

“TO BE WHAT YOU ARE—INFINITELY”:

CHARLES HENRI FORD’S POETICS OF QUEER (IN)VISIBILITY

by

MATTHEW ROBINSON

(Under the Direction of Christopher Pizzino)

ABSTRACT

A focused examination of Charles Henri Ford’s poetry in *The Overturned Lake*, this paper theorizes the active image, a poet praxis that blends the aesthetics of Surrealist and camp traditions within the form of the lyric. A collage-like assembly of juxtapositions of literary images, the active image enables Ford’s subversive engagement with heteronormative conceptions of subjectivity and temporality. Through the exploration of Ford’s poetics, this paper seeks to enrich existent scholarship on Ford’s cultivation of queer communities and his emphasis on queer visibility. Positioning his treatments of queer issues in conversation with his artistic practice, the paper establishes a framework for future studies of Ford’s work wherein the active image is the basis for his development not only of a unique aesthetics but also of a queer communal identity.

INDEX WORDS: American Literature, Twentieth-century Literature, Modernism, Poetry, Poetics, Queer Studies

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MATTHEW ROBINSON

B.A., Mercer University, 2010

M.A.T., Georgia College and State University, 2013

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MATTHEW ROBINSON

Major Professor: Christopher Pizzino

Committee: Channette Romero
Susan Rosenbaum

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2018

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 SURREALISM AND CAMP.....	5
3 THE LYRIC.....	13
4 THE ACTIVE IMAGE.....	20
5 CONCLUSION.....	35
NOTES.....	37
REFERENCES.....	40

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Oppose your own kind of magic to any other reality, event, charm or horror in the world:
that’s the poet’s way.”

– Charles Henri Ford, *Water from a Bucket*

In his collected diaries *Water from a Bucket*, Charles Henri Ford reflects with all the confidence inherent in an aphorism upon the poet’s relationship with their environment. Essential to and implicit in his figuration of the poet is difference. Firstly, the poet must oppose their magic to the world. The charms and horrors of the world do not alone determine poetry—neither does reality in its entirety, nor do events in their particularity. The poet establishes a vital relationship with the world and animates it through this connection. The poet’s interiority operates in opposition to the exterior world. Secondly, the poet shares their own kind of magic. In possession of the knowledge of their unique powers, the poet induces wonder through meticulously crafted illusion. The peculiar magic of one poet is not the magic of another, for it is as individuated as the subjectivity of the poet. Ford’s model of poetry defines the figure of the poet, then, through a network of difference, where the interior forces of the poet function in opposition not only to the exterior materiality of the world but also to those interior forces of every other poet. While situated within this network, the poet engages in an act fundamentally relational. Poetic expression, according to Ford, is not simply self-expression, but more particularly social identification: the poet forges relationships between themselves and the world. The poem is the magic of the relationship.

Ford's definition of the poet figure presupposes a deep self-knowledge but relies wholly upon relationality, and this interplay between the individuality and the interconnectivity of the poet underlies much of Ford's artistic career. In his first collection of poems, *A Pamphlet of Sonnets*, Ford addresses the sonnets to people with whom he has intimate personal relationships, and the poems thus gesture toward the influence of personal relationships on one's poetic expression.¹ As the founder and editor of the journals *Blues* and *View*, Ford brings together the works of diverse artists, fostering in the process a literary space for openly queer individuals.² He couples his poetry in *Poems for Painters* with a variety of his contemporaries' paintings, and through the juxtapositions Ford creates a semantic interdependence between word and image and between himself and his peers. In the experimental chainpoems, Ford initiates the creation of collaborative verse written through an international exchange of letters.³ And, bridging Surrealism and Pop, Ford films the opening reception of his *Poem Posters* exhibit, passing the camera from one guest to another and playing all the while with gossip and public images.⁴ Throughout these diverse artistic projects, as Ford fully indulges in collaboration, his role as an individual poet occupies a decentralized space in relation to that of the community.

To varying degrees, Ford renders himself invisible and privileges a communal poetics, one that emphasizes the presence of queer artists, individuals, and communities. Often omitting or at least diminishing the prominence of his role in the creations of a work, Ford cultivates a poetics of invisibility that enables queer visibility. This kind of magic, however, leaves its faint traces in the art. Something of Ford's unique aesthetic is legible in the shape of the smoke and the gleam of the mirror, in the particular style with which he disappears. Ford's present absence thus facilitates an aesthetics of queer visibility wherein not only are queer artists, individuals, and

communities centralized, but they are centralized specifically and meticulously by Ford through an aesthetics that is itself queer and queering.⁵

Ford's interests in collaboration and community give shape to contemporary scholarship on his work. Primarily attentive to *The Young and Evil*, the novel he and Parker Tyler jointly authored, and to *View*, the journal of art he founded and edited, criticism on Ford emphasizes his efforts in the creation of literary spaces through which queer artists and queer communities represent themselves.⁶ Less studied are those instances in Ford's career when he steps into the spotlight alone, when he employs his aesthetics and launches artistic efforts without an overt collaborative or communal design. The scholarly neglect of Ford's poetics limits the rigor with which one might engage with his representations of queer folks—again, although he promotes queer visibility, these artists, individuals, and communities are visible through a lens of Ford's making. Thus, a theorization of Ford's aesthetic principles necessarily enriches the study of his queer empowerment, that aspect to which much scholarship on him already attends.

In addition to Ford's extensive contributions to collaborations with queer artists, Ford also independently composed several collections of poems. Among this work, many poems still foreground community or relationality, whether explicitly as they address a contemporary or engage in gossip, or implicitly as they allude to popular personalities or engage in intertextual conversations. Moments exist, however, when all interconnectivity falls away and when Ford's poetics remain detached and distinct. Particularly, in his 1941 collection *The Overturned Lake*, Ford includes a section of poems through which he indulges in a metapoetic exploration of the literary image, a section he titles "The Active Image" as a means of describing the project. The complex aesthetics resemble an assemblage, collage, or montage, and in his poetry the cobbled-together matrices of literary images defy neat methods of categorization or comprehension. Here,

Ford's aesthetics experiment with failure, as irrationality inevitably forces the reader to confront the limits of normative and normalizing modes of knowing. As they deviate from the usual, from conventionality, Ford's poetics are—in a literal sense of the word—queer. And as they arrange images and words in defamiliarizing juxtapositions, his poetics queer the poems' contents. More importantly, though, Ford's technique of the active image resists heteronormativity and demands the transgression of its traditional epistemologies through the deployment of irrational literary images. There is a paradox of sight: using the literary image—a picture we literally fail to see—Ford illuminates what we might otherwise overlook. He names in mental images, and the irrationality of his naming reflects the irrationality of the world. In this essay, I set aside Ford's engagements with and representations of queer communities and focus on his development and implementation of a queer aesthetic—certainly not because the nature of the latter is more significant than the former but because a thorough study of the latter facilitates a deeper understanding of the former. To understand Ford's commitment to queer visibility, we must first understand his poetics of impossible images and the paradox of failed sight. We must understand his poetics of queer (in)visibility.

CHAPTER 2

SURREALISM AND CAMP

The scant criticism on Ford's early poetry variously positions his work in conversation with the traditions of Surrealism and camp. Though certainly not a passive recipient of aesthetic principles, Ford engages these aesthetics explicitly in his work, and throughout his life he associated with the central figures and social scenes prominent in each movement.⁷ While demonstrably invested and interested in the principles of Surrealism and camp, Ford cultivates styles of creative production influenced but not determined by them. Indeed, most scholars investigate the manners through which Ford presses the boundaries of these artistic modes, the ways in which he destabilizes their central principles, and the craft with which he repurposes their aesthetics. While Ford entrenches himself in Surrealism and camp, he also troubles them within his poetry. The characterizations of his work as Surrealist or camp therefore only partially explain Ford's aesthetics—and such characterizations may perhaps overly inflect readings of his poems.⁸ The poetry in *The Overturned Lake*, for instance, features Surrealist and camp qualities in such a fragmentary manner that the poems operate outside the purview of either aesthetic.

Even divorced from Ford's work, however, Surrealism and camp are volatile terms. Their instability engenders wide fields of theorizations. The practices of the Surrealists are many and diverse while definitions of camp are contested and controversial. To say, then, that Ford combines Surrealism and camp is to speak with insufficient clarity. As we pursue more precisely honed terminology within these domains, then, we do so to seek a more robust vocabulary for the

discussion of Ford's deviations from his theoretical source material. To understand better Ford's adaptations, we begin with discussions of Surrealism and camp.

As Dickran Tashjian notes in his preface to *A Boatload of Madmen*, a pivotal study of the American avant-garde, the 1924 publication of André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* initiated the Surrealist intellectual movement in Paris (xvi). To access and explore the unconscious human mind, Breton cultivated "psychic automatism," as "a means of expressing the unconscious directly through writing while assiduously avoiding rational control" (xvii). Turbulent historical circumstances, Tashjian explains, forced the movement to shift its borders and definitions as it reacted against complex political attitudes and events—all the while, though, Breton remained the cerebral core of the Surrealists' ever-nebulous movement toward the irrational and unconscious (xvii). The ultimate goal of the Surrealists, as Breton announces in his manifesto, is a unification or actualization of the individual through the realignment of interior and exterior realities: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*" (14). While artistically and politically revolutionary, the ambitious movement sought to inspire new perspectives on the world and to revolutionize human life itself.

As many scholars note, however, the Surrealist body of work lacks perfect unity. Although Breton assumed a central position in the community and published an extensive array of authoritative essays on Surrealism, a plurality of intricately interrelated theories and praxes constitute the movement. Susan Rosenbaum examines the adaptations of Breton's theories by socially marginalized American poets, noting their claims that "their adaptations enabled a truer, freer surrealism to emerge and that surrealist ideals were most fully realized on the margins of the movement" (269). The plasticity of thought essential to Surrealism rendered its transmutation

inevitable—especially as that elasticity created space for “poets and artists who were at times explicitly opposed to Breton’s homophobia and conceptions of women” (269). Even within Breton’s central coterie of artists, however, fractures formed between theory and practice. Elza Adamowicz focuses particularly on the vastly popular Surrealist collage, which she argues “occupies a place of transgression rather than a site of transcendence” (192). Rather than through “the random coupling of arbitrary elements—as postulated by Breton’s ‘theory’ of the image in his first *Manifeste*—” the collage operates through semantic excess and obliterates the dialectical totality and coherence that Breton attributes to Surrealist aesthetics (192-3).

Despite the multidirectional development of the Surrealist movement, Raihan Kadri theorizes an underlying unity, a collective identity through which the various practitioners might coalesce. Reiterating the Surrealists’ orientation toward revolution, Kadri emphasizes not the artistic practices nor the political aims that the Surrealists embraced, but he rather foregrounds the epistemological shift that the movement performs—the goal of the Surrealists was, he argues, to change the way people see the world (11-15). Seen as “a living movement” (13), one that undergoes continual permutation and adaptation, Surrealism grows out from a philosophical pessimism “that continually keeps Surrealism open as a field of research” and that “regulat[es] what can be considered as Surrealist” (15). Kadri traces philosophical pessimism from Nietzsche and locates in the premise two fundamental epistemological methods. First, philosophical pessimism engenders a skeptical sensibility, one that simply doubts “truths.” Further, philosophical pessimism entails “an active process of reducing the ‘true world’ to the level of the image, for the purpose of perceiving difference in the apparent order of things and conceiving alternative possibilities for value and one’s notion of the world” (15). Fundamentally, the spirit of Surrealism, that which in principle binds the movement’s diverse intellectual and aesthetic

products together, is an outlook on the world that doubts accepted truths and that reveals their faults through artistic representation. Kadri's model of Surrealism as "an entirely new epistemological category" (15) provides critical insight Ford's difficult relationship with Surrealism.

Never formally inducted into the Surrealists' ranks, Ford occupied a position from which he could embrace some elements of Surrealism but jettison others. In his early poetry, for example, Ford breaks deliberately with many of Breton's principles and practices—he attends to form and abandons automatism, he lavishes his work with homoeroticism and challenges Breton's homophobia, he builds a queer community and reimagines revolution, he inhabits the mainstream and abandons the underground.⁹ Despite his deviations from several Bretonian theories, however, Ford retains in his poetics what Adamowicz designates as the effects of the Surrealist collage and what Kadri theorizes as the core of the Surrealist movement. In his early poetry, Ford creates collages of literary images that transgress rather than transcend rational thought—the logical disjunction among the literary images demands a break from the epistemological structures in which language typically operates. Ford's associations between words and images do not necessarily establish an alternative mode of knowledge. Rather, indicative of an underlying philosophical pessimism, they simply gesture toward the failure of conventional ways of thinking by placing apparent truths in juxtaposition to reveal their hypocrisies, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Although Ford sustains a contentious relationship with Bretonian Surrealism, the movement's aesthetics and ideals inspire his poetics and propel his prolificacy. Significantly, though, the qualities of Ford's work that mark his difference from Bretonian Surrealism—his formal aestheticization, lavish homoeroticism, queer communality, and mainstream publicity—also establish his connection to camp.

Just as the label of Surrealism prompts an erratic plethora of definitions, so too does that of camp. The term's schismatic signification splinters apart with Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" wherein she emphasizes the camp sensibility as a "good taste of bad taste" (274), a delight in the styles of surfaces and things. The camp sensibility "is a *tender* feeling" for decorative stylization, a frivolity in the aestheticized object (274)—it ignores high culture and indulges the low, privileging style over content (260). "Camp," according to Sontag, "is playful, anti-serious" (271). The dandyism of mass culture and Pop art,¹⁰ camp resonates with "an improvised self-elected class, especially homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste" (272). Sontag theorizes camp as an apolitical overconsumption of extravagantly stylistic materialism and as a sensibility with which bourgeois gay men have an especially strong affinity.

Recent theories of camp, however—in part as reactions against Sontag's strain of thought—decisively note camp's deeply political nature. Within the constellations of theories, Grzegorz Czemiel views camp poetics as a performative act that enables social visibility and that resists normalizing discourses (86-90). For Czemiel, camp operates in opposition to but nevertheless alongside dominant modes of expression. It deconstructs and refashions, "merging the subversive and the aesthetic, the high and the low, [. . . so that] they form an inseparable whole" (96). As such, camp poetics empower those working from the outside margins of society (86). Another cluster of scholars locates camp more definitively, positioning it inseparably within the discourses of queer sexualities.¹¹ Matthew Tinkman, for instance, envisions camp as "the result of labor by queers" (10).¹² Through camp, the queer subject performs queerness from within the system by whose standards they are queer; camp is a self-naming that is aware of the performativity beneath any self-naming (14). Nevertheless, "such camp displays allow queer laborers to recognize themselves in exteriority" (26). Characterized through "work-as-play,"

camp laborers “congeal” in the commodity an anticipation and appreciation of its eventual uselessness. Camp engenders a frivolity that defies typical codifications of value in capital (9), and thus camp is “a philosophy not so much of sexuality but of commodity culture” (33).

Tinkman focuses discussions of camp not simply on performative expressions of queer identity, but on these expressions’ nature as labor and commodity arising against but simultaneously within an oppressive capitalist system. These scholars still explore the decadent aestheticism of camp that Sontag theorizes, but they foreground the ironically deep sociopolitical implications of camp’s superficial and frivolous style.

Throughout the diverse literature on camp, two concepts particularly relevant to Ford’s poetics recur with notable consistency: the camp style divulges a fascination with failure and troubles the definition of seriousness. As Marsha Bryant and Douglas Mao mark the intersections of camp and modernism, they observe that “doing camp means *overdoing* it, pushing the limits of good taste, soliciting a verdict of outrageousness” (2). Camp is a performance, they suggest, that transgresses the bounds of aesthetic normality, or “good taste.” Its “critical evaluation,” they continue, “involves distinguishing successful excess from excess that fails” (2), but the delineation of standards of aesthetic success or failure is of course an impossible if not ridiculous task—failure is the whole point of Ford’s camp. It transgresses or outperforms normativity because those who perform camp do so from an outsider’s social position. Camp enables alternative experiences, expressions, and epistemologies as it teases the limits of normative aesthetics. It is this capacity as a nonnormative, or queer, idiom that Ford realizes within his poetic experiments in camp.

Further, within the performance, as part of that which transgresses, a sense of the unserious arises through an ironic indulgence in camp’s own performativity. Discussing Ford’s

magazine *View* and his novel *The Young and Evil*—notably, both collaborative works—Alexander Howard distinguishes between high and low expressions of camp. Ford’s high camp directly engages the Surrealist avant-garde movement. Reworking its aesthetics in *View*, Ford strips pretention from Surrealism and reveals “its underling absurdities and latently queer quirks” (“Camp” 11). Howard places Ford’s unpublished reflections on Surrealism in conversation with Christopher Isherwood’s definition of high camp, wherein Isherwood notes that camp “always has an underlying seriousness. You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance” (11). Ford’s high camp, in other words, is not a rejection or replacement of Surrealism—it is a reconstitution of Continental Surrealist practices and a realization of the movement’s potential. Ford makes Surrealism fun. Howard’s distinction between high and low camp relies on their respective discursive contexts—while high camp exists in formal or aesthetic experimentation, low camp resides wholly in the “effeminate,” “vulgar,” “anarchic,” and “brazenly queer” expressions of marginalized subjects (12). Howard concludes with an observation about the combination of high and low camp in *The Young and Evil*,¹³ noting how the novel diverges from heteronormative modernist practice to produce a camp aesthetic “that is conducive to the articulation of polymorphous, queer desire” (13). Ford’s high camp creates literary space for low camp performances of queer identity. Essentially, Ford’s camp experimentation enables a unique version of queer visibility: as Ford takes seriously queer individuals and communities, he presents them in all their outrageous performative glamor through a distinctly eccentric aesthetic praxis.

While useful in the identification of different discursive registers in Ford’s work, the distinction between high and low camp ultimately distracts from the potential of camp for queer

expression. Ford's inclusion of marginal subjects' voices contributes at least as significantly to the disruption of heteronormativity as does his aesthetic adaptations of Surrealism—in Ford's poetics, high and low, style and content dissolve into each other.¹⁴ Any political employment of camp, as Czemieli demonstrates, deliberately transgresses social norms; it is a political tool for the marginalized outsider. Further, while Tinkman examines the forms of knowledge “congealed” in the commodities created by gay men in middle of the twentieth century, particularly in the films produced collaboratively by those men, he notes the affinities between camp and the filmic technique of montage¹⁵—an affinity that parallels Ford's fusion of camp with Surrealism. Ford's active image, the unique poetic technique through which he cultivates collages of the literary images, functions like the montage as it engenders a counter epistemology through the association and revelation of contradictions. The resultant effect is not a transcendence, where the clunky combination produces dialectically a unified whole, but it is rather a tumult, where in disorder disparate parts fail to align and coalesce. Failure thus becomes a significant force in Ford's literary image collages—the failure of the reader to comprehend Ford's radically unconventional work and the failure of the heteronormative ideas to remain consistent when juxtaposed with each other.¹⁶ Ford's camp inflections of Surrealist techniques and philosophies afford a poetics through which he presents a paradox of vision: we do not see the literary images into which Ford shapes incoherent principles of heteronormativity, but this failure helps us see the incoherence all the more clearly.

CHAPTER 3

THE LYRIC

Despite Ford's well-established and self-proclaimed interests in Surrealism and camp, an early examination of Ford's poetry by William Carlos Williams evades their explicit discussion, and, through his deliberate avoidance of such obvious literary influences, Williams situates Ford's poetics within the genre of the lyric,¹⁷ a tradition with which contemporary critics of his work seldom engage. In "The Torturous Straightness of Charles Henri Ford," the forward to Ford's 1937 collection *The Garden of Disorder*, Williams offers an alternative theorization of Ford's poetics, one that usefully emphasizes the qualities of Ford's work not finding their origins in the Surrealist or camp traditions. Particularly Williams's introductory essay helps to illuminate Ford's presentations of subjectivity and temporality, both of which are vital characteristics of lyric poetry.¹⁸ Indeed, the poems to which Williams devotes his most extensive discussion are those that Ford places under the section entitled "Late Lyrics," and Williams's and Ford's shared classification of the poems as lyrics reveals a historically specific conceptualization of poetry inflected by their contemporaries in the school of New Criticism.¹⁹ While Williams's essay offers useful insight into the qualities that silently insinuate themselves around and throughout the more boisterously flaunted Surrealist and camp aesthetics, the forward also historicizes Ford's poetic project.

Williams is not, to be clear, oblivious to the effects of Surrealism and camp on Ford's poetry. Indeed, as Tashjian notes in *A Boatload of Madmen*, although Williams evades any straightforward connection of Ford's poetics to the Surrealists, Williams's language certainly

evokes central tenets of the avant-garde movement (161). Williams, for example, characterizes Ford's poetry as "unreal" and "unfamiliar" (Williams 9), as "generally dream-like" (10), recalling the Surrealists' break from realism and rationality and their interests in Freud and the unconscious. Similarly, Williams describes Ford's poetic technique of "extraordinary word juxtapositions" (9) without an explicit mention of the Surrealist image to which it seems so closely related.²⁰ Further, with the title of his essay, "The Torturous Straightness of Charles Henri Ford," Williams tongue-in-cheek evokes Ford's sexual behavior and his aesthetic practice—neither of which might be characterized wholly and accurately as "straight." A tendency towards camp runs implicitly through "torturous straightness" in its covert coupling of sexuality and style and in its in-group joking about Ford. Therefore, while Williams makes a slight nod in the directions of Surrealism and camp, he gestures more broadly in his essay toward the aspects of Ford's lyric poetry that hold his interests.

Although Williams unabashedly valorizes his own poetic practice of contact with the "local conditions that confront us" (*Contact* 10), praising most the poems that deal with the uniquely American cultural landscape from which Ford writes, he also emphasizes Ford's presence as a speaking subject in the "Late Lyric" section of *The Garden of Disorder*. "For every man," Williams writes, "there must finally occur a fusion between his dream which he dreamed when he was young and the phenomenal world of his later years[. . . .] In these later lyrics it seems to me that Ford shows evidence of this important fusion" (10). Williams's assessment of Ford's lyric poems attends to the interrelation of the poet's inner life and the exterior world, recalling a Hegelian model of the lyric that privileges in poetry the spirit of the author.²¹ This focus on Ford as a presence within the poem reintroduces into an analysis of his poetics the role, nature, and presentation of subjectivity. In "Pliant," for example, one of two poems from the

collection about which Williams writes specifically, Ford condemns the government-sanctioned hanging of Rainey Bethea,²² a young black man and the last person to be publicly executed in the United States. Williams praises the poem not simply for addressing “hard material to handle,” but more particularly for the “differences of handling of the to-day conventional theme” (11). As Williams locates the power of “Pliant” in its “important fusion” of the unreality of dream-images and the reality of racism, he also marks the moment of contact, the coalescence, between Ford’s subjectivity and his American cultural surroundings.

Yet Williams’s commentary highlights subjectivity not only in the traces of Ford’s identity resultant from his authorship of the poem, but also in the presentation of a speaker’s voice projected throughout the poem. Essential to Ford’s handling of the difficult content is the lyric “I,” or the first-person perspective, through which Ford presents a fictionalized account of Bethea’s thoughts. The layering of subjectivities in the dramatic monologue, whether of autobiographical, biographical, or fictional natures, proves problematic in “Pliant,” as the actual, historical voice of Bethea is lost beneath Ford’s poetic constructions. As Tirza Latimer notes in her discussion of the complex political position Ford occupies as the author of “Pliant,” the poem expresses Ford’s desire to place marginalized populations in conversation with each other (82).²³ In his particular poetic treatment of Bethea’s lynching, then, Ford reveals his interest in the construction of an intersubjective, polyvocal lyricism. Ford employs the lyric “I” not always in the presentation of a unified persona but sometimes in the development of a dynamic relationality. And, since queer communality preoccupies Ford’s artistic career, the relational affordances of the lyric “I” occupy a central position in his poetics. In other words, Ford’s construction of subjectivity through the lyrical speaker couples indivisibly from his poetics of queer (in)visibility.

Additionally, as Williams's essay integrates Ford's work into the lyric tradition, and especially into Williams's own version of lyrical poetic praxis, he theorizes a subtle but significant difference between the temporalities in Ford's poetry and those of the Surrealists' theories. Williams attributes a generative effect to Ford's "tenuous but concretely imagined word appositions" (10). Ford's unique use of juxtapositions forces the reader "to re-see, re-hear, re-taste, re-smell, and generally re-value all that it was believed had been seen, heard, smelled, and generally valued" (9). The appositions' strengths originate from two interrelated sources: Ford's unusual pairings of words defamiliarize his ideas to the reader, and yet they reside within literary images of vivid clarity—the juxtapositions' literal semantic values are "tenuous," but their visual qualities are immediately, "concretely" apparent. The word appositions thus afford a simultaneous deconstruction and reconfiguration of ideas, where the resultant sensorial resonances between words ground the reader's experience of the poem in the "phenomenal world" (10). For Williams, the indulgence in poetry's revitalization of language engenders a renewed appreciation for material reality; Williams argues, therefore, that Ford's poems exploit the sensorial nature of experience and consequently reinvigorate the reader's perception of the world.

While Williams and the Surrealists each attribute to poetry a form of agency, their theories of poetry conflict violently in their respective valuations of temporality. Intrinsic to Williams's theories of linguistic and sensorial vitality, a sense of immediacy always underlies the experience and the effect of the poem. Conversely, a specific futurity underlies the entirety of Breton's vision of the Surrealist movement.²⁴ While Williams and Breton both believe that the poetic potential of the dream-like becomes kinetic only through its contact with the real,²⁵ Williams harnesses that energy to enliven the perception of the present while Breton channels it

further to envision hope for a new future—what the Surrealists see as a means to an end, Williams sees as an end in itself. Poems, their theories assume, exert a certain power over the reader, and this power manifests itself temporally, in the reader’s lived experience: for Williams, the power of poetry exists in immediacy, and for the Surrealists, in futurity. As Williams appropriates poetry that the Surrealists influenced, Ford’s lyrics exhibit a slippage between these two modes of temporality. Rather than residing wholly within one or the other, however, Ford’s temporal poetics disrupt standard constructions of time, and thus his atypical lyrical temporality plays a pivotal role in the destabilization of heteronormativity.

Ford’s lyric disruptions of subjective and temporal unity also respond antagonistically against the New Critics’ mainstream theories of poetry and criticism. As Ford and Williams each refer to Ford’s work interchangeably as poems and lyrics, they participate in the generalization of the lyric, but the nature of Ford’s participation in the generic redefinition of the lyric breaks radically from that of the New Critics. The Introduction to *Understanding Poetry*, written by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, stresses the communicative quality of poetry as a particularized form of expression for “feelings and attitudes” (177), but as the authors privilege the work of certain poets as exemplary articulations of “the most fundamental interests which human beings have” (192), they dismiss the expressions of those whose social and artistic differences position them in opposition to “*good* poetry, and *good* literature in general” (emphasis added 191). Implicit in Brooks’s “History without Footnotes: An Account of Keats’ *Urn*” is the presence in poetry of an intelligent design and unified purpose—as the parts gain value in their contribution to the whole within an “organic context” (101), Brooks presupposes the text’s underlying coherence. Similarly, as Reuben Brower in “The Speaking Voice” theorizes the tonal and social dynamics within the dramatic situation between a poem’s fictional speakers

and auditors (211-213), he attributes to the poet the desire to forge a rational—or at least intelligible—subjectivity through the speaker figure. Typical patterns of thought like regional idioms and social relations are for Brower means of communication rather than objects of critique. These writings, spanning over a decade, reveal a prevailing attitude about poetry: it is deliberately sensible—sense may be made of it, and common sense is what makes it. It is coherent, in both senses of the word.

Ford's lyric poems thus inhabit a formative moment of the genre's history, and as the genre develops through the theories of the New Criticism, Ford works not only against particular individuals' poetic philosophies,²⁶ but also against various freshly forming poetic norms. Although New Critical theories arise at various points in Ford's poetic career, some well after the publication of *The Overturned Lake*, the discursive trends from which they originate and to which they contribute provide a context in which poems earn their value through their exemplification of specific ideals: namely their unity in purpose and design and their indulgence in complexity and depth. Embracing the irrationality of Surrealism and the superficiality of camp, however, Ford's poetic technique, particularly the collage of literary images, aspires to displace common sense and to trouble the aesthetics of coherence.

As Williams's forward suggests, Ford's poetry features an aesthetic heavily influenced but not wholly determined by the theories of Surrealism and camp. Williams concerns himself in the forward not with situating Ford's work in the Surrealists' international network of sociopolitical revolutions, nor does Williams entertain Ford's camp homoeroticism. He instead locates Ford's poetry in the immediate present of a uniquely American cultural landscape. In Williams's estimation, Ford's most admirable poems are those lyrics "using the banal to escape the banal" (11). The banality of the lyric, with its tropes and conventions well established and

thoroughly explored, also for Ford becomes a line of flight from the banal. Entered into mutually transformative relationships with Surrealism and camp, lyricism in Ford's poetry becomes at some times corrosive and at others generative. As a vehicle for the active image, the lyric also becomes a new model of meaning-making.

CHAPTER 4

THE ACTIVE IMAGE

In 1941, four years after the release of *The Garden of Disorder* and Williams's forward to it, Ford published *The Overtaken Lake*, another collection of poetry. Ford divides the collection into five sections: "A Comedy of Belief," "The Active Image," "A Broom Made of Flesh and Hair," "The Breathless Rock That Swims," and "ABC's." The first and last sections each contain a long poem, and the titles of those poems serve also as the titles of their sections. For the titles of the third and fourth sections, Ford repurposes lines from his poems. "The Active Image," the title of the second section, remains distinct from the others: nowhere within the collection do the words otherwise appear. Whereas the titles of the other sections are characteristic of their constituent poems, the title of the second section characterizes those poems. As a title, "The Active Image" provides editorial commentary on the poems and subsequently inflects their reception. The organization of the collection thus reveals an aesthetic project, one whose aims originate in the theories of Surrealism, camp, and lyricism but whose execution diverges subtly from the praxes of those traditions. Through its title, Ford designates the section as a site for an emergent poetics, one obviously predicated upon the image and interested in its agency. The active image resituates the pictorial collage within a purely text-based medium, wherein the visual experience is wholly constituted by an assemblage of disjointed literary images. The loose associative relationships between these literary images fail to adhere to typical procedures of meaning-making, and through that failure the active image resists normative epistemologies and,

more specifically, transgresses heteronormative values. Impossible images give form to invisible social forces.

The section serves more as an experimental exercise than as a theoretical treatise, and in its metapoetic self-indulgence Ford's work variously develops and deploys the collage technique with literary images. In some poems, then, Ford deliberately reflects on his poetics to theorize the active image while in others he simply relies on that theory to contemplate other matters. The arbitrary alternation between these two poetic modes performs within the section the disjunction of collage, resisting unity and cohesion even within the collection's organizational structure. The intermixture of theoretical and practical work suggests a poetics in the process of becoming, one whose articulation always lags behind its shifting nature. The examination of one, then, yields insights absent from an analysis of the other, and both therefore contribute meaningfully to the active image's theorization. Notably, as Ford announces the theoretical intent only elusively in the title of the section and never explicitly within the poetry, and as the section performs the incoherence of the collage in its organization, Ford privileges the experiential effect of the theory over its clear expression. Looking first at two metapoetic theorizations and then at a standard implementation, this project seeks the clarity that the active image resists and thus significantly reorganizes Ford's poems—often at the cost of his constructed indeterminacy.

As Ford works toward a theory for his own aesthetic in "The Active Image," as he explores his literary heritage in the Surrealist, camp, and lyric traditions, his position shifts within the triangulation, remaining unfixed from poem to poem. The active image is not an alchemical combination but an uneasy negotiation of its terms. The various influences appear heterogeneously. In "The Living Corpse," Ford reflects upon the variation of his technique from the Surrealist image while in the camp-infused "Narcissus in Winter" he deliberates on ideal

relationships with surface images. These two poems provide access not only to Ford's conceptualization of the active image technique but also to his perspective on elements of Surrealism and camp. In "Baby in jail; the animal day plays alone," on the other hand, Ford employs the active image without metapoetic reflection on the technique's literary origins. Importantly, in these contemplations, Ford also experiments with the formal and generic characteristics of the lyric—his project is not simply bound by the extent to which he practices Surrealist and camp theories.

"The Living Corpse" recalls in its very title the Exquisite Corpse word game,²⁷ and thus it places Ford's work into immediate conversation with Surrealism. A necrophiliac love poem, "The Living Corpse" perverts the lyric tradition and fetishizes the reanimated corpse of Surrealism. While the object of the speaker's affection, the living corpse remains cold to its admirer—and the relationship between the speaker and corpse dramatizes that between Ford and the Surrealist aesthetics. Through a translucent veil Ford presents both his infatuation and his dissatisfaction with the technique of the Surrealist image, ultimately rejecting the scornful lover and embracing his own poetic practice. In "The Living Corpse," Ford theorizes the active image as an afterlife of the Surrealist image, as a mutation or extension of it, and in the interpenetration of his lyric and Surrealist influences, Ford transforms each through the presence of the other.

As a framing device, the first and final stanzas enclose the poem, and the resultant sense of self-containment reiterates an important conceptual difference between Ford's and the Surrealists' work, that of authorship and automatism. Ford puts a traditional formal structure of the lyric into the service of his contemplation of the relationship he maintains with Surrealism.²⁸ The opening stanza establishes this relationship through an apostrophic address, wherein the addressor, the "I," admires the features of the second-person addressee, "you":

If I should build a fire in mid-air,
 it would cast on the meadow a bird's trace,
 but the flame would be less bright than your face,
 the shadow less dark than your hair. (1-4)

The speaker characterizes his efforts as inferior to the body of the addressee, and this disparity of aesthetics determines the source of tension that runs throughout the poem. The final stanza repeats a slight variation these lines. The conditional modal verbs “should” and “would” are replaced by “shall” and “will.” The modal transformation removes from the poem the sense of purely hypothetical speculation and instills in it a feeling of absolute futurity. Further, the conjunction “but” softens to “and” in the final stanza so that the difference in aesthetics still exists, but the value judgment implicit in “but” becomes objective acknowledgment in “and.” The verbs now expressing certain future actions and the speaker now accepting his difference, the poem resolves the initial source of tension with the speaker’s conviction to build mid-air fires despite their differences from the features of a corpse’s face.

Ford’s decisive control over the poetic structure contrasts sharply with the general formlessness evoked by the Surrealist corpse. Between the first and final stanzas, the speaker frets over his “sweet obsession” with the living corpse (9)—lamenting that, while singular and special like “a mermaid, or a plasmosome” (11), the corpse will not accept his “heart’s food” (17). Although the speaker recognizes the extraordinary value of the would-be lover, disharmony defines the relationship. Characterized regularly through oppositional extremes—bright and dark (3-4), sound and silence (8), harmless and harmful (9), warm and cold (12-13)—the living corpse is immense, and in the largeness that the “shroud of days cannot cover” (14), infinite potentiality resides. However, wide and “bare as the sky” (16), the living corpse cannot be contained or

controlled—its boundlessness undoes it: infinite, it can never be particular. The individuality of one’s “heart’s food” (17) contrasts inexorably with the duplicitous nature of the corpse.

As the meditation on the living corpse progresses, the discordance between the speaker and his object of admiration becomes gradually clearer, and this dissatisfaction with the corpse’s generic traits articulates Ford’s contention with Surrealism. More specifically, as the corpse embodies “two realities in the presence of each other” (*Manifesto* 36), the poem grants a half-life to Breton’s theory of the Surrealist image. Presented as a body animated by the force of its internal contradictions—it is hot and cold, loud and silent—the corpse recalls the spark Breton attributes to “the difference of potential between the two conductors” of the Surrealist image (37). Importantly for Breton, the “most beautiful images” result from automatism, not from craft or guile or conscious effort (37). Twisting Breton’s pursuit of beauty, Ford personifies the Surrealist image as an unrequited lover in a lyric poem—a clichéd depiction of beauty, one of the most conventional tropes in the cultural tradition away from which Breton sought to break. In a quest for the beautiful image, Ford suggests, the Surrealist image remains within conventional systems of thought.

While enamored of the beauty in the potential of the Surrealist image, Ford forges the active image to expand its limitations. Rather than a simply binary logic, Ford portrays in the first and final stanzas a multi-nodal network of agents: suspended in mid-air, the speaker’s fire shines sun-like, illuminating a bird that casts a shadow over the flowery grasses of the meadow. Ford’s model of the image is a rhizomic ecosystem of concrete, interconnected things. Less of a spark between two conductors and more of a field of energy, Ford’s particular poetic style interrelates disparate agents and extracts semantic potential from their juxtapositional lattice—regardless of their relative lack of beauty. Most importantly for Ford, whereas the automatically

inspired Surrealist image lacks particularity, whereas it exists outside the conscious efforts of the artist, Ford builds his fire himself—the creative process is wholly within his control, a point emphasized in the final stanza in its alteration of “the meadow” (2) to “my meadow” (20). The first-person possessive pronoun exerts Ford’s agency in and ownership of the process of poetic production.

The form of the lyric provides a structure through which Ford darkly contemplates and dramatizes his affinity for Surrealism. With the first and final stanzas contrived as a frame, the poem establishes and resolves its tension neatly, engendering a sense of finality and enclosing the poem upon itself. In other words, the framing stanzas close like a tomb around the meditation on the interminable form of the living corpse. And just as the structure of the poem contains the living corpse, Ford’s alternative aesthetics contain within them a trace of the Surrealist image. While the Surrealist image relies on extreme oppositions, Ford’s active image employs a system of juxtapositions, a constellation of images with uncertain but nevertheless electric connections. Not a single opposition but an array of them, the active image contains in multiplicity the Surrealist image—it may “refuse to die” (18), but the life it leads will be utterly transformed in Ford’s lyric poetry.

Although not overly dramatically, camp acts through the poem’s lyrical performativity, in its deliberate formal contrivances and its hyperbolic necrophiliac affection. But if camp whispers throughout “The Living Corpse,” then it screams in “Narcissus in Winter.” A myth about an infatuation with surfaces and a delight in beauty, the story of Narcissus serves Ford as an ideal site for an exercise in camp. Additionally, as Narcissus suffers in a failed relationship with his own image, one that ultimately destroys and transforms him, the story enables a meditation on the interrelations and disjunctions among subjectivity, self-image, and the image. Ford

investigates in “Narcissus in Winter” the performativity of identity as he employs the active image to collage diverse subjective voices, shattering the illusion of a unified self mediated through poetry.

Polyvocality characterizes the poem as distinct voices construct the dynamic images of and addresses to Narcissus. Importantly, the different natures of the voices emerge only through their varied relationships to Narcissus—although direct addresses punctuate the poem, there is no explicit lyric “I.” There is no self-reflection or introspection, no explicit interrogation of emotion. In the poem, subjectivity presupposes both performativity and relationality. The first two lines operate within the imperative mood, issuing commands to the addressee Narcissus: “Shiver, then, by the faint water, / clip the ferns of ice with your teeth;” (1-2). As they establish the dramatic apostrophic situation, the lines drip with performativity—firstly while Ford writes as a character in a mythical story and more importantly while that character speaks with affected indifference. A reaction to a previous event—“then” implies the poetic address begins as a consequence of some prior action—the lines suggest that the speaker, rejected by Narcissus, feigns disinterest in him, urging him to just keep doing what he was already doing. A camp melodrama in miniature, the first two lines contrast in mood with the remainder of the first stanza, which shifts from the imperative to the indicative: “the body of the black snake falters / and flows from the palms of your feet” (3-4). No longer issuing commands, the speaker now makes and dictates objective observations. The speaker’s personal connection to Narcissus suddenly disintegrates, and the clarity of the dramatic situation blurs. The semicolon thus marks a fundamental incoherence in tone. The relationship between the halves of the first stanza is one of disharmony—there is certainly no logical cause and effect. With the distinct modes of address,

the speaker's subjectivity cracks as the speaker occupies two unique positions—and the fragmentation continues into the second stanza:

The leaf curled in the snow's mouth
 repeats your hands whose lines are prone,
 separate as a branch the blizzard brought
 to remind you of Echo's bones. (4-8)

As the third speaking voice announces to Narcissus nature's intended reprimand, it sounds from afar, gaining through the distance an awareness not only of the natural world but also of its design. The final subjective position, almost as a voice for the universe, has access to Narcissus and his environment in a manner wholly different from the spurned lover and the objective observer of the first stanza. The parallel movements in subjectivities from small to large, from near to far, from personal to impersonal emphasizes the performativity underlying all poetic creation: no single subjective position or speaking voice is more or less contrived than the others. All share a sense of falsity.

From each position, however, the speaker acquires a substantially different relationship to Narcissus, and with these various relations come disparate affinities with his image—as Ford collages diverse speaking voices, he also creates multiple subjectivities, shapes unique relationships, and explores their divergent affordances for the image. Through the unrequited physical attraction of the first speaker arises an attention to Narcissus's body that serves to centralize him in the poem, and the speaker's sexual desire inflects his relationship to Narcissus's image. Importantly, the first imperative simply relates to Narcissus "by the faint water" (1) while the second relates to his reflection, which, as Narcissus's teeth chatter in the cold, "clip[s] the ferns of ice" (2) that spread unfurling over the half-frozen surface of the pool.

Under the power of Narcissus's beauty, the speaker conflates the youth's image with his identity and addresses the reflection as an extension of Narcissus: "clip the ferns of ice with *your* teeth" (emphasis added 2). Focused on Narcissus as an object of beauty or as a lovely surface, the embodied and reflected images are one in being with each other. The image is the essence. Further, the first speaker's subjective position offers a unique reading of Narcissus's relationship with his image. Portraying the "faint water" (1) as delicately coated with "ferns of ice" (2), the speaker highlights the medium specificity of the reflection. Narcissus does not gaze upon a perfect reduplication of his own image—it is altered by its presence on the icy surface of the water. Narcissus longs instead for a particular mediation of his image. The lines thus suggest that the unmediated experience of a pure, singular self is itself a myth. Rather than the iconomaniacal adoration of his reflected beauty, it is the failure to see the image as an image that destroys Narcissus. The first subjective speaking voice emerges through his attraction to Narcissus, and the superficial delight in physical beauty ultimately proves disastrous—for both the speaker and for Narcissus.

By contrast, in the second stanza, the speaker situates Narcissus within a system of interrelated images and employs the active image, enabling in the process a commentary of the image and desire. The speaker's style of address marks a more conventional poetic register—whereas the first speaker initiates the dramatic situation with a low camp repudiation for a personal affront, the final distinct speaking voice engages impersonally with Narcissus. The chatty, conversational tone is gone entirely by the poem's completion, and the nature of the speaker's relationship to Narcissus also characterizes the speaker's relationship to the image. Through the impersonal subjective position of apparent omniscience and aesthetic distance, Narcissus dissolves and resolves into his environment. The significance of his beauty and the

boundaries of his body fade, and as Echo's tragedy reduplicates in the patterned veins of a frostbitten leaf, the twiggy outgrowths of a wind-blown branch, the desiccated scatter of her unburied skeleton, and the chiromantic lines in the creases of Narcissus's palm, his bodily image gains semantic value. Rather than a discrete form, the image of Narcissus exists in relation to his environment. The image itself, the poem suggests, only acquires significance through its associations with other images. The image has no essence—at least not independently—but through the active image assemblage, the suffering Narcissus inflicts on others becomes legible in his beauty. Thus, as Narcissus pines for his reflected image, his desire and his destruction mirror Echo's. The intensity of sexual attraction to an idealistic but unattainable male form indiscriminately obliterates the subjects of that desire. A poem about same-sex attraction—the presumably male speaker and Narcissus both desire a male body—in its final lines troubles the distinction between male homoeroticism and heterosexual desire, a radical and unresolved juxtaposition that arises only through the impersonal distance of the third speaker.

The failure of the voices to cohere as a unified performance of subjectivity affords multiple relationships with the image, and through its various indulgences in beauty the poem contemplates camp. The first speaker's desirous engagement with Narcissus permits affected emotionality and hyperbolic performativity, a low camp style of overdramatic language serving as a means of expression for queer desire. The third speaker's distant connection, on the other hand, permits an intricate interlacing of images, and the revelries in worldly loveliness coincide with sonic lyricism—an aesthetic extravagance that signals a syrupy, high camp indulgence in style and decoration. While an essential visual similarity unites the leaf, hand, branch, and bones, phonemic reduplication unites their poetic presentation. Alliterative, assonant, and consonant fibers weave through the images in the final stanza so that the language binds in excess its

imagery and its musicality: “your hand whose lines are prone, / separate as a branch the blizzard brought / to remind you of Echo’s bones” (6-8)—the “r,” “b,” and “o” sounds repeating throughout. The rhyme scheme of the poem also plays in the theme of reduplication, compounding sonic and formal lyricism into the high camp cloying aestheticism. Although the quatrains’ rhymes seem a reflection of each other, with a pattern of a/b/a/b c/d/c/d, none of the rhymes quite work. In the final stanza, for instance, “mouth” and “brought” are a slant eye-rhyme while “prone” and “bones” are also an imperfect rhyme. The almost-rhymes—the faulty end-sound echoes—repeat the reflection’s imperfect duplication of Narcissus. Just as the reflection is medium specific, so too is the poem, and in typical high camp fashion, the poem delights in its own poetry. The third speaker, dispassionate and distant, aestheticizes Narcissus, and through its sonic and formal lyricism, through its linguistic and poetic overindulgence, the third speaker injects a high camp charm into the poem that complements the low camp melodramatics of the first speaker.

The speakers’ subjective positions and their respective relationships to the image and to camp exist simultaneously and interdependently within the poem—there is no hierarchy. The low camp style of the first speaker underscores performativity and expresses queer desire, and the high camp style positions that same-sex desire alongside Echo’s heterosexual desire. The active image disrupts heteronormativity—both on the larger scale as it collages together the distinct subjectivities of the speaking voices throughout the poem and on a smaller scale as it intermeshes diverse images in the final stanza. In these two instances, queer sexual desire occupies central positions in the poem. And as the poem explores the destructive effects of this desire for the beautiful male image, it also offers insight into a productive relationship with the image generally—insight that informs the development of the active image technique: the

iconophile's libidinal relationship with the image only fails when the image is seen as essence and not as image. Camp appreciation for the surface as a surface affords a healthy delight in loveliness. Further, as the image gains meaning not from its own beauty but from its associations with other images, the collage-like active image joins the camp adoration of aesthetic excess and the semantic potentiality of juxtapositional associations.

While "Narcissus in Winter," like "The Living Corpse," metapoetically theorizes its own engagement with influential traditions in the formation of the active image, "Baby's in jail; the animal day plays alone" employs the new technique without commentary. The first poem in "The Active Image" section, "Baby's in jail" explores the inseparability of desire and temporality from the social context in which they are experienced. Through the active image and its extensive layering of juxtapositions, the poem presents inconsistencies within heteronormative constructions of sexuality and temporality and thus works toward their destabilization. The repression of sexual desire, the poem suggests, propagates a false model of temporality—as a social construct, in other words, innocence interrupts the natural experiences of desire and time.

In the first stanza, the active image situates the concepts of innocence, experience, repression, and liberation within literary images of containment and animality and therefore within the realms of the unnatural and the natural. The opening line, from which the poem gets its title, establishes a disrupted relationship between desire and time. Through incarceration, an elaborate image for the policing of desire, the baby becomes atemporal: it no longer plays with the day. Arrested, the baby, already without a past, also loses the future—or, more accurately, the future becomes a continuation of the present, where for the baby experience can only be defined through lack, as things "not yet" experienced (3). In jail, the baby remains innocent and,

therefore, timeless. The unnatural temporality implicit in the preservation of innocence—in the perpetuation of a state of pastlessness—contrasts sharply with the imagery of the carnal desires that the baby has not yet experienced: “the reek of excitation” (4) and “sensation’s blood” (7). Animalistic and bodily, the imagery positions desire within the natural world. Further, the description of desire functions for the reader as a rough transition, a shift from the initial image of arrested development toward a statement of inevitable experience: “Baby will come to grief and love” (8). A statement seemingly of common sense—of course a baby will eventually grieve and love—the line contrasts in spirit with the initial image of the baby in jail. The active image thus places into the same space the incongruous virtues of innocence and experience as the stanza moves from the sustained atemporality in the social repression of sexuality to the certain futurity in the inevitable exploration of sexuality. The first stanza concludes in the zoo, another image of imprisonment, where families gaze not upon the meek and innocent “vegetarian tiger” (10), but where they look in wonder at feline carnality. The lines repeat the implicit contradiction between the unnatural repression of desire and the desire to indulge in nature impulses, the previously established tension with the two states of the baby.

In the second stanza, Ford again employs the active image, but rather than developing the juxtapositional matrix of literary images from the first stanza, Ford constructs a new field of images in which to explore sexuality and temporality:

If the clover’s leaves are four,
good luck’s just behind the door.

If your hand goes through the mirror:
the glass is dear, but bad luck’s dearer.

Swipe a horsehair from his tail, drown it in a waterpail:

it takes thirty days to make

horsehair turn into a snake.

You want a new dress, I do too.

You bite a butterfly, I'll chew a leaf.

Baby will come to love and grief. (11-20)

The stanza begins with three separate folkloric superstitions: the four-leaf clover as a token of good luck, the broken mirror as an omen of misfortune, and the aquatic transformation of a horse hair into a snake.²⁹ In each, an arbitrary present action and random objects dictate one's future experiences of the world. As the tonal and formal qualities of the lines suffuse them in camp playfulness, an accompanying irony undermines the folk models of temporality. The sudden injection into the poem of sing-song rhythm and regular end-rhyme contribute to the camp anti-seriousness—as do the imperative mood and the internal rhyme—which together create a sense of nursery rhyme-like whimsy. Following the superstitions without transition are two statements. In the first, the speaker and auditor—addressed here suddenly for the first time in the poem—share a desire for the same material object, a new dress. In the second, the speaker and auditor satisfy their desires with the consumption of different objects, a leaf and a butterfly respectively. Whereas the folk superstitions subjugate the future to objects, the combined effect of the two statements is to relinquish the individual from the constraints of time and position them within a continuum of desire. If you bite a butterfly or chew a leaf, there will always be that new dress to covet. Desire is a self-sustaining vector of anticipation that extends from the present into the future. It does not begin or end. Camp frivolity—or the appreciation of decadent things—offers an alternative relationship between desire and time, one of continual deferral of gratification—and perhaps disappointment—through the consumption of beauty. Then, collaged in

haphazardly, the refrain of the final line recalls the previously examined connections between sexual exploration and inevitable futurity. The stanzaic scale of the active image thus establishes a multi-nodal juxtaposition between which a wide field of potentiality spreads, and while the mockery implicit in the folkloric models undermines their position, the active image does not establish a strict hierarchy or resolve the ambiguity of the relationships between the alternative models.

Instead, the active image affords a side-by-side consideration of these temporal models, and through the coexistence of the multiple perspectives on desire and time, the collage of literary images destabilizes the dominance of a heteronormative construction: particularly, the active image demands an interrogation of the virtue of innocence, as its practice represses natural sexual desire and distorts natural temporal experience. While the first stanza through the natural imagery of corporeal indulgence favors sexual liberation as an alternative to innocence and its restrictive temporal model, the second stanza promotes a camp fetishism of the object. In both the sexual and the aesthetic pursuits of gratification, desire directs the individuals' conceptions of time. Thus "Baby in jail" implies that social regulations of desire not only deny individuals their freedom, but they also warp their perceptions of reality.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

As Ford develops the active image, he theorizes a model of writing and reading poetry that operates through incoherence. A strange infusion of Surrealism, camp, and lyricism, Ford's early poetics resist the normative epistemologies that operate antagonistically against difference and dissent. Through a poetics of contradiction and inconsistency, the active image lays side-by-side apparent truths and reveals their dissonance. Deeply political, the active image exposes the fault lines within typical patterns of thought and modes of expression, the places where things do not coalesce perfectly, and as the technique unleashes frictional forces that reside deep within those patterns, it ruptures common sense. In Ford's early poetry, the active image parts by violence the ideas it places together. The active image model therefore provides access to Ford's difficult material in a manner that, unlike the singular juxtaposition of the Surrealist image, accounts for the continually compounding complexity of Ford's nexus of images. Additionally, as his poetic praxis transforms, Ford further expands the limits of the collage as he embraces mechanical reproduction in *Spare Parts*, and he experiments with the constellational juxtapositions of editorial organization in his collection of haiku *Secret Haiku*. As the bringing-together of disparate things remains central to Ford's aesthetic, the active image model serves as a useful basis—but by no means as a comprehensive strategy—for the study of his later engagements with Pop and haiku.

Ford's artistic projects do not simply deploy the collage aesthetic to draw novel juxtapositions or to tease heteronormative hypocrisies. The projects are also often a bringing-

together of queer artists. As Ford decentralizes himself through his collaborative and editorial work and develops instead a collective identity for his readership and his contributors, as Ford gathers together and amplifies the disparate voices of a diverse community, he creates a paradox: in order to render the queer community visible, he disappears. A particular model of the collage, though, a specific aesthetics of assemblage, the active image may also become a means through which Ford reappears. Through its disruption of unity and coherence, the active image may present the queer community refracted multipliciously through its shattered and reassembled lens. But as Ford's peculiarities becomes more legible in the style with which he develops a queer community, the actual community fades. The longer we stare, the more blurred the distinction becomes between Ford's own kind of magic and any other charm in the world. What we use to clarify the object of Ford's individual poetic endeavors might obscure that of his collaborative ones: the active image theorized and implemented in *The Overturned Lake* remains a technique to be explored in his other works. It remains an unresolved paradox, a poetics of queer (in)visibility.

NOTES

1. For a more detailed analysis of Ford's early sonnets, see Stamatina Dimakopoulou's "From a 'Garden of Disorder' to a 'Nest of Flames': Charles Henri Ford's Surrealist Inflections."
2. For a discussion of *Blues*, see Alexander Howard's chapter "Blues and the Belated Renovation of Modernism" from *Charles Henri Ford*. For a discussion of *View*, see Tirza True Latimer's *Eccentric Modernism*.
3. For a discussion of the chainpoems, see Howard's chapter "Community, Circularity, Sociability, Postcards" from *Charles Henri Ford*.
4. Joanna Pawlik, in "Re-membering Surrealism in Charles Henri Ford's *Poem Posters* (1964-1965)," provides an extensive and insightful analysis of Ford's *Poem Posters*, along with a brief discussion of the film.
5. Tirza True Latimer's explanation of her related work with "eccentricity" provides a useful definition of "queer." "I use the words *eccentric* and *queer* more or less interchangeably," she explains, "as they have been used historically. The word *queer* retains connotations from the modernist period, when it circulated as a synonym for 'eccentric, strand, odd, peculiar; suspicious, dubious; abnormal.' The adjective was not always pejorative. [. . .] By midcentury, however, *queer* had long since come to signify homosexuality. More radically political meanings have since accrued to the terms. In the postmodern era, *queer* appropriated and imbued with activist energy by sexual dissidents, became a signifier for dissidence more broadly—indicating resistance to categorization and convention, whether sexual, social, or artistic. *Queer* and *eccentric* both point to departures from social and cultural norms" (4). Ford's aesthetics are queer in many senses of the word, then—not only in the sense of their expression of nonheteronormative sexual desire, but also in the historical sense of strangeness and in the political sense of resistance. The implications of Ford's conflation of oddity or "freakishness" with queer sexual desire becomes for the poet Robert Duncan a point of contention between their aesthetics, a pattern Duncan sees as increasingly problematically prominent as Ford's career progresses as an editor of *View*. See Robert Duncan's "Reviewing View, an Attack."
6. For discussions of Ford's work in the creation of queer-friendly literary spaces and communities, see Dimakopoulou, Howard, Latimer, Pawlik, Rosenbaum.
7. Ford directly engages his interest in these traditions: he mentions Surrealism implicitly in *A Pamphlet of Sonnets* and camp explicitly in *The Young and Evil*.
8. As Alexander Howard recounts in "Camp, Modernism, and Charles Henri Ford," Ford drafted but never completed a manifesto for a new artistic movement. Imaginationism, as Ford named the movement in his unfinished "Notes on Neo-Modernism," would deliberately alter Breton's principles of Surrealism. Although incomplete and inconsistent, the document demonstrates Ford's contentious relationship with Surrealist theory and his conscious cultivation of an alternative aesthetic.
9. For more on Ford's contact with Breton about Surrealism, see Dickran Tashjian's *A Boatload of Madmen* and Alexander Howard's *Charles Henri Ford*.
10. For a history of the figure of the dandy and its relationship with consumer culture, see Elisa Glick's *Materializing Queer Desire: Oscar Wilde to Andy Warhol*.
11. In *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, Moe Meyer defines camp "as inseparable from the constitution of a homosexual social identity," (19) arguing that it is a distinctly queer mode of expression and that non-queer camp is an "appropriation of queer praxis" (1).
12. While Tinkman uses "queer" to name the subjects in his book, he acknowledges the tension between the contemporary and historical uses of the term. Whereas Tinkman primarily discusses the camp productions of gay white men—a group who historically identified as "queer" before identifying as "gay"—the term also connotes political and aesthetic dissidence. (See note 4.)

13. For another examination of camp in *The Young and Evil*, one from which Howard draws, see Juan A. Suárez's *Pop Modernism*. See also Sam See's "Making Modernism New: Queer Mythology in *The Young and Evil*."
14. When divorced from the low camp representations of queer performativity and identity, the high camp emphasis on formal experimentation or aesthetic refashioning in the name of fun results in the deliberate it's-so-bad-it's-good style that Sontag disparages (265) and that audiences enjoy for the sake of irony, parody, or satire. For more on the roles of parody in early twentieth century America, see Leonard Diepeveen's introduction to *Mock Modernism: An Anthology of Parodies, Travesties, Frauds, 1910-1935*.
15. Tinkman discusses the distinction between the meaning-making strategies of montage and those of continuous film, examining the former's political potential and the latter's narrative tradition. "Having such socialized forms of contradiction staged before them comes as revelation, and I dwell on this moment in the work I do with students to make sense of our wonderment at how *easily* montage helps to vivify the contrary tendencies of our own lives. This "Ease" of montage derives from the sense that one does not necessarily have to worry about the ordering of images as an irreducible logic, in the way that film narrative so often seems to dictate; with montage, cinema can be made to disclose with relative quickness and inventiveness—in short, *playfully*—its own conditions for being" (30).
16. For an enthralling analysis of the queer role of failure in mass culture, see Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*.
17. Michael Nicholson's analysis of a transgressive nineteenth-century poet offers a basic but useful definition of the lyric: "In typical accounts of the genre, an individual voice speaks in an intensely personal manner about a single experience in a timeless yet present moment" (637).
18. Despite the dual foci of subjectivity and temporality, however, the genre remains loosely and poorly defined, especially in terms of formal characteristics. Indeed, as Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins argue in their critical anthology, *The Lyric Theory Reader*, the word "lyric" has slowly corrupted into a broad umbrella term for all poems, a nomenclatural conflation that elides the formal distinctions between traditional poetic genres like odes, hymns, and elegies (2). Although begun in nineteenth-century poetic theory and practice, this condensation crystallized in twentieth-century criticism, particularly in the work of the New Critics (3-4), who wrote contemporaneously with Ford and Williams.
19. Severed from literary history, the lyric poem became under the New Criticism "a thing in itself" that anyone might examine without knowledge of its differentiating metrical composition or formal constraints among certain poetic subgenres (Jackson and Prins 160). The New Critics do not, to be clear, dismiss meter and other matters of form—indeed these attributes of the poem are central to several New Critics' analytical methodologies. Rather, their classification of a poem as lyric ignores historically specific conceptualizations of the lyric.
20. In his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, André Breton defines the Surrealist image thusly: "It is, as it were, from the fortuitous juxtaposition of the two terms that a particular light has sprung, *the light of the image*, to which we are infinitely sensitive. The value of the image depends upon the beauty of the spark obtained; it is, consequently, a function of the difference of potential between the two conductors" (37). It is, simply, a juxtaposition of startlingly different terms.
21. Hegel, in *Aesthetics*, states, "[T]he poet who imagines and feels disappears in his poetic activity before the objectivity of his creation. This alienation of himself can only be completely avoided by the artist on his subjective side if on the one hand he absorbs into himself the entire world of objects and circumstances, and stamps them with his own inner consciousness, and if, on the other hand, he discloses his self-concentrated heart, opens his eyes and ears, raises purely dull feeling into vision and ideas, and gives words and language to this enriched inner life so that as inner life it may find expression" (1111). Hegel locates the value of a poem not necessarily in the content, but in the manner through which the poet's subjectivity inflects the content's rendering. The real, deep-down stuff of poetry is the poet's essential particular humanness that becomes universal through the underlying presence of reason, the cognitive faculty unique to and ubiquitous in humanity.
22. In "Pliant," the spelling of Bethea's name is "Betha." If Ford deliberately alters the name, perhaps in an attempt to maintain metrical regularity, thus privileging poetic aesthetics over historical accuracy, Ford severely undermines the poem's credibility as a work of sociopolitical criticism.

23. Latimer states that “unlike the lynched man ‘speaking’ in the poem, Ford was protected by his racial privilege, his status as a member of an ‘invisible’ minority, and his connections with New York’s moneyed Bohemia. The poem, nonetheless, signals Ford’s awareness of his ambivalent situation as an openly gay, white, male, middle-class artist who occupied a position both in and outside the tolerance of society” (82).
24. Their aesthetics are political, and their politics are revolutionary. Jolting audiences from their complacency in bourgeois society and their complicity in its perpetuation, Surrealist art shocks. It strives to awaken the audience to the true nature of the present and to inspire from them the construction of a new future (*What Is Surrealism?* 44-49).
25. In his 1934 lecture in Brussels, “What Is Surrealism?,” Breton explicates the aspirations and accomplishments of Surrealism. “We have attempted,” Breton explains, “to present interior reality and exterior reality as two elements in process of unification, or finally becoming *one*” (49). The disparities between these two states of being produce misery for mankind, and the activity of the Surrealist systematically destabilizes each reality, expanding and teasing their boundaries until they wholly overlap and unite (49-50). Coterminous with the “new state of consciousness,” or “the unification of the personality” (86), is the liberation of the proletariat: “the liberation of the mind, demands as primary condition, in the opinion of the surrealists, the express aim of surrealism, the liberation of man” (48). The personal and the political connect inextricably. The Surrealists’ pursuit of a utopic future results from their profound dissatisfaction with the present: “thought cannot consider the exterior world,” Breton argues, “without an immediate shudder” (47).
26. For a discussion of Ford’s relationship with John Crowe Ransom, a prominent figure among the New Critics, see Howard’s chapter “Building Up and Breaking Down: Surrealism, New York, New Criticism” from *Charles Henri Ford*.
27. In the game of collaborative verse, each participant composes a line without the knowledge of the previous participants’ contributions. The game plays through the Surrealist emphases on irrationality, unconsciousness, and automatism.
28. In “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric” from *The Correspondent Breeze*, M.H. Abrams describes as a feature of the Romantic lyric a “repeated out-in-out process, in which the mind confronts nature and their interplay constitutes the poem” (78). In Ford’s adaptation, the poem begins and ends with a depiction of nature, which inspires a meditation on the living corpse—while the confrontation of the mind and external remain, Ford’s poem works also through the metaphorization of these terms.
29. In diverse regions of America, several versions of this folk belief circulate: “If a horsehair is put in water, and left for some time, it will turn into a snake” (White and Hand 402). The folk story accounts for the horsehair worm that parasitically feeds on grasshoppers and often infected the water troughs in which the insects die (Capinera).

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