Experimental Poetry from the Disputed Territory: Rereading Bernadette Mayer’s *Midwinter Day* and Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*

Lucy Biederman

Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland

When asked, at the start of a 2011 interview for the Poetry Foundation, whether she was born in Brooklyn or Queens, the poet Bernadette Mayer gives a neither/both answer. “The Disputed Territory,” she says, “Brooklyn/Queens, New York,” adding, “I’m honored to be part of the Disputed Territory.” Perhaps Mayer’s early geographical designation—or non-designation—influenced her later attitude toward poetic allegiances and groupings. In anthologies and critical studies, Mayer has been variously placed with New York School, Language, and conceptual writers, a variety that in itself suggests the unclassifiable nature of her work. Mayer conveys something of the discomfort with which she approaches poetic classification when, later in the same interview, she answers an inquiry about Language poetry: “I like it now that they—I shouldn’t say ‘they’—that they’ve developed a sense of humor. For a long time it was in abeyance; now it’s back—well, I don’t think it ever existed, but now it does” (Interview). That cryptic response, jammed with strong proclamations quickly half-retracted, is characteristic of Mayer. Writing on this moment elsewhere, I have noted that Mayer’s “self-admonishing ‘I shouldn’t say ‘they’’ is followed almost immediately—and humorously—by another ‘they’” (Biederman). Had she not mentioned her origins in the Disputed Territory, one might know that Mayer was a native, anyway, by how skillfully she eludes apprehension (Biederman).

The broader, albeit subtextual, question that Mayer evades in the interview might be cast as, “who is speaking?” That question I take from the title of an essay by Lyn Hejinian, whose career-long identification with Language poetry distinguishes her from Mayer, but whose poetics, I will argue, shares with Mayer an adherence to ambiguity that cuts against her strict, career-long
affiliation with Language poetics. In the essay “Who Is Speaking?” Hejinian examines how that question can yield to projects of self-invention and, thus, to the invention of one’s gender. In this essay, I will consider the various ways in which Hejinian and Mayer address and dodge the question “who is speaking?” in two autobiographical early works, Hejinian’s My Life (1982) and Mayer’s Midwinter Day (1981), in the service of creating multitudinous, contradictory, and incoherent female selves. A number of feminist anthologies, critical studies, and literary histories published since the millennium have intervened in the dominant masculinist narratives regarding Language and experimental writing in America; I situate my readings of Midwinter Day and My Life within the current effort to recover what Elisabeth A. Frost and Cynthia Hogue call the “crucial cultural contexts” of women’s experimental poetry (3). In attending to some of the contradictions surrounding the self- and gender-inventions in Midwinter Day and My Life, I argue that readings that draw attention to tendencies in feminist experimental texts that gesture beyond the boundaries of feminist or experimental practices can be in the service of more expansive, rather than critical or discrediting, attitudes toward feminist poetics.

In addition to contradictions within these two books, I will also attend to some of the variances that surround the receptions of Hejinian and Mayer as authors. Although they are contemporaries, Mayer born in 1945 and Hejinian in 1941, Hejinian is more well known, and much more likely to be included in assessments of contemporary experimental poetry. The variance in their receptions probably has much to do with Mayer’s nonparticipation as a critic and Hejinian’s decades-long critical commitment to Language poetry. Hejinian is considered a foundational presence in Language writing for her contributions to its poetry and criticism and as the founder of Tuumba Press. My Life has been one of the bestselling books of the Language movement, by some accounts its bestselling book, a modern classic of experimental poetics and “a clear candidate for academic canonization” (Samuels 103). Juliana Spahr, David R. Jarraway, and others—including Hejinian herself—have associated the book’s formal experimentalism with

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2 The first edition of My Life was published by Burning Deck Press in 1980. I use the revised version of the text, first published by Sun & Moon Press in 1987, in this essay.


4 For example, a chapter is devoted to Hejinian in We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women’s Writing and Performance Poetics, edited by Laura Hinton and Hogue, which is titled after a refrain from My Life, and in Rankine and Spahr’s anthology American Women Poets in the 21st Century. However, Mayer is not discussed in either book.
the post-structuralist drive against essentialism. Meanwhile, Mayer, and *Midwinter Day*, have generally been excluded from recent histories and critical work on women’s experimental and Language poetry. Mayer’s Poetry Foundation interrogator even prefaced the interview with a tale of recently discovering her work, referring to Mayer as a “well-kept secret.” In the context of new feminist scholarship on experimental poetry, and in the spirit of Hejinian’s and Mayer’s own disruptive investigations into the self, I argue for readings that unsettle some of the established answers to the question of “who is speaking?” in autobiographical experimental feminist poetry.

**“Like not having a room of one’s own”: Mayer’s day-in-the-life poetics**

Mayer’s “disputed” status extends to the indeterminate artistic space she inhabits between poet and performance artist. *Midwinter Day*, generally considered her finest achievement, exemplifies how Mayer’s poetics and personae confound categorization. The conceit of *Midwinter Day* is that Mayer composed the book, in its entirety, on December 22, 1978, the shortest day of the year, balancing its composition with various other tasks she describes in the text. Those other tasks are mostly domestic, associated with Mayer’s role as the mother of two young children. *Midwinter Day*, I argue, could be a key text of feminist experimental writing for a variety of reasons, including, rather than in spite of, its rootedness in the female domestic and the implicit connections it tends to make between a woman’s body and an experimental writing that is essentially female. In its refusal to offer definitive responses to the question of “who is speaking?” *Midwinter Day* could invite and model more expansive, open-ended methods of reading texts by experimental female writers.

*Midwinter Day* is related to Mayer’s earlier work *Memory*, a performance piece for which Mayer attempted to record, through notes and photographs, everything she experienced during July 1971. Mayer has called *Memory* an “emotional science project” (qtd. in Vickery 151), a phrase that combines the discourses of high art and high school, suggesting an intervention of female subjectivity in the objective, and traditionally male-dominated, realm of science. *Memory* was also, Mayer has said, an “unrepeatable work” (qtd. in Baker). Her description underscores the performative, as opposed to scientific, nature of the work (given that an actual scientific experiment is, by definition, repeatable). With *Memory*, Mayer said, “I was never trying to take

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5The text and some photographs from the “original,” 1972 gallery presentation of *Memory* were published as a book by North Atlantic Press in 1975 (and can be viewed online at the University of Utah’s Eclipse Archive), although, as Vickery notes, “the book fails to capture the multidimensional breadth of Mayer’s original project” (152).
beautiful photographs. I was trying to take as many as possible” (Lecture). According to Mayer, the intention was to “reflect what actual vision is, and not romanticize it” (qtd. in Vickery 152). Interestingly, in a 1984 letter to the Language poet Rae Armantrout, Hejinian critiques Mayer’s poetry on just those grounds, suggesting that Mayer makes too much of a “romance” out of homemaking (qtd. in Vickery 159). Hejinian’s charge seems to be specific to *Midwinter Day*, Mayer’s epic about her home life published three years before, as opposed to Mayer’s earlier projects, like *Memory*. Although *Midwinter Day* and *Memory* share procedural tactics and concern with tracking the authorial/artistic consciousness, *Memory* tracks Mayer’s life and consciousness before they centered on the heteronormative nuclear family. The objectionable “romance” enters, for Hejinian, when Mayer’s poetry reports the household. In the household, Mayer finds yet another “Disputed Territory,” a space that for different women writers signifies differently.

Nearly every critic who has written about *Midwinter Day* has noted that it contains a unique admixture of dispatches from a writing life and from a life of domestic motherhood. High lyric and narrative description of the nitty-gritty of housework often compete for space within a single stanza. The presence of coexisting, sometimes competing, discourses occasions much of the speaker’s ambivalence regarding her positionality as a woman writer—an ambivalence that runs through the book’s six sections, which correspond to temporal periods in the day. Shifts between mother-speech and poet-speech can be lightning quick, as in the following passage: “I’m not playing. I’m cleaning though I’m crawling around. Are these dishes clean or dirty. I’m afraid not. Shit. The trees lose their leaves so you can see through them. A man and a dog in a yard. A person who doesn’t have friends must explain himself to strangers” (*Midwinter Day* 36). The default “person” in the last sentence here is a man, a “himself”—which is particularly interesting given that Mayer could be seen as explaining herself “to strangers” via *Midwinter Day*. Perhaps, after a few sentences of “crawling around” in the “shit,” figuring out whether the “dishes [are] clean or dirty,” this female speaker finds personhood beyond her immediate reach.

However, the discursive variety—and compositional method—of Mayer’s autobiographical chronicle insists on a speaker/self who, like Walt Whitman, shrugs at her contradictions; she, too, contains multitudes. Megan Burns, whose article on *Midwinter Day* is probably the most comprehensive study of the text, argues, “Instead of separating the categories of child rearing and poetry, Mayer attempts to merge the two since the combination reveals a more accurate portrayal of life.” The two categories are merged in that they appear side-by-side within the book, but this is a fraught merger. Rather than feeding each other, they often fight. In the above passage, the single-sentence “Shit” could be seen as an obstruction to the lyric description of all that
follows it. It also evokes the “dirt” of the dirty dishes, emphasizing the general sense of muddle here. The domestic and the poetic oppose each other, competing for Mayer’s limited time and attention. “We’re only having spaghetti,” Mayer writes as she chops vegetables for the sauce (*Midwinter Day* 67). On a day during which she writes an epic poem in full, dinner suffers.

Part of the formal work of the first section of the text is its foundation of a register capable of containing such admixtures. *Midwinter Day* begins with a description of Mayer’s “opening dream”—thus an implicit link is drawn between text and dream, speaker and dreamer. Mayer frequently refers to the constructed, unreal—dreamy—nature of her dreams, such as when she writes, “Then I saw /The shawls of the dream as if they were the sky /And the dream’s dark vests and the dream’s collar and cuffs” (*Midwinter Day* 2). The word “dream” recurs three times across these two lines—casting something of a trance, but also drawing a bright line between the dream-world and material reality: The repetition reminds us that this is, after all, just a dream.

In her essay “Strangeness,” Hejinian writes of the waking-self versus the dream-self:

> “I,” the dreamer, is not of necessity identical to the “I” of waking life. ... In dreams, the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity is a false one. In fact, the dream’s interdependence from binarisms like form-content, male-female, now-then, here-there, large-small, social-solitary, etc., is characteristic and makes polarity irrelevant or obsolete. (142)

Mayer opens *Midwinter Day* with a “dreamer I” along the lines of Hejinian’s description, one whose logic and concerns are distinct from the “I” in the book’s five ensuing sections. In the first section of *Midwinter Day*, one “you” blends into another, with dream-logic holding sway.

“How can I be both here and there?” Mayer asks as a “dreamer I” (*Midwinter Day* 3). That question echoes throughout the rest of the book, even after she wakes for the day, destabilizing the operating simultaneity in which Mayer asks the reader to believe: namely, that during this day she performs the necessary tasks of the domestic while writing an entire book. By switching between past, present, and future tenses, Mayer establishes a speaker that exists within a temporal reality that cannot be apprehended—or, perhaps, considering the putative terms of the book’s composition, believed. The multiple presences and positionalities of Mayer’s speaker allows Mayer to variously answer and refuse the question “who is speaking?”

Mayer’s speaker hesitates, dodges, and invents space to stop and think in her presentation of a subjective self. Such moments create a refrain throughout *Midwinter Day*, in lines like, “Can I say that here” (4), “There’s something /I want to say, I don’t know how to put it” (25), and “Should I say all this?” (52). Statements of self-consciousness and self-censorship speak to, of course, *Midwinter Day*’s one-day process and relate the text
to Mayer’s consciousness at the time of its composition, “as it happened.” They are also suggestive of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s notion of the “anxiety of authorship,” the feminist and woman-centric re-vision of Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” introduced in 1979, one year after the “midwinter day” of Mayer’s poem and four years before its publication. Bloom’s author, male by default, struggles to emerge from the shadows of his predecessors’ genius; against this background, Gilbert and Gubar describe the female author’s isolation, which results from her sense of “alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers” (50).

In recent years, Gilbert and Gubar’s term has come to be associated with second-wave feminism and some of its limitations, including an emphasis on the experience of the white, middle-class woman and the assumption that her experience speaks for all women. I want to recognize those limitations and their import, as well as recognizing the specific feminist contexts in which Midwinter Day was composed, with the goal of attending to the ways in which feminism and feminist discourses have been used by experimental women writers.

The theme of the anxiety of authorship that runs throughout Midwinter Day links the book to the feminism of its time and place; several passages in Midwinter Day suggest Mayer’s engagement with Gilbert and Gubar. In one such passage Mayer lists women writers, literally writing herself into the history of female authorship. This is a book filled with lists, many of which begin by announcing themselves—for example, Mayer proposes, “Let me tell you / The titles of all the current books” (53). Mayer’s list of women writers, however, seems to come out of nowhere. It emerges from slippage between Chaucer, that stalwart member of the masculinist Western canon, and an anonymous “Etruscan mother”:

If only we could all get some sleep
   like Chaucer
Or a Latin Sabine or Etruscan mother
Who didn’t have the time, chance, education or notion
To write some poetry so I could know
What she thought about things

   There are some who did anyway,
   There’s Anne Bradstreet and Tsai Wen Gi,
   Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alice Notley and me, … (111)

Perhaps Mayer uses Chaucer to lure the reader into her list of female poets, which ends up being ten lines long, and spans various origins, schools, and movements. She includes herself in the lineage of women literary figures who have written “anyway,” in spite of the historical lack of “time, chance,
education or notion /To write some poetry.” Following that list, Mayer turns again toward male-authored texts, at least by allusion:

Touching history with desire
For history to be like food
On the table in the light of the window
It’s shared
There are some things we cannot say!
No, I can’t say that! (112)

The first line in this passage echoes T. S. Eliot’s “mixing memory and desire” at the beginning of “The Waste Land,” and the repeated mention of history in the first two lines of the passage recalls Ezra Pound’s definition of an epic as a “poem including history.” But while Pound’s history is political, economic, martial, and mythological, for Mayer, history is “like food /On the table”—an indoor affair, domesticized. Mayer’s subsequent exclamations of what one “cannot say” could address the difficulty of translating, or scaling, such epical ambition for her poem about home life. In the poem’s first section, Mayer writes, “Freud Pound & Joyce /Are fine-feathered youth’s fair-weather friends /I take that back, better not to mention them /Or it’s the end” (19). Important as they may be, these masculinist figures spell “the end” for the poem at hand. By “taking back” the “mention” of these male giants of twentieth-century art and letters without actually eliding them from the text, Mayer allows for their influence on her own terms. Throughout Midwinter Day, one can find such baits and switches, in which Mayer reckons her grand poetic ambition, and her identification with “Freud Pound & Joyce,” against the domestic orientation of her life, which links her to contemporaneous, woman-centric discourses.

The book’s brief third section, in which Mayer takes her children to the public library, contains some of the book’s most fascinating moments from the standpoint of Mayer’s complex positionality as a female experimental writer. Mayer foregrounds her entry into the library by listing American literary giants who once made their homes nearby, including Edith Wharton, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and W. E. B. DuBois. By placing herself in the library, and within physical proximity of such luminaries of literary history, Mayer makes a bid for the inclusion of her own texts and body in the same space. That she enters with her two young daughters suggests a bid for legitimacy as an author who is also, unlike any of those authors she names, a mother. The term “public library,” like “walled garden,” is one of those signs that seems, impossibly, both redundant and oxymoronic: at war with itself. The cloistered privacy of “library” clangs strangely against the municipal stamp of its “public” role. Within that contradiction, is, of course, opportunity and possibility. Mayer’s authorship, as she asserts and enacts it throughout Midwinter Day, under the signs of author-mother, and
female-experimental-writer, carries with it a similar set of contradictions, possibilities, protections, and limitations. In the library, Mayer’s daughter Marie has a temper tantrum: “It’s a violent outburst of rage and annoyance / Like not having a room of one’s own or the love of another” (44). It is difficult to parse Mayer’s attitude toward the well-known Virginia Woolf maxim to which Mayer refers here, that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write” (Woolf 4). Mayer’s allusion, despite her engagement with feminist authors and texts throughout Midwinter Day, feels halfway ironic, because the reference is set down before a screaming child, in a public setting, as if to underscore Mayer’s lack of a room of her own. However, any irony or cynicism is only partial, because Mayer, like Anne Bradstreet, Tsai Wen Gi, and Woolf’s “Anon.,” writes “anyway,” room of her own or no.

In addition to providing cultural and historical context for Mayer’s authorship, considering the influence of American feminisms of the 1970s and ’80s on Midwinter Day provides context to the conditions in which Mayer published. Peter Baker’s 1996 reading of Mayer provides examples of the setting that made, and may continue to make, authorship a site of anxiety for women. Regarding the third section of Midwinter Day, Baker writes:

For comparisons to the verse-writing skill exemplified in these lines, one might point to Charles Olson’s projective measure or Robert Creeley’s nuance of line and syllable, the most personal poems of Williams, or the strangely affective line of John Ashbery at his expressive best. One might have to turn to such distinguished French practitioners of the free verse line as Pierre Reverdy to find the balance of image and versification that Mayer achieves here with such apparent ease. And again there is the specifically personal and familial consciousness that makes Mayer’s work valuable as a compelling example of a woman’s writing in late-twentieth-century, real-world America.

Baker draws an implicit but obvious distinction between “men’s” and “women’s” writing. He names several male authors to which Mayer’s “skill” might be compared—Olson, Creeley, Ashbery, Reverdy—while Mayer’s subject, “specifically personal and familial consciousness,” is associated with “woman’s writing.” Baker writes of a vague, “real-world America” that he tropes as women’s jurisdiction. He devotes most of the passage to describing in detail the poetry of Mayer’s male cohorts, never naming a female author, nor, for that matter, describing Mayer’s poetry. Earlier in the same piece, Baker suggests the possible presence of the anxiety of influence in Mayer’s approach toward Stein, but he seems unaware of the possibility or presence of anxiety of authorship in Mayer’s work and thought.

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6I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman” Woolf writes (49).
The gendered reception of her own work could be one of the reasons Mayer has abstained from writing criticism. That abstention is notable because, among experimental and Language poets, those who play the dual role of poet-critic or poet-theorist are, if not the norm, certainly more visible. Kathleen Fraser’s feminist journal HOW(ever), which ran from 1983 to 1992, for example, published poems beside a “Working Note” from each poet, “to give some idea of the processes that had gone into the production and of any formal problems proposed or encountered” (Vickery 92). HOW(ever) helped establish a generation of experimental writers, including Susan Howe, Rachel Blau du Plessis, and Fraser, who engaged with feminist and Language themes as poets and as critics. Despite sharing formal and ideological interests with such writers, Mayer’s silence on the critical front makes her an uneasy fit among even such an idiosyncratic bunch.

Maggie Nelson closes her chapter on Mayer in *Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions* with a personal anecdote exemplary of Mayer’s slippery resistance toward, and as a subject of, criticism. As a young poet in New York City, Nelson had asked Mayer for advice on whether she should apply to an English Literature Ph.D. program. Mayer wrote in response, “i don’t think you should ever write criticism” (129). Nelson, then, considers her critical work on Mayer to be “an act of both disobedience and homage” (129). As a poet, Mayer’s refusal to participate in criticism in a field in which criticism can confer poetry with prestige, readership, and canonicity, is particularly notable. That refusal, as Nelson points out, turns into disobedience what other writers would consider homage. Mayer would probably approve of such lingering and unresolvable ambiguities. Mayer’s critical silence, alongside her often contradictorily feminist poetics, amount to not a refusal to answer the question “who is speaking?” but a refusal to answer the question in a way that offers readers a coherent self, or a final story.

**Hejinian’s *My Life: Constructing and deconstructing the sentence***

For Lyn Hejinian—as for other feminist experimentalists like Susan Howe, Maureen N. McLane, and Rachel Blau du Plessis—distinguishing between criticism and poetry often seems beside the point. Hejinian is much less interested in finding static definitions of words like criticism, theory, and poetry than in considering how language might function to create new experiments and experiences within and past the boundaries that terms like criticism and poetry tend to designate. The final essay in Hejinian’s nonfiction collection *The Language of Inquiry*, “Happily,” is lineated, troubling the boundary between poem and essay—and, perhaps, suggesting the possibility of other forms for conveying the ideas like those contained in the preceding pieces in the collection.
Throughout her genre-crossing experiments, Hejinian, unlike Mayer, has strongly identified and been identified by critics as a member of the Language school. The essays in *The Language of Inquiry* were written over 25 years, and, together with the contextualizing headnotes that Hejinian provides before each entry, they constitute something of a personal intellectual history of the Language movement. An implicit but important argument in *The Language of Inquiry* is Hejinian’s centrality to the history of Language poetry. Hejinian describes conversations and debates she has had with other major figures associated with Language and experimental poetry, and the essays and headnotes relate changes in her own work and thinking to changes in the culture of and surrounding Language poetry.

The Language designation that has adhered to Hejinian throughout her career describes, but also has the potential to conceal, the border crossings with which her poetics engage. Hejinian’s close association with the Language movement has made it difficult to read the presences of other, and at times antithetical, modes of thought in Hejinian’s work. Hejinian’s close fit with the Language movement, and, especially, her own critical writings invite close comparisons with other Language writers, particularly female and feminist poets, like the writers I likened her to in the opening sentence of this section. By reading Hejinian’s early book *My Life* in the context of the feminisms of its time and alongside Mayer’s *Midwinter Day*, I hope to unsettle, if only slightly, Hejinian’s coherence as a feminist Language writer, pointing out some of the ways in which she joins Mayer in the “Disputed Territory.”

From its first publication in 1980 on Burning Deck Press, through subsequent editions, including a sequel/revision, *My Life in the Nineties* (2003), and a 2013 reissue of the two titles in a single volume, critics have interpreted *My Life* as a reader-oriented text that invites one to make one’s own meanings from its often-fragmented language. Hejinian wrote the first version of *My Life* when she was 37; it consists of thirty-seven sections with thirty-seven sentences each. The second edition she wrote at 45, and, accordingly, added eight sentences to each section, and eight more 45-sentence sections. Later versions have continued along these lines, a living text reminiscent of Walt Whitman’s many editions of *Leaves of Grass*, as Srikanth Reddy points out. Reddy says of *My Life*, “few examples of literary form have so elegantly connected the life of a writer to the shape of a book” (83). Mayer’s *Midwinter Day* might be another example of such an elegant connection, given its day-length conceit of content and composition. Hejinian herself suggests as much in her 1985 essay “The Rejection of Closure.” *Midwinter Day* is one of Hejinian’s examples of an “open text,” which, like Roland Barthes’s writerly text, “invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in
other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies” (43). In “The Rejection of Closure,” Hejinian also cites My Life as an example of an open text; the essay itself is an example of Hejinian’s facility at providing critical terms through which to describe and understand Language poetry and experimental poetics in general. Numerous scholars, including Marjorie Perloff and Lynn Keller, have employed and drawn from Hejinian’s notion of the open text. Like Hejinian’s designation as a Language poet, the designation of My Life as an open text signals experimentalism, but it is such a neat fit that it could foreclose approaches to the text that, although likely less elegant, speak in other ways to the text’s methods and experimentation. My reading of My Life considers the social and feminist contexts in which it was composed, suggesting the ways in which Hejinian’s text productively disappoints the expectations that tend to surround it.

The social atmosphere in the vibrant early days of Language poetry, in the late 1970s through the early 1980s, were stultifying and silencing for women poets—a period that corresponds directly with the composition and publication of the first version of My Life (and, of course, of Midwinter Day). During these years, as Ann Vickery shows in her feminist genealogy of Language poetry, Leaving Lines of Gender, female experimental poets like Hejinian occupied socially uncomfortable positions, writing and publishing among groups of mostly male poets that prized community and encouraged social involvement but also valued masculinist modes of public speaking and conversation. For example, Vickery describes numerous talks and readings at which male poets held the floor for hours while women sat silently. In a headnote to “The Rejection of Closure” written for the essay’s republication in The Language of Inquiry, Hejinian recalls that atmosphere: “Within the writing community, discussions of gender were frequent, and they were addressed both to perceptible practical problems (instances of injustice) immediately affecting people’s work and lives and to longer-term questions of power and, in particular, the ethics of meaning” (40). Hejinian’s recollection contrasts interestingly with Vickery’s genealogy. Although Hejinian is recalling discussions of gender, she does not apply a gendered lens of inquiry to her recollections. In her headnote, from 2000, the community of 20 years prior discusses as one, while in Vickery’s genealogy (also published in 2000), women remain silent, at least in public. When contrasted with Vickery’s, Hejinian’s account seems almost evasive, or at the very least lacking in detail. Hejinian’s lack of specificity could also suggest some sense of the frustration inherent in translating “perceptible” gender imparity into a durable feminist “ethics of meaning.”

Midwinter Day, like My Life, is an open text, Hejinian writes, because its formal constraint (that it be written in a single day) functions to achieve a sense that its borders are arbitrary and, thus, penetrable. According to Hejinian, in Midwinter Day, “The implication (correct) is that the words and the ideas (thoughts, perceptions, etc.—the materials) continue beyond the work. One has simply stopped because one has run out of units or minutes, and not because a conclusion has been reached nor ‘everything’ said” (“Rejection of Closure” 46).
Vickery’s archival research recovers evidence of Hejinian’s and other feminist poets’ deep considerations of gender, self, and community issues—most fascinatingly in their frequent personal correspondences. These various disagreements that arose based on necessarily dynamic and numerous definitions of feminism evince the challenges that experimental women’s writing, and women writers, faced in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, in a letter to Howe, Hejinian writes of feeling conflicted “between wanting to ‘speak my mind’ about issues vs. a hesitancy to inflict my attitude on others” (qtd. in Vickery 121). Howe’s response to Hejinian criticizes male Language poets, to which Hejinian responds, somewhat surprisingly, that female poets’ silence was “as much our fault as the men’s,” pointing out that male poets had invited female poets to give talks in front of the community and the women had refused (qtd. in Vickery 122). At its core, Hejinian writes, the issue “was not that the men are ignoring us here—but that the women are extremely hesitant to expose their opinions; and that is a problem with roots in the past far more than it is rooted in present conditions” (qtd. in Vickery 122). These letters, which were written in 1980, the year the first version of My Life was published, suggest Hejinian’s unwillingness to direct male attention toward the problem of gender discrimination. Hejinian employs an us versus them discourse (e.g., “us,” “our,” “the women,” as opposed to “the men”), positing a binary between men and women that runs counter to the antiessentialism that critics, including Spahr and Hinton, ultimately tend to find in My Life. I argue that considering the social context of gendered silence and discrimination in which the text was composed—and Hejinian’s ambivalence regarding how to respond to that context—can support, rather than conflict with, a reading of My Life as a text that exists between and/or outside various ideological and generic borders.

Spahr’s important reading of My Life draws on the text in its call for more inclusive and reader-oriented critical histories of American autobiography. Spahr’s reading is also exemplary of contemporary critical interpretations of My Life that, I argue, can be somewhat complicated by considering the text in the cultural context in which it was produced. According to Spahr:

My Life continually questions the possibility of essential self-reflection, of autobiography as the place where one might perpetuate a flattering version of the self. This is a work that looks more at the nature of the autobiographical than at Hejinian’s “actual” life; with [Judith] Butler, it problematizes the “actual” itself. In My Life gender is not stable and not an absolute. “As such,” Hejinian writes, “a person on paper, I am androgynous.” (144)

Hejinian prefaces her statement of androgyny with a clause distinguishing and defining the field of language as separate from lived experience: Hejinian’s “I” is “a person on paper,” not a person in the flesh. In the flesh, as opposed to “on paper,” Hejinian suggests, the author could not
achieve such androgyny. However, I argue that Hejinian’s attitude might be more pessimistic, and more gendered, than Spahr suggests. Spahr aligns Hejinian’s text, ideologically, with Butler’s argument that gender is performative, but Butler’s Gender Trouble was not published until 1990, a full decade after My Life first appeared. Of course, Hejinian’s text could still employ Butlerian antiessentialism even while pre-dating Butler. However, much suggests that this is not the case, including the hesitation and binarism with which Hejinian responds to Howe’s charges of sexism among Language writers and in the text of My Life itself.

Spahr points out that Hejinian employs “the neuter pronoun” throughout My Life, but the examples that she provides suggest Hejinian’s very occupation with, and attention to, an essentialist view of gender associated with French feminism—albeit conveyed through ruptured poetical practices (Spahr 145). For example, Spahr highlights the passage, “In the sentence, ‘one climbs five worn wood stairs and turns left to the scarred open door, then crosses a hall and two feet of linoleum to the four foot Formica counter with two sacks of groceries in seven steps, I am the one’” (Hejinian, My Life 80–81). Spahr reads this passage as an example of Hejinian’s “despecification of the pronoun” (146). Hejinian does not explicitly gender the “I”/“one,” and, as Spahr shows, distances the reader from the scene by beginning the sentence with the metalinguistic phrase, “In the sentence.” However, the scene into which the I “crosses” is, itself, gendered. In the context of the scene, the word “sentence” comes to take on another meaning: It suggests a weary, middle-class housewife returning from the grocery store, serving out the sentence to which cultural expectations have consigned her. Shot through with significant-sounding numbers, the passage sounds like a word problem from a child’s math assignment. The “sentence” begins and ends with the number one, as if to say that all those other numbers, along with the sentence’s and the subject’s progress across them, did not mean a thing. The “sentence” that Hejinian quotes (beginning with the words “one climbs”) and the sentence Hejinian that writes, as author of My Life (beginning with the words, “In the sentence”), end as she states, “I am the one.” As a doubly final statement, the number one becomes, simultaneously, climax and reduction. The speaker’s and author’s movement through this sentence within a sentence, seeking to intensify, deconstruct, or destabilize identity, ultimately fails against the material reality of household tasks.

If Hejinian’s interest lies less in destabilizing gender identity than in conveying its presence in daily, material life, her engagement in My Life with the notion of anxiety of authorship is, like Mayer’s attention to the same thematic in Midwinter Day, indicative of her attention to contemporaneous

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8Hejinian associates the open text with the *écriture feminine* of Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous, finding examples in both theorists’ work of associations between the “feminine textual body” and the open text (Cixous, qtd. in “Rejection of Closure” 55).
feminism. Hejinian creates a string of references to the anxiety of authorship that materializes and enforces the male-female binary while questioning its implicit sense of hierarchy, an ambivalent expression exemplary of her complex relationship to the feminist and social contexts in which she wrote *My Life*. One of the repeated sentences in *My Life* is, “I wrote my name in every one of his books.” The phrase first appears as a chapter heading (28), and is repeated throughout, enacting the inscription of female identity (“my name”) onto the patriarchal world of letters (“his books”). In its subsequent appearances, the phrase is altered, forming something of a plot. The sentence, “When I learned to read, I had written my name in every one of his books,” appears midway through *My Life* (60). And finally, “(this was the same summer that I read my father’s copy of *Anna Karenina* and thus made it my own, so that later that fall it was logical that I should write my name in every other one of his books)” (96). These latter two variations on the theme “I wrote my name in every one of his books” are difficult to parse: when did the speaker write her name in his books? Did it really happen? In what way was it “logical” to do so? If the latter two passages are read together, the temporal sequence of events seems to be:

1. The speaker read *Anna Karenina*.
2. The speaker wrote her name in every (other) one of his books.
3. The speaker learned to read.

The confusion of tenses across these appearances, and the difficulty of piecing them together into a coherent narrative, suggests a ruptured, secret history of female authorship. That it is her father’s copy of *Anna Karenina* that the speaker reads further associates the fractured narrative with the idea of the anxiety of authorship, given its relationship to Bloom’s anxiety of influence and established male literary life. By repeating the phrase “I wrote my name in every one of his books” throughout the text, Hejinian creates an insistence on authorship—a community of self or selves, within the isolation of the female writerly “I.” That insistence becomes all the more understandable given Hejinian’s social context as Vickery describes it.

The anxiety of authorship thematic is one of many disrupted “plots” through which Hejinian simultaneously answers and evades the question “who is speaking?” Another involves the insistently ringing telephone, which the speaker seems more irritated by each time it appears. Considered alongside the household discourse in *My Life*, the sense emerges of a frustrated housewife who has little time to get her “work done.” “I’ll just keep myself from picking up the telephone, in order to get some work done,” Hejinian writes (*My Life* 44). In a later section, “Tell anyone who telephones that I’m not home” (68). And, at last, as frustration mounts, “Whatever I am doing, the rude telephone interrupts, saying, ‘Stop doing that!’” (85).
Hejinian’s domestic is conveyed more experimentally than Mayer’s, through fragmentation, repetition, and parataxis, but when she repeats throughout, “I laugh as if my pots were clean,” it feels like the same “Shit” through which Mayer stumbles as she wonders, “Are these dishes clean or dirty.”

To extend the imagery of the household, for both Mayer and Hejinian, feminism and experimentalism might be less like homes in which they live than like rooms in which they tend to spend a lot of time. As a collective critical history of experimental women’s poetry takes shape, Vickery, Simpson, Frost, and others have discussed the potentially irresolvable problematic of the feminist critic, who by participating in critical discourse, risks reinscribing the hierarchical and binaristic modes of thought that, as a feminist, she seeks to dismantle. However, alongside such dismantling is the feminist work of construction. Here, that construction entails the development of narratives of women’s experimental writing that speak openly about the realities of women’s daily and writing lives, past and present. Without space for “mistakes,” non-feminist gestures, and even antifeminist ideologies in constructed histories of feminist experimental poetry, there is little possibility for the complex feminist criticism that works like Midwinter Day and My Life, with their rigorous attention to women’s lives, demand.

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