'The Purpose of Poetry is to Seem as Lifelike as Possible ...': Communicating the Alive Through Contemporary Poet Chelsey Minnis's Supplemental Language

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“THE PURPOSE OF POETRY IS TO SEEM AS LIFELIKE AS POSSIBLE …”: COMMUNICATING THE ALIVE THROUGH CONTEMPORARY POET CHELSEY MINNIS’S SUPPLEMENTAL LANGUAGE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Lindsay Niedringhaus
December 2011

Accepted by:
Dr. Jillian Weise, Committee Chair
Dr. Catherine Paul
Dr. Cameron Bushnell
Contemporary poet Chelsey Minnis has a style that is unlike any other poet of today. Throughout all three of Minnis’s collections, the speaker is unpredictable in her tone, content, and approach, appearing quite random and flippant. Furthermore, Minnis’s distinctive use of ellipses and ideograms also separate her poetry from any of that of her contemporaries, as they take such a prominent role within her poems, refusing to be ignored. When first reading a Minnis poem, many do not know how to even begin to analyze it, as the poetry does not adhere to any traditional codes, and no rules exist that could guide the reader in his or her investigation. Therefore, after taking into consideration several different theories about how to approach poetry and contemporary work, I provide my own analysis of Minnis’s poetry, concluding that she creates a sort of supplemental language in order to create a presence or experience for the reader.

Prominent support and direction for my arguments begins with Mark Doty’s introduction to Michael Dumanis and Cate Marvin’s Legitimate Dangers: American Poets of the New Century, wherein he introduces the idea of “performative” voice (xxi), as well explains how to approach innovative poetry. In addition, Alicia Ostriker’s theory of “duplicitous poetry” (41) is a running theme throughout my analysis, as I argue that through Minnis’s conflicting speaker, as well as her ideograms and ellipses, the speaker many times presents opposite ideas that “coexist with equal force” (Ostriker 41) within the poetry. Finally, referring to other poets who may have influenced Minnis’s writing, namely Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein, I conclude that Minnis’s poetry is a fresh demonstration of a poet’s struggle of relying only upon language to present ideas. Like
these poets, Minnis employs other devices, hers being her duplicitous speaker, ideograms, and ellipses, in order to supplement language. As a result, Minnis’s poetry arrives even closer to a presence that seems alive, active, and exciting for the reader to experience.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Chelsey Minnis, who would probably laugh at the idea that an entire thesis is written about her work. Chelsey, I’m raising my glass of champagne in your honor (while sitting on a tile floor in fishnets and a fur coat)…
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. Jillian Weise for first introducing me to Chelsey Minnis, then listening to my complaints about her, then laughing at my newfound love for her, then agreeing to chair my committee on a thesis all about her, and finally decoding my thoughts about her, all the while meeting me at fabulous eateries all over Greenville, comparing dog photos and stories, and marveling over two-headed deer sightings at craft fairs. Without her unending guidance and encouragement, this thesis would not be possible.

Thank you also to Dr. Catherine Paul and Dr. Cameron Bushnell, who took time out of busy lives in order to assist me through this process.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

TITLE PAGE .............................................................................................................................................. i

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................................... ii

DEDICATION ........................................................................................................................................ iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ......................................................................................................................... v

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................. 1

II. “I WANT TO SAY IN MY POEM THAT I AM ALIVE!”: COMING TO TERMS WITH A SPEAKER WHO ADMITS HER FAILURE—AND ALSO THAT OF LANGUAGE— TO SPEAK................................................................................................................................. 11

III. “I HAVE BEEN CREATED TO MAKE A SHOW OUT OF EVERYTHING…”: THE SLOW, EXPERIENTIAL Duplicity of Ellipses and Ideograms That Becomes the Speaker’s Performative Voice............. 31

IV. “I HAVE NOTHING TO SAY TO MARIANNE MOORE AND SHE HAS NOTHING TO SAY TO ME!”: THE SPEAKER’S SELF-PROCLAIMED AUTONOMY … OR LACK THEREOF ........................................................................................................ 53

V. CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................................... 68

APPENDICES ......................................................................................................................................... 75

A: “Double Black Tulip”, Bad Bad (Fence Books, 2007) ............................................................... 76

B: “Champagne”, Zirconia (Fence Books, 2001) ........................................................................... 80

C: Illustration on opposite page of “You Look Good, You Feel Good, But You’re Bad ♦ Bad…” (Bad Bad 62, Fence Books, 2007) .......................................................................................................................... 83

Inverted illustration (Bad Bad 125, Fence Books, 2007) .............................................................. 84
Table of Contents (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORKS CITED</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Chelsey Minnis is a relatively unknown contemporary poet whose works include *Zirconia* (Fence Books, 2001), *Bad Bad* (Fence Books, 2007), and *Poemland* (Wave Books, 2009). Describing her work as *avant-garde* does the poetry an injustice, as this term has seemed to evolve to connote an artist who is trying to be “cool” or “unique” for the sake of simply being different. However, Minnis’s poetry is *avant-garde* in the traditionally modernist sense of the word—that is, it is extremely experimental and innovative, transcending traditions that have come before it.

All three collections are characterized by a first-person speaker who is simultaneously angry, silly, depressed, dream-like, detached, childish, sarcastic, flippant, and wise, and the speaker changes tones from one poem to the next, many times from one word to the next within a poem. *Bad Bad*, Minnis’s second collection of poetry, is arguably the most conflicting, outspoken, and daring of the three collections, partly because of the subject matter of the poems, and partly because of the voice of the speaker. Minnis begins the work with sixty eight Prefaces, many of which proclaim the

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1 The publishing houses that have noticed Minnis’s work, Fence Books and Wave Books, are both reputable companies that pride themselves on recognizing writers whose work is outside of the mainstream. In fact, Fence Books’ mission statement claims that the house publishes “challenging writing distinguished by idiosyncrasy and intelligence rather than by allegiance with camps, schools or cliques.” Therefore, companies that most likely examine hundreds of contemporary poets’ works on a daily basis have judged Minnis’s work to be successful. For this reason in and of itself, I cannot quickly disregard Minnis’s poetry.

2 Matei Calinescu’s *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* describes the term *avant-garde* as originating from military implications including “a sharp sense of militancy, praise of nonconformism, courageous precursory exploration, and, on a more general plane, confidence in the final victory of time and immanence over traditions that try to appear as eternal, immutable, and transcendentally determined” (95). Throughout this thesis, when using the term, I am alluding to what Calinescu describes as a sense of innovation, exploration, and nonconformism.
speaker’s talent for writing poetry while simultaneously condemning formal academic training and writing. The collection continues with poems that tend to have a visceral nature to them; the speaker openly says anything and everything, with no regard for filters or social mores. For example, she begins the poem “D.” by writing, “…..think of your own red-bloodedness….. / ….. / …..because you are fucked…” (3-4). Sometimes the speaker appears to be a sexually charged “bad girl,” as in “Don’t Do It Some More”: “…..and I want to be your nursemaid..too..but . . . . . . / …..only for fun….” (3-4). Other times she seems to condemn women who parade their sexuality, such as in “Foxina.” Then the voice becomes innocent and childlike, such as in “Friendship,” when the speaker says, “We are friends and we eat ice creams together…” (22). Toward the end, the speaker returns to the angry, sarcastic poet in “Anti Vitae,” in which she lists her anti-accomplishments and is almost proud of her professional rejections. And scattered throughout all of these poems are ellipses large and small, ideograms, and even a few illustrations.

When I initially finished reading Bad Bad, I felt as if I was reading the emotions of a bi-polar speaker. She’s happy, she’s sad, she’s up, she’s down, and for the majority of the time, she remains at either extreme, never achieving a balance of emotions. Therefore, my preliminary response when reading her work was frustration because I could not pinpoint the voice of the reader. Other readers respond with the same irritation that I felt, while others declare that Minnis is a genius. It is as if the extreme voices of
the speaker have resulted in extreme reactions to Minnis’s work. However, the more I have read Minnis’s work, the more fascinated I have become with the speaker’s conflicting statements, carefully construed word choices, and blatant display of emotions. If the reader is patient enough to analyze the language, then he or she will realize that what appears to be the random voice of the speaker is actually a complex display of thoughts and emotions.

Therefore, in this thesis, I investigate the voice of Minnis’s speaker, concluding that the contrasting tones of the voice are the speaker’s attempts to communicate what Alicia Ostriker terms “duplicitous” ideas (41). I then delve into Minnis’s use of her trademark ellipses and ideograms, and I claim that the speaker relies upon this untraditional punctuation to create a presence for the reader, in turn projecting ideas that language on its own cannot completely communicate. Finally, I broaden the investigation of Minnis’s writing to include those poets who may have influenced her work, pointing out that the loss of faith in language to communicate is a struggle that many poets before Minnis have experienced and highlighting these other poets’ ways of projecting what Mark Doty terms the “performative” voice (xxi). By comparing Minnis’s attempts to overcome the obstacles of language to those of these poets, I point out that though Minnis’s style of communication is very *avant-garde*, or experimental

3 For example, contemporary poet John Gallaher writes in his blog about a recent experience with Minnis’s work: “I brought *Poemland* to a group of young writers last week, and the conversation was all over the place. From praise for the imagination and energy of the deadpan in the book, to hostility and … kind of ‘whateverish’ blandness. … One person said it seems like one of the goals of the book is to find a way to irritate as many people as possible, and I found that fascinating. This is the only book of hers I've read, and I've already suggested it to friends, knowing reaction is going to be, again, all over the place. I think there’s a value to that.”
and innovative, her attempt to move beyond the boundaries of language is a common challenge.

In Chapter One, I focus specifically on Bad Bad’s “Double Black Tulip” in order to provide a close reading of the multiple characteristics of the voice within a Minnis poem. First, I analyze the open-ended questions that the speaker poses through her statements, pointing out that these statements arrive at opposite conclusions, perhaps insinuating the speaker’s struggle with her own identity. Expanding upon this thought, I then refer to Alicia Ostriker’s theory of “poetic doubleness”: seemingly opposite ideas existing with “equal force” within the poem, all to guide the reader toward an overall meaning of the work (41). By illustrating “duplicitous meanings” (41), the speaker is able to provide examples of the floating signifier that is language, in turn showing that relying upon language for communication is a risky move. At the end of “Double Black Tulip,” the speaker openly shares her frustration with her own language, finally giving up in attempting to communicate through poetry.

Chapter Two continues with this idea of the failure of language to aptly communicate, and to make up for the shortcomings of language, Minnis employs the use of extended ellipses and ideograms to better facilitate her messages. Though most extreme in her second collection, Bad Bad, almost every single poem written by Minnis contains not a single ellipsis but a series of ellipses that can go on and on, uninterrupted, for at least a few lines. This punctuation has several effects. First, it serves as a trademark for Minnis, signifying that her voice is always present in the work, and, consequentially, challenging Barthes’s “Death of the Author” in the process. Secondly,
the ellipses cause slowing-down of the reading, as if the speaker is guiding us to contemplate every single word. Also along with this slow reading is more attention toward the experiencing of sensations, and less attention toward the narrative of the poetry.

Minnis also uses several different ideograms throughout much of her poetry, such as hearts, stars, and crosses, and like the ellipses, at first glance, most readers do not know how to approach the symbols. However, also in Chapter Two, I show that through her illustration of the ideograms, Minnis is attempting to communicate with us ideas that cannot be as effectively portrayed through words. By exploring the use for Chinese ideograms, I then present reasons why Minnis’s ideograms are more successful in creating a presence, or voice, than any words that Minnis’s speaker could have used.

Lastly, in Chapter Three, I investigate Minnis’s speaker’s self-proclaimed autonomy. Throughout the collections, Minnis’s speaker outwardly claims that she has not been influenced by any other poets, and her work is brand new. However, after some investigation, I surmise that by proclaiming that she is not influenced by other poets, the speaker is intentionally mentioning these other poets, therefore in fact proving that they have affected her work. Similar styles between Minnis’s work and specifically Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein reveal that all three poets have struggled with the limitations of language to communicate ideas. The end result of this chapter is that by saying she is new, Minnis is ironically aligning herself with these poets, showing that all three attempt to escape the failures of language by implementing different means.
A common barrier when analyzing Minnis’s poetry is the distinctive nature of the poetry itself. Michael Dumanis and Cate Marvin’s *Legitimate Dangers: American Poets of the New Century* is an anthology of contemporary poetry from young American poets that highlights some of the newer voices of today’s poetry. Though Minnis is not included in this anthology, much of the introduction by poet Mark Doty assists in attempting to discover the style and voice of Minnis’s work. Doty writes about an experience with one of his colleagues, Dean Young. Young had shared some contemporary poetry with a group of people who, as Doty writes, “… weren’t enchanted by the work at hand.” Young’s response to this group was, “Well, the poet’s trying to write a poem that never existed before” (Doty 1). Doty remarks that Young’s statement was a wise reminder for any readers of poetry. Notes Doty:

> When someone is trying to make something that doesn’t exist yet, for which there is no clear template, it’s going to look unfamiliar, and it’s likely to arrive with struggle, uncertainty, and a quality of raggedness. What makes things feel polished or “finished” is very often their adherence to codes. (xxi)

After one glance at a Minnis poem, it is easy to see that the poet does not adhere to many familiar “codes” of poetry, such as metered lines, a consistent voice, or traditional grammar, and this is perhaps one of the reasons why some react with an extreme hatred for her work. As Doty remarks, any poetry that does not look familiar appears unfinished or ragged, as it “resists comparison” to any other work. One obvious way in which Minnis’s work resists comparison is that she has written it in a format that
makes any of her poems very difficult to cite in a traditional academic paper. Her unpredictable phrasing, illustrations, periods, ellipses, and strange spacing are impossible to capture in parenthetical quotations. For example, the first ten lines of “Man-Thing” in *Bad Bad* look somewhat like this:

```
man-thing you are permissive
and I like it
like nasturtium
I like it like cavil
```

The Modern Language Association does not provide any guidance regarding parenthetically quoting poems with lines of ellipses or indeterminate spacing. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, I have devised my own rules for quoting Minnis’s poems, which consist of the following:
1. If the quoted phrase is surrounded by more than five periods, I write the phrase with exactly five periods on each side. If the periods preceding or following a phrase are less than five periods, then I include the exact number of periods used.

*Example in poem:*

“…………………………..like it..”

*In my thesis paragraph:*

“…..like it..”

2. If the line has odd spacing, I attempt to replicate it as closely as possible, but I cannot guarantee it is exact.

*Example in poem:*

… .....................I come back to you.

*In thesis paragraph:*

“… .....I come back to you.”

3. Ideograms are duplicated as is.

4. If the lines of a poem are set off from the text of the thesis, I have attempted to replicate them as closely as possible to the original.

5. In Minnis’s *Poemland*, the poet does not provide titles for any of her poems. Instead, she separates each group of lines with a black page. For citing purposes, I am assuming that with each black page is the beginning of a new poem. For the title substitution, I have simply named the poems in chronological order. Therefore, if the quotation in the thesis comes from the second grouping of lines, or occurs after the first black page, then I call this the “second poem.”
I hope that by establishing my own rules for citing and quoting Minnis’s poems in an academic paper, the reader of this thesis will be able to somewhat understand the format of a Minnis poem. However, I have no way of truly quoting a piece of Minnis’s poetry without replicating the actual format of the poem. Minnis’s poetry, by its very nature, resists discussion in an academic setting. Perhaps this is why as of yet, hardly any published critiques about Minnis’s work exist. The only official review of Minnis’s poetry is a “microreview” by Sasha Steensen in the *Boston Review*, stating the obvious themes of Minnis’s work: Minnis is “reverently irreverent,” she chronicles a “love-hate relationship with American poetry,” and her poems contain a “coexistence of seemingly incongruous emotions” (1). Other than Steensen’s paragraph of a critique and a few minor reviews on Amazon.com, to my knowledge, no other criticism of Minnis’s work has been formally published.

As described above, through her conflicting speaker and *avant-garde* style, Minnis is giving me every reason not to write about her work. The style of her poetry makes critiquing, discussing, and writing about her poetry difficult. However, Minnis’s poetry is worth formally examining in order to understand from another poet’s point of view how language, in and of itself, contains millions of slippery signifiers. Minnis’s speaker seems conflicting because the language to describe her is conflicting. The speaker appears to have trouble making up her mind because she cannot ever pinpoint the exact word that will communicate her thoughts. Therefore, the speaker must resort to other tools, that of ideograms and ellipses, in order to supplement the words. By pushing the boundaries of poetry, and language in general, Chelsey Minnis creates a modified
language of her own, consisting of a combination of the complicated voice, “duplicitous” meanings, ideograms, and ellipses. In turn, this “language” gives her poetry a presence which will inch the reader closer to seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling the alive, or signified.
Out of all of her collections, Bad Bad is possibly the most polarizing in its effects on the reader, as the speaker is simultaneously happy and sad, angry and silly, intellectual and childish. After an initial read, I was confused and frustrated with the speaker, as I felt like she could not make up her mind as to what she wanted to communicate. However, after reading Bad Bad a few times, I began to realize that what initially frustrated me—the seemingly confused speaker—is actually fascinating. The sarcastic “doubleness” of the speaker leaves me guessing if she is serious or joking, morbid or weirdly ironic. One of the most compelling poems in Bad Bad that displays a wide range of Minnis’s complicated style and tone is “Double Black Tulip.” 4 In this poem, I am full of questions as to what the speaker means by many of her sentiments, as the speaker appears to question herself as well. Throughout the lines, the speaker is unsure of her own identity, her “happiness,” as well as her abilities to love and be loved. The overall result is that the sheer volume of open-ended questions points to the speaker’s questioning of her ability, and the ability in general, of literature and language to communicate reality. “Double Black Tulip” is a poem that proves to us that words, and more broadly, literature, will never truly function as a mode of perfect communication,

4 To see the poem in its entirety, please refer to Appendix A.
and Minnis’s speaker demonstrates that at some point in our lives, we must arrive at the realization that we will never discover all of the answers.

From the beginning of the poem, the speaker implies confusion about her identity. The title itself, “Double Black Tulip,” could be interpreted different ways. For instance, this could be describing a type of tulip called a “double tulip,” which has larger blooms and more petals than a normal tulip. According to a newspaper article about the Carnaval de Nice tulip, a double tulip variety, many people mistake double tulips for peonies, as they have a similar look due to the large size and amount of petals (Day L09). Therefore, the title denotes a flower that is normally mistaken for another flower. From the start, Minnis hints to us that the speaker could be struggling with who she truly is versus who people perceive her to be. Furthermore, this “double tulip” is black—an odd color for a flower. Traditionally, tulips are viewed as happy, spring-time flowers, but giving the flower a black color makes it appear much more dismal.

Another interpretation is that “double” is not an adjective describing “tulip,” but an adverb describing “black.” Therefore, the tulip is “double black,” or very black, again insinuating that the seemingly pleasure-producing flower is not like its colorful counterparts. However, according to an article in The Washington Post, true black tulips are extremely rare, as most “black tulips” are actually deep purple or maroon, and people just perceive them to be black. Not until a group of experienced horticulturists researched tirelessly did they discover how to finally eliminate the “last intrusive strain of purple” in 1986 to make a truly black tulip (B2). This idea could be translated to the poem’s title in that the speaker either claims to be something she’s not, needing to eliminate her own
“intrusive strain,” or that she is extremely rare, unlike hardly anyone else in the world. From the beginning of this poem, Minnis has already provided us with multiple meanings for the work, but they all point to the same idea: the speaker is struggling with her own identity. Either this speaker is like a double tulip in that she is constantly mistaken for something else, or she is an imperfect product posing as something else, or she is extremely rare, being produced unnaturally, and does not feel like she belongs.

The poem begins, “I have emotions and I also have death wishes….. / ….. / ….. / ….. / I like most things because I know I am going to die…..” (1-5). In these lines, the speaker is somehow connecting the idea of emotions, or liking things, to death. “Death wishes” could refer to the Freudian idea that every human being has an instinct that prefers death and destruction against the external world (Freud 754), or it could simply mean that the speaker is wishing to die. Either way, I am unsure whether the speaker is saying that the “death wishes” are the result of “emotions,” or whether she is trying to point out to her audience that her own emotions are completely separate from her “death wishes,” as if she is responding to someone saying that they were the same. Perhaps the speaker is unsure herself, insinuating that she does not know the difference between “emotions” and “death wishes,” and, referring back to Freud’s theory, that both the “emotions” and “death wishes” are leading her toward destruction. By pointing out these two perhaps similar words that many perceive to be different, Minnis is playing with the idea of language and the effectiveness of communication. To many, “emotions” and “death wishes” may be the same, and to others, they are completely different. Neither word points directly to a signified meaning. When the speaker points out that she has
both things, this almost is a little humorous. I, as a reader, want to say, “So what? What’s your point? What does that mean?”

The speaker continues by saying that the idea of death results with her “lik[ing] most things” (5). Multiple possibilities also exist for this phrase—either the speaker feels almost forced to enjoy life and “like most things” because she knows her time on earth is short, so she might as well enjoy it, or knowing she is going to die brings her a pleasure, resulting in her “lik[ing] most things.” Both of these ideas exist simultaneously. At the same time, we see a speaker who fears death and is attempting to enjoy every minute of life she has left, as well as a speaker who relishes death, and the anticipation of it makes everything before it more exciting. This illustration of seemingly opposite meanings is effective because each meaning does not negate the other; instead, they exist simultaneously and work together to produce an overall tone of some type of pleasure coming from the knowledge of death.

Alicia Ostriker’s *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America* studies the origins and meanings of women’s poetry. In Chapter 1, Ostriker traces the traditions of “poetic ancestresses who have contributed to articulate, often in highly coded form, images of women—and of reality—which are in crucial respects quite different for men’s” (15). When discussing Emily Dickinson’s poetry, Ostriker writes about Dickinson’s way of creating poems that have “duplicitous meanings.” She writes:

A poem … is duplicitous in that it means both what it says and its opposite. I use the term *duplicitous* rather than *ironic* because in irony the
unstated meaning cancels the stated one; here, contrary meanings coexist with equal force, because they have equal force within the poet. (41)

Borrowing Ostriker’s term, I interpret Minnis’s poem as communicating duplicitous ideas of death: either the speaker relishes the idea of it, and/or it truly scares her, and each of these ideas has “equal force” within the poem, as the speaker gives us no guidance to which idea outweighs the other.

The broader question that Minnis implores us to ask when reading these lines is: Does death matter to us? Does it matter if we view death to be good or bad, or must it be one or the other at all? We cannot control death; therefore, perhaps we are wasting time contemplating it. The speaker saying that she “likes most things” because of death almost seems to belittle the idea of death. The idea of death itself is such a dramatic, devastating one for most people, yet the speaker says almost nonchalantly that yeah, she “likes most things” because of it—as if death has caused her, for example, to “like” chocolate ice cream. Suddenly, the speaker has greatly diminished the idea of death; she is not feeding the poor or attempting to save the world because she knows she is going to die. Instead, she “likes things.” At this point, in this one line, the speaker has implied that death is not a big deal to her, and she is not afraid of it.

The first few lines of “Double Black Tulip” are very direct statements from the speaker. Both begin with “I,” followed by a verb, as if the speaker is declaring details about her identity. The third line of words, or ninth line, changes tones a bit, as the speaker does not give off an air of confidence anymore. Minnis writes, “…..my love is like weak….black-legged lambs…..” (9). The speaker goes from emphatically drawing
attention to herself to then diverting attention away from “I,” instead saying “my love” is like “lambs.” This careful change of the subject makes the speaker seem as if she has become defensive, not wanting to point the attention to herself, instead describing the abstract subject of her “love.” Furthermore, this “love” is compared to meek, innocent, and slightly awkward-looking animals. At this point in the poem, the speaker seems to have transitioned from shouting to whispering, nervously admitting that she struggles with relationships and love. However, it is important to notice that the speaker does not apologize or show any signs of regret for her “weak” love. Instead, she states it very matter-of-factly. Much like earlier the speaker questions the meaning and attention that the average person directs toward death, by describing her love as a weak animal, the speaker brings the idea of love “back down to size,” forcing me to reconsider my own ideas of such a great notion as “love.”

The tone changes again with the next line of words, returning to the more confident speaker of the beginning of the poem. Minnis writes, “…..I have never had the right to say things that are true and no one does…..” (12). Again, the speaker appears “duplicitous” in her words. She does not believe we have the right to be truthful to others, as if one must earn the ability to tell the truth. In this sense, only a select group of people (if any at all) have the capacity to “say things that are true,” so truthful speaking becomes a valuable ability. Yet in the very act of stating this idea, the speaker is being truthful, earning her credibility as a speaker. Therefore, yet again, the poem means what it says as well as its opposite. This statement also returns to the idea that no one is
speaking the truth, as something—perhaps language—does not allow them the ability to do so.

In broader terms, yet again, the speaker is asking us to question the idea of “truth.” What is true? Is the ability to communicate truth a privilege? And if no one truly has the right to speak the truth, then many of us must be lying to each other. Furthermore, if we’re all lying to each other, then, in one sense, our lies have become our truths in that we do not know anything else. Suddenly, much as “emotions” and “death wishes” are revealed to have no signified meaning, “truth” also seems to lack meaning, as it has been blurred with the idea of lies.

Following the speaker’s back-and-forth sentiments, she then returns to the death which she discusses at the beginning of the poem when she says, “…..death is the actual worst hope” (15). Yet again, this simultaneous hatred and fascination with death returns, but I am still unsure of its exact meaning. “Death” could be the “actual worst hope” in that the speaker believes it is awful for anyone to ever hope to die. On the other hand, this statement is prefaced with the speaker saying she does not have the “right to say things that are true” (12), implying that the speaker could be lying. Therefore, I also wonder if the speaker does not really believe that “death” is the “actual worst hope.” The speaker gives me no further guidance for this line, so I am left wondering if the speaker wants to die, or if she is making fun of those people who hope to die, or if the idea of death even scares her at all.

Part of the confusion with this line, as well as the “muddiness” of some of the others prior, is Minnis’s use of abstract words such as “death,” “truth,” “love,” and
“hope.” Though many times throughout *Bad Bad* Minnis amazes me with her vivid, specific images, this is not so much the case at the beginning of “Double Black Tulip.” So far in this poem, the speaker has somehow compared emotions with death, admitted her weak ability to love, declared that no one has the right to tell the truth, and returned to the idea of death. Using these abstract words results in the reader never fully comprehending the poem, as I cannot pinpoint in my head the exact meanings of these abstract words. But I think this is exactly Minnis’s point—to show the reader that oftentimes literature, and communication in general, can never fully explain what we want to say to another. By using abstract words such as “death” and “hope,” and causing us to question their signified meanings, Minnis has proven to us the sometimes ineffectiveness of language.5

I approach the next line with much relief when reading of a more concrete image: the speaker again mentions the color black, earlier represented with the “double black tulip” and the “black-legged lambs,” this time saying, “…..I write this poem like a girl in a black wig… .... . .” (21). Now she compares herself to a “girl in a black wig.” Like the “double black tulip” and concealment of the truth, the “girl in a black wig” also implies that the speaker is hiding herself from the audience, disguising herself in a wig.

At this point in the poem, it is important to note that I am not attempting to explain “what’s happening” in the poem, as if Minnis is chronicling a narrative of events. If that were the case, then all I could say was that the speaker is talking about herself. Instead, I am attempting to investigate the tone of the speaker, the languages she uses,

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5 More on the idea of the questioning of language in the metafictional sense is on page 22.
and as a result, the emotions I feel from reading the poem. Returning back to the preface of *Legitimate Dangers*, Doty would say that I am reacting to the speaker’s “performative speech.” According to Doty, “performative speech” describes the “creation of a voice, a presence on the page meant to be an experience in itself” (xxi-xxii). Minnis’s style in “Double Black Tulip” could be considered “performative speech” in that the speaker is not focusing on a narrative—or what Doty calls the “representation of experience” (xxii)—but rather on the performance of the voice, which results in an experience for the reader. In other words, so far in the poem, “Double Black Tulip” does not describe, for example, a specific person trying to commit suicide because she has broken up with her lover. Instead, it is the voice of a speaker who appears to be struggling with her own identity, and the lines point to particular emotions and questions about this idea instead of narrative events that take place.

It is important to point out that in illustrating the “performative speech,” Minnis is not experimental in the least. Instead, according to Doty, her contemporaries, such as Lisa Jarnot or Christine Hume, also are placing more importance upon illustrating a “presence” than creating a linear narrative. In fact, those who have simply glanced through a Minnis poem may be surprised to learn that Minnis is, in many ways, repeating

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6 In “The Aesthetic Transaction,” Louise Rosenblatt gives advice for understanding aesthetics in literature for teaching purposes. Similar to Doty describing literature as “performative” versus narrative, Rosenblatt explains this idea in terms of “efferent” and “aesthetic” experience. The “efferent” experience entails the reader attempting to simply understand what the text is saying, or what is happening with the text, whereas with the “aesthetic” experience, the reader’s own engagement with the work is primary (124). The overwhelming majority of Minnis’s poetry is focused more on describing a “presence” in order to evoke an aesthetic experience for the reader. In other words, with Minnis’s poetry, we should not be so focused on what is going on, but how we are experiencing the poems.
some of the styles of popular contemporary poetry. Without attempting to analyze the words, one could easily discard her work because the aesthetic appearances of the poems seem to not be following, as Doty writes, the “codes” of poetry. In this way, Minnis’s poems in and of themselves are doing what the speaker of “Double Black Tulip” is doing by wearing a “black wig”: creating an outward appearance full of ellipses and ideograms that could deter the audience from the true inward identity.7

Returning back to the poem, after again describing herself as being hidden or disguised, the speaker says, “…..but my heart is the heart of a true skunk…..” (24). The last time the speaker has mentioned ideas of “heart” or “love” is when she compares her love to “weak….black-legged lambs…..” (9), and the speaker returns to the image of an animal to mention her capability to love. In this way, the speaker is implying that the action of loving is inherently animal-like. It is not something that is learned or taught—instead, every person has the capability to love. However, it is important to note that both animals the speaker describes are weak animals. The first is a baby sheep who she specifically describes as “weak.” The second is a skunk, which is not known for its violent attacks or carnivorous behavior, but instead is infamous for dirtying everything in its presence with a foul odor and then running away. Skunks are often thought of as scavengers, being found among trash or on the side of the road. It is not until the skunk is frightened that it sprays its odor. Therefore, to say that the speaker’s heart is like that of a skunk insinuates that the speaker searches for leftovers or trash—or, in the case of

7 In this way, the use of ellipses and ideograms are a hindrance to those who read Minnis’s work for the first time. I will discuss this more in Chapter Two.
the speaker, perhaps those who have been damaged by love. Then, just like the skunk sprays its odor when it is afraid, perhaps the speaker “makes a mess” of her own relationships when she is afraid of being hurt.

Also, both animals associated with the love are black and white: a skunk and a black-legged lamb. The colors black and white insinuate that people view love itself as black and white, i.e., you either love someone or you do not love someone. But because the speaker describes both of these animals as weak, then she is personifying the idea of a “black and white love” as weak, instead recognizing that in many cases, the speaker can both love and hate someone. Interestingly, when describing herself, the speaker stays with the idea of black, with the “double black tulip” and “black wig.” This could imply that the speaker herself does not feel loved, or, because she is costuming herself in a wig, she is attempting to appear that she is not loved or does not care about love.

Returning back to the line, the metaphor of the speaker’s heart and the skunk’s is made more complex by describing the skunk as a “true skunk” (24). At first glance, I am unsure what the speaker means by saying the skunk is “true” as opposed to, say, a “false” skunk. Perhaps she is playing on the idea of “true love,” substituting “skunk” for “love” to draw more attention to the metaphor. Or, perhaps she uses “true” to add more emphasis to the skunk—as in, her heart is the heart of a skunk in every sense of the word. Either way, comparing her own heart to that of a skunk yet again forces me to question the idea of “love” in general.

The speaker then dramatically shifts the tone by directly referencing her own writing. Minnis writes:
The speaker leaves the “scene” of admitting her own musings on life, love, and truth, interrupting the poem with a direct admittance of her writing style, saying it is “bad fluffy thoughts,” or implying that her writing has no substance or meaning. The act of self-reference within a literary work, or metafictionizing, is yet another way for us to question. At this point, Minnis has forced us to step back from attempting to understand the meaning of the poem, instead allowing us to question the entire poem—that is, the aesthetic communication.

By calling her own poetry “bad fluffy thoughts,” or words without intention or depth, the speaker is communicating to us that she disapproves of her own work—or is she? There is also the possibility that the speaker is being sarcastic here as well, perhaps referencing a poetry instructor who may have told her that her own work is “fluffy.” I am more apt to believe that the speaker is being sarcastic instead of truthful, as she compares the “fluffy thoughts” to “the hurtfulness of chartreuse……/…..carpet…..” (30), which is not exactly the most serious simile. Furthermore, after she “admits” to the “bad fluffy thoughts,” she continues with a series of periods that almost seem to be an illustration of these thoughts, floating freely within the poem and not restricted to the tighter periods of the ellipses that are throughout the rest of the work. Directly illustrating the “thoughts” in this way appears silly, as if the speaker believes something as immeasurable as
thoughts can be summed up with the illustration of a few dots. In this way, the speaker is a little tongue-in-cheek, as if she is making fun of those who have told that her own thoughts are “fluffy.”

The mentioning of the speaker’s own writing also has a broader effect on the poem itself, as it directly points to the idea of the inherent failure of language as communication. In her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh explores the function and intention of metafiction, as well as analyzes some works of metafiction and what they contribute to the genre as a whole. When describing some general characteristics of metafiction, Waugh writes that it is a type of fictional writing which self-consciously draws attention to “its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.” She continues by explaining that writers of metafiction provide critiques of their own “methods of construction,” and these writers examine “the fundamental structures of narrative fiction” while also exploring “the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (2). In other words, metafiction utilizes examinations of its own work in order to question the meaning of reality outside of the work.

In the line “…..this is bad fluffy thoughts,” the speaker draws our attention to the judgment of literature and what makes it “good” or “bad.” As stated earlier, the speaker seems a bit tongue-in-cheek when referencing her own work, as if she is making fun of someone else’s idea that any thoughts can be “bad” or “fluffy.” By referencing the poem and directly stating that it is “bad,” the speaker is asking us to question our own judgment of literature. If her thoughts are “bad,” then what makes other thoughts “good”? Writes
Waugh about metafiction, “… it also reflects a greater awareness within contemporary culture of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday ‘reality’” (3). By pointing out that we all have judgments about what makes our own thoughts—and in consequence, our writing—“bad,” this implies that somewhere out there in the world of literature we can also point out the perfect thought or writing. In other words, within reality, we have placed parameters and rules as to what is “good” and “bad,” and this is all dependent upon someone’s opinion—no fact or concrete evidence tells us what is “good” and “bad.” In the same way, Minnis is demonstrating that judging what is “good” and “bad” within a poem is also futile.

The speaker then returns to describing herself when Minnis writes, “…..I must try not to feel a fake kindness…..” (31). This again alludes to the question of what makes something “real” or “fake.” Much like the speaker sarcastically says earlier that no one has the right to speak the truth, here, yet again, the speaker is admitting to succumbing to some sort of falsity. What is interesting is that the speaker does not say she is “acting” fake; instead, she is “feeling” fake. The idea of acting fake means that someone is putting on a disguise to trick someone else. However, here, the person being tricked is the same person who is being fake, as if the speaker is trying to deceive herself or is in denial of herself and her life. Therefore, this line leaves me questioning, yet again, what is real and what is false.

Minnis continues by writing, “If everything can be explained in a note then I will write notes all my life and / never kill myself” (36-37). Interestingly, as far as punctuation is concerned, these lines appear to be the most decisive or matter-of-fact of
any lines in the poem, as these lines begin with a capital letter and no ellipsis, and the phrase ends with a period. Because every other line either begins or ends with an ellipsis, the punctuation in this line is very intentional. I would argue that here, the speaker is making fun of the statement by portraying it as being so final. Obviously, the speaker does not truly believe that “everything can be explained in a note,” for the line is full of sarcasm. She takes the very serious, dramatic idea of killing oneself and juxtaposes it with the sometimes random, thoughtless act of writing “notes.” Simply using “notes” instead of the word “letters” makes the act seem much less thoughtful, as if the speaker has ameliorated her current suicidal condition with writing on sticky notes for the rest of her life. Therefore, we know that the speaker is not being sincere in this statement; instead, she appears to be making fun of the idea of suicide. To further poke fun, she has communicated this sentence as being very straightforward by ending it with a period, as if the speaker is saying, “The end. No more questions.” However, just the idea of suicide on its own invites questions, so this statement is obviously ironic.

Further honing in on the idea that communication, and consequentially reality, is difficult for the speaker, Minnis then writes, “I don’t know if something good will happen or if I will have to bang my head / unceasingly with a stick…..” (41-42). This phrase emphasizes the frustration and confusion that the speaker is feeling throughout the poem. However, the speaker appears passive in that she seems to be waiting for “something good” to happen—she is not making this happen herself. In this way, the speaker feels as if she no longer has control of herself or her life. Referring back to earlier lines, perhaps
this frustration comes from being unable to distinguish between the real and the fake, the deceiver and the deceived.

Minnis continues, “…..this is the total conciliation of my self with my destined self.…./…../…..or else a great phoniness….../…../that is sung with a ukulele…..” (45-49). Much like earlier in the poem the speaker alludes to the idea of multiple “selves” when she attempts to deceive her own self and “feel[s] a fake kindness” (31), here the speaker again admits to having two “selves”: a “self” and a “destined self.” This time, though, one of the selves is a “destined self,” yet again implying that the speaker has lost control of her life. However, the idea of the conciliation of yourself with your destined self does not initially seem like an unwelcome occurrence; we all hope we are destined to do great things, so the conciliation of our current selves with our destined selves would suggest that we have arrived at our destinies. But the speaker is not sure that this has truly happened. She does not know if she has arrived at her destiny, or if she is simply acting phony—a simplistic, goofy “phony” that is much like an entertainer who performs with a ukulele. Here, not only is the speaker admitting that she is unsure of who she is (is she a black tulip or a peony?), but also she is not clear on who she will become. Furthermore, she’s not sure she will know when she ever arrives there.

We then arrive at what I believe to be the best lines of “Double Black Tulip,” as they vividly describe all that the speaker is attempting to convey throughout the earlier lines, as well as offer some sort of reasoning and resolution for all of the questioning. Writes Minnis:

I feel like I have been posing as a dead human being
the purpose of poetry is to seem as lifelike as possible so that you actually exist… 8

Here, the speaker openly admits to her deception, both to the outside world and to herself, by saying that she is “posing.” Interestingly, she is “posing as a dead human being.” Perhaps she is posing as this because she cannot find her “live self,” as she is still attempting to reconcile her self, or the “dead human being,” with her “destined self” that she refers to in line 45. She then suggests that she has given up on posing when she says, “it is very sad to have to get up and walk home…..” (57). It is as if the speaker has realized that she can no longer put on the charade for others, and at the same time, she can no longer wait to find her true self. In this way, the speaker finds herself in a limbo.

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8 In the actual poem, “exist” remains on the line prior to it. However, the margins of this thesis do not allow adequate spacing for me to illustrate this.
of sorts—she can no longer be fake, yet she does not know how to be real either. Therefore, she gives up on being anything, and leaves.

The speaker then admits to her own purposes for writing poetry, and perhaps this poem specifically. She says, “the purpose of poetry is to seem as lifelike as possible so that you actually exist…” (61). The speaker does not say that poetry brings her life; instead, she says that poetry helps her to “seem” lifelike, as if the speaker will never truly be alive. By equating poetry with being “lifelike,” and not actual “life,” the speaker is insinuating that poetry attempts to portray reality, but it never successfully arrives at actual reality. So at the speaker’s ultimate existence, she still is not truly existing, depending upon poetry to help her keep up a façade of life. Furthermore, at this point in the poem, the speaker is admitting that even poetry has failed her, as she “get[s] up and walk[s] home” (57). These lines not only sum up the speaker’s struggle with understanding her own existence but also show her frustrations with language and how it has failed in helping her to exist. If Waugh is correct in that metafiction “reflects a greater awareness within contemporary culture of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday ‘reality,’” (3), then Minnis’s speaker is implying that language has failed in helping us to understand reality. Furthermore, the speaker is not even sure a reality exists.

But as soon as I feel as if the poem’s mood has finally settled at complete disappointment and loss of faith, the speaker’s tone shifts again. As it turns out, she is okay with the idea that language cannot help us to arrive at reality, as then she says, “…..although I only love nothingness…..” (63). “Nothingness” could have a number of
explanations. If she is referring to language, then “nothingness” could imply that the speaker enjoys statements that cannot point to one true meaning, instead pointing to nothing. If she is referring to life and death, then “nothingness” could be death. If the speaker is returning to the idea of love, “nothingness” would perhaps insinuate no love. When first reading this poem, I almost threw up my hands at this point, for I felt like the speaker had spent the entire poem admitting her conflicting ideas of herself, her struggle with thoughts of existence and identity, and her disappointment with language’s effectiveness, only to say that in the end, none of it matters. As a reader, this is frustrating, for I feel as if I’ve wasted my time reading the poem—as if I have just finished reading a story, only to find out in the end, that it was all a dream and none of it really happened. But that’s just it—that’s what I think Minnis wants us to explore—this idea that we are going through life, working to understand everything and arrive at some level of high intellectualism, when really, we may not ever know what we are working toward. At some point, like Minnis’s speaker, we must be somewhat content remaining in a state of “nothingness”—whether that be content with not having all the answers, all the love, or all of the success—or we will drive ourselves crazy attempting to arrive at “something.”

The speaker concludes the poem with this idea by saying, “…..I do not know what level of happiness I am on!...../..../.but/...... ...../...... my great-great-grandmother’s name was Eugenia Hussy…..” (69-73). Reporting upon the “level of happiness” alludes to a patient speaking with a psychologist or a doctor, attempting to communicate her level of fulfillment to a professional in order to be “fixed.” The speaker
then references her great-great-grandmother’s name, implying that one’s happiness or fulfillment can be traced to genetics, perhaps questioning the idea of those who are diagnosed with depression. These last few lines coincide with the speaker saying she is okay with “nothingness,” as the attempt at self-fulfillment is futile and almost comedic.

“Double Black Tulip” is full of questions, sparse of answers, and characterized with a speaker who is angry, silly, confused, self-deprecating, and everything in between. The speaker begins the poem by describing herself as a flower that is either struggling to be like all of the others or wants to be an individual. The speaker then moves into the idea of love, questioning her own ability to love, perhaps insinuating that she is not loved, or disguising herself as one who is not loved. The speaker addresses death in the same way: at some points she is making fun of the idea of death, implying that suicide and death are over-dramatized, and at other points, she laments her own wishes to die. And interlaced throughout the poem are questions regarding the success of communicating through language as well as questions as to how we communicate a reality that seems to be deceiving us.

In the following chapter, I explore illustrations of how Minnis attempts to move beyond traditional exchange of ideas through language, instead using ellipses and ideograms. Much as “Double Black Tulip” illustrates the speaker’s hesitancy to rely upon any word to communicate meaning, in Chapter Two, I will show how this hesitance becomes even more apparent, as Minnis relies more on punctuation than words to convey the speaker’s thoughts. The result of the ellipses and ideograms is an attempt to slow down the reader, guiding her to sensually experience the poetry.
CHAPTER TWO

“I HAVE BEEN CREATED TO MAKE A SHOW OUT OF EVERYTHING…”: THE SLOW, EXPERIENTIAL DUPLICITY OF ELLIPSES AND IDEOGRAMS THAT BECOMES THE SPEAKER’S PERFORMATIVE VOICE

In the preface to Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction, Patricia Waugh writes:

How can we recognize or deal with the new? Any equipment we bring to the task will have been designed to engage with the old: it will look for and identify extensions and developments of what we already know. To some degree the unprecedented will always be unthinkable. (vii)

Though Waugh is discussing fiction, I think her point regarding dealing with “the new” is still useful when attempting to understand Chelsey Minnis’s poetry: the only tools we have to analyze her poetry are those developed from poetry that has come before hers. Therefore, we must come to terms with the feeling of discomfort we initially have from approaching different aspects of her “new” poetry, such as that of the ellipses or ideograms, understanding that perhaps it is not the poetry itself that feels strange, but instead it is our looking at it through the veil of what we already know that limits our understanding of the work at hand.

I am beginning this chapter with an explanation of how we usually approach and react to “new” poetry in order to help prepare the reader for what seems to be a “Chelsey Minnis trademark”: that of the extended ellipses. Especially throughout Zirconia and Bad Bad, Minnis’s first two collections, the ellipses are so extreme and emphatic that at
first, they can be a bit off-putting to a reader who is not used to “reading” such punctuation. When I first approached a Minnis poem, I was so distracted by the ellipses that I could not even get to the depth of the words in the poem. Instead of contemplating Minnis’s phrases, I was wondering how I was supposed to read the ellipses, what—if anything—they were supposed to symbolize, and why Minnis would want to “litter” her work with all of these dots.

All three of Minnis’s collections contain poems with ellipses. Sometimes the ellipses can go on for multiple lines, and other times they occur with strange spacing. Though *Poemland* tends to display the ellipses in the traditional sense of three periods, the repetitive use of the ellipses throughout all of the poems in this collection still make them a loud “voice” within the poetry itself. Because almost all of Minnis’s poems have identifiable series of ellipses, one can recognize a Minnis poem easily. In this way, Minnis is unwilling to have her presence in her poetry forgotten.

In “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes claims that once an idea is put into language on paper, the subject, or author, is lost (142). According to Barthes, society all too often centers literature on “the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions” and seeks the “explanation” of the work through the author, as if the author is “confiding in us” (143). This is an easy approach to take with Minnis’s work, partly because of the confessional style of the poetry. In *Bad Bad’s* “Preface 4,” for example, Minnis writes, “You can say many nasty things about poetry if you like… / But Chelsey understands what is expected of her!” (7). Not only is the speaker mentioning poetry, which immediately makes us think that the speaker is a poet, but also she mentions the name
“Chelsey,” so assuming that the speaker is actually Chelsey Minnis herself is quite easy, as the speaker directs us to do this. Therefore, we could assume that Minnis’s poetry is an autobiography of sorts, and the “explanation” of her work is that it is all of Minnis’s confessions.

Barthes expounds on his notion of the “death” of the author by explaining that traditionally, society has believed that the author is the “past of his own book.” The author works to create his masterpiece, and the result, or “after,” is the work itself. In Barthes’s view, understanding the “death of the author” means realizing that writing is not a “depiction” of something happening; instead, it is “performative” (145). Barthes argues that the act of reading cannot be an attempt to discover the author and, as a result, explain the text; instead, the reader must not determine any single “meaning” for a text, and, furthermore, that the deciphering of the work happens internally—not as a result of the author. Writes Barthes, “A text’s unity lies not in its origin but its destination” (148).9

Barthes’s notion of the “death of the author” is well known, and as a result, assuming the speaker is the poet herself is almost a crime in today’s poetry circles. Though I am not arguing that Minnis’s speaker is Minnis herself, I do think that Minnis is, in a sense, fighting against this idea that once her poem is put onto paper, her readers should always disassociate Chelsey Minnis, the poet, from her work. By “trademarking”

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9 Similarly, in “What is an Author,” Michel Foucault writes that reading a work as a depiction of the author’s own thoughts is simply a device for which we limit ourselves in reading. He writes, “… the author is not an indefinite source of significations that fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses” (221).
her poetry with ellipses, Minnis seems to be telling us, “Here I am! Don’t forget this is a Chelsey Minnis poem!” Therefore, before even delving into what these ellipses may mean to me or how they may affect my experience as a reader, Minnis is already fighting against whatever “tools” I may have developed from reading poetry before hers. And like Waugh suggests, in order to successfully investigate new writing, I must not rely upon “rules” I have learned from other poetry; instead, I should accept the idea that perhaps Minnis wants her presence to be recognized, and consider what this means for me as I read her poetry. By using extreme ellipses and ideograms, Minnis is showing us up front that she is unlike almost any poet we have seen before, so we should not judge her work in with the same parameters that we analyze other poetry. The ellipses and ideograms are a direct warning that Minnis’s poetry is different.

In Chapter One, I discuss the overall implications of “Double Black Tulip”: the speaker has lost confidence in the use of language to communicate thought. The duplicitous meanings of the phrases, the speaker’s admittance that she “poses” as a dead human being (54), as well as her “giving up” on poetry being able to communicate life (57), all speak to the idea that words have failed the speaker. In Chapter Two, I show that Minnis’s speaker has departed from relying upon only words to communicate

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10 A great compromise between the previous “equipment”—as Waugh terms it—that I bring with me to approach a Minnis poem and Minnis’s somewhat confrontational rejection of it is understanding that though Minnis has made her poetry recognizable through the ellipses, this does not equate to the idea that the speaker, or voice of the ellipses, is a direct connection to Minnis herself. In The Power of Genre, Ardena Rosmarin discusses the relationship between critical theory and literary genre, claiming that critics shape their arguments depending upon the genre which they claim the work to be a part. When examining the function of the speaker in different genres, Rosmarin argues that for every piece of literature, two speakers actually exist: “…a real but submerged speaker, the poet who made the poem, and an immediate but fictive speaker, the poet who speaks the poem” (65). With Minnis’s poetry, the “submerged speaker” is evident through Minnis’s ellipses, yet this is not the fictive speaker, and should not be confused as such.
thoughts. Instead of relying simply upon words, the speaker has moved beyond this, supplementing her poetry with other means for communication to assist her in her “performative speech.”

Though many will claim that the ellipses are random and meaningless throughout Minnis’s poems, I disagree. One reason for this is that throughout the poems, Minnis illustrates the ellipses in a variety of different ways, from multiple spacing between each period, to lines of continuous ellipses, to one ellipsis, a space, and then a long line of ellipses, etc. The variety of different ellipses points to the idea that these are intentional and carefully constructed to contribute to the overall effect of the poem. I am not arguing, however, that for every single ellipsis, Minnis has carefully counted each period and each line.\footnote{Perhaps she has, but there is no way of my knowing this for sure. What I mean when I say that she is most likely not carefully counting each period is that I do not think that she is equating, for example, numbers of periods with particular meanings. For example, I do not think Minnis is so specific with the ellipsis that she is equating, say, five periods with an angry tone and ten periods with an even angrier tone.} Instead, referring back to Doty, I believe Minnis uses each ellipsis or series of ellipses in order to create an overall experience or “presence of a voice” for the reader, and this presence with the ellipses is portrayed through what the reader decides is the context of the poem.

In *Topics in Ellipsis*, Kyle Johnson explores the various uses for the ellipsis and investigates linguistic theorists’ findings regarding the main purposes and functions of the ellipsis. Throughout the book, Johnson focuses on the idea that an ellipsis is a replacement for a verb phrase, and we deduce the meaning of the ellipsis (or what verb phrase it is replacing) from the context of the sentence (1). Examples of replacing or
alluding to a verb phrase include what theorists have termed “gapping,” “sluicing,” and “comparative deletion” (3). Put very simply, “gapping” means replacing a verb phrase in a comparative construction with an ellipsis. For example, “I ate outside, and Sally ate apples indoors” would be replaced with “I ate apples outside, and Sally … indoors” (159). “Sluicing” entails replacing the “wh-phrase,” such as “which I do not know,” with an ellipsis (132). “Comparative deletion” is similar to “gapping,” yet it tends to compare two things and usually occurs with the word “than.” For example, “I wrote more pages than Dan has written pages” would transform to “I wrote more pages than Dan …” (11).

According to Johnson, unlike a “run-of-the-mill pronoun,” an omitted phrase “… provides very little guidance in navigating that context to resolve its meaning.” What an ellipsis may provide, at most, is “information about the syntactic and semantic type of its antecedent. The rest is up to how contexts furnish the information necessary to complete the messages that sentences convey” (1).

Johnson sheds light on one reason why so many readers may feel lost when reading a Minnis poem: Minnis intentionally does not provide guidance in “navigating context” toward an ultimate “meaning” for her poems. She does not include a comparative phrase or obvious antecedent for the ellipsis. Instead, she is content to leave the ellipses, and in consequence, the poem, as an experience in which the reader must create the context for him or herself. Furthermore, unlike what many of Johnson’s theorists contend, Minnis does not always use an ellipsis to replace or refer to a verb phrase. Instead, throughout the collections, she utilizes the ellipses in different ways. Sometimes she uses the ellipses to create emotions, such as vulnerability, careful
contemplation, or flippant randomness. Other times the ellipses are a tool which guides
the reader through the process of experiencing poetry. The end result of the various types
of ellipses is that they seem intentional enough to be worthwhile and present in the
poetry, while also fun enough not to invoke boredom during reading.

Throughout the prefaces of Bad Bad, Minnis makes use of ellipses in order to
 evoke a feeling of vulnerability from the speaker. In her review of Minnis’s Bad Bad in
the January/February 2009 issue of Boston Review, Sasha Steensen writes that these
ellipses are “… evidence of the unsteadiness of the speaker’s own hand … These lines
embody the vulnerability that so often lurks behind the book’s defiance.” I agree with
Steensen to an extent; Minnis’s ellipses do highlight the vulnerability of the speaker, but I
do not think that the relationship between ellipses and vulnerability is so clear cut and
simple as to say that the more ellipses we see in a Minnis poem, the more vulnerable the
speaker.

For example, in Minnis’s prefaces, she employs ellipses in the traditional sense—
both in their appearance, portraying them with the traditional three periods—and in the
meaning, which is signifying that the statement is unending, or some things are being left
unsaid (Shaw 105). Because each phrase ends with a traditional ellipsis, this portrays a
speaker who is unsure of how she should present herself to the world. In the Prefaces,
the ellipses assist in creating an unpredictable, questioning speaker, much like the speaker
of “Double Black Tulip” described in Chapter One. The sentiments in these Prefaces are
not so confident that they “deserve” a period at the end of the phrases; in fact, throughout
the sixty-eight Prefaces, not once does Minnis use a period. By ending each phrase with
an ellipsis, the speaker projects the idea that she has left much of her own sentiments unstated, perhaps because her identity is still forming and changing. Evidence of her ever-changing identity is highlighted several times throughout the Prefaces when the speaker’s voice changes throughout the poems. For example, in “Preface 10,” the speaker says, “If I write something then let me be killed…” (6), as if she never wants to write another poem in her life. Then, in the next line, she says, “If anyone wants good poems then they should tell me and I will write them…” (7). These two lines together could indicate a “death wish” as noted in “Double Black Tulip” (41), in which the speaker hopes someone will ask her to write a poem so she will “be killed.” Another option would be that in the line 6, the speaker hates writing poems, but in line 7, she has changed her mind again, realizing she enjoys writing poems, and not only that, but also she only writes “good poems.” A third option is that both lines are sarcastic, and the speaker is making fun of the stereotypical, overly dramatic poets that she has witnessed in her lifetime. The explanations could go on and on, my point being that these ellipses indicate that the speaker is not completely sure of her statements or she wants to keep her options open. Her lines cannot have a definite end because they’re not the “be all, end all” to her identity. In this way, in the example of the Prefaces, I agree with Steensen that the ellipses seem to be “evidence of unsteadiness,” as the speaker’s own identity is unsteady and not fully formed.

But Minnis’s ellipses move way beyond simply denoting “unsteadiness” of the speaker. In one poem in Zirconia, for example, I think Minnis’s ellipses function as accessories to the poem which help to create a sensational experience for the reader.
Throughout “Champagne,” Minnis writes in complete phrases with subjects and verbs; therefore, I do not feel as though these ellipses are used to replace or signify verb phrases. Instead, the ellipses are used to create an overall sensual effect for the reader. For example, Minnis writes, “…..as you are….. / …..straining your cardigan…..sweater….. / ….. / …..with the heels of your pumps stuck to the balcony….. / …..popping pearl sweater buttons… . . . (49-53). In this instance, because Minnis is not utilizing the ellipses to replace verb phrases, we must move beyond the idea that Minnis’s ellipses contribute to “what’s happening,” or the narrative, of the poem. Instead, the ellipses slow the narrative of the poem, consequently emphasizing the overall sexual tension of the scene, forcing the reader to slow down and experience the feeling of anticipation for herself.

In the example of “Champagne,” instead of attempting to figure out a meaning or point to the poem (e.g., why are buttons popping?), the speaker is urging us to just experience and see the sensation of the buttons popping. In this case, the ellipses contribute to the overall sexual tension of the scene. I begin by reading “…..as you are…..,” and I pause and wonder what “you” are doing. The delayed gratification of learning what the subject is doing peaks my interest, and I follow the dots of the ellipses to the next phrase, anticipating what is next. I then read that “you are” “straining your cardigan…..sweater,” and the effect of the ellipses creates a sort of strip-tease scene. Word by word, dot by dot, I am learning what the subject is doing, and the effect that the

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12 To see “Champagne” in its entirety, please refer to Appendix B.
ellipses have on “slowing down” the scene adds to the dramatic effect of the phrasing, in turn creating anticipation and drama for me as I read the phrases.

The writer’s control of the reading through the use of ellipses is not an uncommon practice—in screenplays, at least. In MovieMind for Screenwriters: Write It Right and Get It Written, William Ronald Craig provides the reader with an instruction manual on how to write screenplays. The topics in his book range from notable screenwriters that the reader should study to instructions on creating “round characters” to hints about writing original stories. Craig instructs upon the use of ellipses in his chapter about the “active voice,” when he advises the reader to keep descriptions concise and easy to visualize so that actors will read it in the way that the screenwriter has intended (134). Craig notes that writers “want their intentions known,” which includes having their screenplay read the way the writer hears it in his own mind, and the ellipsis helps the writer to control this reading. Craig writes, “The pause and the ellipsis are helpful because they determine the pace of the dialogue, which can give a clear indication of the state of mind of a character” (132).

Though Minnis’s Zirconia is obviously not a screenplay, Craig’s thoughts on the writer’s use of the ellipsis still apply to Minnis’s own writing style. Just like an actor finds himself pausing during a reading when he or she sees an ellipsis, so too do Minnis’s ellipses force readers of her poetry to slow down, contemplate the words, and aesthetically feel each word. In this way, Minnis’s readers become active participants in the experience of reading her poetry, as we are responding to Minnis’s instructions for the pace of reading her work. In fact, I would argue that to further emphasize that
Minnis wants us to almost be within the scene of the poem, she finishes the poem with a series of ellipses that looks like, “… . . .” (53), actually illustrating a visual of buttons coming apart. The result is a reading that feels sensual, slow, and sexy, as if we have just witnessed a strip-tease.

Of course, the counterargument would be that the ellipses actually speed up the pace of the poems for some readers, as these readers may skip over the ellipses completely. My response to this would be that the ellipses are intentional in the sheer fact that they are present. Because they exist so emphatically within the poetry, we should treat them like words that we would read within a poem. If, for example, we were supposed to read the poems quickly, then perhaps Minnis would not have included the ellipses at all, instead using spaces where the ellipses exist currently. I would argue that the ellipses are so present within the poems that if we were to skip over them, then this would be equivalent to us skipping over a word within a poem. Minnis’s ellipses have just as much presence within the poems as her words, so we should not discount their existence by skipping over them.

In addition to ellipses, in *Bad Bad* Minnis also includes what I would call ideograms in her poems. These are small symbols like stars, hearts, etc. that function similarly to ancient Chinese writing. In the well known *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, Ernest Fenollosa, through the edited writing of Ezra Pound, investigates the use of ideograms in Chinese writing and then suggests that ideograms may act as great communication tools for modern poetry. The analysis of ideograms expands into an explanation of utilizing an “ideogrammatic” way of writing. The writer
argues that ideograms allow for a more concrete communication of details that the English language is not able to carry out. In Pound’s words, “Fenollosa got to the root of the matter, to the root of the difference between what is valid in Chinese thinking and invalid or misleading in a great deal of European thinking and language” (4). Pound argues that if an English man attempts to define something, his definition moves away from the concrete or simple into an “unknown region, that is a region of remoter and progressively remoter abstraction.” A Chinese man, on the other hand, would use an ideogram to depict a “thing.” Writes Pound, “The Chinese still use abbreviated pictures as pictures … Chinese ideogram does not try to be the picture of a sound, or to be a written sign recalling a sound, but it is still the picture of a thing” (5). In this way, the ideogram is able to provide concrete examples of the poet’s sentiments, and Pound later attempts to illustrate proof of this idea through his use of Chinese characters in *The Cantos*.

Similar to Pound’s use of Chinese characters, Minnis employs the star ideogram in Bad Bad’s “Foxina,” sometimes next to words, and other times by itself, in order to more concretely communicate the speaker’s thoughts. Minnis writes, “….ball-gowns ★ imprinted with a…. single…. black…. pineapple…” (78). Again, because the ideograms do not fit the set “code” for poetry, many readers do not know how to react to them. The result is their remarking that the poetry is childish and stupid—and I would agree with this analysis, to an extent. Yes, the ideograms appear childish, and poems containing these create a silly, childlike tone. As Waugh mentions, we are approaching Minnis’s poetry with tools developed from earlier poems, and hardly any other poems use
symbols within them. For some of us, our last experiences with hearts and stars were
doodles we drew in class in elementary school. Therefore, we connect the idea of
pictures and symbols to feelings of childlike immaturity. But I think the ideograms show
the reader that the speaker is not so serious. Minnis projects this idea through the use of
stars, and this could not be communicated as well through the words.

For example, if Minnis had point-blank written that the reader should have fun
with the poem, then we would be taken out of the mood of the poem for a minute, instead
contemplating the abstract idea of how Minnis would like us to approach the poem.
Instead, by sprinkling stars throughout the poem, Minnis is able to add a carefree feeling
to the poem without directly interrupting the reading process. The ideograms help the
reader have fun with the poetry. To go against the norm of poetry, Minnis is not only
creating poems with more light-hearted tones, but also she’s interjecting the sentiments
with stars and hearts, as if to tell her readers, “Lighten up! Have fun with this!”

Still, just like any other rhetorical device which Minnis employs, the ideograms
are not always that simple. What adds depth to Minnis’s poetry is that in the same phrase
that she uses, for example, a star, she juxtaposes this light-hearted feeling with a more
serious idea. For example, Minnis begins “Foxina” with the phrase “…..the women in
the viewing boxes…..” (1) and continues by describing them much like animals on
display, even pets, with the phrase “gold nameplates around their throats” (32). Then,
throughout the poem, Minnis sprinkles phrases beginning with “rocking the” such as
“rocking the ballet…pumps” (61) and “…..rocking the rubberized satin….” (80), as if the
women in the poem are performing for an audience. The obvious implication of this
The poem is that women are constantly on display and feel like they must always look beautiful and exist for the viewing pleasure of the public—quite a dim statement about society. By “decorating” the phrases with the star symbol, Minnis is further driving home the idea of these women valuing appearance. Like a woman who obsesses over decorating herself with the perfect jewelry, Minnis is freely “bedazzling” her own poems, perhaps insinuating that women feel the need to make products of themselves pretty in order to impress others.

However, on the contrary, others could argue that Minnis’s stars are much like a child’s doodles on her class notes—lighthearted, thoughtless sketches that encourage the reader to not get too bogged down in the seriousness of it all. Furthermore, the phrase “rocking the” is a light-hearted, colloquial phrase that refers to someone successfully wearing a style (i.e., “Girl, you are rocking that dress!”). Here lies the somewhat confusing dichotomy of many of Minnis’s poems that seems to frustrate the readers. Either way—whether the stars are telling the reader to lighten up, or whether they highlight the superficiality of women in today’s society—the ideogram gets to both of these ideas by providing us with a visual of the feeling of glamour, fun, and sparkle, without telling us abstractly that the women are “pretty.”

In this way, Minnis employs the ideogram of the star to, referring back to Ostriker’s theory, create “duplicitious” meanings within the poem. The star means what it “says”—that the poem is lighthearted and fun, all about women dressing up and making a show—while also pointing to the opposite meaning, not a “fun” one in the last—that the women feel forced to showcase themselves as products for society. The stars complicate
the tone of the poem, in part by being unreadable in the traditional sense of the ability to read words, and also by producing opposite sentiments that coexist and avoid one simple definition. In this respect, according to Doty, Minnis is similar to her contemporaries in that her speaker avoids being “pinned down.” However, Minnis’s contemporaries avoid singular meanings in their poetry with speed. Doty writes, “… these poets like rapid shifts, turns of tone, quick movements, and do not want to be pinned down. Their love of speed feels anxious or exuberant or both” (xxii). Minnis does the opposite, actively slowing down the reading of the poems with her ideograms.

Minnis most obviously illustrates duplicitous meanings through ideograms in her *Bad Bad* poem entitled, “You Look Good, You Feel Good, But You’re Bad † Bad…” Before even beginning the first lines of the poems, Minnis hits us with a cross ideogram in the title. The phrases “you look good” and “you feel good” have sexual connotations, as if the speaker is attracted to whomever “you” may be. But then she contradicts this idea by saying that “you” is “bad † bad,” as if the subject appears to be wonderful, but in all actuality he is evil or for some reason “bad” for the speaker. However, by repeating “bad” twice, the speaker appears to playing with “you,” like she is speaking to him as if he is a child, wagging her finger at him. But then Minnis adds a third dimension to the title by adding the cross ideogram, as if religion somehow plays a part in the poem, completely confusing the two aforementioned conclusions about the title. What does the cross have to do with a speaker who seems to be sexually attracted to a subject, perhaps teasingly telling him he is “bad bad”?
The traditional idea of the cross is associated with Christianity as a symbol of Jesus’s persecution, but Minnis gives us no other clues throughout the poem that the cross within the title refers to Christianity. Therefore, I must investigate broader meanings for the cross. In his article “The Meaning of Cross-Bearing” in Dallas Theological Seminary’s publication, Bibliotheca Sacra, Michael Green analyzes the various meanings of the cross, including its “prerequisites” as well as its “consequences” (117). Though the speaker in Minnis’s poem does not specifically denote that someone is carrying a cross in the poem, the cross ideogram lies between two main words of the title: “Bad” and “Bad.” Therefore, in a sense, the title is bearing a cross, and Green’s article can give us some hints as to what cross-bearing can mean for Minnis’s poem.

Before Green gives his opinion on the meaning of cross-bearing, he provides the reader with several different ideas as to what people have believed cross-bearing to be. Perhaps one of the most popular views derives from the Jewish tradition, stating that one who bears a cross is signifying that he is a follower of Christ, and this cross is a symbol that he is protected by God (118-19). This idea of the cross as a protector has been carried to the extreme, as many see it as a weapon against evil.13 If the speaker of Minnis’s poem sees the cross as a protector against evil, then perhaps the cross ideogram in the title alludes to the idea that the speaker feels she needs protection from this “bad bad” person. Minnis uses the actual depiction of the cross to suggest this idea without explicitly writing it out in words.

13 For example, many movies and stories denote the cross as a weapon against monsters and/or vampires.
However, another equally possible idea exists: that of a cross-bearer carrying the cross as an act of submission. In his article, Green explains that the cross-bearing which suggests submission dates back to a Roman custom. Any man who was convicted of rebellion against Rome’s sovereign rule was ordered to carry a “cross-beam,” or cross, to his execution place. Green takes this idea a step further by adding, “This starting point … leads to an interpretation that cross-bearing means to submit to the authority or rule one formerly rebelled against, or to obey God’s will” (120). In other words, when a man carries a cross, he is symbolizing that he has given up his rebellious stage in life. Instead, he will carry the cross and submit to God’s commandments.

Transferring this idea back to Minnis’s poem, then, the speaker is “bearing” the cross in order to show submission to the “bad bad” authority that perhaps she once rebelled against. First, she admits that “you” “look good” and “feel good,” as if she is sexually attracted to “you” and finds the subject irresistible. Then, she admits that for whatever reason, the subject is “bad bad.” Next, by placing the cross in between the two “bad” words, the speaker seems to be saying, “Yes, I realize you’re bad, and I’m giving in”—perhaps, with pleasure. In this way, the speaker implies that she is attracted to every aspect of the subject: the good and the bad.

Therefore, the cross ideogram presents to us at least two different meanings: one in which it is used as a protector against the “bad” subject, and another in which it is a symbol for the speaker showing submission to the “bad” person. With the first example, the speaker is attempting to separate herself from the subject. In the second, she yearns to be controlled by the subject. Yet again, Minnis present duplicitous meanings within
the poem, both of which are possible explanations. The next few lines continue this idea of a play between “good” and “bad,” and I continue to wonder if the subject is truly “bad” or “bad” in a way that is actually favorable to the speaker.

In the first two lines, the speaker says, “you’re a swan….so carnelian…./…..to be with you…..” (1-3). The image of a swan is quiet, serene, and elegant, and traditionally, we think of a swan as white. So, from the start, the speaker describes her lover as mild and beautiful. But in the next line, Minnis writes that the lover is “so carnelian,” which is a brownish-red gemstone—a color that does not match up with a swan’s normally white coloring. How, then, can the lover be both serene and swan-like, yet also be described as a reddish color? Suddenly the swan image becomes less innocent or angelic, as if the swan is covered in mud or blood. Still, I do not think that the speaker is communicating to us that the swan is dirty, for “carnelian” refers to a gemstone. She does not, for example, say that the swan is “muddy” or “brick red.” So even though the swan appears less elegant or pure than the traditional image that we associate with the swan, the speaker still compares the lover to a gemstone, which is not dirty in the least. Instead, gemstones are used to decorate oneself and denote elegance. Therefore, at the same time that the speaker negates the traditional idea of an elegant, white swan, the negation is not a true negation in that the lover has not lost all elegance, as he is described as a muddy-colored gemstone. Much like I am not sure if the speaker is separating herself or submitting to the lover with the cross, I am also unsure as to
whether the speaker sees her lover as a serene animal or a less traditional—yet equally elegant—gemstone, as these ideas are not equal.\footnote{Furthermore, by beginning what seems to be a poem about a lover with the image of a swan, many would immediately associate Minnis’s poem with William Butler Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan.” Much like the idea of good and bad intermingling in Minnis’s poem, so too does Yeats take this tone when he transforms the idea of a romantic Zeus swooping in on his lover and turns it into a grotesque rape scene (Paglia 16). So at this point in Minnis’s poem, we are wondering if this lover, who reminds the speaker perhaps of a reddish-colored swan, is really a villain or lover to the speaker.}

Minnis continues the good/(perhaps) bad descriptions, and I am not sure at this point whether the speaker is describing her beloved or the emotions of being in a relationship with this lover. The speaker provides no subject for the phrases, only ellipses, leaving the decision up to us depending upon the context of the poem. She writes, “…..so vexing & vicious….. /….. /…..with quirts of leather….. /…..and rock-roses…..” (6-9). “Vexing & vicious” definitely denotes more of a “bad” lover or relationship—one who annoys, is easily angered, and is perhaps temperamental. But then Minnis uses the image of “quirts of leather,” or leather whips, which calls to mind a sadomasochistic relationship. The speaker does not tell us who is using these quirts—whether it is the speaker implementing or accepting the abuse. If I follow the idea that the cross-bearing denotes that the speaker is submitting to the lover, then I can assume it is the lover with the whips. However, if the speaker’s cross is more of a weapon to protect her from the lover, then perhaps she is using these “quirts” to separate herself from the lover. Either way—whether the speaker is abusing her lover, or if she is accepting the abuse—I can still surmise that the speaker is projecting the idea of pleasure from pain.
But then Minnis returns to the more beautiful, serene image of the lover by associating him or her with “rock-roses,” which are shrubs of brightly colored flowers. On the surface, this image is more in line with the lover who began the poem appearing as a swan: this lover is beautiful, delicate, and quiet. However, a rock-rose is not the quintessential flower for love, much like a red rose. The name itself, literally, a rose made of rock, denotes the idea that the love has physically hardened or toughened. Perhaps this points to a relationship that has fallen out of love, or perhaps this signifies a relationship that can withstand any trials. Furthermore, the rock-rose grows in dry, hard soil, meaning it does not require much, if any, cultivation, and oftentimes it grows by itself, not doing well if positioned near other plants (Barringer 261). So the connotation of the speaker’s relationship takes on many other meanings: the relationship is tough, it could be unfeeling; it could be full of love, able to withstand anything, or it could be loveless; it is an easy relationship that does not take much cultivation, or it is a relationship that cannot survive if bothered by outside sources. The poem does not give us enough clues as to which idea trumps another; therefore, we are faced with duplicitous meanings.

As if we were not convinced enough that the speaker wishes to project multiple meanings, the first page of “You Look Good, You Feel Good, But You’re Bad † Bad…” is juxtaposed on the opposite page with an illustration of a two-headed deer. Referring back to Ostriker’s idea of “poetic doubleness” and the “harmonizing of opposites,” this illustration begins to make more sense. The doubleness is most obviously illustrated in

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15 For an example of this illustration, see Appendix C.
the deer that has two heads, yet both heads are identical. For instance, the animal does not have one deer head and one lion head. Therefore, the illustration is not saying that opposites come together to make one solid meaning. Instead, one word, one musing, one picture, can have multiple meanings, all of equal value, which come together to make one idea. The deer is surrounded by pictures of various objects, such as a roses, diamonds, whips, coffins, and money signs. All of these symbols could represent ideas that exist with equal force, none being truly “good” or “bad.” For example, the same basic idea of “carnelian” having duplicitous meanings, both a gemstone and a muddy red color, is also referenced with the diamond in the illustration. Though most would always think a diamond to be a beautiful gemstone, it also signifies marriage, commitment, and as a result, to some it may signify entrapment. All of the symbols included in the illustration have similar duplicitous meanings. And if we do not fully understand the idea of “doubleness,” Minnis then still solidifies the idea by also including a negative, or inverted, version of the same picture of a two-headed deer as the concluding page to her collection.16

Realizing that words will always communicate multiple meanings, never assisting us in completely arriving at the signified, Minnis employs ellipses and ideograms as rhetorical devices in order to further contribute to the overall effect of her poems. The ellipses help the speaker to create a sensational experience for the reader, communicate complex emotions, such as vulnerability, as well as assist in slowing the pace of the act of reading. The ideograms, like words, also communicate duplicitous meanings throughout

16 For an example of this illustration, see Appendix C.
the poetry, yet Minnis demonstrates that the ideograms assist in adding a depth to the poetry that is not possible with just words. By administrating these alternate modes of communication, Minnis challenges our accepted means of communication, proving to us that words are just that—words—and other devices, such as that of the ideogram or ellipsis, offer a supplemental mode of communication that cannot be achieved as thoroughly with only language.
CHAPTER THREE

“I HAVE NOTHING TO SAY TO MARIANNE MOORE AND SHE HAS NOTHING TO SAY TO ME!”: THE SPEAKER’S SELF-PROCLAIMED AUTONOMY … OR LACK THEREOF

In the previous two chapters, I have discussed Chelsey Minnis’s realization that words have failed to communicate; as a consequence, the poet has attempted to ameliorate the situation by implementing ellipses and ideograms in order to assist in sharing her thoughts. By making use of a rather avant-garde way of communicating, Minnis has already proven to us that she is unlike most poets of her time. However, the speaker still feels the need to outwardly claim that she is different, new, and not relying on any other influences for her own work. Nowhere are these declarations more obvious than throughout the Prefaces of Bad Bad. For example, in “Preface 9,” Minnis writes, “If poetry is dead…then good” (1). In “Preface 18,” the speaker says, “I cannot write poems to honor other poets… / I do not think of them at all…” (1-2), or, more pointedly in “Preface 48,” “I would like to say… ‘This poem was influenced by Marianne Moore!’ / But, ‘I have nothing to say to Marianne Moore and she has nothing to say to / me!’” (4-6).

Perhaps the need to separate herself from supposed influences comes from not trusting the reader to arrive at this idea on her own, or perhaps Minnis does not trust her own poetry enough to project this idea. A third interpretation is that Minnis is yet again projecting duplicitous meanings: by outwardly saying that she is unlike any other poet, she is at the same time pointing out poets who have possibly influenced her.
Furthermore, after careful analysis of some of the speaker’s influences (or non-influences), I will show that the speaker is actually proclaiming that her struggle with language and the art of communication is actually a tradition that can be traced back to many poets before her, and in many ways, she is not autonomous at all.

Nowhere are these *apparent* declarations of autonomy more obvious than in the Prefaces in *Bad Bad*; the speaker continually contrasts her own writing with what she views as boring, stale poets of academia. By continually reminding the reader of other poets whom the speaker views as her opposites, the speaker is highlighting those features of her own writing that make her unique. For example, Minnis begins the entire collection of *Bad Bad* by writing in “Preface 1,” “People say ‘nothing new’ or ‘the death of the author’ but, I am new and I am not dead” (1-2). Here, the speaker is purposefully illustrating herself as separate from the collective by writing “People say…” By using the word “people” instead of, for example, “we all say,” the speaker immediately separates herself from this nameless group that discusses poetry, showing that the speaker defines her identity as one which is not this group. However, this is not a simple “me” versus “them” situation for the speaker. Instead, Minnis further emphasizes this gap between the speaker and everyone else by implying that the collective is composed of at least two separate groups, neither of which the speaker is a part. Minnis writes that these “people say ‘nothing new’ or ‘the death of the author’” (1). One interpretation of this phrase is that these “people,” already separate from the speaker, are discussing poets who produce “nothing new.” That being the case, then Minnis has introduced a second collective—that of the poets being discussed. If we follow this interpretation, then in this
first line, Minnis has illustrated the speaker as being completely ostracized, not a member of either two groups mentioned: those “critics” discussing poets, and those poets who are discussed.

Furthermore, also with this first line, the speaker alludes to both Ezra Pound and Roland Barthes. “The death of the author” was coined by Barthes. His theory notes that once an idea is put into language on paper, the reader should approach the subject, or author, as insignificant (142). When Minnis’s speaker says “I am not dead,” she is distancing herself not only from Barthes’s theory, proclaiming that the author’s voice stays quite present within the poetry, but also many literature theories in general. She implies that her poetry surpasses theorists and explanations, and we should approach her work with no predefined codes. Furthermore, by saying that she “is not dead,” the speaker seems to be telling the reader that her poetry is alive, exciting and fresh. Still, by even alluding to Barthes, the speaker is acknowledging his influence upon her work.

“I am new” alludes to Pound’s “make it new” mantra. In The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound, Michael Alexander provides a “re-reading” of Ezra Pound’s work with the hope that it will dispel the notion that Pound’s poetry is so difficult to understand that it is inaccessible. Describing Pound’s work in simpler terms, Alexander explains that Pound vowed to take “prime material,” or reality, and “translate” it into poetry (67). Catherine Paul’s Poetry in the Museums of Modernism agrees with Alexander’s notion, writing that Pound’s poetry is a response against his formal education, which was

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17 This supports my argument in Chapter Two in which Minnis’s ellipses function as a trademark for her poetry. See page 32.
“dominated by the scholarly methods of philology where abundant factual data could overwhelm an artifact or literary work.” In her chapter about Ezra Pound, Paul explains that Pound’s early work encourages “intellectual and emotional engagement” with the reader in contrast to Pound’s literary education. Writes Paul, “Pound wanted a literary artwork to stand apart from the collection in which it was displayed, ready to work its magic on a reader” (78). Similarly, Minnis’s speaker, much like Pound, rebels against formal education, stating that true poets are not taught or encouraged in academia (e.g., “If anyone thinks they need to write reviews, teach classes, edit magazines or / translate books in order to write good poetry…then maybe they should just take / a rest from it…,” “Preface 1” 8-10). Therefore, at the same time that Minnis’s speaker is saying she is unlike any other poet before her, she is also pointing out a particular poet whose views align with her own. In this way, the speaker is sending us a mixed message: her poetry is new, and the work cannot be classified with any one group or genre; on the other hand, by proclaiming that she is new, she introduces an oxymoron, as her proclamation is in fact a mimic of other poets—specifically, Ezra Pound.

Also in the very first line of Bad Bad, Minnis introduces to the reader an issue with which many poets and writers of any kind may struggle: How can they ever create poetry that is new and different if every word that is written is probably influenced by someone’s work that they have read? Harold Bloom explores this idea by theorizing what he calls “the anxiety of influence.” According to Bloom, one poet’s work inspires another’s to be formed, and the result is work that, on some level, refers back to the previous work that was read. Because poets must create original work in order to be
successful, they must differentiate from other work by “misreading one another, so as to
clear imaginative space for themselves” (5). I think Minnis’s speaker is aware of the idea
that all poetry is influenced by poetry before it, because by alluding to Barthes and
Pound, she is pointing this out. In this way, she is saying she’s new while also admitting
that she could never be completely unique. Minnis’s speaker is more tongue-in-cheek
when saying she is not influenced by other poets, for at many points, Minnis seems to be
closely echoing sentiments of poets who have come before her—the most obvious being
Marianne Moore, as the speaker points this out to us in “Preface 48” when she says, “I
would like to say… ‘This poem was influenced by Marianne Moore!’ / But, ‘I have
nothing to say to Marianne Moore and she has nothing to say to / me!’” (4-6).

One obvious way in which Minnis’s speaker is similar to Marianne Moore’s
speaker is their shared “hatred” for poetry. In her famous poem, “Poetry,” Moore begins
by writing, “I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all / this fiddle. /
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one / discovers in / it after all, a place
for the genuine” (1-5). The idea of abhorring poetry is one that is definitely reflected
within Minnis’s work. For example, in the third poem of Poemland, she writes, “When I
read poems I don’t like them…” (5). Soon after in the fourth poem, she writes, “With my
poetry, I want to barricade myself from other people’s / poetry…” (23). Or, referring
back to “Double Black Tulip,” the speaker feels as if poetry has failed to make her feel
alive, so she “gets up” and leaves in disgust (57). Nevertheless, in the same breath that
Minnis’s speaker says she hates poetry, she also talks about the joy it brings her, much
like Moore says that for every poem she “dislike[s],” she still finds in it “a place for the
genuine.” No matter the hate she has for it, Minnis, too, sees true poetry as genuine and still feels some sort of pleasure from it. For example, she uses poetry as a way to give back to her lover: “Sometimes I get the right feeling in the afternoon… / And that’s when I write a poem for you…” (fifth poem in Poemland, 44-45). This same idea that poetry can be a gift or rewarding to another is also echoed in “Preface 10” of Bad Bad. Minnis writes, “If anyone wants good poems then they should tell me and I will write them” (7). Therefore, in many poems, the speaker still communicates that poetry brings her some kind of joy, while also saying in the same poems that it brings her much frustration.

The love/hate relationship with poetry that Minnis’s speaker projects is not a new idea at all, and it is most often credited to Marianne Moore’s ars poetica. Therefore, when Minnis writes in “Preface 48,” “I would like to say… ‘This poem was influenced by Marianne Moore!’ / But, ‘I have nothing to say to Marianne Moore and she has nothing to say to / me!’” (4-6), I must believe that the speaker is being sarcastic in this line. Perhaps the speaker is making fun of those poets who actually believed that they are so unique that no other poet has made an effect upon their work. Or, perhaps Minnis is returning to Bloom’s “anxiety of influence,” and the speaker is frustrated when realizing that she will never be able to escape comparisons with poets who have come before her. No matter the intention, by emphatically using Marianne Moore’s name in her work, the speaker is showing her kinship to a poet who, like the speaker, struggles with the frustrations of writing and reading poetry, or on a broader scale, with language itself.

While Minnis is like Moore in their speakers’ attitudes toward poetry, Minnis is similar to Gertrude Stein in her playful, repetitive, idiosyncratic style that contributes to
the questioning of identity. In her article entitled “A Poetics of Difference: The Making of Americans and Unreadable Subjects,” Melanie Taylor seeks to discover Stein’s representation of gender identities. In order to do this, Taylor explores Stein’s “materiality of language” instead of the “materiality of the body.” Therefore, Taylor focuses on Stein’s anti-narrative techniques to show how Stein attempts to dismantle the traditional idea of binary models of gender identities (26).

When introducing the language of The Making of Americans to the readers, Taylor calls the work an “anti-novel.” She writes:

Stein’s anti-novel is notable for its distinctive textual practices and material effects: its juxtaposition of the grammatical with the ungrammatical and constant awkwardness of syntax, even in its more conventional interludes; its presentation of the meaningless as meaningful; and its recycling of a limited range of words and phrases in what poses as a continuing citation of the present. (27)

Though Stein’s use of ambiguities and awkward syntax can be difficult to read and frustrating to many, Taylor argues that Stein has a method in the rhythms and patterns and meaning behind the confusing prose (27).

Similar to Stein, Minnis also employs awkward syntax, ambiguities, and repetition, much to the chagrin of many of her readers. However, like Taylor’s analysis of Stein, I do not think the atypical grammatical structures and repetition is lazy or meaningless; instead, I would claim that Minnis, like Stein, has a method to her structure.
Taylor focuses on the incremental developments of Stein’s work to point out that initially, the changing temporal markers imply movement, which coincides with how we think a narrative should “act.” For example, she quotes Stein writing, “There will then soon much description of every way one can think of men and women,” which later shows up as “Sometime there will be here every way there can be of seeing kinds of men and women.” However, soon after this, Stein turns this notion on its side, instead writing paradoxical statements such as, “He begins then at the beginning of the ending of his middle living to repeat more and more the whole of him.” Taylor explains that the “dismantling” of the “traditions of conventional narrative,” including disrupting Stein’s monotonous repetition, help to dismantle the traditional views of gender by making their binary categories appear “nonsensical” and “inadequate” in a world without formal structure (28-29). In other words, our simple, binary view of gender works in a world that is itself simple and linear. However, by fooling us into believing we are reading a linear work, only to turn this idea upside down, Stein upsets our idea of how the world appears, and we realize that our simple, binary signifiers of gender refuse to fit in nicely in the more paradoxical world in which we live.

In most ways, Minnis’s style of writing is not nearly as complex as Stein’s. However, in Bad Bad’s “Man-Thing,” Minnis does make use of repetition and ambiguity much as Stein does in order to “dismantle” traditional ideas of gender. And Minnis’s poetry takes this “dismantling” a step further, also demolishing the reader’s expectations and interactions of the partners within a relationship. Minnis begins “Man-Thing” with
three lines of scattered ellipses (Minnis takes more liberty with ellipses throughout this poem than in many of her others), followed by:

man-thing you are permissive……

......................................and I

..................................................like it................................. (4-6)

The speaker introduces “man-thing” to us by saying that he is “permissive,” implying that “man-thing” allows the speaker to do whatever she wants. Though at first glance this may seem like the speaker is in control of the relationship because she is allowed to do as she pleases, note that Minnis uses the word “permissive,” still hinting that man-thing must give permission to the speaker. In this way, though man-thing allows her to do as she pleases, he is still in control of the relationship, as he is the one giving the permission.

Minnis then confuses this idea with the repetition of the word “use” throughout the poem, insinuating that the speaker is in charge of the relationship. She writes, “…..but you get used to it…..” (20), “to want you like a souvenir….. / …..and that’s all I can use of / it…..” (46-48), and “….. you are to be / used like a sentiment” (49-50). These three phrases all denote the idea that “man-thing” is used by the speaker. With the first, “man-thing” is “used to” the speaker “com[ing] back to you” (12). In other words, he continues to accept the speaker, no matter how many times she leaves him and then returns. With the second “use” phrase, the speaker is comparing “man-thing” to a souvenir. Traditionally, a souvenir is a material item that reminds the owner of a moment in the past—proof that the memory existed. Therefore, in this sense, “man-thing” is a
possession of the speaker, acting as proof that something in the past has occurred. Lastly, the speaker outright admits that “man-thing” is “to be used,” as if he is her possession. Interestingly, she uses him “like a sentiment,” or emotional thought. Emotions, or emotional thoughts, occur without a person planning them—they happen instantaneously, physiologically. Therefore, at this point in the poem, the speaker is using “man-thing” so carelessly and naturally that she does not even think about using him anymore. Using him is second-nature to her. Another possibility is that the sentiment is “used” in that it is fake, its purpose for existence related to the speaker’s personal gain. For example, I could use the fake sentiment of sympathy in order to make someone like me, not truly sympathizing with the person. In this sense, “man-thing” has become an object for the speaker which allows her to act a certain way in order for something to happen in her favor.

At this point in the poem, Minnis has transitioned from introducing the “man-thing” as the one holding power to completely dismantling the idea with the repetitious use of the word “use.” Suddenly, the speaker is in complete power, and “man-thing” is more of a “thing” than “man.” But then Minnis turns a corner again. As Taylor describes with Stein’s work, as soon as the reader has decided that the writer has intended for the reader to envision a certain situation, the poet disrupts the flow once again. Minnis begins by writing “although” (58), placing the word all by itself on a line, surrounding it with no ellipses, which is significant for this poem. By placing the word by itself, Minnis calls the reader’s attention to it, signaling to the reader that a change is about to take place. Then she writes, “it is like a bricked-up door to leave you…..” (59).
Obviously, a door is something which has the sole intention of being a gateway for entering or exiting. No doors are meant for standing in or staying. Rather, they are thresholds, the points of beginnings. However, this door is “bricked-up,” meaning it is no longer in use, and no one may enter or exit it. Therefore, at this point in the poem, the speaker implies that leaving “you” is impossible. Something keeps her from leaving “man-thing,” as if he still has some sort of power over her. If his door was open, or even able to be opened, then she could continue to “use” him. Instead, it is bricked up, and he will not let her in or out. Here, Minnis has shifted the power back from speaker to “man-thing,” again demolishing any notions we have continued to build from reading this poem.

Taylor points out that most readers leave Stein’s work feeling confused and concluding that the work has no meaning (28), and as stated throughout this thesis, Minnis’s poetry also causes readers to feel confused in that it does not adhere to certain codes that the readers have brought with them from previous poetry-reading. However, in the case of “Man-Thing,” unlike Stein, Minnis’s speaker does bring together the juxtaposing ideas in order to reach some sort of conclusion. This is actually very uncharacteristic for Minnis, who usually leaves her poems “hanging” for the reader to reach his own conclusion. However, because “Man-Thing” is about the notions of relationships and the interactions between the two parties involved, perhaps the speaker, like Stein, is attempting at all costs to bring down any idea of binary parties, and she does this through using the term “demi-madness.”
When Minnis is writing about a speaker and a beloved, she writes, “…..because it is a demi-madness ..... / ..... / ..... of lowliness .....” (83-85). “Demi-madness” denotes a half-madness. The relationship is not completely mad because neither party is always in this “lowliness” of existence. Instead, both parties are “demi-mad” because the power shifts back and forth between the two. She then writes, “like….. / .....seesaw rust” (86-87). Assuming that she is still speaking of the relationship, the speaker now compares the relationship to the image or feeling of a ride that goes up and down, up and down, still reinforcing the power play between the couple. However, the couple is not a seesaw; rather, it is like the “rust” of a seesaw, so it is not the ride itself, but corrosion that is stuck upon the ride. Therefore, with this image, neither party is in control. Instead, the ride itself is in control and they are both the byproduct of corrosion of the ride. In other words, the couple is not the relationship itself; rather, they are a weird product of the relationship that reveals its age and destruction, and they continually ride up and down upon it.

Much like Minnis follows Stein’s example with her style of writing, Minnis also approaches the idea of the reader/poet relationship as does Stein. In her work *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity*, Juliana Spahr argues against a popular conception of Stein’s work: “My argument here is that Stein’s works are not subversive, as often assumed, but are rather connective. They connect with readers. They deny authorial authority and instead encourage readers to be their own authors” (40-41). Spahr writes that though the “disjunction and fragmentation” of Stein’s work echoes that of other modernist writers, “she uses these techniques in very different
ways than do her modernist peers” (41). For example, Spahr writes that unlike many of her peers, Stein uses very basic vocabulary. Spahr writes, “Her words are intentionally common, simple, and never esoteric” (41).

Many may disagree that Minnis’s work “connects with readers” at the onset, as the visual aesthetics of the poems, such as the illustrations, ideograms, and ellipses, may at first scare readers away, as mentioned in Chapter Two. However, if readers take the time to read a Minnis poem closely, the reader will find many colloquial phrases or words that will connect with him or her. I am not claiming that like Stein, Minnis only uses basic vocabulary. Throughout her poems, Minnis does include many esoteric words. For example, in “You Look Good You Feel Good But You’re Bad † Bad,” Minnis includes phrases such as, “…it is curacao…..to be with you…” (13), “it is quince to be with you…..” (39), and “…it is cormorant to ravish…..” (50). Therefore, the vocabulary could sometimes be intimidating for a reader who is not accustomed to such words.

However, not all of Minnis’s lines include such obscure words. She juxtaposes this more difficult vocabulary with basic, colloquial phrases that almost anyone could understand. And similar to Stein, specifically in Tender Buttons in phrases such as “to last brown and not curious” (14), oftentimes Minnis takes simple words and changes their usage from, for example, an adjective to a verb. But then many times, Minnis, unlike Stein, employs simple colloquial phrases, for as stated in Chapter One, throughout her sixty-eight Prefaces in Bad Bad, Minnis’s speaker argue against the academic poet. This is evident in phrases such as in “Preface 1”: “Poetry should be ‘uh huh’ like… ‘baby has to have it…” (7). Certainly, these are words, or actual everyday phrases, that the reader
can understand. What’s more, they’re funny. The idea of someone saying, “Baby has to have it” when referring to a poem sounds hilarious, and inserting that bit of humor into her poems makes the speaker appear less pretentious and intimidating.

“Further,” writes Spahr, “… in order to understand Stein’s work as something other than Dadaist, one needs to look at what its builds, at its alliances, and not merely at its resistance or subversion” (41). Spahr then includes an anecdotal story of teaching Stein to one of her introductory-level composition courses, wherein most of her students are immigrants, and they all deduce different readings from Stein’s poem. Here, I would argue that Spahr is in the danger-zone of what I would consider a copout for justifying “good poetry,” in which someone says a poem is successful because different people are all able to understand it in different ways. However, thankfully, then Spahr rounds up her argument of how people should view Stein’s work by writing, “Stein’s work suggests that questions of authorial intent are not a priority. It is not that the author is dead, just never really in control” (43).18

This last quote from Spahr describes what Minnis’s speaker, as well as Moore and Stein’s speakers, are proclaiming throughout the collections. Their avant-garde styles of writing seem to refuse to allow the author to die, as the styles, such as the ellipses of Minnis, are quite recognizable to the reader. However, as we read their poems, we can sense the speakers’ frustrations in never feeling fully in control of what they would like to project. Moore’s speaker admits her disliking of poetry for its failure to communicate; after extreme repetition, Stein turns phrases on their sides to grab the reader’s attention;
Minnis employs extreme, strange-looking punctuation in order to attempt to get her points across. In their own ways, each poet is admitting the distrust of the language to communicate, as they cannot fully, through words, project ideas. Therefore, the end result is that they employ other devices which result in fascinating pieces of art, presented to us in the form of poems, that create a “performative speech” for the speaker.
CONCLUSION

In Zirconia, Bad Bad, and Poemland, Chelsey Minnis employs the devices of Ostriker’s “duplicitous” meanings, ellipses, and ideograms to create an overall experience or, as Doty writes, a “presence of a voice” for the reader, and Minnis portrays this presence through the context of the poem. The ellipses force us to slow down our reading, contemplate the language, and draw connections between the conflicting voices of the poetry. The ideograms illustrate emotions and allusions that arguably could not be portrayed as well through words. With these devices, Minnis supplements everyday language by creating her own mode of communication through distinctive punctuation, grammar, and syntax, and the result is a voice that is alive and more real than almost any voice present in today’s contemporary poetry.

If time and space allowed, I could most likely write hundreds of pages about Chelsey Minnis’s poetry, as her style invites endless controversy, questions, and fascinating ideas. This thesis is only the beginning of the conversation about Chelsey Minnis, and in order to jumpstart this conversation, this thesis hones in on Minnis’s style and provides examples and explanations of the speaker’s duplicitous nature. All three chapters point to the idea that the speaker has lost faith in language, in and of itself, to communicate her ideas. Instead, the speaker relies upon other devices, such as that of duplicitous meanings, ellipses, ideograms, and referencing other poets in order to further communicate with the reader. Note that the goal of this thesis is not to declare that language has failed us all in communication. Instead, I am demonstrating that Minnis is showing us a way to further, and perhaps better, communicate than simply through
words. Whereas many may believe that the only way to write a poem is to assemble words in a metered line, Minnis shows us that, for example, a line of dots could communicate just as well. In short, Minnis’s poetry has guided me to question the exchange of ideas through language, while it still has led me to admire language’s multiple connotations that allow it to be somewhat of a beautiful mess.

I could have taken the thesis in multiple directions other than the way it is currently presented. Throughout my research about Minnis’s speaker, I found myself investigating various tangents, from the history and implications of botanical symbols in poetry to the art of reading poetry aloud and how Minnis’s ellipses could transform this practice. For example, one very obvious issue that I did not investigate thoroughly in this thesis is Minnis’s poetry in terms of feminist theory. Many of her poems, such as Bad Bad’s “Man-Thing,” illustrate a female speaker that is at many times a strong dominatrix. Then, in other poems such as Zirconia’s “Uh,” the speaker appears sadomasochistic, imploring the subject to “knock [her] down” and “press [her] against blue tile” (21). Further exploration of how the speaker views her own power as a female in a (perhaps) heterosexual relationship would lead to some fascinating ideas on the dynamics of contemporary relationships.

Another topic that I did not fully explore is Minnis’s repetitive use of symbols. Throughout all three collections, Minnis uses many of the same symbols over and over in a variety of different ways. Some examples of these symbols are fur, diamonds, champagne, flowers, chandeliers, blood, fashion, sex, young girls, and rodents. Analyzing these symbols in light of the recent Gurlesque movement would also help to
understand musings central to the ideas of female pleasure, queer theory, and construction of identities. For example, in “You Look Good, You Feel Good, But You’re Bad † Bad…” Minnis’s speaker plays with the idea of sex, using the symbol of the young girl. The speaker describes her lover, “…..like a man but like a dark schoolgirl…..” (35), and then later, “…..I want to pretend you are a girl…../…..because it will only last for a moment .....” (61-62). If we assume that the speaker is a girl, then is she really wishing that the lover look like a girl? Is the speaker admitting her homosexuality? Or, like many poems of the Gurlesque movement, perhaps she is proclaiming her power in the relationship, as if by stripping the lover of his maleness, the speaker is able to be the dominant leader of the relationship. Furthermore, this “girl” is a “schoolgirl,” which raises questions about the idea of innocence, young love, or even pedophilia. Further investigation into the symbol of sex, as well as the other aforementioned symbols, could lead me into many different directions as to their contribution to the Gurlesque movement, or poetry as whole.

I would also like to investigate the conflation of author and speaker in Minnis’s poetry. In an earlier draft of this thesis, I dedicated a good amount of the first chapter to explaining why many readers would believe that the speaker of Minnis’s poetry is actually Chelsey Minnis herself. I then went into a great amount of detail about why supposing that the author and speaker are the same is a dangerous move, and what this assumption would do to the reading of one of Minnis’s poems. I eventually discarded the entire section because I realized it strayed too far away from the actual poems, instead relying heavily on theories and assumptions of the reader. Another reason that I removed
this section is because I realized my thoughts against the conflation of the author and speaker were, honestly, common sense to today’s poetry reader. The arguments against assuming the author to be the speaker are numerous. The more interesting way in which I could approach this topic would be to analyze the speaker’s performance of “Chelsey Minnis” the character, as many times throughout the poems, the speaker either mentions a female poet or Minnis’s actual name. Studying how the character of “Chelsey Minnis” projects herself as a poet, what she includes and excludes as her personality traits, and the duplicitous faces of the character would have been a much more interesting approach.

Along with this idea is the reader’s response to the speaker mentioning Minnis. How do we continually combat the urge to assume the speaker to be the poet? How do we believe the character of “Chelsey Minnis” to be different from the poet, and how does this character symbolize contemporary poets, or does it at all?

Highlighting more of Minnis’s punctuation, including strange capitalization, commas, exclamation points, and spacing, could also contribute to the characterization of Minnis’s speaker. In this thesis, I have focused solely on ellipses and ideograms, yet I did not touch on any other types of punctuation. For example, in Bad Bad’s “Foxina,” Minnis writes words with various patterns of capitalization, such as “RoCkInG” (83), “rOckInG” (85), “chastE” (87), “smOkIng” (88), and “glASSes” (201). Examining possible implications of this capitalization, as well as its effect upon the reader, could lead to further explanation of the speaker’s voice. The unique approach to punctuation most obviously alludes to E. E. Cummings’s poetry, such as “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r,” and
seeking to understand his poetry in comparison to Minnis’s would contribute to the exploration.

In “Preface 12” of Bad Bad, Minnis writes, “A poem should not be flawless but should be able to bear the burden of its / flaws…” (9-10). Approaching a Minnis poem with only the knowledge of familiar codes of poetry, many would view Minnis’s strange use of punctuation and conflicting speaker as flaws to her poems. Readers do not know how to approach a poem that is, for example, laden with star symbols or contained by unending ellipses, so at first glance, many could disregard her work as “weird” or “gimmicky.” But Minnis’s speaker points out that poems do not need to be “flawless.” In fact, they “should not” be flawless. Perhaps the speaker is saying that poems that are flawless seem too perfect, too uncomfortably ideal, too far from reality—that which, in and of itself, is imperfect. Instead, the speaker says that a poem should have flaws, and should “be able to bear the burden” of them. If Minnis’s “flaw” in her poetry is her overwhelming use of ellipses or her idiosyncratic implementation of ideograms, then it is a carefully crafted and all-encompassing flaw. Minnis’s poetry, as her speaker suggests, is “able to bear the burden of its flaws,” as these flaws contribute to the overall presence of the work—a voice that is alive, an emotion, a sensation that illustrates a world that is itself full of questions, mistakes, and imperfections.

Minnis’s work changes the way we view poetry, and likewise, communication. She proves that sometimes we do not need words to denote a feeling through language, as an ideogram can convey the same emotion, or, perhaps, convey it even better. With her integration of ellipses, ideograms, and illustrations into poetry, Minnis shows us what to
feel instead of telling us through words. Her work appeals to the common reader who, for example, relies upon a smiley-face ideogram to denote his happiness when he is texting to a friend. As Pound explains about ideograms, they are “pictures AS pictures,” not depending upon words to describe the picture (5). Therefore, Minnis’s ideograms appeal to those in modern society who want immediate satisfaction of receiving emotions from pictures.

On the other hand, Minnis’s ellipses do the opposite, slowing down the reader and urging him to contemplate each phrase, each word, and each symbol within the poem. And, unlike the ideogram, which can be quickly texted to a friend, the ellipses resist duplication. One would never try to accurately text or instant message one of Minnis’s poems, as typing the ellipses would take way too much time and dedication to counting each period. Therefore, at the same time, Minnis is both appealing to and going against the harried nature of modern society. The ideograms immediately portray sentiments to the reader, yet the ellipses tell the reader to approach the words at a leisurely pace. In this way, much like the duplicitous nature of her poetry, Minnis also is encouraging a duplicitous reading of her work.

In a broader sense, Minnis’s poetry could be considered an exciting indicator for the future of contemporary poetry. If she has proven that a sensual, alive presence can be conveyed through an illustration of a two-headed deer, then one can only imagine what she or her contemporaries will do next with the style of the poem. Minnis has showed us that poetry is not just words or rhythm or alliteration or any other presupposed characteristic of a poem, but instead it is, in its simplest form, an artistic message. And
the way this message is communicated is just as important, if not more important, than the message itself.
Appendix A

“Double Black Tulip”, Bad Bad (Fence Books, 2007)

```
I have emotions and I also have death wishes...

I like most things because I know I am going to die...

my love is like weak black-legged lambs...

I have never had the right to say things that are true and no one hears...

death is the actual worst hope...

I write this poem like a girl in a black wig...
```
but my heart is the heart of a true skunk.

I must try not to feel a fake kindness.

If everything can be explained in a note then I will write notes all my life and never kill myself.

I don't know if something good will happen or if I will have to bang my head ceaselessly with a stick....

this is the total conciliation of my self with my destined self.....
I feel like I have been posing as a dead human being

with my eyelids open...and my head at a doll-tilt...

it is very sad to have to get up and walk home...

the purpose of poetry is to seem as lifelike as possible so that you actually exist...

although I only love nothingness...
I do not know what level of happiness I am on!

but

my great-great-grandmother's name was Eugenia Hussy...
Appendix B

“Champagne”, Zirconia (Fence Books, 2001)

CHAMPAGNE

................you are alone with..........................1

.................................2

........................unstable champagne on your teeth..........................3

................................and you swallow flecks of it..................4

................................5

................................6

..............................and then it keeps rumbling in your glass..................7

................................the wet........8

................lukewarm fluid in your oral cavity..........................9

................................10

................................11

...................................granular..................12

................................13

................controllable champagne..........................14

...........................poured downward..........................15

................................16

................................17

................................as you lick the corpuscles..........................18

........or spores of burst carbonation..........................17
your nose with the sleeve. of your fuzzy. sweater. and push all the chairs. out of your way.

and crush. thistles and thistles of soft foam. with the fulcrum. of your jaw. and swallow the ruptured...drink.

as a translucent inset of your larynx. reveals.

rivulets...in your throat...and you reach the doorframe. )
chewing the droplets
like the ephemeral gristle of triumph!
as champagne trickles down your neck
as you are smiling
the level ascends and ascends in more champagne glasses
as you are
straining your cardigan...sweater
with the heels of your pumps stuck to the balcony
popping pearl sweater buttons...
Appendix C

Illustration on opposite page of “You Look Good, You Feel Good, But You’re Bad †

Bad…” (Bad Bad 62, Fence Books, 2007)
Inverted illustration (*Bad Bad* 125, Fence Books, 2007)
WORKS CITED


<http://www.fenceportal.org/?page_id=590>.  

85


