

## *Introduction*

### *Poetry, Modernity, Crisis*

The idea of poetry as a genre in relation to crisis is nothing new. Commentators have assumed a natural link between poetry and crisis since at least 1897, when the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé declared his infamous “*crise de vers*.” From Mallarmé’s vantage, the end of the nineteenth century was witnessing a crisis in ideas that was itself related to a crisis in society on the cusp of the twentieth century. Poetry, if it were to remain relevant, would now need to find a shorthand through which to encode the dislocations and contradictions of modernity’s reigning social and economic order: Industrial capitalism. It would need to establish idioms that were irreducible to the communicative demands of an emerging commodity culture, yet still firmly rooted in the ground of contemporary social experience.<sup>1</sup> Roughly one hundred and twenty years later, the forms of sociality, political organization, and financial accumulation that defined Mallarmé’s *fin-de-siècle* world have been steadily and irremediably transformed. Capitalism – modernity’s persistent underlying economic logic – has continued to morph through successive stages, punctuated by cycles of growth and retraction, forcing steady social adaptation at every turn. At the same time, the conception of poetry as a genre in relation to the nagging sense of crisis wrought by this unceasing state of flux and transformation has only deepened, raising once again the question of the specific relationship between poetry and crisis.

This book charts the linkages between these two terms as it investigates a few of the many ways poetry, as a set of linguistic forms and cultural practices, has engaged iterations of crisis – economic, cultural, and epistemological – that have occurred throughout, and indeed become synonymous with, modernity. The relationship between poetry and crisis is far from being circumstantial. In modern societies, poetry becomes a means of lending *form* to crisis, rendering it socially and aesthetically legible. Poetry, perhaps more than any other process of forming, immediately raises questions of language’s role in shaping the social. As a set of

self-aware language-based operations, poems interpose their formal aesthetic arrangements between their reader and any semantic content they carry, confronting their reader with their status *as* language. Poetry, then, is inherently social and material; poems, as events that take place in language, are vitally attuned to language's social ontology, its embeddedness in practice and custom, institutions and movements, patterns and assumptions, networks and modes of exchange. Poems, moreover, have often been enlisted to register and document moments when language's social ontology breaks down, changes tack, or morphs into something new. Crisis becomes a shorthand for such moments, marking historical rupture points when a given mode of social organization, with its linguistic operations, becomes arrested in its normal functioning, and thus exposes itself to view.

*Poetry and the Limits of Modernity* poses the question of poetry's relationship to crisis in the context of the Depression 1930s, when the growth-based model of Fordist capitalism – and with it the progressive, developmentalist logic associated with the modern, liberal nation – found itself beset by system-imperiling setbacks and limitations. From the vantage point of the early 1930s, all of the indicators – falling GDP, curtailed industrial production, widespread bank closures, surging unemployment – suggested that this intricately networked system was on the verge of collapse: Industrial capitalism seemed for the first time to be genuinely imperiled.<sup>2</sup> According to the conventional narrative, the Depression constitutes a neatly cordoned-off decade or so between the World Wars, a period bookended by the October 1929 stock market crash on one end and the gradual recovery through the New Deal engineering of the Keynesian state and the mass mobilization of the defense industry in preparation for war on the other. Rather than accepting this neatly bounded account, though, I propose that the forms of crisis associated with the Depression constitute an ongoing expression of modernity as such. According to this revisionist narrative, crisis has become normalized within US-American culture in the form of a set of shared experiences of ongoing upheaval, as we struggle to reposition ourselves amid the fluctuations and disparities of life (dis)organized by capitalism.

Rather than amounting to an aberration from the normal functioning of modernity, the crisis signaled by the Depression occurred as part of a lived ontology, one that has become synonymous with a generalized, even culture-wide set of affects and experiences. This idea is summed up in Lauren Berlant's notion of "crisis ordinariness," according to which "[t]he present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another" (7). Crisis, for Berlant, "is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process

embedded in the ordinary” (10). The lack of exceptionality attached to crisis in Berlant’s model suggests that events that may be experienced as deviations from the routinized functioning of market-based modernity – such as the Depression of the 1930s, the post-1973 recession, or the post-2008 “economic downturn” – are in fact indicators of perennial cycles of economic reorganization. Such cycles never occur in isolation from their social and cultural contexts; as Annie McClannahan sums up the effects of the post-2008 recession, a “sense of crisis has become both the ambient context and the manifest content of cultural production, social experience, and economic life in the United States” (15). If living with crisis has become a normalized aspect of social life in the early twenty-first century, parallels to such a social experience must be sought out in earlier historical moments, such as the Depression of the 1930s.

In the approach to its centenary, amid our own not-quite-unprecedented forms of precarity, accumulation through dispossession, structural unevenness, ecological disaster, and media technologies whose social impacts (positive *and* negative) we are only beginning to grasp, the 1930s Depression feels more urgently contemporary, and the project of historicizing and interpreting it more pressing, than at any previous moment. My title’s use of the phrase “Depression America” thus suggests not an exceptionalistic or nostalgic notion of the US-American nation, but an acknowledgment of the relevance of the phrase in suggesting a set of ongoing affects and experiences. As a term summing up the way in which system-wide economic contradictions become social realities, “crisis” furnishes a practical shorthand for this experience of American Depression as an economic and cultural phenomenon associated with an unsettling of the progressive notion of modernity and its ideological expressions. In her account of the 1930s Depression, Jani Scandura uses the phrase “depressive modernity” to suggest what she describes as “a modernity that moves neither forward nor backward, but idles, trembling, face-to-face with the fallout of progress” (3). In staging an overlap between economic and affective registers, Scandura’s “depressive modernity” accounts for the process by which crisis-driven instability becomes personalized. Along similar lines, I adopt “crisis” as my keyword here due to its peculiar ability to index the points of intersection and overlap between the economic, the social, the material, and the poetic. Crisis names a general ontological condition of modernity, as well as resonating with the more particular usages I survey in what follows. More specifically, crisis suggests a significant overlap between the sphere of political economy, where it names inbuilt, cyclical forms of destabilization and devaluation endemic to

modernity, and the sphere of aesthetic (and particularly poetic) practice, where it implies a breakdown in the previously taken-for-granted means and techniques by which the arts can be said to intervene in the social. Raymond Williams suggests such an overlap between the social and the aesthetic when he adopts the term “crisis” to account for a widespread sense of rupture within modernity: “Since the late nineteenth century, crises of technique – which can be isolated as problems of the ‘medium’ or of the ‘form’ – have been directly linked with a sense of crisis in the relationship of art to society” (*Marxism* 163). Williams makes it clear that diagnoses of crisis occurring within particular cultural forms – such as Mallarmé’s “*crise de vers*” or the various attestations to a Depression-era crisis in literary language that I survey below – are in fact expressions of a more generalized sense of crisis that occurs as the linkages mooring the aesthetic to its social and material underpinnings are subjected to the exigency of adapting to constant systemic change.

In my application, then, the term “crisis” enables me to gauge and assess the interrelationships between poetry and the social during a particularly pronounced period of upheaval and reorganization. It is not, however, my intention to posit a singular model of crisis and then retroactively read the poetries of the period back into it. Instead, I read across a broad spectrum of poetic texts by writers hailing from an array of class, racial, regional, and cultural backgrounds and embracing a variety of aesthetic and political positions to discover how a range of poetic forms and styles became engaged in documenting and inscribing crisis. Viewing the Depression decade’s poetic output through this notion of overlapping forms of historical crisis – economic, political, cultural, and epistemological – reveals the many linkages running through the work of the period’s poets, who, beyond their historical coincidence, shared a project of discovering and elaborating forms and idioms capable of encoding economic and cultural rupture. The Depression exposed the fault lines within a partially achieved modernity and revealed the nation’s “combined and uneven development” – the coexistence of the premodern and the hypermodern – to be an inbuilt effect of the system itself, as the experience of living with economic and cultural turmoil became a normalized feature of US-American life in the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> The texts I revisit here are thus motivated by a common sense of urgency in discovering and mapping out the *limits* of US modernity, in the sense of both limitations to the prevailing Fordist, growth-based model and its cultural logic, and of modernity’s reaching its limits as it transitions into *something else*, something that would later assume identifiable contours as late or postmodernity.

Taking my cue from such observations, I venture a set of related propositions: First, that the crisis in modernity signaled by the Depression of the 1930s not only upended firmly held notions of progress and prosperity, but also undermined the legitimacy of the communicative forms on which the modern nation relied for information and social cohesion. This situation, in turn, led to ever-deepening doubts concerning the efficacy and value of *all* media – including language itself – in their ability to represent the social. Second, I propose that such anxieties concerning representation and language as sites for the production and dissemination of cultural meaning during the Depression were often addressed in the language-based art of poetry. As a self-reflexive medium capable of limning the boundaries of linguistic expression, poetry works to reassert language's signifiatory capacities by adapting them to the exigencies of specific historical moments. In its aesthetic application, then, crisis suggests a situation in which, under the duress of the disruptions of living with modernity, the relationships between social life and the forms enlisted to represent it become challenged, called into question, and ultimately renegotiated.

*Poetry and the Limits of Modernity* thus proposes that alongside the economic, political, and cultural crises of the 1930s, there occurred an epistemic crisis that became codified in the work of second-generation modernist poets whose careers were launched around the onset of the Depression, as these poets grappled with modernity not as a liberatory project, but as an endless series of setbacks, dislocations, and ruptures. With the Depression as a breakdown of the smooth functioning of modernity and its market-based social organization, this book claims, there occurred a parallel breakdown in the social ontology of language, as the latter came to be regarded with suspicion for its role in perpetuating forms of commodification and appropriation associated with a crisis-ridden modernity. As I will argue throughout, the interface between the poetic and the social is sharply revealed through a Depression-driven epistemic shift, in which poetic language was forced to reconfigure its relationship to a society that was itself always in flux. What emerges in the aggregate of this survey of a broad cross-section of the poetic idioms associated with the Depression is a sense of poetry's critical stance regarding market modernity as a progressive, developmentalist force, and a related commitment to the project of reinscribing language's social ontology.

Contemporary critics have frequently adopted a rhetoric of crisis to describe the uneasy linkage between poetry and society within modernity, particularly its Depression-era instantiation.<sup>4</sup> These critics have, however, stopped short of offering fully-articulated theorizations of the ways in

which economic and social crises translate into epistemological and poetic ones. *Poetry and the Limits of Modernity* seeks to fill this gap as it builds upon these earlier critics' explications, taking their lines of inquiry further as it seeks to add a much-needed layer of complexity to current understandings of the interchange between poetry as a social activity on the one hand, and modern social life as a normalized, albeit unevenly distributed, sense of crisis on the other. My intention, simply put, is to deepen our understanding of the relationship between social forms and poetic forms at a particularly vexed moment in modernity.

### **Economic Crisis and/as Crisis of Representation**

Capitalist modernity, as political economists and cultural historians have claimed, becomes virtually synonymous with crisis as it takes the form of cycles of expansion and retraction, prosperity and panic. Giovanni Arrighi accounts for such recurring phenomena by positing a process punctuated by successive regimes or cycles of accumulation, or "long centuries," which involve transfers of economic hegemony from one imperial power to another as the global economy is retooled in the image of new forms of production, accumulation, and investment. Each of these successive epochs is initiated by a "signal crisis" as such new forms take hold, and closed by a "terminal crisis" that occurs as a given regime reaches its limits, when periods of heavy investment in production and manufacturing yield to periods of financialization and liquidity that tend to mark the "autumn" preceding a final collapse.<sup>5</sup> As Arrighi's model suggests, then, crisis becomes a normalized mechanism of capitalist modernity, an "ordinary" modality of the structuring logic of markets, as periodic destructions of accumulated capital mark the transition from one epoch to the next. David Harvey offers a parallel economic rationale for the normalization of crisis, in which an inbuilt market tendency toward falling rates of profit leads to situations in which surpluses of capital that cannot profitably be reinvested are destroyed. Such forms of "creative destruction" function as inherent features of the system, becoming "embedded within the circulation of capital itself. Innovation exacerbates instability, insecurity, and in the end, becomes the prime force pushing capitalism into periodic paroxysms of crisis" (*Condition* 106).<sup>6</sup> As periods of instability clear the field of weaker competitors, they also concentrate existing forms of *constant* capital – infrastructure, machinery, resources – into fewer and fewer hands.<sup>7</sup> A paradox thus emerges: For its value to be realized, capital must be kept in circulation, yet there is a system-specific tendency working in the

opposite direction, namely toward concentration, centralization, and over-accumulation. Crisis, as a shorthand for this paradox, lays bare the contending interests and uneven patterns of development within a given society. As Harvey makes clear, “[a]t the moment of crisis, all of the contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production are expressed in the form of violent paroxysms” that take the form of social conflict (*Limits* 200).<sup>8</sup> Ongoing economic readjustment, which results from the chronic upheaval to which modern, market-based societies are prone, destabilizes not only the economic realm, but the whole of the process of social reproduction. Far from being exceptional, then, such periods of crisis are part and parcel of the “normal” functioning of capitalist modernity.

Apart from – yet related to – its specifically economic meaning, the term “crisis” assumed a prominent place in the Depression period’s cultural criticism. The leftist intellectual Louis C. Fraina, for one, was explicit in linking the economic to the cultural; in *The Crisis of the Middle Class* (1935), written under the pen name Lewis Corey, Fraina explained that the crisis of capitalism was also a “crisis of culture” (See 223–27). The liberal critic Alfred Kazin concurred with the idea that the economic collapse signaled a cultural crisis; in his landmark critical account of American realist writing *On Native Grounds* (1942), he described the “crisis of the nineteen-thirties” as a period “which opened for Americans as a financial panic and as a sudden stop to the gluttony of the boom period” of the post-World War I years and ended as a “transformation . . . in American life” (363). Kazin makes it clear that, for observers during the period, it was no longer possible to separate the economic from the cultural; the Depression was a “material failure,” but it “could not be understood in material terms alone” (363). Kazin’s account suggests the ways in which the fallout from economic crisis played itself out on social and aesthetic levels, imposing confusion, but also a heightened sense of social responsibility, on the period’s writers. As Edmund Wilson summed up the situation in the pages of the *New Republic* in 1932, “[i]t has now become plain that the economic crisis is to be accompanied by a literary one” (539). The ramifications of Wilson’s literary crisis were widely felt, and writers, for their part, sought out the means to respond.<sup>9</sup> The first American Writers’ Congress, held over three days in April 1935 in New York, was conceived in response to the economic decay its organizers – who included among their number figures associated with the literary left to varying degrees, including Kenneth Burke, Langston Hughes, Meridel Le Sueur, Lewis Mumford, John Dos Passos, and Nathaniel West – saw as

a sure sign of the collapse of the capitalist system.<sup>10</sup> The congress aimed, according to a call published in the January 22, 1935, issue of *New Masses*, to “reveal, through collective discussion, the most effective ways in which writers, *as writers*, can function in the rapidly developing crisis” (“Call” 20; emphasis in the original). More than anything else, the congress testified to a shared awareness on the part of a generation of young writers (and elders such as Upton Sinclair and Theodore Dreiser) that the cultural ramifications of the acknowledged failures of the capitalist system – including its exposure of the nation’s already-existing class, cultural, regional, and racial fault lines – constituted their most pressing issue.

The manifest concern of the congress with parallel forms of crisis – social and literary – was echoed by its individual contributors. In an absentee address to the congress titled “The Writer as Technician,” John Dos Passos associates the crisis of the Depression with a parallel “crisis” of language, in which “terms are continually turning inside out and the names of things hardly keep their meaning from day to day” (78). For Dos Passos, the solution lay in the writer’s assumption of the role of “technician,” a position that, according to Dos Passos, aimed at “the development of his material and of the technical possibilities of the work,” in marked contrast to the aims of business, which always aims to “buy cheap and sell dear” (79). Acting in the capacity of technician, the writer, and especially the poet, would recalibrate language’s signficatory capacities to the exigencies of the present by bringing them up to the standards set by the emergent modes of inscription with which writing, as a medium, now had to compete. As an explicit rejection of an earlier model of artisanal handicraft that had been adopted as an analogy for the social role of the writer, this embrace of the role of technician (or producer or engineer) marks a shift in writers’ conceptions of their own role during the period.<sup>11</sup> For Dos Passos, the idea of technicianship was vital, as language – which he describes as “the mind of the group” (79) – was in desperate need of being rescued from the degrading effects of commercialization. Dos Passos’s epic U.S.A. trilogy (1930–36) can be read as a dramatization of the failures of language in modern America, an extended effort to reclaim the power of everyday speech against the perversion of language by society’s elite; his preface to the first single-volume edition of the trilogy in 1938 makes it clear that “U.S.A. is the speech of the people” (vi). In a telling moment in the trilogy’s third volume, *The Big Money*, Dos Passos reemphasizes his commitment to “rebuild the ruined words worn slimy in the mouths of lawyers districtattorneys collegepresidents judges without the old words the immigrants haters of oppression brought to Plymouth



how can you know who are your betrayers America” (350). The trilogy thus undertakes the utopian project of wresting control over language from powerful elites and “rebuild[ing] the ruined words” by rearticulating their social and historical situatedness, thus realizing their liberatory potential.

Such anxieties concerning the vulgarized status of language in a time of crisis were not limited to the literary left, however. Writing from the other side of the political aisle, James Laughlin IV would make comparable claims in his preface to the 1936 inaugural issue of *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*, a magazine that Laughlin started at the behest of his mentor Ezra Pound. Far from embracing the revolutionary, Soviet-inspired Marxism of *New Masses* and the Writers’ Congress, Laughlin’s preface bears a strong Poundian influence as it explicitly declares its support for the social credit economics associated with the British economist Major C. H. Douglas. Despite such ideological differences, Laughlin’s rhetoric bears striking similarities to that of Dos Passos and his comrades on the left: “We think with words,” Laughlin writes, “[a]nd the clarity of our thought (and consequently our actions) depends on the clarity of our language” (n. pag.). Like Dos Passos, Laughlin saw parallel crises affecting modern society and its language: “The world is in crisis, and language is at once the cause and the cure,” he writes (n. pag.). As much as their politics may have differed, Dos Passos and Laughlin were drawn to issue similar denunciations of what they both viewed as a degradation of language brought about by its commercial uses. The crisis in capitalist modernity, these practitioners of language insisted, had led to an evacuation of meaning in which language, their own chosen medium, had lost its power to represent the social.

### Toward a Poetics of Crisis

The assertions concerning a crisis in literary language I have surveyed above are supported by the period’s writers’ many ironic disavowals of the written word. James Agee’s observations, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), are telling in this regard:

Words could, I believe, be made to do or to tell anything within human conceit. That is more than can be said of the instruments of any other art. But it must be added of words that they are the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication, and that they come at many of the things which they alone can do by such a Rube Goldberg articulation of frauds, compromises, artful dodges and tenth removes as would fatten any other art into apoplexy if the art were not first shamed out of existence:

and which, in two centrally important and inescapable ways: falsification (through inaccuracy of meaning as well as inaccuracy of emotion); and inability to communicate simultaneity with any immediacy; greatly impairs the value and the integrity of their achievement. (209)

Here Agee identifies language's very flexibility as its fundamental flaw: Through the sleight-of-hand rhetorical tricks of the writer, words can be made to do anything their user wants them to do, which leads to a loss of immediacy and outright falsification. In what began as an article for *Fortune* magazine in the summer of 1936 and swelled to hundreds of pages in its final published form five years later, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* cannily performs the "Rube Goldberg articulation of frauds" it describes as it fails to come to the point in meandering passages such as this one and intentionally hedges its bets regarding its own medium, namely "words." In Agee's literary experiment, language necessarily fails to embrace the moment in all its startling clarity, a task to which, Agee strongly suggests, photography alone is equal.

Agee's is perhaps the clearest explication of the crisis in language to which I am referring. In its perversion of linguistic transparency, the text takes up what Sue Currell has called "the fight over words and their function in the 1930s" (82).<sup>12</sup> For Agee, the beleaguered status of words – what Mark Goble refers to as "Agee's pained understanding of language as a medium in which distortion and misrepresentation are unavoidable" (266) – results from their use within increasingly corporatized and bureaucratized social structures, in which the ideologically compromised writer could only collude with business and governmental interests to aestheticize their agendas, thereby deluding readers. Rejecting such a collusion, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* can be understood as a deliberate effort to undermine the corporate and governmental agendas of the very agencies that financed and supported it (namely *Fortune* magazine and the Farm Security Administration). In imagining a way out of this conundrum, Agee, who had himself published a book of poems titled *Permit Me Voyage*, which appeared in the Yale Series of Younger Poets in 1934, contrasts what he views as debased uses of language with the art of the poet: "Words cannot embody; they can only describe. But a certain kind of artist, whom we will distinguish from others as a poet rather than a prose writer, despises this fact about words or his [*sic*] medium, and continually brings words as near as he [*sic*] can to an illusion of embodiment. In doing so," Agee concludes, "he [*sic*] accepts a falsehood but makes, of a sort in any case, better art" (*Let Us* 210). The poet embraces the necessary illusion

that words can reach beyond mere description to embody their object. This mimetic function of language is at its most efficacious when language foregoes its efforts at realistic representation, a task for which it was always shoddily equipped to begin with, and insists on its own materiality.<sup>13</sup> That this task is both necessary and impossible becomes its defining feature; the conceit of words that embody, rather than describing, comprises the fundamental “as if” that marks Agee’s strained bargain with language.

The poets who came of age during the period tended to share Agee’s suspicion regarding language’s representational capacities, a position that led to their own frequent recriminations concerning their reliance on language. The Objectivist group of poets that coalesced around Louis Zukofsky in the early years of the decade took up this agenda through an insistence on resituating language within its social and material coordinates (as I will discuss at greater length in Chapter 1). George Oppen, one of the founding members of the group, offers an emblematic example of writerly suspicion concerning language’s decoupling from its social and material registers in his poem “A Language of New York” (1965):

Possible  
To use  
Words provided one treat them  
As enemies.  
Not enemies—Ghosts  
Which have run mad In the subways  
And of course the institutions  
And the banks. If one captures them  
One by one proceeding  
Carefully they will restore  
I hope to meaning  
And to sense.

*(New Collected 116)*

In this retrospective poem based on his experiences during the years of the Depression and Second World War, Oppen – a self-described “man of the Thirties”<sup>14</sup> – suggests that for the poet, words are best treated with suspicion. It remains possible to use them, his poem contends, correcting itself as it goes along, not in a way antagonistic to their properties, but with a sensitivity to the material absences they mark. Words are finally “Ghosts” – the word itself is isolated at the end of a line through the poem’s stuttering use of enjambment – that have somehow eluded capture to “run mad” in the subways, the institutions, and especially the banks. Having acquired the phantom objectivity associated with the commodity

form and the reified market society to which it corresponds, words must now be rounded up one by one, as it were, by the poem itself, which assumes the task of lifting language out of this impasse.<sup>15</sup> As Oppen's poem self-reflexively proposes, the poem's status as a linguistic construct constitutes its Achilles' heel, yet the poem, as an instance of patterned language, is uniquely positioned to issue commentary on the predicament of language. As Oppen himself will put it elsewhere, "relevant thought begins with the distrust of language" (*Selected Prose* 181). Despite this "distrust," Oppen would admit the necessity of continuing to rely upon words (his infamous twenty-five-year poetic silence notwithstanding), but he would approach them with the utmost care, acknowledging that to use them is to take on the impossible task of "restoring" them "to sense" – that is, to their communal, non-instrumentalizing function.

As both Agee and Oppen suggest, poets of the Depression period were drawn to acknowledge and embrace language's imbrication within the social and the material. These poets thus problematized an ideological stance associated with earlier modernisms that Mark Goble sums up as an anti-communicative bias, born of a need to reject the creeping influence of mass culture.<sup>16</sup> Narratives of modernist writing as a wholesale rejection of language in its modern, media-driven impoverishment have been incredibly persuasive; they offer an explanation for the rebarbative difficulty of modernist texts as rejoinders to the sphere of the everyday, marked by a saturation of market values and increasingly ubiquitous popular media and commercialized cultural forms. According to a modernist poetics of difficulty derived from such agendas, poetry rejects language's "merely" communicative function as a means of reminding its readers of its own material status; through its operation in modernist poems, language becomes opaque, calling attention to itself *as* language.<sup>17</sup> For the writers who came into their maturity in the wake of the 1929 crash, *pace* Oppen, it was increasingly clear that there was no position outside the market, no stance somehow untainted by its values. Like Oppen, these writers very often made the self-conscious decision to rely on language even while they admitted its inseparability from a modern, commercialized, and thoroughly technologized mass cultural sphere.<sup>18</sup>

The poets whose work I examine here represent a second generation of modernist writers who were compelled to position their own work with respect to an already-existing edifice of modernist poetic innovation, at times by building upon it and at others by questioning and critiquing it. These writers tended to represent minoritized communities as representatives of either a first generation of American-born children of immigrants

(Zukofsky, Reznikoff, and Macleod), Jewish backgrounds (Zukofsky, Rukeyser, and Reznikoff), or other marginalized groups or cultures (in the case of Niedecker, rural working-class white Midwestern, or in the case of Brown, African American). They were born between 1894 (Reznikoff) and 1913 (Rukeyser), with most clustered around the turn of the century (Brown, 1901; Niedecker, 1903; Zukofsky, 1904; Macleod, 1906), meaning that most were in early adulthood at the time of the 1929 crash. Each of these poets embraced or was impacted by the period's leftist politics to a greater or lesser degree. They came by their modernism through reading Pound, Eliot, Williams, Moore, Sandburg, and Cummings, and they came at it from the perspective of relative outsiders to this largely old-stock American white Anglo-Saxon Protestant first generation of modernists. Earlier modernists sought to counter the alienating effects of commercial culture and commodity consumption by elevating poetic language into an "autonomous" Euro-American mythos (T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound) or designating poetry a "supreme fiction" set apart from the commercial sphere of everyday life (Wallace Stevens). The poets who came of age in the thirties, however, grappled with the reification of language not by attempting to assert the autonomy of their craft or to remove poetic language from the sphere of commercial culture or technological media, but rather by affirming the social ontology of language through their work of restoring a sense of its material context. There is at the same time a measure of self-doubt regarding the epistemological project of initiating idioms capable of restoring sense to words, an inability to address the quandary definitively; this project rests, as Agee puts it, on a "necessary illusion," or what we encounter in Oppen's poetics as an inbuilt sense of the elusiveness of language that resolves itself, if at all, in a tacit decision to use language despite, or in full acknowledgment of, its frequent collusions with the degraded, the inauthentic, and the false.

### **Toward a Social Ontology of Poetic Form**

The form-content dynamic, in its relationship with the social and the historical, has by now been an ongoing point of departure for generations of commentators on poetics; as Charles Olson's famous dictum (which he attributes to Robert Creeley) has it, "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (240). In Olson and Creeley's midcentury poetics, the equivalence between form and content explicitly reduced the former to an expression of the latter, as the move of viewing form as a natural outgrowth of what a given poem wanted to say came to

dominate the postwar poetics associated with the New American Poetry.<sup>19</sup> Beginning in the 1970s, Language writing opened the way to an understanding of form's social and political implications. The language writers politicized the understanding of form as an ongoing and open process that they inherited from Olson, Creeley, and others, as "open" forms came, sometimes reductively, to stand in for the presumed social "openness" of New Left politics. In such accounts, the idea of "open" form very often falls prey to the same fetishization of the text that it sets out to critique, as formal innovation comes to stand in for political commitment, a gesture that was often tacitly reproduced in the work of poetry critics in the 1980s and 90s.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, Fredric Jameson's exploration of literature's "political unconscious" opened the way for a more nuanced understanding of what Jameson labels an "*ideology of form*," in which "the individual text or cultural artifact" can be understood as a "field of force in which the dynamics of sign systems of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended" (*Political* 98; emphasis in the original). Through this interpretive move – in which "form" is apprehended as content" but remains irreducible to it (99) – the formal arrangement a given text adopts appears as an ideologically loaded, historically significant encoding of competing and often contradictory social formations. While Jameson initially proposed this model to account for narrative as a social form, it can equally well be enlisted to account for poetic form as an inherently social and political activity, in which – as Walter Kalaidjian puts it – "a work's intrinsic form inscribes extrinsic politics" (8). More recent work on literary form as a socially situated phenomenon bears out this claim in contributing to an evolving concept of form as a name for the conjunctures and linkages between the literary and the social, furnishing a sense of form as what Anna Kornbluh aptly describes as "composed relationality" – another name for what I characterize here as a poem's social ontology (5).<sup>21</sup>

But how do poems register conceptually the moments when hitherto taken-for-granted social formations begin to break down? If poetic language can be understood as a formalized, language-based mediation of social structures, then poetry bears an inherent relationship with moments of collapse, as poems register, in both overt and more oblique ways, the conflicts and contradictions beleaguering a given historical moment. Barrett Watten posits a relationship "between historical crisis and the capacious unfolding of aesthetic form" that locates in moments of historical fracture emergent energies that point toward utopian futures (xxi). For Watten, such an aesthetics brings into view ruptures within the ongoing

project of modernity, offering “moment[s] when the rationalized lifeworld comes undone, however briefly, and we are given a glimpse of the orders we are contained within” (xxi). Ruth Jennison gestures toward a similar understanding of form when she claims that during economic crises, “poetics is *the form of the crisis*, providing us with entry points into the . . . ontology of capitalist disaster” (“29/73/08” 38; emphasis in the original). Jennison proposes that as each crisis within modernity “rises out of, and lays bare, new limits, and wrenches open new forms of consciousness,” poetic form does significant cultural work as it “provides a historically apt textual mediation of the rapidly proliferating limits to capital,” a totalizing force that otherwise remains resistant to representation (45). A poet utilizes the materials at her disposal within a given historical moment, but she marshals these into legible formal arrangements; the results are both deliberate and accidental, as poetic form becomes what Pierre Macherey characterizes, paradoxically, as a “free necessity,” an improvisational exercise in shaping what lies ready to hand (46). This idea of poetic form as social practice poised between the (over)determined and the contingent avoids reducing itself to what Lucy Alford critiques as an “epiphenomenal” notion of form as a secondary phenomenon “growing out of specific social conditions that it mimics or opposes” (12). Aesthetic (and especially poetic) forms are never merely second-order operations within a given society, solely contingent upon its economic, social, and political organization, as a rigidly determinist model might have it.

The lines of causality linking the aesthetic to the social become blurred, as changing modes of accumulation, emergent technologies, renewed sensory regimes, new affects and modes of relationality, and novel modes of representation emerge coevally, exerting a mutually generative pressure as they shape, and become shaped by, each other. This process is encapsulated within Jacques Rancière’s notion of the aesthetic, a term by which he indicates not a set of specific, autonomous cultural practices, but “configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity” (*Politics of Aesthetics* 9). In Rancière’s aesthetics, configurations of the social overlap significantly with artistic configurations, as nascent forms of art and writing encode shifting modes of political subjectivation and social reproduction from which they are finally indissociable. Artistic forms thus take shape within the “sensible fabric of experience within which they are produced,” which is in turn “multiply determined” (*Aisthesis* x). Aesthetic practices occupy a crucial position within what Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible,” a sensory and affective terrain that is never simply a result of its material

substratum (12). Thus the language-based practices we group together under the aegis of poetry assume their place alongside related practices distributed across the social field and subjected to the same pressures. In proposing a social ontology of poetic language, then, I want to suggest that poetry often initiates new linguistic configurations adequate to the exigencies of the social configurations it serves to encode. At stake in such an insistence on poetry as a social act is an understanding of poetic forms as a means of lending linguistic substance to communal experience; poetry names a set of practices that are constituted through and through by the social in its mediation by language, even if there are elements within poems that remain irreducible, idiosyncratic, and idiomatic, and thus resist easy classification.

### Chapter Outline

I read the poetry of the thirties less as a continuation of earlier modernist modes than as a widely varying set of formal experiments loosely graspable as versions of “late modernism,” a self-conscious cleavage within the modernist project that, according to Tyrus Miller’s account, tended to embrace contradiction and outright paradox through its “apparent admixture of decadent and forward-looking elements” (7). During the 1930s, as Miller’s account suggests, modernism entered its “decadent” period, its “autumn,” as it encountered its limits.<sup>22</sup> As such, Depression-era cultural production was fraught with contradictions: On one hand, the period remained fully preoccupied with its own modernity as it worked to assimilate emergent technologies for inscribing, recording, and storing information. On the other, it tended to indulge a nostalgia for forms of culture and sociality located outside the spatial and temporal coordinates of modernity. The period thus took on a Janus-faced cast in its embrace of both the ultramodern and the *antimodern*, a set of terms that existed in a mutually defining relationship.<sup>23</sup> During this period of cultural and epistemic reorganization, poets actively worked to position themselves amid a field of contrasting definitions of the poetic, in which a still-dominant (but increasingly challenged) earlier modernist paradigm of poetry as autonomous artisanal labor or craftsmanship coincided uneasily with an emerging sense of poetry as a socially-embedded cultural practice in mutually-sustaining dialogue with technologically-generated media and modern social institutions summed up in the notion of the writer as a technician. Each of the chapters in what follows focuses on the work of a particular poet, which I read as a response to a specific aspect of the Depression as a



signal crisis within modernity. In each chapter, then, I will frame the notion of crisis slightly differently, as a set of circumstances refracted through a particular poetic idiom as it mediates, through a wide range of textual strategies and effects, the ongoing project of modernity.

In exploring the implications of these claims, the chapters comprising this book fall into two distinct yet related parts. The first, titled “Historical Materialism and the Materials of History,” is made up of chapters on Louis Zukofsky, Muriel Rukeyser, and Charles Reznikoff. This part develops connections between Zukofsky’s incorporation of a Marxist philosophy of history in his long poem “A” and the literal incorporation of historical materials, such as photographs in the case of Rukeyser and trial transcripts in the case of Reznikoff. Chapter 1 proposes that Louis Zukofsky’s ongoing work on “A” is animated by a strong investment in restoring a sense of language’s historical and material situatedness – its social ontology – as a means of combatting what Zukofsky and other contemporary writers saw as its vulgarization within an emerging commodity culture. This chapter argues that in the eighth and ninth sections of “A,” written between mid-1935 and early 1940, Zukofsky equates labor to language, revealing both to be historically contingent and socially produced. The chapter begins by returning to the debate between Zukofsky and Ezra Pound over the concept of the commodity to reveal an under-discussed aspect of their quarrel, namely its basis in the two poets’ attitudes concerning language’s relation to materiality. It then moves on to align the treatment of the commodity in “A”-8 and (the first half of) “A”-9, an often-discussed aspect of these sections, with their seldom noted but equally important thematization of language. The chapter focuses on the equivalences the poem draws between labor and language to claim that the project of restoring both to their concrete historical conditions of social production furnishes a key to reading Zukofsky’s demanding long poem. This chapter thus sets in place fundamental concepts for the book as a whole, including an implicit skepticism regarding language as such, especially in its relation to the commodity form, and a concomitant need to draw on socially situated idioms in establishing poetry’s ongoing vitality.

For Rukeyser and Reznikoff, the subjects of the following two chapters, the project of reasserting language’s status vis-à-vis the social assumes a less explicitly Marxist cast than it does for Zukofsky, but establishing language’s social ontology as a means of resisting its commodification remains a central preoccupation. Chapter 2 addresses Muriel Rukeyser’s Depression-era poetics in the context of the straight photography associated with both commercial venues such as the photo-magazines *Life*, *Look*,

and *Fortune*, and New Deal governmental agencies, especially the Farm Security Administration. This chapter claims that Rukeyser's poetics rejects the logic by which language became complicit with such photography in rendering aestheticized and therefore consumable images of the modern world. Instead, Rukeyser's poetics envisions a new, hybridized mode in which language, in this case that of the poem, exists in a critical tension with the photographic image. This chapter also argues that "extension," a concept that relates Rukeyser's work to commentaries by Lewis Mumford, Vannevar Bush, and Marshall McLuhan, among others, functions as a critical concept describing the process by which poetic language becomes a counterpoint to the public archive of images generated by emerging commercial media and an increasingly technocratic state. The final section examines the thematization of photography in "The Book of the Dead" to claim that Rukeyser's epochal 1936 long poem, which documents a mining disaster in Depression-era West Virginia, scrutinizes the prerogatives of photographic seeing by rendering the photographic apparatus into a visible component of the industrialized rural landscape the poem surveys.

Chapter 3 considers the historical itself as a mode of reckoning with contemporary crisis. This chapter focuses on Reznikoff's rarely discussed (and until recently out-of-print) 1934 version of *Testimony*, a text that consists almost entirely of found language in the form of collaged-together excerpts from nineteenth-century trial transcripts. The chapter proposes that *Testimony* utilizes these materials to suggest a link between past and present violence and social fragmentation. It argues further that *Testimony* rejects narratives of progress associated with the modern American nation as it tacitly embraces the "debunking" imperative animating the work of interwar historians such as Caroline Ware, which rejected the idea of history as a redemptive force. Reznikoff's text is organized around the spectacle of the body in pain as a galvanizing scene within the modern public sphere, where public affect and social belonging were generated through collective acts of witnessing (and often perpetrating) violence and disaster. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the final subsection of *Testimony*, titled "Depression," draws its subject matter not from Reznikoff's 1930s present, as its relatively few critics have suggested, but from the aftermath of the "Depression" of 1873, as the text proposes this earlier period as a parallel to the crisis of the 1930s. In recalling this earlier period, the chapter claims further, *Testimony* proposes a negative vision of economic and technological modernity by revealing its human collateral, as well as the cyclical nature of modern social and economic crisis.

Part II, titled “Ethnographic Modernity and Its Discontents,” examines an ethnographic turn within modernist cultural production that became especially pronounced during the Depression, as writers and artists aligned themselves with epistemologies and social forms excluded by society’s libidinal investments in rationalistic modernity.<sup>24</sup> In these chapters I examine poets’ ethnographic affiliations with modernity’s spatial and temporal others as taking place within a critical project that sought to maintain a distance from what many viewed as modernity gone awry. At the same time, however, these poets often signaled their discontentment – or at the very least their ambivalence – regarding ethnographic modernism’s frequently appropriative investments in forms of alterity. Part II thus deals with poets who explicitly acknowledged modernity’s unrealized promises and uneven effects as they grounded their poetic idioms in explorations of what the modern, in its progressive, development-oriented thrust, excluded. Chapter 4 takes up this discussion as it addresses Sterling A. Brown’s essays and blues-based poems, particularly those appearing in his 1932 collection *Southern Road*, to raise questions of commodification in the context of the technologized recording and dissemination of African American musical forms, especially the blues. This chapter identifies a crisis of authenticity brought about by sound recording in its relation to such racialized cultural forms, as the technology of the phonograph promised, on one hand, to inscribe and preserve the fleeting soundscapes of Black music with exceptional fidelity, but on the other, removed them from their communal milieu, in the process transforming them irrevocably in the name of capitalizing on them. This chapter situates Brown’s essays and poems as a crucial index to such anxieties and claims that in Brown’s work (and that of other commentators), the folksong collector, an intermediary figure who garners material through what Brown will call “absolute participation,” emerges as a figure antithetical to the commodification of folk forms. Brown’s attitude toward the phonograph was ambivalent: Like other Black modernists such as Langston Hughes, he embraced it at times, and at others dismissed it as an emblem of commodification and cultural appropriation. Rather than occurring as a disruptive presence, though, the phonograph emerged within a shifting set of cultural practices in which the boundaries between live performance and recorded sound, as well as bodies and recording apparatuses, became permeable and negotiable. Thus, even when Brown’s poems celebrate the blues as an uncommodified oral cultural form indissociable from its social and material milieu in the folk community, as in his iconic poem “Ma Rainey,” phonography becomes a kind of vanishing mediator between the poem and its

vernacular sources, as Brown's poems' constructions of orality are underwritten by its inescapable technologized presence.

Chapter 5 continues to explore the antimodernist response to modernity's crisis-driven impasse as it examines the seldom-discussed poetry and editorial activities of Norman Macleod, a Southwest-based poet who had strong ties to both influential modernists of an earlier generation such as Ezra Pound and Harriet Monroe, and the younger generation of communist-affiliated writers gathered around the little magazine *New Masses* – two spheres of influence that found themselves increasingly at odds as the Depression deepened. Macleod was an internationally visible figure during the Depression decade, when he published in many prominent venues and released two collections of poetry, *Horizons of Death* (1934) and *Thanksgiving before November* (1936). The chapter analyzes Macleod's published poems alongside his editorial activities to argue that Macleod challenged modernity's developmentalist logic as he cultivated a regionalist aesthetics that positioned the Southwest – particularly its Chicana and Indigenous cultures – as holistic, vital, and integrated, in contrast to the alienation and destruction he associated with the cities of the East and their disaffected denizens. The chapter also scrutinizes Macleod's tendency toward cultural appropriation in his combination of the period's "proletarian regionalism" with a deep interest in the ethnographic as both a generalized aspect of literary modernism and a period-specific phenomenon.

Chapter 6 focuses on the poems of Lorine Niedecker's collection *New Goose*, which was published in 1946 but gathered material she had been working on for over a decade. The chapter begins by considering Niedecker's reception as a rural (and even backward) practitioner of her own brand of Midwestern, folk-inflected surrealism as a deliberately minoritizing gesture with a primitivist agenda. It then moves on to claim that Niedecker's surrealism-inspired explorations of unconscious processes overlap significantly with her (auto-)ethnographic take on her own rural Wisconsin surroundings. The chapter positions Niedecker's short, witty, object-oriented poems in *New Goose* as ironic embraces of the primitive, in which the appropriation of rural artifacts functions analogously with the appropriation of the poet herself as a rural artifact. Niedecker's poetic project in *New Goose* is rooted in an antimodern epistemology that links it with the overlapping discourses of ethnography and surrealism, in which the rationalized logic of capitalist modernity is challenged and critiqued through an embrace of modernity's seeming opposites, the premodern and

the prerational. Based on this insight, the chapter contends that the objects one encounters in Niedecker's poems are produced through a "poetics of detachment" in which, like surrealist objects, they assume a fetishistic ability to conjure up repressed and residual libidinal economies that form the obverse of modernity. Niedecker's poems thus participate in the condemnation of commodification I examine throughout as they issue a pointed critique of the appropriation of rural culture, embodied by her figure of "the museum man," a gatherer of artifacts with a primitivizing agenda.

The book's Coda addresses an economic and cultural shift in national focus from production toward consumption that took place in response to the theory that the Depression was a "crisis of underconsumption." According to this logic, capitalism could best be salvaged by stimulating consumer buying power, and thus bolstering demand for the emerging commodities associated with what Rita Barnard has called the "culture of abundance." This book thus concludes by proposing that a Depression-era gravitational shift from a producerist model associated with Fordist industrialism toward the mass consumption that would come to define the postwar period was paralleled by a displacement of the notion of the writer (or poet) as a *producer* toward one of the writer (or poet) as *consumer*. This poetics of mass consumerism can be seen in its offing in the Depression-era work of George Oppen and Mina Loy, but it reaches its fullest expression in the postwar poetry of John Ashbery, as well as the work of more recent poets such as Robert Fitterman and Juliana Spahr.

Whether they consciously registered the challenges affecting their chosen medium of language or not (some did quite explicitly, others less so), the poets I consider here were led to reconsider their role in society, the relationships between their work and other media and cultural forms, and the very nature of representation itself. These poets remained less interested in arriving at poetic registers purified of their associations with market society than in revealing *all* usages of language, even their own, to be caught in the crisis of signification entailed by contemporary experience. The very idea of what constitutes the poetic is defined socially, and (over)determined by a range of historical factors. Meanwhile, the Depression decade, once viewed as modernism's less genteel but more politically engaged stepchild, has become increasingly central to a revisionist understanding of the twentieth century. As we near its centenary, the lessons of the Depression – the instability of the institutions supporting a liberal-democratic, capitalist society, the persistence of poverty and

discrimination, the lingering effects of past forms of violence and exploitation – resonate with a renewed insistence. Far from being a punctual event that can be relegated with increasing certainty to the past, the “crisis” of the Depression begins to feel more like a generalized condition of modernity, a cultural experience whose baggage is still very much with us.