drives windmill sails. In

Cervantes's original tale, "the lass in boy's clothing" is Dorothea, a woman wronged by a man. The curate, who surprises her outdoors while she bathes her feet, allays her fears:

> And so, señora, or señor, or whatever you prefer to be, dismiss the fears that our appearance has caused you and make us acquainted with your good or evil fortunes, for from all of us together, or from each one of us, you will receive sympathy in your trouble. (Cervantes 795)

Released by the offer of a sympathetic hearing, Dorothea fights back her tears as she finds voice. Within the frame of desire in *Memnoir*, the feminine voice, long suppressed, cries to be heard, the unwritten writing longs to be written and read. In this scene, Dorothea's narrative enacts historical disadvantage. Her back story is filled with silence, a feature that affects the mode and significance of its emergence into voice or print.

There are other aspects of silence, not apparent on Retallack's page, in this piece of text from *Don Quixote*. Retallack copies this fragment from an English language version of her source, *Don Quixote*, originally in Spanish. Although I read it in *Memnoir* as Retallack's hard text, there is an immediate question about her ownership, the text emerges from hybrid parentage. Her placement of Cervantes's text in her volume *Memnoir* is doubly fragmented, a fragment of his appearing as a fragment of her rather different work (skirting around complexities added from questions about traces of *Don Quixote*'s own literary forebears). By doing so, she imports language, characters, a scene and the ethos of *Don Quixote* into *Memnoir*. Specifically acknowledging her source in a short appendix adds gravitas to the import, positioning this intertextuality under a spotlight. And although readers will not uniformly appreciate the significance of that stage work relating to *Don Quixote*, Retallack can be seen as having done her authorial best to influence the constructed frame whereby *Don Quixote* connotations can influence readings of *Memnoir*. And whatever flows from that correlation will leach silently, page by page, throughout *Memnoir* by dint of the allusive perfusion she has set up.

Perfusion is an apt term to use in relation to *Memnoir* because "mem" is an ancient word for water. Mem's hidden story embeds in the sign "M". As a vertical wavy line with five peaks, the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph represented the sound "n" and referenced water, 4,000 years ago. Along its subsequent journey through ancient Semitic from 1800 BCE, through Phoenician about 1000 BCE, and then subsequent adoption into Roman, the sign turned horizontal, shortened to two peaks, became zigzag and, although it continued to represent water, it came to represent the sound "M" (Rosen 192). On this basis *Memnoir* could translate as "black water". A concomitant characteristic of black water predictably includes lack of transparency; it constitutes a medium that prevents reading what lies at bottom. Thus, black water offers another image that prevents narratives from surfacing. In other words, it marks a potential repository for

unwritten feminine text with a quality that resists that text's cultural emergence. Against that dark resistance, and like the embodied experience of the "lass" in *Don Quixote*, *Memnoir* expresses a longing for the untold feminine to be released, to be related "in a calm, clear voice" despite her long-held disappointment expressed in her "deep sigh" and "her tears". Or, to invoke another trope in *Memnoir*, the oft-echoed longing for Eurydice, as representative of feminine's buried voice, to be released from the underground fate to which she has been condemned by the representative masculine weakness of Orpheus. The longing for the silent voice, unrepresented in hard text, can be imagined as an underground flow of unwritten feminine text beneath the material surface of that part of the page on which no writing appears.

4. The slit (second glance) in the text

Early on page 10 of *Memnoir* appears this passage:

> . . . in the slit second of a single pulse to reveal the tear
>
> the tears in all the pages in all their ambiguity paging
>
> through x number of photo albums knowing and not
>
> knowing all there is not there with only a few clues to
>
> go by . . (10)

Here, Retallack's hard text reaches out in multiple directions. Memory of the common expression "a split second" causes reading pause. Is "slit second" a typographical error? Or a Freudian slit? Encouragement to take a second glance may be fuelled because the reader encountered "the spilt second glance", another near miss of "split second", only four pages earlier:

> it's too funny how
>
> funny it is to feel sometimes and not others how to
>
> remotely sense a sweet violence in the brevity i. e. the spilt
>
> second glance (6)

Retallack evokes the differentials of "spilt" and "slit" where readers may expect "split", causing readers to take a "second glance", even if for only a "second". The site of this aporia is a slit in the text, one that encourages the "second glance" and one via which the imagined letter *p*, in this example, enters readings. The consequent opportunity for reading alterities builds on unwritten feminine text, for example, the letter *p*, if placed, even tentatively, to swell the word "slit", creates a word that palpably differs from the hard text on the page.

Slits in the text of *Memnoir* admit ingress, not only to unwritten letters, but also to differential readings of time that produce their own form of "second glance". Like *Afterrimages*, although via differing forms, the poethical energies of *Memnoir* perform across an enacted bridge, a before and after of time. Through its conversation between the split portions of the title, the opening page of *Memnoir* sets up a frame of interest around our respective relationships with the past and the future:

> Mem: What's our relationship to the past?
>
> Noir: Same as to the future.
>
> Mem: Then what's our relation to the future?
>
> Noir: You don't want to know.
>
> Mem: In other words the jig is up?
>
> Noir: In other words the jig is up. (1)

For Retallack's philosophical interests, the relation between desire and knowing, mediating the desire to know, is always a loaded issue. In part, the need to shuck off unhelpful aspects of memory, that is, what we believe we know, and the corresponding need to remember differently in order to better inhabit the present, frame the to and fro of the text portions in *Memnoir*. Hence, provocations for the reader to revert, to check whether memory of reading, even as recently as four pages earlier, was accurate, create significant movements that align with a major textual concern.

Playing with the "second" of time and stirring in mystic possibilities among differential viewings, the "second sight" involved in memory's revisiting glance towards a prior event or circumstance may be brief, of one second's duration, but nonetheless significant. References to Eurydice occur on other pages of *Memnoir* as the reader negotiates, through this text, the polysemy of the second glance. In Eurydice's case, Orpheus's glance back, his backwards glance, proved fateful. This is a powerful gender story. In my view, the point is that her chance of agency is removed by that glance; in direct consequence of masculine agency, she is relegated forever to a feminine underground fate, a place where her voice cannot be heard by the living. The back and forth movement of the *Memnoir* text offers a performative allusion compounding portentous concerns about the second glance. The fateful second glance operates along multiple axes: time, tale, direction, doubt and memory. Retallack's text uses instances of second glance and double take to engage the reader with her ethical concerns.

Another instance of the doubling mechanism is the dominant extent of intertextuality. Her text repeatedly employs words that derive from other texts; they have been employed elsewhere in

differing contexts, and the accumulation of historical use funnels through her material. This sense of historical information contributes gravitas even where she demonstrates playful use. Paradoxically, she uses the past to negate its cultural force, turning the past to her poethical purpose.

As a concrete example, there is a question about the proper order of these two slit/spilt seconds, presenting an aporia as to which has primacy. Should we defer more to the past or to the present? Whom does the future serve? Is the page 10 "slit second" anaphoric of the page 6 "spilt second glance"? Or was the page 6 version cataphoric, reaching for what was to follow? In other words, in which direction should the reader choose to imagine the text refers? From its opening dialogue, *Memnoir* offers a plethora of temporal alterities, held within textual simultaneity. Now and the two thens (then past and then future) coalesce in this textual present. Although our relations to both past and future are said to be "the same", understanding is withheld: "You don't want to know" (1). The text inhabits a fluid, multidirectional temporality. And yet, throughout, headings continually refer to the present tense, suggesting the reader should continually adjust, page by page, to the moving fixity of the present.

Time has its own materiality but the "slit" of this text has physical materiality, albeit ambiguous because the gap in the slit may be considered vacancy; rims are the means by which we define an aperture. That does not mean a zone of absence is immaterial. John Cage wrote of his visit to an anechoic chamber at Harvard University:

> [I] heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. (8)

When I earlier suggested that the page layout of *Memnoir* resembles a chamber within which the hard text sits in isolation, I had Cage's passage about the anechoic chamber partly in mind. But on the page, the expectation of absence may be reversed; it is in the unmarked parts of the page that we anticipate absence of text. From Retallack's directional steers towards the margins and white spaces, and adding to this Cage's experience in the anechoic chamber, we may attend more acutely to the unwritten feminine zones wherein meaning also performs.

Returning to the quotation from *Memnoir*, might "slit" in this text "reveal" feminine anatomy? In my reading, this text searches for material signs of a literary feminine and for signs of an immaterial literary feminine. That search looks for spaces, including spaces through the materiality of the page, even slitting or tearing the fabric on which its text appears. If the reader imagines a vaginal "slit", its materiality affords entrée to a decidedly feminine realm. Of course, the connotations do not flow only one way, "slit", as coarse slang for the vulva, is a

weighted gender term. As the embodied violence of that slang suggests, the feminine gendered space has experienced oppression, another complication that requires memory alteration in order to swerve to a more productively conversational gender culture. Consider the destructive implications to the materiality of the page in "the slit second of a single pulse to reveal the tear the tears in all the pages". The fabric upon which the text displays can be torn, ripped or, more deliberately, "slit". That the vulnerable pages associate with "a single pulse", suggests body, bodily frailty and isolation (marginalisation). Slitting the ("second of") that pulse evokes slitting a major blood vessel, a mortally destructive act. Through this variety of connotations and gestures, Retallack's text enacts, in my reading, a gendered violence against the feminine. Turning to time, too, the text imagines the "second" to have sufficient materiality that it can be "slit". That sort of sensed materiality continues in the reference to tearing of pages but, as the passage auto-indicates, textual ambiguity is rife.

Leaving aside the energies of *Memnoir* about time, tense and memory, the hard text draws attention to its own ambiguous idiosyncrasies, and then points out to other texts, some real, some imagined. The language sensibility that notices the absence of "p" in "slit second" offers a reading opportunity to keep the "split" ambiguity in play. Indeed, the alterities exceed duality because the "spilt" option is also in play. The language philosophy proposition *p* that the spelling may be erroneous feeds back into philosophical themes running through this work. My point is that the ambiguity introduced through the letter *p*, whether represented in hard text or imagined by the reader, brings alterities of reading into play. Accordingly, in addition to its associated reflection on feminine intra-lexical proliferation, the space, which may be figured as the space between the first glance and the second glance (or double take), offers another entry to the space in which unwritten feminine text may be imagined. In relation to the text from page 10, it is a reader who, picking up its echo, reprises the "split" version. Although the provocation to do so arises from hard text, the particular swerve of ambiguity depends upon the reader being alert to alterities not represented on this page in hard text. Consequent ambiguity fingers the materiality of text, including the silhouette materiality of the imagined missing letter.

5. *Silent intertextuality*

As noted in the preceding paragraph, Retallack's texts sometimes point to other texts. Not all of that indication is acknowledged. Oblique or indistinct gestures to other hard texts perform a silent intertextuality, pathways that readers can only recognise if they catch the reference. I shall note two oblique indications of this sort on page 10 of *Memnoir*, one to Gertrude Stein and the other to theological and cultural critic Mark Taylor.

Retallack's text says, of the photo albums, "all there is not there". Without altering the sense, this almost echoes Stein's famous line "there is no there there" (*Everybody's Autobiography* 251). Stein's line indicates that the imagined place does not align with a real place. In a sense, this is another version of the gap between signifier and signified in the structure of desire. In Retallack's text, the photo albums provide metonymy of the futility of referencing the past. Photographic records afford false guidance on present viewing. What they record of the past will have changed – or should be changed. This gesture on Retallack's part performs a different device from the hints of absent "p" in "slit" because the text she introduces via her near echo of Stein's text is a real text. Through silent intertextuality, Retallack's text invokes and arguably imports Stein's words, written elsewhere as hard text.

The near anaphora of "the tear the tears" could be read as an enacted correction or a real-time record of tears welling up from one to many. Does one instantiation, or both, refer to torn tears or cried tears? In my reading, beyond the direct reach of hard text, the reference to tears conjures up Mark Taylor's 1990 *Tears*, a book that plays strongly to Retallack's interests. My research discovers that, in part, Taylor's title derives from an extract from the Samuel Beckett short story "Texts for Nothing": "my words are my tears" (*The Complete Short Prose* 131). Along with that, Taylor also offers as epigraph this unattributed quotation from Robert Smithson: "Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void (prefatory page)". This too is a statement consonant with Retallack's lexemic and lettristic concentration. If I am correct that Retallack's "the tear the tears" line references Taylor's book, it is typical of her work that such references lie silently on its surface, often unnoticed. This sort of silent intertextuality offers another example of unwritten text. Referring briefly to Retallack's poem "Afterrimages", the text at the top of each page derives from sources not all of which are readily located. Typically, Retallack quotes some sources, but her writings are palpably composted in her wider readings too.

Theological philosopher and cultural critic Taylor explores nothingness, and absence of language, in terms sympathetic to Beckett, Derrida and Cage. One of Taylor's chapters in *Tears* is titled "How to Do Nothing with Words", a nice twist on Austin, whose performative language theory he questions, relying on Derrida's doubt that Austin's stringent conditions of *felicity* are capable of realisation (209–10). Bringing up the "ex", Taylor opines, "Writers who do nothing with words are always ex-communicated, for their non-message is forever ex-communication" (227). Around this point, addressing parapraxis, he quotes Certeau from *La fable mystique*:

> The combination of two terms substitutes itself for the existence of a third term and positions it as absent. This combination creates a hole in language. It cuts out a pointed space that directs non-language. In this respect also it "deranges the lexic." In a world that is supposed to be entirely written and spoken, thus lexicalizable (*lexalisable*), it opens the void of an unnameable, it points to an absence of correspondence between things and words." (227)

Certeau's address can apply to Retallack's combination of two terms in portmanteau words. Her non-normative words too can observably make "a hole in language" and "cut out a pointed space that directs non-language". And in her enactment of feminine silence, she opens language voids. Retallack appears to practise what Taylor (through Certeau) preaches.

Retallack is not alone in using the kind of feminine silent intertextuality I address. It features in the work of others among her contemporaries, for example, feminist Language poet Harryette Mullen, who hails from the San Francisco Bay area, the other side of the North American continent from Retallack. In its silent intertextuality, Mullen's work operates much like Retallack's. Mullen's long unpunctuated poem *Muse & Drudge* (1995) rolls out a sassy recomposition of Afro-American-associated jive and lyrics such as blues and rock and roll as a challenge to the polar feminine roles gestured by the title. For example, this portion:

> half the night gone
> I'm holding my own
> some half forgotten tune
> casual funk from a darker back room
>
> handful of gimme
> myself when I am real
> how would you know
> if you've never tasted
>
> a ramble in brambles
> the blacker more sweeter juicier
> pores sweat into blackberry tangles
> going back native natural country wild briers (3)

Associating with the "half forgotten tune" is the line "handful of gimme", which references, in Ella Fitzgerald's "Gulf Coast Blues", characteristics of unreliable northern men. The original lyric runs "they got a handful of gimme, and a mouth full of much obliged". Mullen tweaks another old "half forgotten" line "from a darker back [black] room" to achieve her "blacker more sweeter". The erotic suggestion in the original line "blacker the berry, sweeter is the juice" frames black women (and men) into a white's narrative of highly charged black sexual prowess. Black lyricists played off that paradigm too. In 1980, herself then in her eighties, Alberta Hunter recorded a raunchy version of the song she wrote decades earlier, "I've Got a Mind to Ramble". The final verse faces down the imagined listener via rhetoric of sexual conquest:

My girlfriend said the blacker the berry,

sweeter is the juice, (hee),

My girlfriend said the blacker the berry,

sweeter is the juice, (hee),

That's the reason I got a long tall young black one

For my personal use

It is likely that Mullen, who places "ramble" and "blacker more sweeter" in close proximity, is aware of Hunter's song. The black berry lyrics undoubtedly derived from vernacular because, as long ago as 1929, the expression surfaced as title to Wallace Thurman's novel *The Blacker the Berry*, which dealt with racial identification, the protagonist of mixed race eventually accepting her own identity.

Mullen's "pores sweat into blackberry tangles . . . wild briers" evoke many associations. The word "pores" suggesting "pours", a torrent of sweat, but also the "poor/pore" in expressions like "pore black folks" as imagined through an elevated social gaze that notices a different pronunciation or simply suggests poor spelling. We can compare this with Retallack's comment about the social class significance of "h" in "The Scarlet Aitch": "This humorous phoneme has of course had a primary function in the social drama of British – and, to some extent, American – class divisions" (*TPW* 106). Mullen's "blackberry tangles" and "wild briers" suggest pubic hair, particularly in proximity to the sexuality implicit in "sweeter juicier"; and running on to "wild briers" suggests danger, thorns, even "wild fires".

But "briers" with an "e", instead of "briars", evokes the tales of "Br'er Rabbit", especially that pertaining to his tangle with Brer Fox, whom he outwitted in relation to the brambles of the briar patch. White author Joel Chandler Ross truncated "Brother" to "Br'er" to suggest the pronunciation of imagined slave narrator Uncle Remus. Among slaves, the currency of the oral originals, which may have come from Africa, was undoubtedly enhanced because protagonist Br'er Rabbit's rascal wit keeps him one step ahead of the more powerful Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear. Mullen rhymes "bramble", which often refers to the common blackberry, with "ramble" and "tangle". Her strophes are themselves a tangle of fragments that produce multiple evocations rooted in racial stereotypings and imaginings of American blacks, some by whites, some by black writers too. As Retallack does, by her silent intertextuality of Stein and Taylor, so does Mullen in her experimental feminist poetry by employing fragments that recall texts, songs and cultural resonances of marginalisation embodied in words and phrases.

Like Mullen's interweavings of musical and literary references, within Retallack's frame, her unspoken, and therefore silent, references to Stein and Taylor import their different texts, augmenting its palimpsest characteristic through silent intertextuality. Stein's and Taylor's are hard text, but not printed on Retallack's page. And beyond the specificity of Retallack's or her contributor's pages, the generality too of "all the pages in all their ambiguity paging", the companion parts of material texts, are represented in the page 10 passage, their materiality reinforced by "the tear the tears in all" of them. By either route, whether they are tears as rents in fabric or drops of sorrow, the text treats the pages as distinctly material. The silent intertextuality performs another function of the feminine quality *filled with silence*. An active reading experience always summons up more than is obviously present on the page. Memory, word associations, cultural triggers, pattern recognition: all play their part. Where the hard text indicates other texts, imagined or real, then, consequently, connotations, frames and readings swell.

6. Fragmented silences

Retallack lists the quality *fragmented* as a "current identification of the feminine", but as I mentioned earlier, these terms can overlap. This section on fragmented silences touches on intertextuality, including the silent intertextuality discussed above. But the silences addressed by this section arise from the fragment nature of intertextuality, which is a different range and approach from that of the preceding section. Recognising intertext, whether hard text or unwritten feminine text, as fragment, produces its own aspect of silence.

Retallack often incorporates fragments of other texts in a form of collage. Consider her inclusion of fragments from J. L. Austin and Jane Austen in her poem "How to Do Things with Words". Consider her insertion of extracts from other texts in *Memnoir*, for example, the portion lifted from *Don Quixote*. Consider the mélange of extracts from varied sources positioned on the top part of the pages in *Afterrimages*, and the abraded reductions of those that survive onto the lower part of those pages. Retallack's practice performs a great deal of intertextuality of fragments. Some are recognised from her lists of sources; others are picked up by reader recognition. In all these cases, those words have appeared before, in different texts in different contexts. As I shall explain, these fragments are accompanied by their own silences.

What a fragment gestures to may be limited to a precise hard text or may extend to a work, an author, a body of work, a discourse, or more. The reach of projection will be moderated by reading, for these projections involve reading possibilities. Reading possibilities are in part provoked by the text but further shaped by unpredictable features of the individual reader and

the circumstances of the reading. For example, in my reading of Retallack's work, and this is particularly true of *Memnoir*, a strong theme emerges of her concern to represent the literary feminine voice, even the unwritten feminine voice.

Retallack's plastic use of fragments seems in keeping with, perhaps a fractal refraction of, her flexible messing with the componentry of individual words, for example, in portmanteau constructions. Her practice is aptly described, as Lynn Keller does, as "palimpsest", overwriting texts producing "palimtexts", pages upon which more than one message represents (Keller, *THINKING poetry* 70–96). Such poetic appropriations speak to old and new uses. For example, the blurb on the back cover of *Afterrimages* addresses this historical range: "All of civilization to date, all of history is after all aftermath, afterthought, afterimage." The words she borrows are second-hand, third-hand; they are used goods, second-hand roses, but she employs them towards new readings, new meanings. Retallack draws intertextual material from ancient and modern sources. Her intertextuality diverts the historical flow of those language fragments. I could say "redirect" rather than "divert" but that would suggest a control she does not pretend to have. Although she seeks productive poethical swerves, she does not spell out reading placements for the letters she (re)arranges.

Some of the effects of unwritten feminine text tie to fragmented intertextuality. The reader's memory of letters lost to attenuation, or the recall of original words that contributed their parts to portmanteau words, comprise fragmentary ghosts that haunt the text, not directly represented in hard text. Other signifying blanks are constructed in partnership between reader and writer. Consider the play between *virtual* and *ritual* in the following passage:

> the music swells i.e. the music is swollen with the
>
> sweetness of virtual pain ritual pain the ritual can hardly
>
> contain the virtual pain one thing is for sure one thing is
>
> for certain one aka is standing in for another while the
>
> culprit just (sped) over the horizon spewing technicolour
>
> exhaust (*Memnoir* 34)

When *virtual* and *ritual* present in a form of lettristic echo, yoked by textual proximity, a structural relationship is gestured, but readers are left to construct their readings from the spoken/written portion and what they glean or contribute as the unspoken/unwritten portion. What is it about those words that shape up to something meaningful in the reading? Is it to the sidestep right in "rite" (from "ritual") or the virtue in "virtual" to which this teasing yoke gestures? The lettristic similarity of ritual and virtual is mesmerising. And then there are those

things never explicitly stated but which a reader, accurately or idiosyncratically, reads into their reading. Where the text says "the ritual can hardly contain the virtual pain one thing is for sure one thing is for certain one aka is standing in for another . . .", it references ideas inhering in the words "sure" and "certain", raising doubt about whether they can stand in for each other. Earlier in *Memnoir*, the lettristic move from "Archimedean point" to "Archimedea" (12) is a step of clarification because the gesture to feminine Medea is oblique in the first instantiation but arguably explicit in the second. The moment of realisation elucidates; as the penny drops, the ideal Archimedean point is infused with Medea narrative, realising the impossibility of objectivity. Nothing is sure or certain. Medea's tragedy is borne of her having been swamped by betrayals. This type of relearning historicity is a central theme of *Memnoir*. Introduction of intertextual fragments ties to Retallack's poethical purposes in her typical practice. The resultant interpolation breaks syntax, transposing past text into present palimpsest. To introduce Medea into rhetoric around an Archimedean point swerves the conversation, infuses it with an additional, and feminine, savour. For the poethical venture, the critical issue is what difference of cultural meaning flows from introducing the fragment into the frame.

An old fragment in a new frame re-presents the past in the present. Presentation of a fragment asserts, as much as any written representation can, because all written representation is necessarily past, the obligation to operate in the present, at time of reading, because that is the only available time. Hence, the insistence throughout *Memnoir* on the "PRESENT TENSE". And although what is presently available is always only partial – we cannot know everything, we cannot be sure we know everything that is relevant, we cannot attain an Archimedean point – at least we can be sure of the partiality of our knowledge. Knowledge of that unknowing deficit may free us, just as procedures of chance free both writer and reader. Awareness that knowledge about sources is fragmentary affects reading. Doubts about the source-frame of the text translate to tentative, malleable alterities of readings. And, in similar vein, reading in the light of Derridean post-structuralism comforts readers in the knowledge that they have the right, the power, to read the text as they understand it, and that other versions in the chain of significance are always waiting to be released to the reader by means of the trace or *pharmakon* in the course of readings. Such approaches should give over to appreciation of silences because silences, as Retallack's work shows, can stand for something too.

7. Reading the space as unwritten feminine materiality

As one function of typographical blanks, Van Dijk references liminal space "surrounding the poem": "[I]t is a frame saying 'this is poetry'" (Dijk 410). Without disagreeing with that proposition generally, the liminal space can nevertheless be a zone of wonder, a place where the

reader must work out whether, and if so, how far, the poem or its influence, reaches into that liminal zone. A normative poetry work or collection usually presents in a systematic form. Sometimes that form will merely comply with publisher preference, say, as to whether the poems are justified left or right, or positioned about centre page. In other cases, portions of text will encroach on what might be expected to be blank (or white) space. In these cases, the white space is actively and obviously colonised by written text. In so doing, the written text claims at least part of the white space as territory of performance. Just as when actors run through the auditorium, suddenly the audience finds the stage of performance has encroached on their space. The fourth wall has been broken. So too with poetry like *Memnoir*. And this performance encroaching into the terrain of white space and silence has well-established gender implications.

The "gender implications of the relations between writing and silence" were explicitly explored before Retallack's writings (Johnson, "Writing" 347). What interests me is Retallack's poethical methods that draw her reader to the margins or the white spaces. In her 1990 article "Writing", Barbara Johnson turns her explication of Derrida's theory of writing and deconstruction to the importance of "space" in the phenomenon of silence in relation to the unwritten, unheard stories of women. I take up her essay at the point she flips focus from writing to reading:

> Derrida's theory of writing turns out to have been, in fact, a theory of reading. . . .What does it mean to introduce "space" into reading? For Mallarmé, it means two things. It means giving a signifying function to the materiality – the blanks, the typefaces, the placement on the page, the punctuation – of writing. And it also means tracking syntactic and semantic ambiguities in such a way as to generate multiple, often conflicting, meanings out of a single utterance. (346)

Retallack's practice reflects her sensibility to all those aspects of materiality noted by Johnson, fieldwork, font work and so on. And her practice mirrors Johnson's description in the way she mines syntactic and semantic ambiguities for alterities of the feminine literary. Johnson continues:

> Just as Freud rendered dreams and slips of the tongue *readable* rather than dismissing them as mere nonsense or error, so Derrida sees signifying force in the gaps, margins, figures, echoes, digressions, discontinuities, contradictions, and ambiguities of a text. . . . (346)

Similarly, my reading of Retallack finds signifying force in the splits and slits. She composes her work with the intention that it will be read in such a manner, thereby deliberately opening it to deconstructive readings in pursuit of poethical alterities, readings of cultural difference. Johnson delves in more detail into the politics of silence, space, authority and gender power. Her points are salient and worth quoting at length:

> The possibility of reading materiality, silence, space, and conflict within texts has opened up extremely productive ways of studying the politics of language. . . .
>
> . . . "reading" in its extended sense is deeply involved in questions of authority and power. One field of conflict and domination in discourse that has been fruitfully studied in this sense is the field of sexual politics. Alice Jardine, in *Gynesis* (1985), points out that since logocentric logic has been coded as "male," the "other" logics of spacing, ambiguity, figuration, and indirection are often coded as "female," and that a critique of logocentricism can enable a critique of "phallocentrism" as well. . . . While Cixous, Irigaray, and others work on the relations between writing and the body, many feminists on both sides of the Atlantic have been interested in the gender implications of the relations between writing and silence. In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar show how nineteenth-century women writers struggled for authorship against the silence that has already been prescribed for them by the patriarchal language they must both use and transform. Adrienne Rich also explores the traces of women's silence in a collection of essays entitled *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (1979). These and other works have as their project the attempt to read the suppressed, distorted, or disguised messages that women's writing has encoded. They require a reading strategy that goes beyond apparent intentions or surface meanings, a reading that takes full advantage of writing's capacity to preserve that which cannot yet, perhaps, be deciphered. (346–47)

Retallack is a feminist poet whose writing frame lies along the lines webbed together by Johnson, particularly materiality, ambiguity, silence, space, grammar and the political relations of writing to gender. Retallack, too, references Derrida, Freud, Cixous, Irigaray and Rich in her essays. Her sensibility to the materiality of language, and her attention to the business of writing, right down to the individual letter or mark, aligns notably with Johnson's remarks.

Just as Johnson's critical works perform as feminist epistemological work, so too do Retallack's poethical performances. Retallack's work strives against feminine oppression, the relegation caused by phallocentrism. The term "phallocentric" emerged from psychology before its applications in psychoanalysis and in literary criticism. Its common meaning is simple enough, referencing the purported centrality of the phallus as symbolic of male dominance in generation, in identity and through language, but its application, particularly in psychoanalysis is arcane. For the purposes of Johnson's text, it is sufficient to note the linguistic means by which the masculine asserts ascendancy over the feminine. Against this force, Retallack strives to perform texts that operate on differential grammars. Her works serve poethics, a principled, hopeful vision of cultural change through language work. She not only points to the phenomenon of feminine silence; she points to specific sites where it may be found or sensed, and she attempts to change the grammars that govern her writing, and modify reading, all with an aim to swerve towards cultural change.

Retallack's text in *Memnoir* emphasises the materiality of text: hard text (including letters), imagined text, suggested text, referenced text. Moreover, her hard text draws attention to the interstices between alphabetical letters, for example, the otherwise normative space between letters where an interpolated "p" could make something different from "slit". Likewise, her

proliferation of apostrophe marks in G'L'A'N'C'E'S' attracts attention to the materiality of its non-normativity. Something is happening between the alphabetical letters. Mention of those apostrophes brings to mind Golz's essay "Apostrophe's Double", discussed in Chapter Three. The subject's or reader's "turn away" from the apparatus of language that represents male privilege has relevance in this context too. In her essay, Golz used a photograph of a woman turning away from the camera as illustration. Absences of feminine hard text can also be read in appropriate texts as a consequence of that kind of double apostrophe. Throughout *Memnoir,* the text points to margins, and to white spaces, as zones of expectancy for unwritten feminine writing. Adding to the depth of this imagined space, its characterisation as a shift to a new grammar points that as an important way to shift from gendered oppression of current cultural imperatives.

This is what the swerve from hard text space to marginal space does: it transcends cultural imperatives; it escapes the confining structure. The beetle's escape from Wittgenstein's bottle is no simple conduit between like situations. The leap happens to be from one grammar to another. My propositions derive support from the first of two paragraphs on the penultimate page of *Memnoir*:

> PRESENT TENSE
>
> i.e. how to get her by means of a swerve out of the
>
> grammar how it (was) is it that some thing hot dog
>
> happens from Old Norse *happ* meaning luck of the draw
>
> the arrow from one point to the next bring some one or
>
> another to e.g. the point of song i.e. cross-dressed logics
>
> fill the screen on which is playing not a metaphysical
>
> movie but hailed as (37)

The grammar that the putative female protagonist of this passage is to be got out of is marked with the past tense "(was)", at odds with the page heading of "PRESENT TENSE". The words "a swerve out of the grammar how it (was) is it that" may remind us of the present tense in Beckett's title *How It Is,* a work of great interest for Retallack, liberally quoted in her essays. The interpolated happening of "hot dog" suggests happy play, playfulness, associations with carnival or baseball game, and the vernacular expression of enthusiasm: "Hot dog!" The text references procedures of chance, the "draw" of an arrow, and the point which, drawing from other pages of the book, might not be an Archimedean point – a point where the entire terrain of the problem is laid out to objective view – but one that segues to "the point of song", another

ludic shift. (For references to Archimedean point see, e.g. Retallack, *Memnoir* 9, 12). The logics of the new grammar will be "cross-dressed logics". Dipping through this frolic, it is significant that the imagined swerve is out from one grammar, and into another. This will not be a particular predefined grammar, but one to be experienced, one that will operate freely with alterities, chance procedures and "cross-dressed logics". In the gender tolerance of the new grammar, masculine clothing will be exchanged for feminine and possibly vice versa.

Cixous advised women writers "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard" (390). Swerving from the strongly personal in Cixous's rhetoric, but nonetheless in keeping with its feminine energies, Retallack's poethical awareness is sensible of the amorphous body of silent women, the unrecognised Emily Dickinsons. Retallack's experimentalist art advances her intellectual and societal concerns rather than writing her individual body. In my view, the body her work mostly imagines is the feminine body of the feminine word, viewed lettristically. That body represents in four sites: hard text, the page upon which hard text performs, the hard text brought into play via hard text, and an imagined body of unwritten text, unspoken voice, that longs to be heard and ought to be heard. Whether she is consciously aware of it or not, her white spaces develop into sites where readers can imagine feminine texts. Such texts are not only those that Samuels terms "soft text" but extend to writings that have remained unexpressed because of the stifling gender effect of phallocentricism.

I have already discussed means whereby Retallack changes words, deals with lettristic details, for example, interposing all those apostrophe marks in my metonymic title to this thesis. Meaning can be imagined (or read) in spaces between letters, and in spaces between words or phrases. Some of those meanings are produced by awareness of the references and fragments. Careful reading of her work raises awareness of a body of unwritten or unspoken feminine voice. I contend, particularly in those portions of *How to Do Things with Words, Afterrimages* and *Memnoir* where "field work" draws attention to the spaces, the unwritten feminine text can fairly be imagined there. In *Memnoir*, I am drawn by that platform, by references to marginalisation in the hard text, and by the layout of the pages, to read those white spaces as another site that stands for, represents, the body of feminine text that has not been written. Retallack's poethics employ white space, in several recognisable functions, to call voice from silence. In this context, and we may think of Beckett and Cage in this regard, silence is the other of speech; speech is the other of silence. When speech and silence are brought together into conversation by means of the white spaces, the poethical reach of the text extends. Extended reach is a recognisable desire of Retallack's poethics, because their material concerns

lay down a challenge for fresh cultural attitudes, including that feminine voices be heard without phallocentric curb.

When Retallack concedes that authorial intent or desire will invade the urgencies of choice to affect what she terms as the "shape of the indeterminate elements" (*TPW* 87) and when Darragh describes the random function as a "programming concept" (*a(gain)²st the odds*), their terms point to *grammar*. The term "shape" associates closely with "form", and "form" tends to be shaped by grammar, the rules of the language game in play. As with so much of Retallack's poethical strategies of composition, her zone of intervention, at bottom, amounts to altered grammars. Sometimes her rhetoric is less explicit about this gear change, but even where her attention turns to other aspects, her terms tend, as in this instance, to indicate grammars.

In a recorded conversation, Retallack and Waldrop discuss writing as legislation. Initially, Waldrop resists the legislative mantle for poets implied in Shelley's "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" and Oppen's "Poets are the legislators of the unacknowledged world". Waldrop starts by saying "[T]his means nothing to me. I think of poets as language-maintenance crew!" But then she concedes "Though obviously, while I write I do lay down the rules. At least within the boundaries of my work, I legislate." Retallack responds, "legislative thinking is political and strategic thinking. It's about marking territory and reorganizing the power structure in the public sphere. Or at least reorienting it to one's advantage" (Retallack and Waldrop, "READINGS"). Legislation is a powerful form of grammar; legislative words explicitly create the rules that shape culture by governing cultural behaviour and curbing aberrance. Retallack's explicit use of the terms "political" and "legislation" discloses her poethical desire to alter the rules of the language game.

Some things cannot be spoken (or written), only shown. As Wittgenstein stated in the final proposition of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (qtd. in Kenny 31). Normative spaces in speech can be described as pauses, gaps to be filled by response, time or meaning. Between written letters, words or sentences, normative spaces ease reading. Between topics, speakers or subjects, paragraph breaks occur. After one character asks a question, there is typically a pause while the addressee considers and formulates an answer. In writing, these exchanges are typically marked by a line break. Each of these marks represent silences of one sort or another. But Retallack invests some of her spacing with enhanced meanings, the opportunity space in which alterities can be sensed or read. For example, in "G'L'A'N'C'E'S'", Retallack prises those spaces further apart. She indicates feminine spaces around the hard text in *Memnoir* as zones of feminine text. The silences that flow from those sorts of embodiment are non-normative and, in Retallack's work, bodies of

unwritten feminine text. Those silences speak via a differential and fractal grammar accessible only to those who admit voice to an underworld of feminine literature, some unwritten. They speak of, and for, stifled feminine voices like that of Eurydice.

GLANCES' Chances

> But what is a letter that has no literality?
>
> – Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of Reference"

Thus far in this thesis, my address has turned towards Joan Retallack's written language, initially entered through the metonymic portal of one exemplary lexeme, **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**. This conclusion is not a place to repeat my thesis arguments; rather, it offers exit, a chance of apostrophe, a "turn away" from one thing and a "turn towards" another. Thus, this conclusion functions as an excess, a Derridean supplement on the coastline rim of my thesis structure.

Retallack's keen sensibility to structure continually attracts her to the rim, the coastline where inner meets outer, this meets that. That is why she projects her imagined zones of representation into liminal spaces between letters, between words, into margins, and onto white spaces on the page. As Vickery observes:

> Retallack is interested in this edge between present and past, self and Other. The very title of her poem, *Afterrimages*, contains the term *rim* as a hidden supplement, an excessive syntax that threatens the stability of meaning. Retallack's poetry reads the rim of Western knowledge, revealing it as an imaginary construct that represses what would otherwise be recognized as cracks in the picture. As Retallack suggests, this unintelligible space is feminine, phallic and phobic. "The feminine . . . as we understand it in the intercourse of nature," she argues, "may be nothing more or less than the fluid drive zone of unintelligibility." This psychoanalytic gendering of knowledge (which follows the Aristotelian paradigm) is a primary distinction between Retallack and other Language writers. For Retallack, the feminine is the Other of knowledge – or rather, it is "know ledge," the edge of the knowing "I." (171; ellipsis in orig.)

By projecting her imagined zones of representation into unwritten spaces, Retallack wilfully plays through a lexicon of unintelligibility. The "edge" or "rim" represents an aspect of the *frame* of writing – or of reading – the edge beyond which the "fluid drive zone of unintelligibility" begins.

In "The Frame of Reference", Barbara Johnson teases out the importance of *frame* in reading, and then moves through the frame to consider address. Johnson's essay constitutes an erudite reading of the Poe–Lacan–Derrida series encountered in Chapter One of this thesis. Johnson pokes fun at Derrida's reading of Lacan, which relies on his assertion that Lacan missed important framing features of Poe's "The Purloined Letter". Moving through the frame to consider address, Johnson reviews the dichotomy of constative versus performative. Towards the end of her essay she says, "To be failed by a text implies that the text is not constative but *performative* and that the reader is in fact one of its effects. The text's 'truth' is what puts the reader in question, what performs *him* as its 'address'" (501). Johnson's neat chiasmus of the text–reader relationship not only upends their agency (who's on top?), it inevitably reviews the

author–reader relationship because the text represents the author's words. That she does so with reference to *address* reminds us of the essential question about *apostrophe*, namely "who addresses whom?" On Johnson's word, performative texts like Retallack's cast the reader as one of their effects.

While seeking which direction to glance along the framing rim of this thesis, I turn aside to my reader to observe that a distinct challenge in my writing about Retallack is to hold focus because the proliferate referentiality of her text continually diverts one away in multiple directions. This bubbling proliferation was what first attracted me in her essays, which I read before reading her poetry. With further reading, other alignments, sympathetic to mine, emerged. Like Retallack, I am interested in word puzzles. For example, my poetry collection *Briefcase* (2011), most pieces of which I sequenced by chance procedure, comprises examples (including fragments) of language surrounding its narrative of a domestic violence incident, for example, a constructed fragment of a legal text performed in Wingdings. Like Retallack, I take an ostensive view of language. Her poethical performances play with normative tools of written language – compositions of lettristic marks and words – she does not seek to make new letters but uses existing ones in non-normative grammars.

As I continue along this thesis rim, noting Retallack's text and its readers (including me), I am reminded of her desire for productive conversations (*TPW* 96; *The Supposium* I–IV). English poet Emily Critchley dedicates *Some Curious Thing* (2016) "for my poetry foremothers" and prefaces that it "is a rewriting of Joan Retallack's *Memnoir*". Critchley's text offers its own readings of Retallack, for example, "Euridice enters the tunnel of faith & our tongues our minds turn to the stupidity of dust our dwellings are flooded, our forests, fire – naturally – this could have been represented another way" (19). Critchley's gesture to alterities of representation suggest other available outcomes for Euridice if her faith were not in a tunnel, if she confronted the ecological challenges. The words "this could have been represented in another way" or "how to interpret the difference between you & your life" (Critchley 15) echo some *Memnoir* text that raises philosophical and compositional questions like "knowing and not knowing all there is not there with only a few clues to go by" (Retallack, *Memnoir* 10). The poethical conversation enacted by Critchley's performance responds to Retallack's yearning for conversation.

Some of the poems I have written during this course of study refract my thinking about Retallack's practice. These are less consciously directed towards Retallack's work than Emily Critchley's but they are products of my dwelling on Retallack matter. Although this is an

academic, critical thesis, not one based partly on artistic, creative work, I refer to two in their character as aspects of my critical response. Two years ago, I wrote:

> **Fishing bee**
>
> Spilled from their silver skins,
>
> fish bones collect on the beach
>
> in configurations freed
>
> from a muscular grammar,
>
> loosed from longing, celebrating
>
> their magical escape in fresh hieroglyphs.

Here, jumping sideways from "spelling bee", I represent in my own metaphor the "magical" translations of language bits, freed to recompose according to operations different from those mandated by restrictive grammars of form within normative skin. Observing that for the Greeks, "the letters had an atomic and elemental character", Johanna Drucker recounts that Lucretius "noted that if all the letters in the Homeric epics were set free from their literary form, jumbled in a sack, and then poured out, they would reconstruct the universe" (*The Alphabetic Labyrinth* 56). Drucker also noted that two major themes introduced by Herodotus and Plato were "cross-cultural borrowing and divine origin" (22). By manipulating currencies within the lettristic economy as a means of poethically reconstructing the universe, Retallack re-engages cross-culturally with the ancient, magical, iconic feature attributed to alphabetic atoms.

Thinking much about the tenderness Retallack developed for the letter *aitch* in "The Scarlet Aitch" (*TPW* 102), I address myself in a similar direction in this poem:

> ***she go letter rate***
>
> *(for h)*
>
> this half-mast letter, dropped
>
> between consonant and vowel,
>
> detained a while
>
> in alphabetical line, and then,
>
> surviving language
>
> when language washes out,
>
> she drifts,
>
> drifting

through the ache of space,

full hollow,

wholly

opening to laughter,

unpunctuated,

drifting, a sort of sound,

a sort of breath

Swerving from Retallack's work, I imagine *aitch* (adopting Retallack's feminine characterisation) surviving beyond human time in post-meaning circumstances. In both this poem and "Fishing bee" my interest forms up on the alphabetical letter in new cultural circumstances. This reminds me that Retallack's work typically offers new circumstances, and therefore reading alterities, to lettristic marks. In my reading, she retains the connection between those marks and language, even though she disrupts their pathways as signs to meaning. In her poetics, signs burden marks and meaning burdens language. Her *poethics* radically frees language through freeing its written atomic marks.

Beyond poetic responses, critical commentaries, too, swell Retallack's conversational reach. Leaving to one side published reviews, in April–May 1997 Retallack corresponded by email with Carol A. Kelly, a Master of Fine Arts student at George Mason University, Virginia. Previously unknown to Retallack, Kelly emailed her when she was about to undertake a class assignment to review *Afterrimages*. My attempts to locate Ms Kelly have been unsuccessful but I have read the correspondence in Joan Retallack's papers. Retallack not only referred Kelly to existing reviews; she later read Kelly's consequent review from which I shall shortly quote a portion. There, Kelly references the final two lines in ":MYSTORY:WHATS WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE:", the final poem in *Afterrimages*, and therefore the concluding words of that collection. Among Retallack's papers I have read early drafts of this poem, the body of which performs in upper case, each word separated from others by a full stop. Based around material of approximate autobiographical significance, it begins with a roll call of three important people who died in the year of Retallack's birth: "V.WOOLF.J.JOYCE.JELLY.ROLL.MORTON.HE.DEAD". Of the poem's final two lines, Kelly says:

> the sense of accident or chance in language is wonderfully impacted:
>
> "FILLING.IN.BLANKS.ON.THE.STAVES.AND.COMPLICATING.THE.MU

> SIC”
>
> A meticulous composer, Retallack knows what she’s doing when she breaks
>
> “MUSIC” so she ends with “SIC,” a word that means “what is printed in this book
>
> was intentionally written as such.”

On 15 May 1997, Retallack responded generously, commending Kelly for her “wonderful review”, which picked up mathematical notations in the text unmentioned by other reviewers. Retallack described Kelly’s work as an “astute, observant, intelligent, reading”, and offered advice about material on Wittgenstein (email). Whether on the large stage of poetics, through collaborative events like “The Supposium” at the Museum of Modern Art’s Founder’s Room (2014), or in personal communication, Retallack’s practice seeks and offers conversation. Because such conversation is excess to her poetical works, conversation extends as a poethical supplement beyond the structural frame of her work.

Having journeyed some distance around the rim of my thesis, looking on both thesis text and Retallack’s text, I feel there is something obvious I have overlooked, some *pharmakon* trace so embedded in the structure of the discourse that it has eluded my eye. And finally, rhyming with “Chances”, I see it: “GLANCES, *An Unwritten Book*”. This unpunctuated version reappears from time to time in this thesis and in Retallack’s writings, including referencing and listings in bibliographies. For example, “GLANCES”, attributed to Genre Tallique, not only appears in essays but lists in the bibliography to *The Poethical Wager*. Surely this unpunctuated version must represent the normative other of **G’L’A’N’C’E’S’**.

The word *glances,* whether performing in lower case, simple upper case, or upper case spaced by inter-lettristic apostrophe marks, pervades Retallack’s writing. She also drops it into her conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop, reported in 1999:

> R.W. . . . [I]f you take the linguistic model, it is not the phoneme but the connection of phonemes that makes language, the differences in the sequence. It’s always relation.
>
> J.R. Yes, a moving, dynamic relation that allows things to glance at or by one another-in both senses of the word “glance” – seeing, recognizing, but also glancing off of and past, moving on. (Retallack and Waldrop, “A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop” 349)

The word *glance* is evidently an important word in her lexicon. Its relative frequency in her writings makes it notable, each version gesturing to the others. But the oft-referenced and oft-quoted book “GLANCES” carries its own supplement, the italicised subtitle or description “*An Unwritten Book*”. What is this thing, an unwritten book? How can something “unwritten” have any forcible presence under the guise of an organised project such as a book? I concede that I have continually referred to “my thesis” since I started work towards it, even when it was only a

few scrappy ideas and vague inklings. But Retallack performs Genre Tallique's "unwritten" book into print time and time again. That Tallique's "unwritten" book can claim some state of being is supported by the many quotations that Retallack purportedly derives from it. Those fragments suggest a bodily source. Yet similar claims might be made about Derrida's *différance* – although Derrida, who invented that word, denied it stood for anything, even though its effect throws everything into doubt.

Tallique is herself a sort of shadow of Retallack and her "Unwritten Book" represents, as she does too, through Retallack's extended, ludic performance. Interestingly, its title is apparently quite normative, not a whisker of apostrophe in sight. I repeat the following passage from ":RE:THINKING:LITERARY:FEMINISM:", which we encountered in my "Initial Glances":

> Gender/genre is pure experiment. Every boundary construction is a gamble, a dare, a hypothetical with consequences. That most have chosen to repeat old experiments does not logically negate the possibility of new forms. . . .
>
> There are energetic experimental traditions in our culture. It's in their direction our lucky glance falls. Glance, yes. I refuse the word "gaze." The gaze turns self and other to stone. The glance is light in the gossamer breeze of chance, *un coup de dés,* inviting the unexpected. Genre Tallique, GLANCES, An Unwritten Book (*TPW* 133)

This passage links "gender" and "genre", the latter term further noteworthy as Tallique's first name in the subsequent attribution. I deduce that Tallique's name represents "gender" too, linking through "experiment". In this passage it seems implicit that the "gaze", arguably 'the male gaze", is discounted by Retallack in favour of the feminine "glance". "Glance" links in rhyme with "chance", and the passage clusters references to chance/gamble/dare/lucky, experiment and the "possibility of new forms". The "unwritten book" appears to gesture beyond the known, beyond the ordinarily constructed. It seems to comprise a volume outside the normative structure, in a library of alterities. What forms might it take? I wager, tentatively, that it might be located at something like an Archimedean point. Without agonising over processes of knowledge, it would be comfortable in its unknowingness. Accordingly, it would be exemplary, taking delight in every instance.

Although unwritten, its breath might draw more in the papery folios of writing than in the laryngeal folds of speech. It may refer to Joan Retallack's **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'** as an unwritten book. It will neither read along synchronic nor diachronic axes, but in liminal zones between them. Its written marks will be licensed to move position, to congregate as they choose. They will perform in "différantial" grammars that might not even observe rules.

In my reading, "GLANCES, *An Unwritten Book*" fits well on those unwritten feminine spaces I discussed in Chapter Four. In this reading, "GLANCES" takes ghostly form as errant

afterimage of an apostrophised version, a fragment of an earlier fragment, emerging as the *pharmakon* that leads from my thesis text to alternative readings. In this reveal, "GLANCES" frames up in a deceptively normative direction but bearing the troubling trace of its apostrophised relation. As exemplar, the purportedly unwritten book expresses alterities just as much as its non-normative alter ego **G'L'A'N'C'E'S'**. The lexicon of feminine unintelligibility is thereby brought home to the normative, where it undoes itself, bridging through the poethics of chance via the Lucretian swerve of patently normative atoms.

Unwritten feminine spaces may be much like the air, a freer zone for expression. In the space through which atoms fall and swerve, chance operates as an agent of creativity and hope. Setting language atoms free lies at the heart of Retallack's practice, something gestured by these final words from *Memnoir* about what to do with "your prize", with which I finish this work:

> . . . let go flick it into a cup flick it to make decisions
>
> who can flick it farther you or your friend take it outside
>
> flick it and watch your prize as it flies out of your hand
>
> into the air (38)

Works Cited

"Aitch", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Amsler, Mark. *Affective Literacies*. Brepols Publishers, 2011.

Andermahr, Sonya, Terry Lovell and Carol Wolkowitz. *A Glossary of Feminist Theory*. Arnold, 1997.

Apollinaire, Guillaume. *Alcools et calligrammes*. Imprimerie Nationale, 1991.

"Apostrophe", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Aristotle. *Parva Naturalia*. Edited by David Ross, Clarendon Press, 1955.

Austen, Jane. *Persuasion*. Oxford UP, 1930.

---. *Sense and Sensibility*. Magpie Books, 1996.

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Clarendon Press, 1962.

---. *Philosophical Papers*. Clarendon Press, 1961.

---. *Sense and Sensibilia*. Oxford UP, 1962.

Barthes, Roland. ---. *A Lover's Discourse*. Translated by Richard Howard, Vintage Books, 2002.

---. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, 1975.

Beckett, Samuel. *Collected Shorter Plays*. Grove Press, 1985.

---. *The Complete Short Prose*. Grove Press, 1995.

---. *How It Is*. Grove Press, 1964.

---. *The Unnamable*. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press, 1991 (283 – 407).

Behrendt, Stephen C. "Review of Afterimages by Joan Retallack." *Prairie Schooner*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (Fall 1996), pp. 175-182. University of Nebraska Press. Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40634361 Accessed: 26-09-2020 03:07 UTC

Bénabou, Marcel. *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books*. Translated by David Kornacker, U of Nebraska P, 1996.

Bergvall, Caroline. *Éclat*. Sound & Language, 1996.

---. "Foreword." *I'll Drown my Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*, edited by Caroline Bergvall and others. Les Figues Press, 2012.

Black, Max. *A Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. Cornell UP, 1964.

Blom, Ina. *On the Style Site: Art, Sociality and Media Culture*. Sternberg Press, 2007.

Bohm, David. *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. Routledge/Kegan Paul, 1980.

Bök, Christian. *Eunoia.* Coach House Books, 2009.

Brand, Gerd. *The Essential Wittgenstein*. Basic Books, 1979.

Braune, Sean. "From Lucretian Atomic Theory to Joycean Etymic Theory". *Journal of Modern Literature,* vol. 33, no. 4, Summer 2010, pp. 167–81.

Cage, John. *Silence*. Wesleyan UP, 2011.

Calvino, Italo. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Minerva, 1992.

Campbell, David A. *Loeb Classical Library, Volume III: Greek Lyric*. Harvard UP, 1991.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Penguin Classics, 1998.

Carruthers, A. J. *Notational Experiments in North American Long Poems, 1960 – 2011*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

---. "Procedural Ecologies: Joan Retallack's "Archimedes' New Light"". *Contemporary Women's Writing.* Oxford University Press, 2016.

Certeau, Michel de. *The Mystic Fable*. Translated by Michael B. Smith, U of Chicago P, 1992.

Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de. *Don Quixote*. Translated by John Ormsby, LimpidSoft, www.limpidsoft.com/small/donquixote.pdf

Cha, Theresa H. K. *Dictee*. U of California P, 2001.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa". *Continental Aesthetics*, edited by Richard Kearney and David Rasmussen, Blackwell Publishers, 2001, pp. 388 - 399.

Critchley, Emily. *Some Curious Thing*. Barque Press, 2016.

Culler, Jonathan. "The Linguistic Foundation". *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and M Ryan, 2nd ed., Blackwell, 2004 (56 – 58).

---. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. Routledge, 2001.

cummings, e. e. *Selected Poems*. W. W. Norton, 1994.

Damon, Maria. *Dark End of The Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry*. U of Minnesota P, 1993.

Darragh, Tina. *a(gain)^{2}st the odds*. Potes and Poets Press, 1989.

---. *Dream Rim Instructions*. Drogue Press, 1999.

---. *on the corner to off the corner*. Sun & Moon Press, 1981.

---. *Striking Resemblance*. Burning Deck, 1989.

Derrida, Jacques. "Différance". *Literary theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2004 (278 – 299).

---. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson, The Athlone Press, 1981.

---. *Glas.* Translated by John P. Leavey, Jr, and Richard Rand. U of Nebraska P, 1986.

---. "Of Grammatology". *Literary theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2004 (300 -331).

---. "Plato's Pharmacy". *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson, U of Chicago P, 1981, pp. 63 - 172.

---. "Semiology and Grammatology". *Literary theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2004 (332 – 339).

Devenish, Alan. "Spd of Snd. Grace of Lt: Joan Retallack's "WESTERN CIV" and the "Cultural Logic" of the Postmodern Poem Author(s)". *Contemporary Literature*, Autumn, 1994, Vol. 35, No. 3, Autumn, 1994, (547-566). University of Wisconsin Press Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1208695

Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. Oxford UP, 1966.

"Diffuse", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Dijk, Yra van. "Reading the Form: The Function of Typographic Blanks in Modern Poetry". *Word & Image*, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 407–15. doi:10.1080/02666286.2011.589569

Donkel, Douglas L. *The Understanding of Difference in Heidegger and Derrida*. Peter Long Publishing, 1992.

Donne, John. "The Sunne Rising". *The Poems of John Donne.* edited by Herbert Grierson, Oxford UP, 1964 (10).

Drucker, Johanna. *The Alphabetic Labyrinth*. Thames and Hudson, 1995.

---. *The Visible Word*. U Chicago P, 1994.

Ensler, Eve. *The Vagina Monologues*. Ballantine Books, 2018.

"Etiolation", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Felman, Shoshana. *The Literary Speech Act.* Cornell UP, 1983.

"Form", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Fraser, Kathleen. *Translating the Unspeakable.* U of Alabama P, 2000

Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Oxford UP, 1999.

---. "The Uncanny". *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2004 (418 – 430).

Gisborne, Nikolas. *The Event Structure of Perception Verbs.* Oxford UP, 2010.

Golz, Sabine I. "Apostrophe's Double". *Konturen*, vol. 10, pp. 22–53, 2019. doi:10.5399/uo/konturen.10.0.4509.

"Grammar", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

"H", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Hatlen, Burton. "Joan Retallack: A Philosopher among the Poets, a Poet among the Philosophers". *American Poetry of the 1990s*, special issue of *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 42, no. 2, , pp. 347–75. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1209126.

H. D. *Sea Garden*. Constable and Company, 1916.

Healy, Randolph. "The Eighteenth Letter". *Lynx: Poetry from Bath*, no. 13, December 1999. www.dgdclynx.plus.com/lynx/lynx138.html.

Hejinian, Lyn. *The Language of Inquiry*. U of California P, 2000.

"Write", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Holy Bible. Eyre and Spottiswoode (Publishers) Limited. (King James version, undated).

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press, 1984.

Howe, Susan. *Singularities*. Wesleyan Poetry, 1990.

---. Cover endorsement. *Think of One*, by Peter Inman, Potes & Poets Press, 1986.

Inman, Peter. *at. least*. Krupskaya, 1999.

---. *Platin*. Sun & Moon Press, 1979.

---. *Red Shift*. Roof Books, 1988.

---. *Think of One*. Potes & Poets Press, 1986.

Johnson, Barbara. "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida". *Yale French Studies*, no. 55/56, pp. 457–505, doi:10.2307/2930445.

---. "Writing". *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Joyce, James. *Finnegan's Wake*. Faber and Faber, 1939.

---. *Ulysses.* Penguin Classics, 2000.

Keller, Lynn. "FFFFFalling with Poetry: The Centrifugal Classroom." *Poetry and Pedagogy*, edited by Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

---. "Fields of Pattern-Bounded Unpredictability: Recent Palimptexts by Rosmarie Waldrop and Joan Retallack". *American Poetry of the 1990s*, special issue of *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 42, no. 2, Summer, 2001, pp. 376–412. www.jstor.org/stable/1209127.

---. *THINKING poetry.* U of Iowa P, 2010.

Kelly, Carol A. Essay review of "Afterrimages", 15 May 1997. Joan Retallack's papers, Joan Retallack's possession.

Kenny, Anthony. *The Wittgenstein Reader*. Blackwell, 1994.

Kinnahan, Linda A. *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry and Contemporary Discourse.* U of Iowa P, 2004.

Kinzer, Greg. "Excuses and Other Nonsense: Joan Retallack's 'How to Do Things with Words'". *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 47, no. 1, Spring, 2006, 62–90. JSTOR. www.jstor.org/stable/4489148.

Klagge, James C. *Simply Wittgenstein*. e-book, Simply Charly, 2016.

Kristeva, Julie. "An Essay on Abjection". *Powers of Horror*, translated by Leon Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1982.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. Translated by Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton and Company, 2006.

---. "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud". 1957. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed., Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004.

Lauterbach, Ann. Review of *Afterrimages* for Wesleyan UP. 25 March 1994. Joan Retallack's papers. Joan Retallack's possession.

Leavey, John P., Jr. *Glassary.* U of Nebraska P, 1986.

Levin Becker, Daniel. *Many Subtle Channels: In Praise of Potential Literature.* e-book, Harvard UP, 2012.

Lucretius. *De Rerum Natura.* Translated by Brad Inwood. *The Epicurus Reader*, edited by Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, Hackett, 1994.

Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Oeuvres complètes*. Gallimard, 1971.

---. *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard / A Roll of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance.* Translated by Robert Bononno and Jeff Clark, Wave Books, 2015.

"Marriage", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

"Maternity", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

"Matrimony", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

McAfee, Noëlle. "Feminist Philosophy". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2018, plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/feminist-philosophy. Accessed 21 August 2019.

McCaffery, Steve and bpNichol. *Rational Geomancy.* Talonbooks, 1992.

Milne, A. A. *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Egmont UK, 2004.

Mullen, Harryette. *Muse & Drudge*. Singing Horse, 1995.

"Name", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Nietzsche, Friedrich. “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense”. *Literary theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Olson, S. Douglas. *Loeb Classical Library, Volume V: Athenaeus: The Learned Banqueters*. Harvard UP, 2009.

Osman, Jena. Cover endorsement to *Procedural Elegies/Western Civ Cont’d.* Roof Books, 2010.

---. “Gumshoe Poetry.” *Poetry and Pedagogy*, edited by Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

“Ostensible”, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

“Parenthesis”, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

“Patrimony”, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Perec, Georges. *A Void*. Translated by Gilbert Adair. Vintage, 2008.

“Perform”, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Perloff, Marjorie. “Afterimages: Revolution of the (Visible) Word”. *Experimental – Visual – Concrete: Avant-Garde Poetry Since the 1960s*, edited by K. David Jackson, Eric Vos and Johanna Drucker. Rodopi, 1996.

---. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. Princeton UP, 1981.

---. *Wittgenstein’s Ladder and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*. U of Chicago P, 1996.

Phillips, Tom. *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel.* 4th ed., Thames and Hudson, 2005.

Pinker, Steven. *The Language Instinct*. Penguin, 1994.

Plato. *The Phaedrus*. Translated by J. Wright, MacMillan, 1921.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *Selected Tales*. Oxford UP, 2008.

---. “X-ing a Paragrab.” *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*. Vol 4, 260 – 266. Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, https://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/xingc.htm Accessed 5 October 2020.

Pound, Ezra. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Faber and Faber, 1954.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse.* Indiana UP, 1977.

“Prof. Nikolas Gisborne – What’s Grammar For?” *YouTube*, uploaded by the U of Edinburgh, 8 May 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=myvD96EQx9s&t=14s.

Rasula, Jed. *Syncopations*. U of Alabama P, 2004.

Raworth, Tom. *Collected Poems*. Carcanet Press, 2003.

Report of confidential reader for Wesleyan UP on script of *Afterrimages*. Undated. Joan Retallack’s papers. Joan Retallack’s possession.

Retallack, Joan. *Afterrimages.* UP of New England, 1995.

---. "A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop". *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1999, pp. 329–77. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1208882. Accessed 17 Feb. 2020.

---. "Archimedes' New Light." *I'll Drown my Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*, edited by Caroline Bergvall and others. Les Figues Press, 2012.

---. *Circumstantial Evidence.* Sultan of Swat Books, 1985.

---. "Conversation with Peter Inman". *Washington Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, August/September 1989.

---. Cover endorsement. *a(gain)2st the odds*, by Tina Darragh, Potes and Poets Press, 1989.

---. Cover endorsement. *Red Shift*, by P. Inman, Roof Books, 1988.

---. Email to Carol Kelly. 14 April 1997. Joan Retallack's papers. Joan Retallack's possession.

---. Email to Carol Kelly. 15 May 1997. Joan Retallack's papers. Joan Retallack's possession.

---. *Errata 5uite.* Edge Books, 1993.

---. *Gertrude Stein: Selections*. Edited and Introduction by Joan Retallack, U of California P, 2008.

---. *How to Do Things with Words.* Sun and Moon Classics, 1998.

---. *Memnoir*. Post-Apollo Press, 2004.

---. *Mongrelisme*. Paradigm Press, 1999.

---. *Musicage*. Wesleyan UP, 1996.

---. *The Poethical Wager*. U of California P, 2003.

---. *Procedural Elegies/Western Civ Cont'd*. Roof Books, 2010.

---. "The Reinvention of Truth". 2007. *How2*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2007, www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_1/letters/pdfs/retallackreinvention.pdf.

---. *The Supposium*. Litmus Press, 2018.

---. "What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?" *Jacket*, no. 32, April 2007, jacketmagazine.com/32/p-retallack.shtml.

---. "READINGS: Continuing Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop". *How2*, vol. 1, no. 8, 2002. www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_8_2002/current/readings/retallack.htm.

Retallack, Joan and Juliana Spahr. *Poetry and Pedagogy.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan. "The Implied Order: Structuralism". *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed., Blackwell, 2004.

Royle, Nicholas. *Jacques Derrida.* Routledge, 2003.

Samuels, Lisa. "Eight Justifications for Canonizing Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*". *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1997, pp. 103–19.

---. "If Meaning Shaped Reading, and Leslie Scalapino's Way". *Qui Parle*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2001, pp. 179–200.

---. *Mama Mortality Corridos.* Holloway Press, 2010.

---. "Soft Text and the Open Line". *Axon*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2018, axonjournal.com.au/issue-14/soft-text-and-open-line.

---. *Tomorrowland.* Shearsman Books, 2009.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. "Course in General Linguistics". *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Scalapino, Leslie. *Way.* Green Integer, 1992.

Schmidt, Michael. *The Great Modern Poets*. Quercus Books, 2014.

Searle, John. *Minds, Brains and Science*. Harvard UP, 1984.

Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet.*

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Ode to the West Wind". *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, edited by A Quiller-Couch, Oxford UP, 1973.

Silliman, Ronald. *The New Sentence*. Roof, 1987.

"Space", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Spahr, Juliana. *Everybody's Autonomy.* U of Alabama P, 2001.

Spender, Dale. *Man Made Language*. Routledge/Kegan Paul, 1981.

Staten, Henry. *Wittgenstein and Derrida*. U of Nebraska P, 1985.

Stein, Gertrude. *How to Write.* Dover Publications, 1975.

---. *Lectures in America*. Beacon Press, 1935.

---. "Sacred Emily". 1922. *Geography and Plays*. Something Else Press, 1968.

---. *Tender Buttons*. 1914. Sun & Moon Press, 1990.

Taylor, Mark C. *Tears*. State U of New York P, 1990.

Vickery, Ann. *Leaving Lines of Gender.* Wesleyan UP, 2000.

"Vocal", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

"Voice", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

"Vowel", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Walpert, Bryan. “AIDS and the Postmodern Subject: Joan Retallack’s AID/I/SAPPEARANCE”. *Poetics Today*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2006, pp. 693–710.

Welehan, Imelda. *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to “Post-Feminism”*. New York UP, 1995.

Williams, William Carlos. *Spring and All.* New Directions Publishing, 2011.

“Wing-ding”, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *The Blue and Brown Books*. 1958. Basil Blackwell, 1964.

---. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, Blackwell Publishing, 2009.

“Word”, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

“Write”, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

“X”, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, (1989).

Zukofsky, Louis. *“A”*. U of California P, 1978.

---. *Prepositions: Collected Critical Essays*. U of California P, 1981.