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From Collectivity to Embodiment: Political Engagement in Eileen Myles's Selected Poetry

Abstract. This paper examines how Eileen Myles's poetry serves as a potent mode of political engagement. I analyze two poems, "An American Poem" (1991) and "I always put my pussy" (1993), to explore how poetry becomes a site of resistance. By placing these two poems in dialogue I demonstrate how Myles's political poetry employs two key strategies: collectivity and embodiment. "An American Poem" subverts national narratives by reimagining Myles's personal identity within the framework of American aristocracy. In contrast, "I always put my pussy" foregrounds desire as a radical political act, demonstrating how Myles uses embodiment to reimagine national belonging. The analysis of these poems is situated within Myles's 1992 presidential campaign to illustrate how poetry becomes part of their broader political activism. Myles's poetry operates as both a critique of hegemonic structures and a visionary act, showing the potential of poetic language to reimagine resistance.

Keywords: Eileen Myles, collectivity, embodiment, poetry, political engagement

1. Introduction

Eileen Myles (they/them), an openly queer poet and novelist, is now recognized for weaving political themes into their poetry. Composing "An American Poem" (1991) marked a pivotal moment that prompted a deeper engagement with political themes in their work (Weaver). Since then, they have increasingly used poetry as a lens through which to consider the socio-political realities of the United States. Their early political poems, such as "An American Poem" and "I always put my pussy," often explored the tension between queer resistance strategies. The poems discussed in this article reveal an interplay between collectivity, which pushes for political strategies that dismantle fixed notions of identity, and embodiment, the affirmation of lived queer experience. This tension mirrors the evolving debates between the gay activism of the time and the emerging frameworks of early queer theory. Both strategies are shaped by the legacy of second-wave feminism, which surfaces in Myles's poems either through the use of

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irony, as in "An American Poem," or in the assertion that "the private is political," as in "I always put my pussy." This duality in Myles's poetic approach also places their work in dialogue with the tradition of American poetry of dissent, as exemplified by Walt Whitman, with whom Myles shares an investment in interrogating national identity and belonging.

What sets Myles apart, however, is the intertwining of poetry and political performance that began during the 1992 presidential election. By running as a write-in candidate against George Bush and Bill Clinton, Myles turned their campaign into an artistic critique of power structures, exposing the inaccessibility of political power to women, lesbians, and artists (Krakowska 14). This fusion of creative practice with activism reflects a broader lineage. In 1979, filmmaker and queer experimental cinema pioneer Barbara Hammer staged "Put a Lesbian in the White House," a performance that confronted the limitations of political representation (Krakowska 6). Hammer's work, which sought to place lesbian subjectivity at the center of experimental film, reflected a broader artistic tradition of using queer visibility as a mode of resistance. Moreover, Myles's project has been further developed in Zoe Leonard's "I Want a President" (1992), a manifesto inspired by Myles's campaign that articulates a desire for leadership grounded in marginalized experiences. The tradition of using art and performance to challenge heteronormative political structures continued into 2020, when Polish artist Maja Luxenberg performed "I Want a President" during the country's presidential election, demonstrating the transnational impact of the radical queer feminist lineage (Halber and Kamińska 21).

This article examines "An American Poem" and "I always put my pussy" as manifestos and calls to action, foregrounding the central tension between Myles's strategies of resistance. In both poems, Myles underscores the importance of queer visibility, a goal entwined with early 1990s activist strategies that sought to assert minoritarian presence in the public sphere. Although the emphasis on visibility resonated with the politics of the time, later developments in queer theory and activism, as well as Myles's own evolving work, indicate the need to continually reassess strategies of resistance.

2. Eileen Myles: Poet of the Public

When asked about the political nature of poetry, Myles asserted that poetry is "always, always, always a key piece of democracy. It's like the un-Trump: The poet is the charismatic lover. You're the fool in Shakespeare; you're the loose cannon. As things get worse, poetry gets better, because it becomes more necessary" (Cox). Through this positioning, Myles aligns the poet with the role of a political actor, framing poetry as a crucial force in sustaining and defending democracy. Myles's decision to run in the 1992 U.S. presidential election was an extension of their poetic intervention. By transforming their campaign into a form of performance art, they were able to expose the structural barriers preventing a person belonging to a minority group from holding political office.

Myles became the first openly female, lesbian artist and working-class U.S. presidential candidate. Their campaign underscored the systemic exclusion of marginalized individuals from

political representation, emphasizing that, as a minority, they were living under the tyrannical condition of "taxation without representation" (Rotkhopf). In a letter from October 12, 1991, announcing their candidacy, Myles described themselves as

> a 41-year old American, a female, a lesbian, from a working class background, a poet, performer and writer making my living pretty exclusively from those activities. I am a taxpayer. I've lived the majority of my adult life under the poverty level, without health care. I have never made over $20,000 a year nor have I ever lived in a household where our combined incomes approached that amount. More Americans, far more Americans are like me than George Bush. Why is he ruling this country and our lives?

Thus positioning themselves in a stark contrast to the elite ruling class represented by the then ruling president George H. W. Bush. In conversation with Johanna Rotkhopf, Myles recalls that their decision to run for president was prompted by George H.W. Bush's appropriation of the term "political correctness" in a speech at the University of Michigan. According to Myles, the term had originally been used within lesbian circles as a means of internal critique, but Bush's rhetoric weaponized it against marginalized communities, including activists, people of color, queers, and women—"everybody he didn't want to hear from more than once" (Rothkopf). In response, Myles transformed every public engagement into an extension of their campaign, explaining

> if you asked me to do a poetry reading, if you asked me to be on a panel, if you asked me to speak at a memorial, whatever it was, I was going to run for office, and that would not end until November of 1992. That was the large single gesture that bound all my activities. (Rothkopf)

Their campaign embodied the spirit of political poetry, advocating for policies that challenged dominant political structures. Poetry has long been viewed as a realm separate from politics, a space for aesthetic reflection rather than civic engagement. David Orr notes that contemporary American poetry is often dismissed as "passive, swoony, and generally not in the business of doing things," but, in contrast, politics is seen as "active, gritty, and comparable to war" (2). However, this dichotomy obscures their shared reliance on rhetoric. As Orr argues, both poetry and politics are modes of persuasion, though their goals differ (409). Jay Parini expands on this idea by asserting that poetry holds a capacity for political expression, its power emerging not through slogans but through language that exposes injustice in urgent, incisive ways (116). Adrienne Rich claims that poetry "wrenches around our ideas about our lives as it grows alongside other kinds of human endeavor" (*What is Found There* 58). Therefore, poetry is not a passive reflection of the world but an active force that disrupts and questions it. Poetry challenges not only external societal conditions but also the internal comforts of the poet, even confronting the desire to remain silent. As Audre Lorde argues, "poetry is not a luxury," but rather "a vital

necessity of our [women's] existence" (37). When poetry is translated into language, thought, and concrete action, it shapes the environment in which we nurture our hopes for survival and change (37).

This perspective aligns with Myles's reflections on the political dimensions of poetry. Their work illustrates poetry's capacity to contest dominant power structures. The following sections trace how Myles mobilizes poetry as both a vehicle of social critique and a site for imagining alternative futures, negotiating between collective solidarity and embodied experience as interwoven forms of resistance.

3. Imagining Collective Belonging in "An American Poem"

In "An American Poem," the speaker imagines themselves as part of the Kennedy family, aligning with its privilege and political power, yet also evoking the democratic ideals linked to John F. Kennedy. Written at the height of the AIDS crisis, the poem serves as a critique of American political structures and an assertion of a queer, working-class perspective that, at that time, remained largely excluded from national narratives.

The poem employs free verse and an irregular structure to create a conversational, self-reflective tone that mirrors spoken language. This stylistic choice reflects the influence of the New York School of Poetry on Myles's work. Associated with figures such as Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Alice Notley, the New York School emerged in downtown Manhattan during the 1950s and 1960s as a collective of experimental artists. Their work, characterized by wit, informality, and a conversational register, often drew on surrealism and abstract expressionism, incorporating elements of daily life, humor, and pop culture into their poetry, offering a playful response to contemporary events. For Myles, the term signifies an aesthetic lineage and conveys an ethos of community and place—writing that emerges from the immediacy of one's surroundings and grounds poetry in social relations (Nelson 169). The orientation toward the communal resonates in "An American Poem," where immediacy and intimacy reinforce its personal narrative. The absence of a consistent syllabic structure or formal rhyme scheme reflects a rejection of traditional poetic conventions, paralleling the speaker's resistance to normative societal structures. In this way, the poem's conversational rhythm allows the speaker's voice to resonate as authentic and unfiltered.

In "An American Poem," Myles constructs a voice that grants them access to conversations about the marginalized by slipping into an imagined lineage. They describe this process as one that opened the door to political poetry and a "version of themselves they could claim" (Weaver). This act of poetic self-invention recalls, who in *Leaves of Grass* declared, "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos…" positioning himself simultaneously as an everyman and a cosmic figure (461). Like the nineteenth-century classic, Myles crafts a marginal speaker who demands authority, blurring the line between persona and person. They go further by imagining their speaker as part of the Kennedy family, collapsing the distance between writer and reader through the use of a name embedded in the American imagination.

I was born in Boston in
1949. I never wanted
this fact to be known, in
fact I've spent the better
half of my adult life
trying to sweep my early
years under the carpet
and have a life that
was clearly just mine (ll. 1–9)
……
and I knew from
a very early age that
if there were ever any
possibility of escaping
the collective fate of this famous
Boston family I would
take that route … (ll. 27–33)

The speaker positions themselves as a member of a "wealthy and powerful / American family," invoking the imagery of privilege, prosperity, and historical significance. The emphasis on "American" foregrounds the presumed heteronormative and patriarchal norms historically naturalized within such an identity. Yet, the poem resists these associations: the speaker expresses a need to "escape" from the collective fate of their family, transforming departure into an act of refusal. To leave, in this context, is to reject the heteropatriarchal structures that foreclose freedom and authenticity. Teresa de Lauretis argues that marginalized subjects cannot sustain themselves within such structures (145); José Esteban Muñoz identifies the present as "impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and 'rational' expectations" (27). The poem thus frames liberation not as elective but as necessary—an act of agency against a system that denies queer subjectivity. By consciously deviating from the "straight path" of normative expectations, the speaker embraces desires that are considered "wrong" and disrupt cultural scripts of happiness, belonging, and success.

When the speaker escapes, they enter their "hidden years," a space that simultaneously conceals their inherited privilege and their sexual identity. The decisive moment of becoming a lesbian is marked by the symbolic gesture of "stepping off the flag," an act laden with dual significance. On one level, it enacts the political labor of coming out, which, in the context of the poem's 1990s milieu, constitutes an assertion of visibility and self-determination. In this sense, Myles's poem participates in the broader cultural argument of the 1990s that visibility itself constitutes empowerment, echoing activist strategies such as those of the Lesbian Avengers or ACT UP. On another, it signifies a renunciation of the speaker's family history and

the privileges it affords, staging a refusal of normative expectations. In this way, the gesture operates as a personal and political rupture.

on an Amtrak to New
York in the early
‘70s and I guess
you could say
my hidden years
began. I thought
Well I’ll be a poet.
What could be more
foolish and obscure.
I became a lesbian.
Every woman in my
family looks like
a dyke but it’s really
stepping off the flag
when you become one. (ll. 35–49)

The speaker’s journey is marked by shame, as they confront their “ignominious pose” associated with claiming their lesbian identity:

While holding this ignominious
pose I have seen and
I have learned and (ll. 50-52)

Shame in “An American Poem” functions simultaneously as a destabilizing force and a catalyst for self-recognition. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick theorizes shame as a “disruptive moment in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication,” highlighting how it fractures one’s sense of belonging while simultaneously intensifying self-awareness (36). In “An American Poem,” shame is not simply an emotion to be overcome; rather, it is an affective state that propels the speaker toward a more profound understanding of the self. The poem captures the dual function of shame, disruptive and revelatory, when the speaker declares, “While holding this ignominious / pose I have seen and / I have learned and.” Here, shame is not merely a burden but an epistemological tool, one that forces the speaker to reckon with the contradictions of their identity.

I am beginning to think
there is no escaping
history. A woman I am currently having

an affair with said
you know you look
like a Kennedy. I felt
……
I am a Kennedy. (ll. 53–59; 73)

This realization is further reinforced by the line, "there is no escaping history," which situates the speaker's shame as personal and structural, tied to the inherited privileges and burdens of their family lineage. By positioning themselves as a Kennedy and a lesbian, the speaker confronts the irreconcilable nature of these identities. Shame is not an endpoint but a threshold, compelling the speaker to navigate the tension between legacy and self-definition. The recognition of their positionality within a lineage of influence allows the speaker to apprehend belonging and alienation. The Kennedy name signifies wealth, influence, and national belonging—an identity rooted in heteronormative, white, patriarchal structures. Lesbianism, on the other hand, situates them outside these very structures, rendering them both invisible and illegible within the dominant historical narrative. Thus, the speaker's act of "stepping off the flag" operates dually as a rejection of familial privilege and an assertion of agency:

I am a Kennedy.
And I await
your orders.
You are the New Americans.
The homeless are wandering
the streets of our nation's
greatest city. Homeless
men with AIDS are among
them. Is that right? (ll. 85–93)

The deep awareness the speaker gains through shame is further emphasized in their mention of the "New Americans." By highlighting those marginalized under capitalist heteropatriarchal systems—homeless people, queer individuals affected by the AIDS crisis, and other socially excluded groups—the speaker reveals the systemic failures that support American society. This challenges the dominant stories that portray capitalism and heteropatriarchy as the natural and unquestioned norm. Instead of being a neutral or normal system, it is shown as an exploitative structure that harms the most vulnerable—those who can't afford housing, healthcare, or basic security. By creating a speaker who both shares and resists the privilege of the Kennedy lineage, Myles points out the contradictions within American national pride. The speaker's self-awareness acts as a critical lens to question and shake up the national myths of prosperity and inclusion:

here, are we all normal.
It is not normal for
me to be a Kennedy.
But I am no longer
ashamed, no longer
alone. I am not
alone tonight because
we are all Kennedys.
And I am your President. (ll. 150–58)

The speaker negotiates their positionality within intersecting systems of power and privilege, acknowledging the tensions between their inherited identity as a Kennedy and their lived reality as a lesbian. The line "It is not normal for / me to be a Kennedy" emphasizes this dissonance while also critiquing the unequal distribution of wealth within capitalist society. This tension is further exacerbated by the recognition that the privileges associated with their family name do not necessarily translate into a sense of belonging. Instead, the speaker's sexual identity marks them as an outsider, alienated from their lineage and the dominant cultural script. This recognition of alienation aligns with Myles's broader critique of the capitalist heteropatriarchal order.

Ultimately, the speaker reclaims their identity as a Kennedy—not as a symbol of power or privilege, but as a declaration of political and collective potential. Myles employs satire and irony, highlighting shared cultural roots between themselves and the Kennedys, while simultaneously undermining the authority and seriousness of the Kennedy lineage. This strategy resonates with the rhetorical practices of second-wave feminists, who frequently deployed humor and parody to expose the workings of patriarchy (Fahs 157). Some of the most enduring feminist interventions of this period emerged from "the brilliant ways that feminists used language, particularly when they were poking fun at political figures, undermining 'serious' institutions, and collaborating to expose the workings of patriarchy" (157). Myles's adoption of these strategies demonstrates the influence of second-wave feminist rhetoric on their political poetics.

Moreover, in reframing their Kennedy identity, the speaker does not simply reject it; rather, they repurpose it as a site of political intervention. The reclamation of the Kennedy name does not signify an embrace of privilege but a reimagining of its meaning, which also points to the democratization associated with the Kennedy name. At the same time, Myles criticizes the privilege of this affluent family, and does not disregard the fact that John F. Kennedy was the first Irish Catholic president, making him a symbol of increasing democratization and access to power in American society. The speaker, thus, subverts this name into a symbol of collective resistance, an invitation to envision a world where the markers of privilege—wealth, power, and access—are not hoarded by the elite but redistributed for the benefit of all. This gesture evokes a moment in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, when the artist writes: "What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the

same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too" (100). According to Muñoz, Warhol detects a quotidian utopia in the object of a Coke bottle, suggesting a world where distinctions dissolve in the shared act of consumption (9). Myles, however, both subverts and extends this utopian impulse. "An American Poem" exposes the material inequalities and exclusions underpinning fantasies of accessibility while reconfiguring the Kennedy name as a tool for collective identifications. The rhetorical question, "Shouldn't we all be Kennedys?" followed by the affirmation, "we are all Kennedys," transforms the name from a marker of elite power into a call for solidarity, using satire to reposition privilege as a shared political potential rather than a source of exclusion.

Myles extends this critique beyond personal identity, calling out the structural inequalities that shape American life, including homelessness, gender and sexual inequality, and the AIDS crisis. In doing so, "An American Poem" resonates with the radical manifesto of the Third World Gay Revolution (1971), which demanded "a new society—a revolutionary socialist society" where resources such as food, shelter, healthcare, and education are freely available to all. "An American Poem" envisions an alternative future, one that aligns with Muñoz's concept of queer futurity. Muñoz argues that manifestos such as those of the Third World Gay Revolution should be read through a logic of futurity: "The 'we' speaks to a 'we' that is 'not yet conscious,' the future society that is being invoked and addressed at the same moment" (Muñoz 20). In a series of videos for *Louisiana Channel*, Myles reinforces this vision: "In the democracy in which I live I want it to just be the state of things. My work has to be utopian. What I have to do as an artist is start creating the world I wanna live in" (00:07:49-00:08:05). Here, political poetry becomes a generative act, moving beyond critique to imagining new forms of collective belonging. Through this lens, Myles envisions a world that disrupts inherited privilege and reclaims visibility, and envisions a queer future unbound by the constraints of capitalist heteropatriarchy.

4. Lesbian-National Embodiment in "I always put my pussy"

"I always put my pussy" exemplifies Myles's queer politics of embodiment, an insistence on identity as lived, material, and politically charged. Written not long after "An American Poem," it brings to the fore another way of reimagining national attachments. The act of "stepping off the flag" in "An American Poem" inaugurates a new position that finds fuller articulation in "I always put my pussy." Composed between 1992 and 1993, in the wake of Myles's unsuccessful presidential run and the ascent of the Clinton era, the poem operates simultaneously as a lesbian manifesto and a declaration of artistic autonomy, positing lesbian identity as an alternative to the mainstream present.

Formally, "I always put my pussy" employs free verse to generate rhythm, arranged in two irregular stanzas whose repetitions of words and sounds create a hypnotic effect. Myles favors short, often enjambed lines that force the reader to dwell on each phrase independently, while the poem's cadence recalls both spoken language and chant-like invocation, again testifying to

the influence of Myles's New York School contemporaries. What distinguishes this poem, however, is its subject matter. It speaks with openness about lesbian identity, refusing euphemism or concealment. In doing so, Myles foregrounds lesbian embodiment as central to the poem's politics.

The arguments staged in "I always put my pussy," invite another comparison to Whitman. In "Proto-Leaf," Whitman channels the intensity of his love for men into the language of democratic comradeship, insisting that these passions are foundational to his poetic voice: "I will write the evangel-poem of comrades and of love" (17). His yearning to give full expression to what he calls "the burning fires" of desire is inseparable from his national vision; the poet's erotic life becomes a source of authority for his imagined community (17). Similarly, Myles navigates that same charged space where the personal becomes a platform for reimagining national life, collapsing the divide between the public and the private. In "I always put my pussy," lesbianism emerges as a site of possibility, positioning the lesbian speaker in direct opposition to heteropatriarchal structures. The speaker reclaims and destabilizes dominant national narratives, conceptualizing their lover's vulva as a nation unto itself. The poem begins with the speaker's assertion:

> I always put my pussy
> in the middle of trees
> like a waterfall
> like a doorway to God
> like a flock of birds (ll. 1–5)

The poet reclaims "pussy," a term often wielded as an insult or marker of weakness, and instead imbues it with power, equating it to a nation, a symbol of allegiance, and a site of political belonging. The poem's opening lines place the speaker at the center, "in the middle of trees / like a waterfall / like a doorway to God / like a flock of birds," situating lesbianism as a transcendent force that is both natural and divine. By aligning the lesbian body with these images, Myles foregrounds lesbian visibility as a strategy of resistance, one that confronts historical erasure and reclaims space within cultural and political discourse. While Myles's reliance on visibility resonates with the urgency of the early 1990s, queer activism and theory have since interrogated the limits of this strategy. Lisa Duggan, writing in 2002, critiques "the new homonormativity" as a politics that, rather than contesting dominant heteronormative structures, assimilates into them, producing "a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (179). From this vantage, visibility alone no longer constitutes a sufficient form of resistance. Nevertheless, Myles's explicit articulation of lesbian desire, particularly from the position of an obscure poet whose national recognition was amplified by their presidential campaign, remains radical for its historical moment:

> I always put my lover's cunt
> on the crest

of a wave
like a flag
that I can
pledge my
allegiance
to. This is my
country. Here,
when we're alone
in public. (ll. 6–16)

As the poem progresses, the speaker shifts focus from their own body to their lover's, transforming the lover's vulva into a national emblem: "like a flag / that I can / pledge my / allegiance / to." This gesture recalls Monique Wittig's theories of lesbianism as a distinct political and ontological category, one that exists outside of heteronormative structures (9-10). The lover's vulva, positioned "on the crest of a wave," becomes not only a literal topography but also a metaphorical crest, another national emblem. The speaker does not seek to reconcile their identity within the constraints of American nationalism but instead creates a new allegiance—to lesbianism itself: "like a flag / that I can / pledge my / allegiance / to. This is my / country. Here, / when we're alone / in public." In pledging allegiance to their lover's body, rather than to the nation-state, the speaker refuses patriarchal and capitalist structures in favor of a self-defined trajectory.

The paradox of being "alone in public" further underscores the poem's political stakes. The speaker suggests that lesbian existence remains illegible within dominant cultural frameworks; they are "alone" because their experience is not widely acknowledged, yet their very presence in public signifies a form of resistance. Myles thus articulates lesbianism as a form of belonging that is at once hyper-visible and spectral:

My lover's pussy
is a badge
is a night stick
is a helmet
is a deer's face
is a handful
of flowers
is a waterfall
is a river
of blood
is a bible
is a hurricane
is a soothsayer. (ll. 17–29)

The speaker's enumeration of what their lover's vulva represents, "a badge," "a night stick," "a helmet," further emphasizes the poem's rebellious ethos. These objects, traditionally associated with policing and state authority, are reclaimed as emblems of protection, power, and defiance. Myles suggests that if the nation refuses to accommodate lesbians, they will construct their own space of belonging, one where lesbian identity itself serves as the foundation for a reimagined nation. By attributing varied and often contradictory meanings to the lover's vulva, simultaneously sacred and mundane, powerful and tender, Myles constructs a new lexicon of lesbian existence. The vulva becomes both a "soothsayer" and a "bible," invoking a spiritual register that subverts patriarchal religious authority. In doing so, Myles once again aligns their vision with Muñoz's concept of queer futurity: the imagination of alternative worlds that resist and surpass existing structures of oppression (Muñoz 20). The lover's vulva, like the queer utopian horizon, signifies a possibility not yet realized but insistently envisioned. Myles remains more focused on identity while at the same time the speaker imagines a certain utopia.

The final stanza reiterates the poem's central theme, as the speaker proclaims:

> I always put
> my pussy in the middle
> of trees
> like a waterfall
> a piece of jewelry
> that I wear
> on my chest
> like a badge
> in America
> so my lover & I can be safe. (ll. 45–59)

The speaker explicitly links the act of centering lesbian desire with the pursuit of safety and visibility in America. They "wear" their body as a badge—representing the empowerment rooted in an embodied experience. In contrast to "An American Poem," where the speaker grapples with shame and the weight of national disidentification, "I always put my pussy" constructs a space where lesbianism is not only visible but central. Myles's poetic vision aligns with Wittig's notion of lesbianism as a mode of world-making and a means of carving out alternative spaces of belonging (Wittig 9). This political dimension is further underscored by the poem's historical context. In 1993, Myles performed "I always put my pussy" during a Lesbian Avengers action at Bryant Park's Gertrude Stein monument—an event that sought to "reunite" Stein with Alice B. Toklas. This act of public lesbian commemoration—staging a symbolic reunion for a historical lesbian couple—mirrors the poem's themes of visibility and resistance to erasure. By reciting this poem in that context, Myles positioned lesbian desire as both a historical and contemporary political force. If Myles's earlier engagement with American nationalism sought to queer

the presidency, here they offer an even more radical intervention: rejecting the nation-state entirely and instead forging an alternative future grounded in the body and desire.

5. Conclusions

Eileen Myles's political poetry exemplifies the capacity of lyric to operate simultaneously as critique and as a mode of imaginative world-making. By reading "An American Poem" and "I always put my pussy" together, this article demonstrates how Myles mobilizes two distinct yet complementary strategies—collectivity and embodiment—to resist normative cultural narratives and envision alternative modes of belonging. These strategies reflect not only the activist climate of the early 1990s but also enduring tensions in queer theory between visibility, solidarity, and the limits of identity-based politics.

"An American Poem" interrogates American national mythology by reconfiguring the Kennedy lineage as both a burden and a site of potential reclamation. Through irony, satire, and the affective register of shame, the poem destabilizes inherited privilege while transforming exclusion into the grounds for collective identification. "I always put my pussy," by contrast, foregrounds lesbian embodiment and desire, positioning them as radical sites of allegiance and political belonging. Read together, the poems reveal Myles's refusal to resolve the tension between structural critique and personal assertion; instead, they stage this friction as constitutive of queer resistance. Myles's poetics therefore resists confinement to a singular political mode, offering instead a vision of lyric as a space in which competing strategies of resistance coexist and reinforce one another.

This dynamic approach also positions Myles within broader debates about the political role of poetry. Their work challenges the notion that lyric is separate from civic life, instead insisting that poetry is a crucial site where national myths and cultural exclusions are reconfigured. In this respect, Myles's oeuvre aligns with traditions of American dissent poetry while also extending those traditions by incorporating queer and feminist strategies of parody, erotic reclamation, and visibility. Their poetry does not merely critique dominant structures but enacts alternative collectivities and affiliations through language itself.

The implications of this reading extend beyond the historical moment of the early 1990s. Future scholarship might examine how Myles's later poetry develops these strategies in response to shifting paradigms in queer theory and activism, particularly their turn toward ecological concerns and nonhuman presence. Comparative work could situate Myles within transnational lineages of queer dissent, tracing how their strategies resonate across different cultural and political contexts.

Ultimately, Myles's poetry underscores the generative potential of lyric as a form of political engagement. By weaving together collectivity and embodiment, their work models how poetry can interrogate systems of power while simultaneously envisioning futures that have not yet been realized. In doing so, Myles challenges scholars to rethink the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and to recognize lyric as a forceful agent in shaping imaginaries of queer resistance and belonging.

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