This paper offers a brief consideration of the literary ballad as a register of what by the mid-
’60s economists had diagnosed as “urban crisis” and in 1970 John Ashbery called “urban
chaos.”vi I’m particularly interested in how poets used the ballad to see and see into the failures of
the “spatio-temporal fix” of urban renewal.ii My general idea is that in the twentieth-century, as
the formal properties and “barriers”iii of traditional ballads fragment and disperse, the non-
modern attributes of the ballad—its orality, its structure of address, the performative,
anonymous, narrative dimensions of popular song—appear embossed, lending the postmodern
ballad’s distortions a specifically comparative and institutional character. The ballad’s historical
transformation in the crucible of “print-capitalism” heightens this embossment: the broadside
ballad especially can be understood as another of those forms that, in Benedict Anderson’s terms,
“provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the
nation” by providing readers with a "complex gloss on the word 'meanwhile'."iv

By the somewhat incongruous term postmodern ballad, I mean to signal the transition from
the modern to the postmodern that Frederic Jameson has described in terms of a “temporal
sinking to a subordinate feature of space as such” and the shrinkage of time to the present.v I see
the postmodern ballad’s distinctive responsiveness to crises of capital not only as embossment or
register, but in the words of Gwendolyn Brooks, as a reckoning with “the not-old and with
surprise”—a phrase that seems particularly apt to the lived experience of these crises.vi That said,
the meanwhile of Brooks’s well-known ballad on the extrajudicial killing of Emmett Till in 1955 (“A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.” (1960)), for instance, like the meanwhile that structures my main test case, Muriel Rukeyser’s “Ballad of Orange and Grape” (1973), suggests that the postmodern form is aware of a multiplicity of incompatible publics and differentially subordinated temporal regimes. The circulation of Till’s murder as an event of the present in the Negro and mainstream presses, for instance, galvanized the civil rights movement in part because it showed the degree to which neither Bronzeville nor Mississippi nor, for that matter, the spaces of everyday life so conceived, “fit” in one another.

The postmodern ballad is a form, in other words, doubtful about its comparisons, about its representational drive toward the social totality. This is especially so because of the contradictions the demise of urban renewal and the emergence of a black middle class in “cities within cities” like Harlem and Bronzeville exposed. In the case of New York, as Samuel Zipp has shown, these concentrated metropolitan geographies were substantially affected by projects aimed at “beating suburbia at its own game” and attracting capital in order to “keep urban spaces profitable and the city competitive in regional and national markets”—and to keep white middle-class shoppers—especially women—downtown. Indeed both Rukeyser’s and Brooks’s ballads prominently feature mobile urban women out of place and time—a liberal, white, upper middle-class teacher-poet “stalling it off” in East Harlem and a black middle-class “Bronzeville Mother” for whom the mere act of waiting—attending the trial of her murdered son—is cast in the criminalizing headline rhetoric of “loitering” in Mississippi. This engagement with the media environments of these cities, as well as with urban and national print culture,
suggests an important dimension of the ballad’s function as a mode of criticism attuned to the circulation and representation of print language as “the news.”

By describing the postmodern ballad’s structure as “comparative” I mean to stress its reflexivity. Poets use ballads to engage in comparisons that engender reflections on the historical form’s reinscriptive, recursive, mediated and remediating character. The form comes “wrapped in a ballad,” as Susan Howe puts it. Yet the ballad also performs a basic, ground-level kind of comparative work: it sees by reduction, rather than complication; it’s an optic for perceiving “the infrastructure of everyday life” in simple, though not simplistic, colors and planes. It sees what in other modern institutional time-spaces—those of the school, the courtroom, and the press, for example—appears as less visible and less sayable. Thus “A Bronzeville Mother” begins:

From the first it had been like a Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood. A wildness cut up, and tied in little bunches, Like the four-line stanzas of the ballads she had never quite understood—the ballads they had set her to, in school.

This reflexivity about what it is like to be—and indeed live—within something homologous to the ballad structure allows for the conjuring up and rethinking of the poem’s projection of ordered social space. Thus both poems question the binary systems they have been “set to,” and the processes by which the genre and “culture” more generally are collected and recollected, thematized, and assigned particular literary and cultural functions. In this regard the ballad is also significant for the way it signals a response to crises of cultural obsolescence that follow on and anticipate crises of capital. What is “collectible” or “readable” (or learnable or teachable) here remains only a partially open question.

Rukeyser was radicalized much earlier in her career than Brooks—at Vassar, and then in her work on the Scottsboro trial, the disaster at Gauley Bridge, and the Spanish Civil War—but only turned late, and only once, to the ballad. Brooks, on the other hand, engaged often with the
genre, but turned away from it after her radicalization at the Second Black Writers Conference at Fisk University in 1967 and the devastating riots of ’68. That said, neither poets’ “turn” to or from the ballad should really be conceived of as a detour or outright rejection so much as an about-face, a facing of the ballad head-on—an interpellation, rather than a backing in or out. In other words, the postmodern literary ballad is not a disavowal of orality or musicality or the ballad’s popular power as a cheap, vernacular, often silly, often gossipy, often parodic, urban form for the expression of collective experience. Nor does its literariness entail a facile negation of the mass cultural form recognizable in the folk revivals of the ’40s and later in the ’50s-’70s. Instead, these poems turn more on the thinness of such distinctions, using the ballad’s recursivity (how it turns on itself, sonically and rhythmically), and its iterability, its capacity for re-presentation, as well as its narrative structure, to reflect on the ongoingness of the story it tells or pretends to be telling, and will inevitably tell again. To put it another way, the form’s responsiveness to what Steve Newman has designated “the call of the popular” in large part underwrites the literary ballad’s flexibility as a site for the negotiation of contemporary crises across multiple sociohistorical axes.

In the opening stanza of “Ballad of Orange and Grape,” the process of sinking, subordination, and shrinkage that Jameson documents, and its rearrangement of the infrastructure of everyday life, occur through a series of “afters” that unfold into series of movements through space:

After you finish your work
after you do your day
after you’ve read your reading
after you’ve written your say–
you go down the street to the hot dog stand,
one block down and across the way.
On a blistering afternoon in East Harlem in the twentieth century.
The non-traditional rhyme scheme and use of the second person signal not only that the ballad will not function as we know it from Wordsworth or Dunbar, but also that the poem’s concern extends reflexively beyond the work environment to the poet’s position in the built environment of the street and the neighborhood. The stanza’s last sentence, a fragment, formulates two time scales—the afternoon and the century—shrunken into East Harlem. Its grammatical incompleteness points to the postmodern ballad’s formal responsiveness to the fragmentation and regression of urban respatialization and its aesthetic failures, and anticipates the breakdown of the grammatical list of binaries in the fourth stanza into the grammarless, non-binary list of the fifth:

I ask him: How can we go on reading and make sense out of what we read? – How can they write and believe what they're writing, the young ones across the street, while you go on pouring grape in ORANGE and orange into the one marked GRAPE –? (How are we going to believe what we read and we write and we hear and we say and we do?)

He looks at the two machines and he smiles and he shrugs and smiles and pours again. It could be violence and nonviolence it could be white and black women and men it could be war and peace or any binary system, love and hate, enemy, friend. Yes and no, be and not-be, what we do and what we don't do.

On a corner in East Harlem garbage, reading, a deep smile, rape, forgetfulness, a hot street of murder, misery, withered hope, a man keeps pouring grape into ORANGE and orange into the one marked GRAPE, pouring orange into GRAPE and grape into ORANGE forever.

In an important sense, the century that concludes the first stanza (“On a blistering afternoon in East Harlem in the twentieth /century.”) is more spatial than temporal. Rather than scaling up, the century’s relative position is the fragment’s most diminished terminus, an imponderable
time-scale converted into the smallest conceivable pressurized space, a proscenium for the staging of the misencounter between the hot dog vendor and the “you”—become an “I”—who “faces him in between.” Rukeyser’s ballad hinges on this in-betweeness, though this positioning is less one of indeterminacy or, indeed, ambivalence, than a determined awareness of a chosen position, one with particular power and limits.

The final three stanzas of “Ballad of Orange and Grape” return us to the poem’s title. “Orange” and “grape” do not have an indexical function; rather, the question of what they—and along with them, the ballad itself—may index is at stake. As Amy King observed in a recent discussion of the poem, orange and grape are not opposites. They resemble one another more than any actual fruit; the words refer more to the “markings” on “the usual two machines.” From the general standpoint of capital, a standpoint to which the vendor seems wise, it doesn’t matter into which machine the garish liquid is put. Their consumption depends on the visual grammar of the immediate, not on “reading comprehension.” “Belief,” in other words, appears to have little or nothing, to do with the matter—and that symbolic crisis, a crisis of belief—in representation, in reading and the meaning of readability, in the shared values and valuation of language, in poetry’s didactic possibilities—lands hard in the poem’s final forever, the seemingly eternal present pouring of content into indifferent forms under the cover of a smile and a shrug.

But the corner of East Harlem and question of the readability of the final stanza’s list hold out other possibilities. These poems are, to a degree, symptomatic of the demise of such projects and the larger global economic crisis of the ‘70s, but only to a degree. They also require an acknowledgment of the role active resistance played in the demise of urban renewal and its schematized modernist aesthetics. Moreover, Brooks and Rukeyser wrote neither Poundian Villonauds (after Swinburne) nor, as Pound titled one poem, ballads for Gloom. Nor are their
ballads anthems of late capitalism. Brooks once wrote that “if you wanted a poem, you only had to look out the window.” Looking out the window at the accumulation of capital in the twentieth century necessarily entailed different meanings, different politics, when the view was from East Harlem or Bronzeville. But that a writer could look out of the window and write a ballad seems particularly striking. I hope I’ve begun to suggest how, in important ways, the ballad undergirds both mainstream and experimental print poetries’ efforts to reorganize and reinvent the literary as a counterforce to the spatial crises of urban renewal and the cultural logic of crisis mediated by print journalism. These efforts suggest that the ballad’s special responsiveness to crises of capital may lie precisely in the comparative structures that drive it: after all, there is no singular, authoritative ballad; the genre resists the twinned identities of property and authorship; it never sings a single or a cover, but always another song, a song with a seriality different than that of the newspaper and the court of public opinion. There is not one ballad of the landlord, one ballad of housing crisis, one ballad of lynching, or, as the title of Adrienne Rich’s “Ballad of the Poverties” (2009) makes clear, one ballad of the poor. Thus iterability entails not simply something like “the violence of the afterlife of lynching” that Jacqueline Goldsby sees in Brooks’s focus on mothers, but arguably, the violence of anticipation—the next lynching, the next crisis, the next article, advertisement, interview.

Brooks’s “A Mississippi Mother” ends:

    The last bleak news of the ballad.
    The rest of the rugged music.
    The last quatrain.

The “last” of the “last bleak news of the ballad” may be read as the ballad’s ultimate reminder that there will not be a final quatrain or a final headline to the limits of capital. But here I think “last” means “latest,” as in the latest in a series. The barriers may recrudesce. But “last” may also designate possibility, and reckon with that possibility not in a “great reversal of decisions” but in
the dialectical tension between material social practice, the representation of space, and the space of representation. All of the poets I’ve referred to here, conduct such a reckoning “with the not-old and with surprise,” and make tactical use of the ballad’s capacities not so much to hide or protect poetry from the encroachments of capital but, as Rich has written, “to imagine a future for poetry, not drawn from the headlines but able to resist them.”

**Ballad of Orange and Grape** (Muriel Rukeyser, *Breaking Open*, 1973)

After you finish your work  
after you do your day  
after you've read your reading  
after you've written your say –  
you go down the street to the hot dog stand,  
one block down and across the way.  
On a blistering afternoon in East Harlem in the twentieth century.

Most of the windows are boarded up,  
the rats run out of a sack –  
sticking out of the crummy garage  
one shiny long Cadillac;  
at the glass door of the drug-addiction center,  
a man who'd like to break your back.  
But here's a brown woman with a little girl dressed in rose and pink, too.

Frankfurters frankfurters sizzle on the steel  
where the hot-dog-man leans –  
nothing else on the counter  
but the usual two machines,  
the grape one, empty, and the orange one, empty,  
I face him in between.  
A black boy comes along, looks at the hot dogs, goes on walking.

I watch the man as he stands and pours  
in the familiar shape  
bright purple in the one marked ORANGE  
orange in the one marked GRAPE,  
the grape drink in the machine marked ORANGE  
and orange drink in the GRAPE.  
Just the one word large and clear, unmistakable, on each machine.

I ask him : How can we go on reading  
and make sense out of what we read? –  
How can they write and believe what they're writing,  
the young ones across the street,  
while you go on pouring grape in ORANGE  
and orange into the one marked GRAPE –?
(How are we going to believe what we read and we write and we hear and we say and we do?)

He looks at the two machines and he smiles and he shrugs and smiles and pours again. It could be violence and nonviolence it could be white and black women and men it could be war and peace or any binary system, love and hate, enemy, friend. Yes and no, be and not-be, what we do and what we don't do.

On a corner in East Harlem garbage, reading, a deep smile, rape, forgetfulness, a hot street of murder, misery, withered hope, a man keeps pouring grape into ORANGE and orange into the one marked GRAPE, pouring orange into GRAPE and grape into ORANGE forever.

A Bronzelle Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon. (Gwendolyn Brooks, The Bean Eaters, 1960)

From the first it had been like a Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood. A wildness cut up, and tied in little bunches, Like the four-line stanzas of the ballads she had never quite understood--the ballads they had set her to, in school.

Herself: the milk-white maid, the "maid mild" Of the ballad. Pursued By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince. The Happiness-Ever-After. That was worth anything. It was good to be a "maid mild." That made the breath go fast.

Her bacon burned. She Hastened to hide it in the step-on can, and Drew more strips from the meat case. The eggs and sour-milk biscuits Did well. She set out a jar Of her new quince preserve.

. . . But there was something about the matter of the Dark Villain. He should have been older, perhaps. The hacking down of a villain was more fun to think about When his menace possessed undisputed breath, undisputed height, And best of all, when history was cluttered With the bones of many eaten knights and princesses.

The fun was disturbed, then all but nullified When the Dark Villain was a blackish child Of Fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty, And a mouth too young to have lost every reminder Of its infant softness.
That boy must have been surprised! For
These were grown-ups. Grown-ups were supposed to be wise.
And the Fine Prince—and that other—so tall, so broad, so
Grown! Perhaps the boy had never guessed
That the trouble with grown-ups was that under the magnificent shell of adulthood, just under,
Waited the baby full of tantrums. It occurred to her that there may have been something
Ridiculous to the picture of the Fine Prince
Rushing (rich with the breadth and height and
Mature solidness whose lack, in the Dark Villain, was impressing her,
Confronting her more and more as this first day after the trial
And acquittal (wore on) rushing
With his heavy companion to hack down (unhorsed)
That little foe. So much had happened, she could not remember now what that foe had done
Against her, or if anything had been done.
The breaks were everywhere. That she could think
Of no thread capable of the necessary Sew-work.

She made the babies sit in their places at the table.
Then, before calling HIM, she hurried
To the mirror with her comb and lipstick. It was necessary
To be more beautiful than ever.
The beautiful wife.
For sometimes she fancied he looked at her as though
Measuring her. As if he considered, Had she been worth it?
Had she been worth the blood, the cramped cries, the little stirring bravado,
The gradual dulling of those Negro eyes,
The sudden, overwhelming little-boyness in that barn?
Whatever she might feel or half-feel, the lipstick necessity was something apart.
HE must never conclude
That she had not been worth it.

HE sat down, the Fine Prince, and
Began buttering a biscuit.
HE looked at HIS hands.
More papers were in from the North, HE mumbled. More maddening headlines.
With their pepper-words, "bestiality," and "barbarism," and
"Shocking."
The half-sneers HE had mastered for the trial worked across HIS sweet and pretty face.

What HE'd like to do, HE explained, was kill them all.
The time lost. The unwanted fame.
Still, it had been fun to show those intruders
A thing or two. To show that snappy-eyed mother,
That sassy, Northern, brown-black--

Nothing could stop Mississippi.
HE knew that. Big fella
Knew that.
And, what was so good, Mississippi knew that.
They could send in their petitions, and scar
Their newspapers with bleeding headlines. Their governors
Could appeal to Washington . . .

"What I want," the older baby said, "is 'lasses on my jam."
Whereupon the younger baby
Picked up the molasses pitcher and threw
The molasses in his brother's face. Instantly
The Fine Prince leaned across the table and slapped
The small and smiling criminal. She did not speak.
When the HAND
Came down and away, and she could look at her child,
At her baby-child,
She could think only of blood.
Surely her baby's cheek
Had disappeared, and in its place, surely,
Hung a heaviness, a lengthening red, a red that had no end.
She shook her head. It was not true, of course.
It was not true at all. The
Child's face was as always, the
Color of the paste in her paste-jar.

She left the table, to the tune of the children's lamentations, which were shriller
Than ever. She
looked out of a window. She said not a word. That
Was one of the new Somethings--
The fear,
Tying her as with iron.

Suddenly she felt his hands upon her. He had followed her
to the window. The children were whimpering now.
Such bits of tots. And she, their mother,
Could not protect them. She looked at her shoulders, still
Gripped in the claim of his hands. She tried, but could not resist the idea
That a red ooze was seeping, spreading darkly, thickly, slowly,
Over her white shoulders, her own shoulders,
And over all of Earth and Mars.

He whispered something to her, did the Fine Prince, something about love and night and intention.
She heard no hoof-beat of the horse and saw no flash of the shining steel.

He pulled her face around to meet
His, and there it was, close close,
For the first time in all the days and nights.
His mouth, wet and red,
So very, very, very red,
Closed over hers.

Then a sickness heaved within her.
The courtroom Coca-Cola,
The courtroom beer and hate and sweat and drone,
Pushed like a wall against her. She wanted to bear it.
But his mouth would not go away and neither would the
Decapitated exclamation points in that Other Woman's eyes.

She did not scream.
She stood there.
But a hatred for him burst into glorious flower,
And its perfume enclasped them--big,
Bigger than all magnolias.

The last bleak news of the ballad.
The rest of the rugged music.
The last quatrain.

**The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till** (Gwendolyn Brooks, *The Bean Eaters*, 1960)

after the murder,
after the trial

Emmett's mother is a pretty-faced thing;
the tint of pulled taffy.
She sits in a red room,
drinking black coffee.
She kisses her killed boy.
And she is sorry.
Chaos in windy grays
through a red prairie.

**The Ballad of the Landlord** (Langston Hughes, *Jim Crow’s Last Stand* (1943))

Landlord, landlord,
My roof has sprung a leak.
Don’t you ’member I told you about it
Way last week?

Landlord, landlord,
These steps is broken down.
When you come up yourself
It’s a wonder you don’t fall down.

Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
Ten Bucks you say is due?
Well, that’s Ten Bucks more’n I’ll pay you
Till you fix this house up new.

What? You gonna get eviction orders?
You gonna cut off my heat?
You gonna take my furniture and
Throw it in the street?

Um-huh! You talking high and mighty.
Talk on – till you get through.
You ain’t gonna be able to say a word
If I land my fist on you.

*Police! Police!*
*Come and get this man!*
*He’s trying to ruin the government*
*And overturn the land!*

Copper’s whistle!
Patrol bell!
Arrest.

Precinct Station.
Iron cell.
Headlines in press:
MAN THREATENS LANDLORD
.
.

TENANT HELD NO BAIL
.
.

JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL.

1 "That urban chaos is the problem we have been seeing and seeing into," as Ashbery writes in "Definition of Blue," in Double Dream of Spring (1970). See ChristopherNealson, Matter of Capital (Harvard UP, 2011) for an account of how Ashbery develops "a network of topoi" that amounts to a response to "a matter of capital." The Ballard plays a noteworthy role in Ashbery’s work. Consider Ashbery’s "Hotel Lautréamont" from the book by the same title (1992) which proceeds with sestina-like repetition, and begins and ends, “Research has shown that ballads were produced by all society, / working as a team. They didn’t just happen. There was no guesswork. / The people, then, knew what they wanted and how to get it.” See also Ashbery’s “Fantasia on ‘The Nut-Brown Maid,’” which appeared in Houseboat Days (1977). The title refers to a fifteenth century Ballard.

2 The term is David Harvey’s, from The Limits to Capital (Verso, 2006). A failure in which, by many accounts, the high-modernist aesthetic ambitions of city planners aligned with, if not facilitated, the movement of federal funding into private-sector projects designed for the increased accumulation and flow of finance capital. In most instances, the respatializations of “slum removal” that ensued were immense verticalizations—towers and superblocks—that ultimately served to further displace and disenfranchise the poor and, also crucial for the Ballard, anonymize public housing. Langston Hughes’s “Ballad of the Landlord” for instance, not only points to the intersection of the Ballard and with one of capital’s principal obsessions—housing—but also suggests how the Ballard engages with the modern newspaper, and specifically, the headline, as one of the principal means by which institutional racism is standardized and narrativized into the homogenizing structures of temporality on which Anderson focuses.

3 In “Speeches at the Barriers” (1983), Susan Howe figures the Ballard as a kind of speech activity capable of dismantling as well as shoring up the barriers of gender, classism, and racism. See Maureen McClane’s transhistorical treatment of the Ballard in Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry (Cambridge UP, 2008).

4 See Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (Verso, 2006), and the essays by Pheng Cheah, Jonathan Culler, and Andrew Parker in Grounds of Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson (Routledge, 2003). My sense of the broadband Ballard is informed by the essays available on The English Broadside Ballad Archive hosted by the University of California Santa Barbara—especially Paxton Heymeyer’s “The Social Function of the Broadside Ballad; or, a New Medley of Readers”—and on the Library of Congress’s introduction to and collection of “Traditional Ballads.”

5 For a recent précis of this argument, see Jameson’s “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” NLR 92, March-April 2015.

6 Brooks described the mother in this poem this way: “[her mother] has certain lessons to hand down to the young—certain positives that, she believes, were reliable yesterday, and are reliable today, and will be reliable tomorrow unless we humankind are going to start from scratch with new gods, new earth, new sky, new exists and entrances, and an absolute revolution, or reversal of decisions.” See Brooks’s Blacks, p. 32. See also Karen Jackson Ford, “The Last Quattrain: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Ends of Ballads,” Twentieth Century Literature, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Fall 2010), pp. 371-395.

7 In The New Urban Renewal: The Economic Transformation of Harlem and Bronzeville (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008), Derek S. Hyla writes: “Harlem and Bronzeville have undergone two similar transitions in the twentieth century: changing from affluent white areas to significant black communities and then from mixed-income black areas to highly concentrated poor neighborhoods. Each alteration has highlighted major societal forces that have been instrumental in shaping America’s urban landscape. The formation of these communities as cultural, politically, and economically self-contained black spaces—cities within cities in the 1920s—expressed the importance of industrialization, patterns of black urban migration, antagonistic black/white relations, and black solidarity on urban neighborhoods. Their second transition, from thriving, segregated communities to what Kenneth Clark coined the “dark ghetto” in Harlem and Arnold Hirsch labeled the “second ghetto” in Bronzeville signaled how deindustrialization, concentrated public housing construction, persistent white racism, and black middle class movement to the suburbs merged to create extremely disadvantaged black neighborhoods that engendered America’s urban “underclass” (4-5). In Black Metropolis (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970), St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton quote the Urban League Report of 1966, which described this urban “underclass” more starkly, as an “urban black peasantry” (lxiii). See “Postscript: 1969” (lx-1xx). Hyla credits economic globalization as a force
both for the initial decline of these areas (industrial labor force moving away) and for their redevelopment (downtown centralization) and gentrification by the black middle-class in the twenty-first century.

Before she read “The Ballad of Orange and Grape” at the University of Warwick, England in 1971, Rukeyser remarked:

At 5:30 every afternoon the white people go streaming out of Harlem with their attaché cases—social workers, teachers, undergrads…and in one’s guilt, one tries to stall it off a little. I went…to that hotdog stand… I was thinking of air conditioning. I knew I ought to be living there. This goes on and on in me all the time.…it’s a lot like everything else. What the hell form is a thing like that? I’ll be damned if I write a ballad.

Pheng Cheah’s analysis of what Anderson calls the “spectre of comparison” suggests how we might read Rukeyser’s gloss in terms of “a catachresis for the material conditions that have brought double-consciousness into being—innovations in communications and technology, more precisely, newspaper-print language and long-distance transportation, which have caused the world to shrink for everyone and not just the intelligentsia. These material developments,” Cheah adds, “have created quotidian universals that make everything comparable for everyone, and cause everyone to compare everything” (11). Or, as Rukeyser puts it, “it’s a lot like everything else.” But rather than reproduce these universals, the postmodern ballad re-presents them as distortions, raising questions about the limits of comparability and commensurability. See “PoemTalk #78” at Jacket2: http://jacket2.org/podcasts/how-can-they-write-and-believe-poemtalk-78.

Consider, for instance, the differences in Langston Hughes’s “Ballad of the Landlord” (1941) and Brooks’s engagement with the Chicago Defender. In Hughes’s ballad, readers see how the traditional literary form fragments as it comes up against the deceptive, standardized racialized drama of the headline with which the ballad ends: “MAN THREATENS LANDLORD :: TENANT HELD NO BAIL :: JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL.” Brooks’s work, as Jacqueline Goldsby has shown, cannot be read independent of her concern with the circulation and selling of Till’s murder in the Negro press. See Goldsby’s A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006). The founding of the Associated Negro Press in Chicago in 1919 and its demise in 1964 is part of the critical backdrop to this story; Brooks, like Hughes, wrote regularly for the Defender. As Allen Ginsberg’s “Ballad of the Skeletons” (1995) suggests, the ballad’s ability to register obsolescence can also be cast against the horizon of the publishable: “Said the NY Times skeleton / That’s not fit to print.”

The phrase appears in Samuel Zipp’s Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York (Oxford UP, 2010). Evan’s and Tim’s papers open up other possibilities for thinking about how the everyday might work in the ballads of women poets.

Another way to conceptualize space in these poems might be to borrow the terms David Harvey adapts from Lefebvre in The Limits of Capital. “Ballad of Orange and Grape” in this reading establishes a dialectical tension between material social practice (the classroom, the school, the block, the street as experienced spaces); representations of space (the poem’s representation of East Harlem, the street, the twentieth century); and spaces of representation (space as it is lived on the street corner, by the man in the drug addiction center, the brown woman and the little girl, and the black boy of the second and third stanzas, as well as by the vendor and Rukeyser herself).

In another context, Fredric Jameson describes gossip as “…the mediation [and discourse] whereby spatial forms are at one with collective experience…a kind of speech that is neither uniquely private nor forbiddingly standardized in an impersonal public form, a type of discourse in which the same, in repetition, is transmitted again and again through a host of eventful variations, each of which has its own value…. Gossip is indeed the very element in which reference—or if you prefer, the ‘referent’ itself—expands and contracts, ceaselessly transformed from a mere token, a notation, a short-hand object, back into a full-dress narrative. People as well as things are the reified markers of such potential story-telling: and what for a high realism was the substantive of character, of the individual ego, is here equally swept away into a flux of anecdotes—proper names on the one hand, an intermittent store of gossip on the other.” See “Ulysses in History,” The Modernist Papers (Verso, 2007) 144-145. These remarks suggest a number of questions about the function of gossip in the postmodern ballad. For more on the ballad’s silly and parodic dimensions, consider Terry Eagleton’s “Ballad of English Literature” (1986) and “Ballad of Marxist Criticism” (1997), in which he quips, “Jameson is fine but to imbibe it after wine / Just leaves you feeling rough.” No doubt Eagleton is familiar with W.K. Wimsatt’s Parodies of Ballad Criticism (1711-1787) (1957). Consider also E.E. Cummings’s “Ballad of an Intellectual” (1932) or Marx’s own regard for his juvenile ballads imitating Heine.
To Rukeyser’s list of binaries we might add Zipp rehearsal of the convenient, polarizing fictions that often characterized the discourse about urban renewal. Zipp writes “The ‘planners’ versus the ‘walkers,’ the ‘view from the tower’ versus the ‘view from the ground, even ‘Moses’ versus Jacobs’—all these oppositions capture in concepts what was actually a historical process. One the one hand were the planners, the removed apostles of what James Scott calls ‘authoritarian high modernism,’ who descended from on high to wipe away history, street life, and the day-to-day patterns of working-class neighborhood life in the interests of administrative order. On the other were the walkers, whose peregrinations represented an entirely different city, a reservoir of affiliations and attachments that the view from on high surveyed and even controlled, but did not understand. These oft-repeated metaphorical figures describe accurate tendencies,” Zipp concludes, “but employed in accounts of actual events they become static placeholders rather than active navigators reaction to events in the flow of time. They are fixed and frozen outside of history” (11-12). Part of Zipp’s project is to show how such binary characterizations—typical of modernist reformism in writers like Jacob Riis—tend to ignore or obscure the historical process of modernization. The postmodern ballad seems particularly suited to adopt a standpoint from which this process—and the crises that mark it—may be reconsidered in nonbinaristic terms.

As Zipp observes, “Out of East Harlem came the first resistance to urban renewal and the first critique of “modern urbanism and… its ‘mass way of life’” (21). And as Jameson observes in Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Duke UP, 1991), “in the realm of architecture…the modifications in aesthetic production are most dramatically visible…and their theoretical problems … most centrally raised and articulated.” The trajectory of Gwendolyn Brooks’s work, from what Richard Wright called the “world of the kitchenettes” that opens A Street in Bronzeville (1945) to the Mecca flats building of In the Mecca (1968), anatomizes the cultural logic of urban renewal. The particular history of the Mecca Flats building, from its use as a hotel in the 1893 World’s Fair, to its shift to an all-black middle-class population by 1912, to its purchase by the Illinois Institute of Technology and subsequent demolition and redevelopment in 1956 as Mies Van der Rohe’s Crown Hall for IIT’s School of Architecture, touted by the University’s website (http://arch.iit.edu/about/sr-crown-hall) as a “universal space that can be infinitely adapted to changing use” and “the site,” the City of Chicago’s Official Website proudly adds, “of a Jan Tichy video display”—perhaps tells the story of capital accumulation and uneven development through the postwar rise of the University more powerfully than any narrative. The Hall’s designation as a National Historic Landmark by the National Parks Service in 2001 in a certain sense completes this story.

That said, what Ericka Beckman has recently observed about fiction in another context is also true of ballads: they have long served to underwrite the imaginative and fictive underpinnings of capitalist enterprise (“An Oil Well Named Macondo: Latin American Literature in the Time of Global Capital,” PMLA, 2012 Jan, Vol.127(1), pp.145-151). Indeed, in the nineteenth century, companies often employed poets to write broadsides to sell their products, and in Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America (Columbia UP, 2012) Mike Chasar has recently shown how the Burma-Vita Company used billboard ballads to do the same between 1926 and 1963; this “roadside verse,” Chasar argues, provided important commercial vernaculars and conceptual models for poets like Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams (indeed Williams’s “Ballad of Faith” (1950)—a faith in purity of the automobile—suggests as much). But perhaps no example of capital’s absorption of the ballad is as telling as that of the use of Bertolt Brecht’s and Kurt Weill’s murder ballad “Mack the Knife” in Goldfinger (1964), which becomes the blueprint for the franchise, as Adrian Daub and Charles Kronengold write, “all about how capitalism has become a kind of fate.” See “‘A Golden Girl Knows’: The Ballads of James Bond” in The James Bond Songs: Pop Anthems of Late Capitalism (Oxford UP, 2015).