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Gesturing Beyond Modernism:
Frank O'Hara, Metonymy, and the Performing Self

Abstract: This article studies the changing role of metonymy in Frank O'Hara's poetry. In his early work, O'Hara often uses metonymy for the referential assortment of various modernist fields of influence. The origins of O'Hara's signature 'I do this, I do that' style can be traced back to the problems of self-consciousness which emerge in these early homages to modernism. Though he is often celebrated for the swift responsiveness and spontaneity of his urban poetry, these metonymic homages reveal a poet with deeper and longer attachments in the object-world. Such attachments alert O'Hara to the risk of turning the self into one of the concrete or objectual signifiers of his metonymic assemblages. O'Hara's early negotiation with the descriptive legacies of modernism and the resulting anxiety about self-consciousness will be demonstrated through an analysis of his sestina, "Green Words." O'Hara's solution will entail changing the logic of metonymy from contextual assemblage, where the body often finds representation as a conceptual object, to a foregrounding of the inherently metonymic character of bodily and gestural expression, where the body emerges as a dynamic and responsive presence. Thus, this article investigates how O'Hara's ekphrastic accounts of contemporary art allowed him to break away from modernism to embrace a poetics of embodied responsiveness.

Key words:
Frank O'Hara, poetry, modernism, avant-garde, gesture, metaphor, metonymy

> *"While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born."*
> Frank O'Hara, "Personism"

I like to reflect on those famous photographs which show O'Hara talking on the phone, while typing on a typewriter or casually leaning against the wall with a cigarette between his fingers. His telephone posture seems to convey something about lyric voice and performance, about the role that the body plays even when voice is disembodied and carried through a technological device, about how we might pose and use our bodies while talking on the phone, or while lifting a poem off the page and enhancing that performance with our bodies. Theories of the lyric tend to emphasize mechanisms of voice and sound. John Stuart Mill's famous characterization of poetry as an 'overheard' phenomenon, Robert Frost's idea of the 'oversound' in poetry. And this is for good reason. After all, sound is one of the primary resources of poetry. But I suggest talking on the phone as a model for lyric performance because there, though voice is still central, gestures and bodily language enhance the quality of what ends up being a disembodied voice. While reading O'Hara's poems, we often overhear not only an abstract or unconscious aspect of a speaker, but also the ways in which a speaker incorporates the gesturing body into poetic expression.

In this article, I will demonstrate how O'Hara learns to use the body to supplement the descriptive and rhetorical strategies that he learned from various modernist movements.[1] Rather than working with singular notions of a 'modernist style' or 'modernist imagery,' however, I wish to employ a more dialectical semiotic framework and focus instead on the changing tension between the metaphorical and the metonymic modes while distinguishing between modernist poetry and various departures from it in the middle of the twentieth century. Although Roman Jakobson's distinctions between metaphor and metonymy have gathered much dust over the years, metonymy has remained a ubiquitous concept in studies of O'Hara's poetry.[2] That is not only due to O'Hara's referential style and use of montage, both of which can be abundantly found in modernist poetry. What really distinguishes O'Hara's urban poems is his use of gestures to supplement poetic

[1] Parts of this article are based on my PhD dissertation *The Plain Sense of Things: An Analysis of Mid-Twentieth-Century Departures from Modernism* (Stanford University, 2020).

[2] In "Marginal Notes on the Prose of the Poet Pasternak" (*Pasternak: Modern Judgements*, ed. Donald Davie and Angela Livingstone, London: Macmillan Education, 1969), Jakobson associates metaphor with poetic language and depth because it entails meaning being "imported into objects" (146). Metaphorical language, in other words, makes investments in the things it names and ascribes significance to them by associating the internal workings of the psyche with the external elements that are brought into the space of poetry. Jakobson associates metonymy with the language of prose, whose organizing impulse is contiguity, or "association by proximity… the narrative moves from one object to an adjacent one on paths of space and time or of causality; to move from the whole to the part and vice versa is only a particular instance of this process" (141).

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reference. As I will demonstrate shortly, gestures are inherently metonymic because while 'drawing' certain signals with our hands or bodies, we inevitably rely on part-whole or contiguity relations. Hence, gestural communication provides a metonymic logic that is quite different from modernist metonymy's emphasis on contextual assemblage.

After explaining the changing role and importance of metonymy throughout O'Hara's career, I will divide the article between two sections. In the first, I turn to one of his early surrealistic poems, "Green Words," to demonstrate the kinds of descriptive freedom that surrealist assemblage introduce to O'Hara's technique. While thinking about O'Hara's bewildering arrangements of objects and locations, I like to have in mind Yves Tanguy's surrealist assemblages where various captivating objects are held together by very thin and barely visible threads that resemble spiderwebs. These paintings capture for me the restless traffic between metaphor and metonymy that is characteristic of modernist rhetoric. While the individual entities strive for autonomy and metaphorical depth, the subtle threads keep disturbing their claims to significance by asserting the primacy of their metonymic arrangement. In a similar vein, O'Hara turns to the sestina which ensures that there is a formal 'thread' connecting the various claims made by the repeating end-words. Despite the freedoms it offers to O'Hara's descriptive style, however, the surrealist mode also conveys a certain anxiety about what happens to the self ("me" is one of the end-words in O'Hara's sestina) and whether the self can stay afloat without being absorbed into the objectual landscape. In the second section, I show how O'Hara's encounters with contemporaneous artists enabled him to move beyond this self-consciousness by emphasizing the body, which had received ample sensuous representation and description in modernist poetry while remaining largely absent from it as a gestural and dynamic presence. This final section will offer analyses of O'Hara ekphrastic responses (the literary description of visual artworks) to paintings by his Jane Freilicher and Jackson Pollock. Gestures prove especially resourceful for O'Hara's ekphrastic attempts because his ekphrastic procedure often combines painterly description with a kinesthetic responsiveness to visual art (e.g., an embodied response to an artwork in a museum).

What We Talk About When We Talk About Modernism

It is hard to return to modernism without feeling self-conscious about the necessary shortcomings of our descriptions. The term refers to such a rich variety of decadent, post-Symbolist, avant-garde, aestheticist, or experimental late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century styles that formulating a coherent description of their mutual ambitions proves nearly impossible. But artists and writers share in this challenge. The legacies of modernism are so diverse that any artistic negotiation with the earlier phases of twentieth-century aesthetics requires fashioning compelling authorial tactics or strategies. While describing O'Hara's various

engagements with the modernist backdrop and his reworking of the modernist collage, Rona Cran argues that "we see him exorcising his poetic predecessors and artistic contemporaries through his employment of collage, before using it to mediate between the disjointed, referential fragments that make up his body of work."[3] Cran's language recognizes both the unconscious endurance of modernism in O'Hara's imagery – thus his need to "exorcise" them – and his self-conscious strategies to "mediate" between the various aesthetic sensibilities purposefully montaged together in his poems.

Though it may be somewhat misleading to generalize the image as the central concern of all modernist movements, given O'Hara's painterly poetic style, the image inevitably becomes the primary site of his negotiations with the modernist heritage. The impulse to define O'Hara's poetic style against a generalized modernist backdrop is likewise motivated by the poet's style itself. Especially in his earliest negotiations with modernist influences, O'Hara cultivates the notion of a modern poet who actively fashions himself in relation to this generalizable "crew of creators."[4] Though he does not always erase distinctions between their styles, the moment he gestures out of their force field to distinguish his own style, he folds them into a category, just as any critic would while tracing the historical evolution of certain aesthetic sensibilities. Therefore, the critical anxiety that one might just miss the nuances of O'Hara's individual references, or the deeper significance they cultivate through the social and contextual reorganization of the cultural field, is reflective of O'Hara's own creative anxiety.

In what ways was imagery central to modernist aesthetics? While characterizing modernist imagery, critics tend to call attention to the growing demands for concrete presentation starting with the Symbolist movement toward the end of the nineteenth century and the wide-ranging afterlives of the short-lived Imagist movement. Privileging a short episode like Imagism for explaining the tendency toward concrete imagery as a widespread modernist phenomenon may be unconvincing. But Imagism's insistence on concrete description is very much a part of the genealogy of descriptive rhetoric in the modern era. As Peter Nicholls observes in *Modernisms,*

> *Imagism thus begins to suggest a way of moving beyond a Paterian 'moment' freed from the continuum of normal experience, a moment which at the turn of the century had become the 'impression' of Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford… Much of the subsequent history of modernism is foreshadowed in this at first sight rather trivial distinction between "image" and "impression.*[5]

[3] Rona Cran, *Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature, and Culture: Joseph Cornell, William Burroughs, Frank O'Hara, and Bob Dylan* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 10.

[4] Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 17

[5] Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms*
(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 167.

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Nevertheless, it would still be misleading to take the concrete image as constituting the core of modernist description because apart from the few poems written dutifully in the Imagist mode, the work of a single concrete image never becomes standard practice in modernist poetry. An exclusive emphasis on the work of concrete imagery obscures the dramatic threads which hold these images together in such works as Ezra Pound's *Cantos,* Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and Mina Loy's "Songs to Joannes." In *Modernism,* Peter Childs argues that "in general the more the literary styles, such as those of the Modernists, tend towards dense, poetical imagery, the more they are likely to gravitate towards metaphor. Part of the emphasis on metaphor in Modernism can be demonstrated from its use of symbols for allegorical or representational effect."[6] The metaphorical depth activated by the sensuously intricate images of modernism is undeniable. However, in most cases, these images also appear as part of dramatic structures. Insofar as they provide metaphorical insights into the relations and tensions between subjectivity and episodes of perceptual intensity, they also necessarily highlight threads between these intensities. Thus, the metonymic mode, which emphasizes contiguity and context, proves equally significant to most traditions of modernist poetry.

Though it would be impossible to provide a comprehensive account of modernism by making distinctions between the metaphorical and metonymic modes, the uneasy traffic between the two modes is perhaps one of the most pervasive signs of modernist aesthetics, especially in those traditions where montage and pastiche play key roles in gathering various sensuous and perceptual intensities. Think about the self-conscious images in T.S. Eliot which strive for metaphorical intensity but cannot help pointing back to the dramatic voice and the central subjectivity which hold them in a restless balance. Ironically, then, the modernist desire to find "a way of moving beyond a Paterian 'moment' freed from the continuum of normal experience" ends up foregrounding the perceptual efforts of a central subjectivity even more strongly. The fact of there being a *stream* behind the stream-of-consciousness method and its implications for subjectivity become more interesting than the individual entities gathered by that consciousness. A more thematic investigation of modernism might relate these formal and semiotic features to questions like alienation and fragmentation.
For example, while describing T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Michael North talks about how "in certain lines, metaphor dissolves into metonymy before the reader's eyes."[7] Even though "poetic structures themselves reinforce [a] metaphoric bias" by making concrete and sensuous images appear as metaphorical extensions of a restless subjectivity, Eliot calls attention to

[6] Peter Childs, *Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 190.

[7] Michael North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 76.

[8] Ibid., 79.

the crisis of metaphor or the self-consciousness of metaphor by constantly introducing metonymic relations to the poem.[8] Similarly, Charles Altieri considers the centrality of the metonymic mode to Eliot's "Prufrock":

> *Metonymy in fact is rhetorically the perfect figure for Prufrock's problems of sustaining interpersonal relationships. For the problem of intersubjectivity is essentially a problem of overcoming metonymy, of feeling and of making felt that one is not 'formulated in a phrase' but that a full being is expressed through its partial manifestations.*[9]

Therefore, even in the more dramatically organized works of modernism, the sensuous intensity and self-consciousness end up foregrounding the perceptual efforts of an organizing subjectivity. In other words, as Altieri suggests, together "they point beyond themselves only to signify an absent whole which neither he nor others can grasp." [10]
In poetry after modernism which prioritizes montage the traffic between metaphor and metonymy is not ensnared anymore in self-consciousness or constant claims of significance. For example, O'Hara's lists of places, objects, artists, and artworks immediately activate context. The search for metaphorical opportunities comes after, once a sense of context is established for the poetic voice to search for sites of significance and affective commitment. This is not to suggest that O'Hara's various references lack metaphorical depth. However, they are not usually framed with 'grammars' of significance, as scholars of modernism like to say. The word 'grammar' is often used while characterizing the various descriptive strategies of modernism because modernist reference comes laden with grammatical and syntactical claims of significance. In O'Hara, however, reference is more typically used to create social context than to disclose sensuous grammars of perception. While comparing O'Hara and T.S. Eliot, James Breslin distinguishes between the role of self-consciousness in their poems: "Self-consciousness is not the kind of trap for O'Hara that it is for a character like Prufrock; self-consciousness, instead, generates the fluid energy that gives life to O'Hara's multiple guises."[11]

The most important reason behind this difference - Eliot's self-conscious and O'Hara's more fluid style - has to do with the body. The interest in sensuous and concrete imagery in modernist montage privileges the body as a sensory and perceptual apparatus. As Michael H. Whitworth explains, "they include the body as the residence of the five senses."[12] However, Whitworth continues,

[9] Charles Altieri, "Steps of the Mind in T.S. Eliot's Poetry," *Twentieth-century Poetry, Fiction, Theory,* ed. Harry R. Garvin (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1977), 187.

[10] Ibid.

[11] James E.B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945-1965* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 241.

[12] Michael H. Whitworth, *Reading Modernist Poetry* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 55.

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"very few modernist poets consider the body as something creating its own sensations through sexual desire, the consumption of food and drink, and through the process of aging."[13] In addition, while emphasizing the body as the site of sensory intake and synthesis, modernist poetry often leaves out the gestural aspects of bodily expression. Thus, as we slide from metaphor to metonymy in Eliot's "Prufrock," we are aware of the body's involvement in cataloguing the variety of psychologized imagery around it. However, the body never attains kinesthetic and gestural dynamism because it does not orient us through the poem with expressions that can supplement that grammatical or the rhetorical. Metonymy proves to be the central literary device for foregrounding the gesturing body. As the applied linguist Jeannette Littlemore shows, gestural communication is inherently rich in referential metonymy:

> *For example, in order to gesture a 'house', one might make a triangle with one's hands to refer to one of the most salient parts of a house: the roof. This would involve a part for whole metonymy whereby the shape of the roof represents the whole house. We can see the same phenomenon if we think of the gestures one might use to indicate other concrete items, such as a tree (where we might gesture the branches, or the trunk), a table (where we might gesture the flat top), a bed (where we might gesture the act of sleeping), or someone absent-mindedly gesturing the opening and closing of a pair of scissors, while looking for scissors.*[14]

Given that our bodily representations of concepts routinely practice the two dominant logics of metonymy (part-whole and contiguity), when poetic language makes us aware of embodied expression trying to supplement the descriptive, it immediately suggests a metonymic core to the poetic operation. Note that this is different from a metonymic *representation* of the body, as in Eliot's "Prufrock," where the body is represented through references to its parts or adjacent relations. In contrast, gestural expression makes us aware of a body that can exceed the representational impulses of language.

When James Breslin explains O'Hara's use of a "theatricalized self that is never completely disclosed in any of its 'scenes'," or when Rona Cran demonstrates the way O'Hara designs his poetry to be "experienced, rather than interpreted, by his readers" through "continually redeploying himself," they are ultimately calling attention to the expressive and embodied core of his poetry, as well as to how the embodied element tempers the relentless claims of significance and metaphorical depth that even the most casual linguistic reference may perpetuate.[15] Lytle Shaw was the first critic to observe the centrality of gestural expression to O'Hara's

[13] Ibid.

[14] Jeannette Littlemore, *Metonymy: Hidden Shortcuts in Language, Thought and Communication* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 69.

[15] Cran 2014, 39 and 147. Breslin 1984, 231.

poetry. Like Breslin and Cran, Shaw argues that "working in relation to gesture has for O'Hara is to liberate him from 'the poem' as a unit of composition."[16]

Nevertheless, it took some time for O'Hara to get there. In the earlier stages of his poetry, when the influence of modernism weighed heavily on his artistic process, he often experimented within the various grammars of modernism. O'Hara's busy homages to and metonymic assortments of modernist legacies, especially in his early poems, pose significant challenges to his attempts to launch the kind of dynamic first-person voice which will become characteristic of his 'I do this, I do that' style. While trying to launch the active and dynamic "I" into the object-oriented or impersonal landscapes metonymically organized in his poems, O'Hara comes to realize that his speakers run the risk of becoming parts of these chains.

His solution to this problem will involve fashioning a more embodied and gestural poetic expression. This way, rather than contextualizing the self in a metonymic chain as a signifier or rendering the self interpretable through its projection onto the various entities in a context, the poem can foreground the embodied act of its positioning in relation to a context. In other words, rather than using metonymy to shore up contexts which situate the self in a web or network of relations, O'Hara will master the art of using metonymy to maintain a sense of *towardness*. As he says in "Poem," "everything / seems slow suddenly and boring except / for my insatiable thinking towards you."[17]

O'Hara and Metonymy

Why characterize O'Hara literary arrangements of these various fields of influence as metonymic at its core? On a simpler level, I associate the metonymic impulse with O'Hara's playful, paratactic assortment of multiple aesthetic movements. These early poems typically develop chains of association with particular artists and artistic movements. This is not to say that O'Hara, as part of his imitations of or playful homages to modernist movements, creates images without metaphorical depth. Certainly, O'Hara's individual images are not mere placeholders for the concerns or sensibility of larger aesthetic movements. However, when presented in a sequence with playful theatrical and apostrophic gestures, they inevitably turn into substitutes for the aesthetic movements whose stylistic and descriptive conventions they embody.

"Memorial Day 1950," offers an amusing survey of modernist art movements, a survey which also announces O'Hara's stylistic repertoire.[18] This kind of metonymic arrangement of the various modernist fields of influence is typical of O'Hara's early poetry. He begins with a declaration: "Picasso made

[16] Lytle Shaw, "Gesture in 1960: Toward Literature Situations," *Frank O'Hara Now,* ed. Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 40.

[17] O'Hara 1995, 354.

[18] Ibid., 17.

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me though and quick, and the world; / just as in a minute plane trees are knocked down / outside my window by a crew of creators." The syntax is occasionally disjointed, calling attention to the mechanical operations of language. The voice, however, is always playful and amusing, such that it quickly enlists syntax for improvisation. Micah Mattix reads the statement "Picasso made me" as both "refer[ring] to O'Hara's debt to Picasso's style…" and how "the poet, in exploring himself in his work, becomes a work of art."[19] In these early metonymic arrangements, O'Hara is clearly aware of both creating and being created. While positioning these fields of influence, O'Hara grows conscious of the risk of being defined by them with a kind of Oedipal anxiety. Cubism, for example, is not a mere technique. It is a historically-charged strategy for variously disguising and performing the self. When O'Hara engages with the presentational ambitions of cubism, he realizes that he is also inevitably representing and constructing himself.

Successful interpretations of these poems require a discursive understanding of the active, performative interventions of self (the "I" statements) as well as what Sydney Shoemaker calls the process of "being presented to oneself as an object."[20] O'Hara continues to catalogue his various influences in "Memorial Day 1950." He names Gertrude Stein, Paul Klee, Dada, Rimbaud, Pasternak and Apollinaire, as well as paying homages to the machine-obsession of Russian futurism: "Poetry is as useful as a machine! / Look at my room. / Guitar strings hold up pictures. I don't need / a piano to sing, and naming things is only the intention / to make things." As opposed to adopting their techniques, O'Hara prefers to name them and make them a part of his descriptive technique. Whereas modernist movements used the surface of language to establish concrete grounds for the realizations of imagery, O'Hara's metonymic surfaces collapse all distinctions between depth and surface. He intends to show how the machinery of linguistic signifiers situates the speaking-subject amidst many representational regimes. It is through the eruptions, interruptions and various obstinacies of language that we gather information about the subject who at once mediates and is mediated by language. Even these litany-like playful negotiations with modernism anticipate O'Hara's later management of the poetic voice through spontaneous declaration and embodied expression. In some sense, then, the modernist legacy serves both as a playful target for O'Hara to articulate his own poetic sensibility and an overwhelming field of influence that he needs to move beyond.

Unsurprisingly, metonymy appears frequently in many studies of O'Hara's poetry. James Breslin, for instance, situates O'Hara amongst mid-century poets whose

[19] Micah Mattix, *Frank O'Hara and the Poetics of Saying 'I'* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), 31.

[20] Sydney S. Shoemaker, "Self-reference and self-awareness," *Self-reference and Self-awareness*, ed. Andrew Brook and Richard C. DeVidi (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), 90.

departures from modernist and decadent writing "pushed toward the metonymic pole of writing."[21] Lytle Shaw recognizes the limitations of the Jakobsonian categories while still emphasizing O'Hara's metonymic arrangements and the enduring power of the metaphor-metonymy distinction "both as methods of specification and as the groundwork for tracking a significant shift away from metaphor in poetry since the 1950s."[22] Similarly, Hazel Smith describes the "dynamic interplay" between "metaphor and metonymy" in O'Hara's works as trapping the reader in a continuous process of "deconstruction and reconstruction: they are continually propelled by the disintegration of meaning towards another possibility of meaning, and, as such, they actively participate in the construction of the poem."[23] Most recently, in a comparative study of O'Hara and Thomas Wyatt, Jeff Dolven offers a Bourdieuan conception of metonymy as "the figure of side-by-sideness, how things come to mean one another because they share space in the world." [24]
What explains the endurance of this critical concept – metonymy - in studies of O'Hara's work? Part of the reason is stylistic: Many O'Hara poems make tireless references to places, artworks, personalities, and objects, thereby seemingly avoiding metaphorical depth and placing more emphasis on the contextual assortment of their parts. The other reason is that many early studies of O'Hara's poetry tended to emphasize his commitment to creating and maintaining *surfaces* without substantial depth. Marjorie Perloff, the pioneering critic on O'Hara's poetry, advanced this distinction in her earlier assessments of O'Hara's aesthetic style. For example, in "Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention," she characterizes the dynamism of O'Hara's urban poetry by showing how the multiplicity of references in his poetry work "metonymically to create a microcosm of the poet's New York world."[25] Over time, however, as critics began to offer more thorough investigations of the social, gendered, and cultural depths of O'Hara's references, the critical privileging of O'Hara's surfaces started to seem insufficient. Nevertheless, the metaphor-metonymy distinction has continued to inform studies of O'Hara's poetry because they are incredibly useful for characterizing O'Hara's rhetorical maneuvers.

In a 2004 interview, Perloff addresses the shortcomings of her earlier characterization of an anti-symbolist impulse in mid-century poets: "But in hindsight, O'Hara's proper

[21] Breslin 1984, 59.

[22] Lytle Shaw, Frank O'Hara: *The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 279.

[23] Hazel Smith, *Hyperspaces in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara: Difference / Homosexuality / Topography* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 99.

[24] Jeff Dolven, *Senses of Style: Poetry Before Interpretation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 109.

[25] Marjorie Perloff, "Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention," *boundary 2,* 4(3), 1976: 796.

[26] Marjorie Perloff, "On & Off the Page of Poetry," P*oetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays,* ed. David Jonathan Y. Bayot (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 56.

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names, which I took to be "just" names, do signify."[26] Similarly, in a conversation with Charles Bernstein, Perloff revisits her earlier assessments of O'Hara's referential apparatus: "[I]n the case of Frank O'Hara, where I used to think most of the person and place names were intentionally fortuitous, now scholars are writing solemn treatises about the significance of lunching at Larré's on 56th St. or on the meaning of Gauloises."[27] Rather than advancing a more valid interpretation of O'Hara's style, changes in Perloff's assessments capture the very structure of O'Hara's anxiety which is rooted in his chiefly metonymic mode of description: Is the poem held together by an "I" whose subjective valuation and metonymic assortment provides significance to its contexts? Or is the poem held together by a "context" which enables the "I" certain performative opportunities and significance? While metonymy can make it seem like "the parts of reality are mutually indifferent" (Jakobson), it can also call attention to the radically subjective configurations of that reality.[28] As Lytle Shaw explains, O'Hara's poetry often problematizes "how and in which contexts names take on meaning and who has the power to enforce this meaning."[29]

In *Power in Verse,* Jane Hedley shows how metonymies preserve imagined contexts (or, at least, the manner of their extraction from an imagined context), while metaphors tend to obscure or remove context: "whereas the orientation of metonymy is worldward, metaphor tends to pull the external world into the mind. Metonymy presupposes a contiguous, extrinsic field of reference that is in some sense already given. Metaphor pulls its terms out of context." This "already given" aspect of metonymy grants it a greater degree of realism than metaphor. It also allows metonymy to produce an illusory sense of presence. Think about the prominence of metonymy in historiography (e.g., "England declared war"). We rarely dwell on the term "England" because these historical metonymies are so prevalent. They immediately convey an (illusory) reality and presence, as if such entities really and undoubtedly exist. Likewise, when O'Hara casually refers to artists or artistic movements, he simultaneously makes them present to the aesthetic imagination, while also underlining the illusory of their metonymic presence. This awareness inevitably translates to his own artistic identity: He, too, can be swallowed by this metonymic context into representing a broader style or sensibility.

Like in historiography, metonymy features prominently in the narration of personal history and autobiography. In O'Hara's case, for example, his constant allusions to modernist legacies acquire metonymic function. They engender an illusory sense of presence. For example, in a declaration

[27] Marjorie Perloff, "The Alter(ed) Ground of Poetry and Pedagogy," *Poetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays,* ed. David Jonathan Y. Bayot (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 88.

[28] Jakobson 1969, 146.

[29] Shaw 2006, 37.

This article studies O'Hara's fashioning of an embodied poetic voice through his diverse negotiations with the modernist tradition and cultivation of an ekphrastic responsiveness.

like "Picasso made me though and quick," O'Hara is pulling both Picasso and the poetic self into a metonymic chain, whereby both are presented as stand-ins or extensions of an aesthetic sensibility. In *Moved by the Past,* Eelco Runia associates metonymy with the idea of "presence in absence… not just in the sense that it presents something that isn't there, but also in the sense that in the absence (or at least the radical inconspicuousness) that *is* there, the thing that isn't there is still present." In Runia's account, then, metonymy is also caught in a conflicted relationship with the present: It can neither be fully present nor fully absent. Rather, it becomes emblematic of "discontinuity" and "the need for presence."

The dialectic of presence and absence activated by metonymy is fundamentally related to poetic voice, which characteristically runs the risk of being decontextualized, being removed from a physical context and turning into a "presence in absence." This duality always accompanies the act of reading poetry. Voice as a physical phenomenon is always necessarily removed from its origin (to become audible). But just as

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metonymy maintains a "worldward" orientation and retains contextual memory, voice can also launch into the word through a more embodied trajectory. The challenge for O'Hara is to find a poetic syntax and language that is capable of presenting that trajectory. As O'Hara will discover, there are compelling strategies to convey the gestural projections of a voice, as well as to preserve the traces of its stemming from particular contexts.

Frank O'Hara's Modernist Returns

The modernist movement that most energized O'Hara's early artistic development was Surrealism which was appropriated by American poets towards the middle of the century. Surrealism was an organized movement with manifestos and rigorous attention to the teachings of psychoanalysis. But once the movement reached the American context, it ceased to be an intellectual "revolution," offering instead more general tools and recipes for description. In addition, it took many different forms, even leading to a number of different 'schools' of poetry. In a 1973 article, Paul Zweig observes how "by the time the 'left wing' modernism of the surrealists reached the United States, it had become a scattering of detached ideas and techniques, moving in separate directions, appealing to extremely different writers for different reasons."[30] Whereas in its original iterations, surrealist automatism sought to eradicate rational distinctions between subject and object, in mid-century American poetry, Surrealism was absorbed into the self-aware and dramatic voices of poets like Ginsberg and O'Hara. There is here a clear inconsistency between a technique first conceived for the systematic dissolution of consciousness and later appropriated for bolstering the self-conscious performance and autonomy of voice.

O'Hara locates his interest in surrealism in its ability to unite "the duty, along with the liberation, of saying what you mean and meaning what you say beyond any fondness for saying or meaning."[31] The dialectical tension between saying and meaning can be projected onto the semiotic tension between metaphor and metonymy.

For O'Hara, Surrealism is distinct from many avant-garde movements due to its insistence on dwelling in this liminal space of signification.[32] Surrealism, accordingly, holds a special place because it relies on a strategic metonymic displacement of everyday objects from their contexts. This metonymic gesture simultaneously prepares the grounds for subjectification, for the metaphorical project of self-fashioning. In other words, metonymy intensifies contextual awareness but when the decontextualized arrangement of various entities attains sufficient coherence

[30] Paul Zweig, "The New Surrealism," *Salmagundi* 22, 23 (1973): 274.

[31] Frank O'Hara, *Art Chronicles* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1975), 17-18.

[32] In *Art Chronicles,* O'Hara juxtaposes Cubism and Surrealism by describing the former as "an innovation" dealing with "technique" and the latter as "an evolution," dealing with "content" (17-18).

to consolidate an extratextual (or imaginary) unity, the self can start to speak with a sense of "liberation."

Theodor Adorno conceptualizes surrealism around a similar tension between necessity and freedom, or to use O'Hara's language, tension between "duty" and "liberation." Adorno's perspective is crucial because like O'Hara, he was interested in looking *back* to the movement with renewed urgency awarded to it from a historical distance. Both were writing about Surrealism in the 1950s. In "Surrealism Reconsidered" (1956), Adorno asserts that "if surrealism itself now seems obsolete, it is because people already deny themselves the consciousness of denial that is preserved in Surrealism's photographic negative."[33] Adorno identifies the same artistic tension as O'Hara. Only, instead of using the words for "duty" and "liberation," to describe the "the dialectical images of Surrealism," he refers to a "dialectic of subjective freedom in the state of objective unfreedom."[34] The "photographic negative" represents both the assertive ego of the surrealist artist and how it demands a kind of "self-annihilation, for which in dreams no energy is required."[35] The artistic self seeks liberation from a context that he himself has metonymically demarcated from the objective world. Surrealism, as a result, creates a feedback mechanism that "discharges itself in the shock [which] is the tension between schizophrenia and reification."[36] The self remains excessively situated, while asserting its own psychologized logics of contiguity.

Most postmodern returns to surrealism start with this "shock." Rather than waiting for metonymic patterns to acquire a metaphorical significance, early O'Hara begins by awarding the world inflated significance and metaphorical potential. Hence, O'Hara's early poems turn to ecstatic apostrophes which register the shocking inevitability of self-consciousness: "Oh! Kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!", "Look! The table, like an arrière- / pensée, trembles on its legs and / totters forwards."[37] In these poems, clearly influenced by Surrealism, metonymic tendencies are obvious but rather than creating enduring contexts from which the self can struggle for liberation, they feature the inflated and hyperbolic mannerisms of a self that has made too many investments and now feels anxious to maintain the metonymic surface. Endless temptations, tangents, distractions, and apostrophic interjections help the speaker to continually renew the sense of a surface. This spontaneity allows O'Hara to perform sincerity, or what Altieri calls "an all-encompassing honesty… where there can be 'no secrets.'"[38] However, what remains missing from O'Hara's earlier

[33] Theodor W. Adorno, "Surrealism Reconsidered," *The Challenge of Surrealism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 35.

[34] Ibid., 33.

[35] Ibid., 34.

[36] Ibid., 33.

[37] O'Hara 1995, 15 and 26.

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experiments with surrealist description is a dynamic bodily presence that can maintain this performance of sincerity.

Let us now turn to one of O'Hara overtly surrealistic experiments to see this more clearly. In "Green Words," a sestina written in 1953, the poet rotates the following end-words: "grapes," "sun," "sky," "cat," "strokes," and "me."[39] Given that this is an O'Hara poem, it is no surprise that "me" – of all the end-words - heats up the most. O'Hara continuously reconfigures a setting in which the objects – cat, grapes, sky – acquire a sense of presence. The formal structure of the sestina serves to renew the sense of a shared context and surface. The poem's various objects are presumably a part of the same context, and, when placed side by side, demand new forms of imaginative combination. In addition to their contiguity, there is a permutational process of surreal presenc*ing* which results from their newly formed interactions: "I sat down on the sun," "and I sit on the grapes accidentally. It does feel like the sun," "I am pushed into the sun by a cat," and the last tercet:

> *The grapes are dying in the sun.*
> *And the sky is its own black cat*
> *which it strokes, as it does me.*

While the sestina requires the poet to privilege three end words in the final tercet, it still has to include the remaining three. This underlying formal structure reveals the extent to which the specific coexistence of these particular objects has become indispensable to the sense of the poem's overall atmosphere. Nonetheless, as the end-words grow increasingly abstract and register their influence over the poetic consciousness, the referential function of language relaxes and the metaphorical impulse begins to overshadow the metonymic assemblage of the objects. Thus, the restless traffic between metaphor and metonymy which characterizes many modernist practices of montage comes to undergird O'Hara's poem as well. The formal structure of the sestina repeatedly fortifies the contextual ground, while each object charges up with their own claims for significance, even competing with "me," the poetic self which also grows increasingly more concrete.

The title, "Green Words" announces the process of abstraction at the heart of the poem's linguistic strategies by associating words with colors. Accordingly, we can read each word like a brush "stroke." In fact, O'Hara chooses "stroke" as one of the end-words because he wants to activate it as both a noun and a verb. In addition to its obvious contextual meaning - moving the hands gently across a surface (i.e., stroking the cat) - stroke throughout the poem also

[38] Charles Altieri, "Surrealism as a Living Modernism," The *Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945,* ed. Jennifer Ashton (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), 56.

[39] Frank O'Hara, "Green Words, A Sestina," *Poems Retrieved,* ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco, City Lights, 2013), 122.

refers to marks made on a surface (as in brushstrokes). The poem embodies a painterly logic that likens words to brushstrokes, which create the surface of the painting *and* reveal its fragmentary, compositional structure. The equivocation of abstract language and abstract painting is both generative and threatening. Though abstraction enables more plasticity for unexpected semantic associations, conflating syntactic units with painterly gestures also reveals traces of discontinuity. Since a brushstroke can never be repeated identically, each application of the same color becomes a marker of difference, and each word – though they are all "green" – refers to an individual's unique history of perception rather than a perceptual stability secured by shared context. Throughout the poem, as objects rotate, they gain in private association. "Me" - the self in the accusative - is a part of this rotation and it gains objectual presence as well.

The endlessly permutating non-logical relations in "Green Words" manage to produce delightful painterly effects and startling arrangements in every stanza, however, the poetic voice remains rather too formulaic. In addition, this mode risks detaining the poetic self within accusative and objectual states. W.H. Auden warns O'Hara of this danger in 1956. Auden had been serving as judge for the Yale Younger Poets Series, and in 1956, unsatisfied with almost every submission, invited John Ashbery and O'Hara to submit manuscripts. Though Auden ended up choosing Ashbery's manuscript, he wrote a letter to O'Hara, praising his work and warning him about the surrealist excess in his poetry: "I think you (and John too, for that matter) must watch what is always the great danger with any 'surrealistic' style, namely of confusing authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue."[40] O'Hara's initial reaction in his correspondence with friends would be dismissive of Auden's criticism, but he would indeed grow out of this surrealist mode in search of a more declarative and dynamic poetic style.

Ekphrasis and the Gesturing Body

As we have seen so far, in O'Hara's various negotiations with modernist legacies, the body, a crucial component of self-performance, receives little attention. This is not entirely surprising because *the body* is also conspicuously absent from modernist poetry in its gestural capacity, as well as from many philosophical accounts on self-consciousness. While foregrounding the kinesthetic and agentic mechanism which participates in the generation of the subject, Carrie Noland argues that "subjects also make *motor* decisions that challenge cultural meanings in profound ways.... If moving bodies perform in innovative ways, it is not because they manage to move without acquired gestural routines but because they gain knowledge *as a result of performing them*."[41] This kind of attention to how the body might become a

[40] Quoted in Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 249-250.

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site of agency and afford new possibilities for reinvention is a trademark of affect studies today. For O'Hara, the body offers a crucial opportunity to break free from the descriptive strategies of modernism or from the uncomfortable traffic between metaphor and metonymy which entraps the corporeal body within a representational space. A more kinesthetic presentation of the body allows O'Hara to generate a lyric voice which can convey the dynamism of embodied responsiveness.

O'Hara grows more aware of the need for an embodied presentation of the self as he continues his negotiations with modernism and through his encounters with his painter friends in the New York School. Experiments in ekphrasis, in particular, allow O'Hara to record his encounters with artists and artworks, not only on an intellectual level but as a wholly embodied experience. I will analyze two particular poems here to demonstrate the way O'Hara uses such ekphrastic experiments to advance a more embodied poetic voice and to cultivate a wider range of affective states. The first poem is O'Hara's homage to Jane Freilicher and the second is his response to encountering a Jackson Pollock painting in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In the early poem, "Interior (with Jane)," O'Hara strikes a balance between description and performative utterance.[42] He is interested especially in how Freilicher depicts the permeability of surfaces, and how, in so many of her paintings, one cannot tell where the interior ends and the exterior begins.

The eagerness of objects to
be what we are afraid to do

cannot help but move us Is
this willingness to be a motive

in us what we reject?

The first two lines are connected with a peculiar rhyme, "to/do," which speaks to the ultimate inseparability of our actions from the potentials our imagination locates in the object world. The characteristics associated with object and human are ironically inverted in the third line. Objects, which "are eager to be" now *do*; they move us. And we, typically afraid to do, are now be-ings moved by objects. By forcing the dependencies between subject and object into a syntactical bind, the speaker's formulation collapses on itself. The speaker realizes that though he is "moved" by objects, the poem literally cannot move without them, so he turns in the second part to the object world in all its material glory: "a can of coffee, a 35¢ ear / ring, a handful of hair, what / do these things do to us?" He starts creating metonymic arrangements of the "stupid things" which mysteriously trigger some emotive attachment.

[41] Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 3 and 8.

[42] O'Hara 1995, 55.

After the metonymic arrangement of these objects, like his painter-friend Jane Freilicher whose paintings evoke continuities between interior and exterior spaces, O'Hara guides our eyes toward the exterior, from the objects in the room toward the wintery landscape outside the window: "We come into the room, the windows // are empty, the sun is weak / and slippery on the ice." The window, like the body, is the threshold which mediates between the interior and the exterior without imposing any hard distinctions. O'Hara's treatment of the body is similar to how Sigmund Freud describes the body as a surface: "A person's own body, and above all, its surface, is a place from which both external and internal perceptions may spring. It is *seen* like any other object…" Freud emphasizes "the manner in which a person's body attains its special position among other objects in the world of perception."[43] O'Hara's poem likewise demonstrates the bidirectional flow of sensation from the inside and the outside. While the first part of the poem grapples with a thought, the second part moves out to the object world to search for satisfying correspondences to thought. What is the role of the body in all this? Does it remain a passive storehouse of stimuli or can it actively interfere and differentiate its position "among other objects"?

The final couplet introduces an irreducible gesture that captures both the physical and the emotional movement of the body:

And a
sob comes, simply because it is
coldest of the things we know.

Like *being moved,* sobbing is a rare reaction in lyric poetry. It is colder and more reserved than weeping or wailing. There is something automatic or what Susan Rosenbaum calls "unselfconscious" about this impenetrable gesture.[44] It is not merely a matter of doing in the way objects "do… things to us." It "comes" rather as a spontaneous event that resists the kind of theoretical contemplation that O'Hara had performed at the beginning of the poem. The primary event in the poem is dictated neither by objects nor through their metonymic arrangement. With this final sob, the body acquires a unique agency that distinguishes it from objects. Such spontaneous gestures expose the need to differentiate between self as object and self as subject, or, to use Freud's vocabulary, the bidirectional movement that feeds the ego – "from without (sense-perceptions) and from within."

Movement becomes the central mediator between presence and presencing, especially when describing the potentialities in a given scene or object. Our thoughts can move forward in lyric time but even O'Hara's

[43] Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id,* trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1990), 25-6.

[44] Susan B. Rosenbaum, *Professing Sincerity: Modern Lyric Poetry, Commercial Culture, and the Crisis in Reading* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 76.

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most ephemeral images are mindful of their culturally-mediated abilities to *move* someone. Being moved characterizes an imprecise affective state, and as such, is rarely encountered in poetry. It is nevertheless one of O'Hara's central affects. He uses it to blur the distinctions between the human and the nonhuman world. In "Poem" he writes, "All the mirrors in the world / don't help, nor am I moved / by the calm emergency of my / image in the rain," and in "Aus Einem April," "Haven't you ever fallen down at Christmas / and didn't it move everyone who saw you? / isn't that what the tree means? the pure pleasure / of making weep those whom you cannot move by your flights!"[45] In these examples, the affective meaning of "to move" is supplemented with the literal meaning of the word, referring to how the self is positioned.

For a poet whose attention is steadfastly committed to the instant, this semantic duality is ultimately inevitable. O'Hara's desire to move *from* and move *on* are continuously interrupted and challenged by his being moved *by* things. The poet, however, determined to move on to the next impression, always catches up with the tension which results from his departure from images and not with the images themselves. Perhaps this is the definition of anxiety. Always being late to an image so that when we discover its power to seize us, we are already entering the force field of the potentialities gathered by the next image. In semiotic terminology, anxiety accompanies the "metonymic impulse that reaches indiscriminately for the next thing."[46] It is this affective mechanism which will become the mainstay of O'Hara's poetry: The spontaneous interruption of metonymic assemblage with an event which quickens the body into supplementing its sensory and sensuous investments with embodied expression and gesture.

Let us now turn to an ekphrastic *ars poetica,* O'Hara's poem about a Jackson Pollock painting. In "Digression on Number 1," O'Hara narrates his experience of browsing through various modernist artworks which fail to *move* him.[47] After this unexcited metonymic assemblage, where metonymy uncharacteristically fails to usher what it names into presence, O'Hara encounters Pollock's painting and describes the liberating potential that he discovers in its modes of abstraction. His casual tour around the museum becomes an autobiographical survey of his aesthetic development. The poem opens with a restless voice that fails to make meaningful distinctions: "I am ill today but I am not / too ill. I am not ill at all. / It is a perfect day, warm / for winter, cold for fall." In short, *it's simply one of those days*. The theatrical language feels spontaneous and reluctant. The self is thrown into the poem without a sense of direction. "A fine day for seeing," O'Hara casually resolves. Eventually he starts

[45] O'Hara 1995, 39 and 186.

[46] Kathryn Schwarz, *What You Will: Gender, Contract, and Shakespearean Social Space* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 58.

[47] O'Hara 1995, 260.

his tour and reports seeing Miró's ceramics, "the sea by Léger," "complicated Metzingers," "a rude awakening by Brauner," and "a little table by Picasso, pink."

O'Hara offers a catalogue of these modernist artworks, but he is clearly not *moved* by them. The modernist artworks maintain an impersonal distance, denying the poet the opportunity to fashion a personal voice. There is a searching tone as O'Hara compresses, with skillful syntactic organization, all of these "seen" artworks into the space of a single thought and stanza. The word "see" sonically proliferates as O'Hara repeats it in the stanza: "A fine day for seeing. I see / ceramics", "and I see the sea by Léger." Despite its generality, the language is clearly probing for some meaningful habit or anchor. As readers, however, we are not able to participate in O'Hara's tour because the word-play and the descriptions of the artworks remain vague or esoteric.

After a round of concentrated "seeing," the poet returns to his reluctant attitude: "I am tired today but I am not / too tired. I am not tired at all." There ought to be some way of representing the abstract, emotional wavering of the poet's quotidian existence. But the metonymic arrangement of the modernist artworks and their mutual emphasis on the concrete have not provided the poet with the technical means. By returning to a declarative attitude, O'Hara reinforces his need to move through and beyond modernism. He is searching for a form of expression that can launch the self without a dependence on the objective world. At last, the poet sees the Pollock painting. This encounter disturbs the prevailing metonymic logic of the poem. It anchors our perception with a sharp demonstrative turn: "There is the Pollock." Pollock's drip painting invites the poet to trace its painterly gestures with an embodied imagination. Rather than studying an object, the poet finds himself implicated in "the many short voyages" of Pollock's "perfect hand." The gestural tracing of Pollock's hand movements transports him onto an imaginary landscape:

> *Stars are out and there is sea*
> *enough beneath the glistening earth*
> *to bear me toward the future*
> *which is not so dark. I see.*

Rather than studying an object, the poet finds himself implicated in "the many short voyages" of Pollock's "perfect hand." The gestural tracing of Pollock's hand movements is still metonymic, even more radically so than the contextual arrangement of the various paintings in the museum, because the "perfect hand" and O'Hara's tracing of Pollock's embodied process with his own hands, engender an exhilarating maze of part-whole relations. These gestures transport O'Hara onto an imaginary landscape. He ends the poem by repeating the declarative "I see," but this time it is devoid of objects. Earlier, this verb had served to highlight the various semantic associations that one could gather around the word. Now, the sonic patterns ("eye", "I") and the evident metaphorical meaning ('I understand') do not foreground the materiality of language as a medium. Instead, they invite the reader to

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embody the projectile gesture of the last lines and to experience the spontaneity of utterance as a mode of valuation in itself.

The embodied self has finally become inextricable from the 'grammars' of sensuous perception. Whereas in his homages to modernism, O'Hara was often compelled to invent intricate syntactical strategies, this encounter with Pollock allows him to realize that "we are always already part of the sentence that our grammars afford us."[48] He teaches O'Hara not to drop declarative speech acts (e.g., "I am ill... but not too ill") in favor of sensuous representation but to embrace their abstract modes of valuation. The wavering and non-committal turns of the self can indeed prepare the grounds for more embodied and gestural projections of the self "toward the future." O'Hara's encounters in the contemporary art circles and the ekphrastic mode encourage him to foreground the body as a site of agency and knowledge in cultivating aesthetic responsiveness. The gestural dynamism of his ekphrastic attempts offers new and exciting possibilities for the use and performance of the first person in lyric poetry in the postmodern era as well as in the confessional paradigm. These painterly encounters help O'Hara to master the art of maintaining a dynamic first-person voice and of keeping the voice from being constantly burdened, as in Eliot's "Prufrock," by the psychologized versions of itself in every objectual description and sensuous investment.

[48] Charles Altieri, "What is Living and What is Dead in American Postmodernism," *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1998), 217.

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