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On Holding and Being Held: Hart Crane’s Queer Intimacy

And I have been able to give freedom and life which was acknowledged in the ecstasy of walking hand in hand across the most beautiful bridge of the world, the cables enclosing us and pulling us upward in such a dance as I have never walked and never can walk with another. (Crane, *Letters* 181)

In his rapturous description of crossing Brooklyn Bridge with Emil Opffer, the sailor with whom he shared the most intense affair of his short life, the lovestruck Hart Crane imagines New York’s monument to modernity as a kind of rocking cradle. Crane’s ‘beautiful’ bridge ‘encloses’ and lifts Hart and Emil, offering refuge and support while they experience their ‘ecstasy’. Just as a cradle replicates the holding environment of the mother’s body, Crane’s experience of the bridge – whose ‘cables breathe’ as its ‘arms’ lift in the address ‘To Brooklyn Bridge’ that begins his 1930 epic *The Bridge* – also recalls the earliest scene of intersubjective intimacy (*Poems* 46). For the object relations psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, holding is both the first stage of satisfactory parental care and a form of loving. Winnicott stresses that the term ‘holding’ denotes ‘not only the actual physical holding of the infant’ which starts of course in inter-uterine life, ‘but also the total environmental provision prior to the concept of *living with*’ (*Maturational* 43, italics in original).[[1]](#endnote-1) Yet beside the image of being safely held, held up, and, implicitly (in their ec-stasy) held together by the other, the passage depicts the intimate hand-holding of the two lovers. The symmetrical touching of ‘hand in hand’, performed syntactically in the phrase’s chiasmus, contrasts with the clear asymmetry of the bridge’s maternal holding. In what we might be tempted to dismiss as an embarrassingly sentimental letter, Crane hints at the possible complexities of intimacy, suggesting two distinct models of object relations; two distinct somatic and affective partnerships.

This article explores intimate contact in Crane’s two published volumes of poetry: *White Buildings* (1926) and *The Bridge*. I am interested in the ways in which Crane’s work explores the conceptual and spatial bounds of intimacy: Crane allows us to appreciate that intimacy relies on confusion between sexual and non-sexual registers and affects, and is predicated on a dynamic between containment and space. I will employ the Winnicottian concept of ‘unintegration’ – a state in which one can safely experience the feeling of falling apart because another ‘holds’ the environment – to explore an alternative to the Lacanian emphasis on jouissance that has dominated queer readings of Crane’s poetry. I want finally to argue that Crane’s poetry articulates (and enacts) an intense desire for a hard-won reciprocal intimacy based on recognition, a form of intersubjective exchange that may be illuminated by the psychoanalysis of Jessica Benjamin.

Following Benjamin, we might characterize the two distinct models of intimate partnership in Crane’s Brooklyn Bridge letter by the terms ‘mutuality’ and ‘complementarity’. Classical psychoanalysis, Benjamin argues, has stressed ‘complementarity in interaction over mutuality. The other is represented as an answer, and the self as the need; the other as the breast, and the self is the hunger; the other actively holding, the self is actively being held’ (47-8). Significantly, Benjamin claims that such complementary dual unity forms the basic structure of domination, while mutuality forms the path to recognition and equality. I want to suggest that the distinction between these relationships is key to Crane’s exploration of intimacy. While Crane’s lyric ‘I’ sometimes wants or even needs to be held, he also aspires towards a form of recognition characterised by such tropes as mutual looking and hand-holding.

As Langdon Hammer notes, ‘Hands and eyes are the parts of the body that fashion bonds in Crane’s poetry, and the marks that they frequently bear testify to the extreme difficulty of this task: “blamed bleeding hands” in “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen,” the swimmers “lost morning eyes” in “Voyages II”’ (130).[[2]](#endnote-2) Intimacy is often a problem as much as a longed-for possibility in Crane, but it remains a constant preoccupation enacted at the level of the body. The words *hand/s*, *lift*, and *hold* feature prominently across the work, and *eye* and *eyes* are in fact the most frequently recurring words in Crane’s relatively slight poetic corpus.[[3]](#endnote-3) Most often such references are to the eyes of another rather than to the speaker’s own eyes, and this interocular looking -- as the lyric ‘I’ gazes into the eyes of the poem’s ‘you’ – signals the kind of recognition that is so central to Crane’s understanding of successful intimacy. While recent queer readings have been more attentive to Crane’s interest in the body, there has been a tendency to bypass such moments of apparent slush in favour of scenes that might be read as examples of jouissance*.* Intimate pleasures, complex in their own right, are presumed to be less interesting than the painful pleasures of the death drive. Rather than choosing not to read moments of intimacy, or reading beyond or behind such scenes for metaphysical significance, I want to explore the full complexity of these often fraught accounts of spatial proximity and bodily and affective contact.[[4]](#endnote-4) In making such excursions, I suggest that we might consider the discrepancies between queer theory’s Hart Crane and Hart Crane’s queer theory, if it may be termed as such. Crane’s poetry offers an alternative to solipsistic (but paradoxically self-splitting) representations of desire and sexuality on which a particular incarnation of queer theory, rooted in intrapsychic Lacanian paradigms, would encourage us to dwell. Indeed, I think that a turn to the intersubjective theories of the object relations school, or ‘Middle Group’,[[5]](#endnote-5) allows us to shift the focus from ‘desire’ on to terms such as ‘love’, a word that Hart Crane, who frequently enjoyed making puns on his own first name, might well have preferred.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In my attempts to trace a more affirmative strand to Crane’s poetics, I follow the instructive lead of Michael D. Snediker, who has also sought to eradicate the poet from the ‘narratives of *jouissance* and self-destruction’ that have dominated queer readings of his work (45).[[7]](#endnote-7) As Snediker has argued, queer theory’s fetishization of self-shattering illuminates most queer readings of Crane, which take his biographical suicide and poetic failure/textual difficulty as paradigmatic of queer self-dissolution.

Merrill Cole, Gordon A. Tapper, and Tim Dean all agree on the centrality of jouissance to Crane’s work, the latter, for instance, arguing that ‘Crane's reader is asked not to identify with a textually generated subject position (homosexual or otherwise) but to reexperience a jouissance that eliminates every subject position’ (‘Hart Crane's Poetics’ 105). While such works as ‘Possessions’, Crane’s bleak meditation on the painful pleasures of cruising, suggest a congruence between queer desire and a deathly jouissance, they also initiate an exploration of structures of intersubjectivity that might be discussed in terms of recognition, mutuality, sociality, and, yes, even intimacy. The emphasis on self-shattering not only leads us to miss crucial aspects of Crane’s poetic project, but also contributes to the overwhelming discourse of failure that, as John Emil Vincent has powerfully argued, is used by Crane critics to describe his ‘life, his alcoholism, suicide, sexuality, and career, as well as single poems, groups of poems, his poetics, his execution of those poetics, and his cosmology’ (127). And as Vincent astutely notes, saying Crane’s life was a failure ‘suggests things about a successful life that seem suspect’ (131).[[8]](#endnote-8)

The celebration of jouissance to which Snediker refers gathered momentum in the first decade of the twenty first century, but now shows, I would suggest, some signs of exhaustion.[[9]](#endnote-9) Yet in 2003 Tim Dean could claim that US queer theorists, influenced by Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, had in fact shown little interest in the Lacanian concept of jouissance: ‘Queer theory, which has such an elaborate discourse of pleasure, shows little regard for what exceeds the pleasure principle’ (‘Lacan and Queer Theory’ 248).[[10]](#endnote-10) Dean provides a notable exception to this apparent moratorium on jouissance in Leo Bersani’s 1987 essay ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’, a powerful critique of the ‘*redemptive reinvention of sex*’ which, written at the height of the AIDS crisis, famously argues for the ‘inestimable value of sex as […] anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinuturing, antiloving’ (215, italics in original). But by the time Dean’s essay on Lacan and queer theory was published, this ‘exception’ was already becoming the rule. In 2004 the fetishization of self-shattering found its most dramatic, influential, and persuasive incarnation in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman’s dizzying celebration of queer negativity. *No Future* finds in jouissance the basis for a queer politics, or rather a queer anti-politics; the end of politics and its dependence on futurity. Throughout the book, Edelman (who, like Dean, has also written on Crane) opposes reproductive sexuality with *sinthom*osexuality ‘a term that links the jouissance to which we gain access through the sinthome with a homosexuality made to figure the lack in symbolic meaning-production on account of which, as Lacan declares, “there is no sexual relation”’ (*No Future* 113). Edelman argues that the death drive names what the social calls on the queer to figure (in opposition to the future-facing figure of the Child), and impels queers to take this role seriously: to embrace negativity as a means of challenging value as defined by the social, and thus to challenge ‘the very value of the social itself’ (*No Future* 6).

I don’t wish to claim that there is no place for the strategic use of jouissance in accounts of queer sexuality and queer (anti-)sociality, but rather that it provides a limited field of vision for the kinds of affective and embodied relations depicted in, among other things, the poetry of Hart Crane. While Bersani and Edelman’s celebration of the negativity of queer sexuality offers a powerful position against attempts to put affirmative forms of sociality at the service of homophobia, it is, not at all surprisingly, less helpful in the analysis of queer affections at their most communal, egalitarian, nuturing, and loving.[[11]](#endnote-11) But significantly (for this relationship between queer theory and jouissance) Bersani’s attention has recently turned to the question of intimacy. In the 2008 book *intimacies* (co-authored with Adam Phillips), Bersani offers his own version of queer intimacy, one that remains rooted – or would at least claim to remain rooted -- in a negative logic of intrapsychic analysis. Bersani’s ‘impersonal intimacy’ is born out of narcissism, the very thing that, he claims, psychoanalysis has misled us into regarding as the enemy of intimacy.

In the first chapter of *intimacies* Bersani outlines a mode of ‘pure potentiality’, an ontological anterior to subjecthood that he finds most evident in the analytic exchange (26). Bersani celebrates the analytic encounter because he thinks that it allows us to imagine an ‘impersonal intimacy divested of sexual longings and anxieties [...] a special kind of talk unrestrained by any consequences other than further talk’ (*intimacies* 28).This ‘special kind of talk’ allows one, crucially, to access the It (the *Es*) in the I: the ‘self-hypotheses of the unconscious are realized – more exactly, suspended in the real – only in talk. And this talk may be the only imaginable form of a nondestructive *jouissance*, the *jouissance* of giving and receiving, through embodied language, the subjecthood of others’ (*intimacies* 29). But framing the dilemma of intimacy as a choice between talk and sex is a much less obvious move if we turn to a Winnicottian, as opposed to Lacanian, mode of analysis. In the writing of the Middle Group we find an emphasis on the somatic, spatial, even haptic elements of the analytic scene that might add a further layer of complexity to the Adam Phillips aphorism (‘Psychoanalysis is about what two people can say to each other if they agree not to have sex’) that begins Bersani’s meditations. Patrick Casement has written on the role of space in the analytic process, while Christopher Bollas has emphasised the patient’s relationship to the objects in the room, including the sensation of being on the couch.[[12]](#endnote-12) And touch played an important – and famously controversial – role in Winnicott’s practice as well as his theory: in a recent essay collection on this very topic, Graeme Galton notes how Winnicott ‘subscribed to the idea that physical holding might sometimes be required as a means of providing extra containment for the neediest of his patients’ (2). As I hope to elaborate through my readings of Crane, object relations psychoanalysis allows us to think though the erotic *and* non-erotic haptics of intimacy in ways that escape Lacanian paradigms.

Yet while he relies on Lacan’s emphasis on the narcissistic structure of love, Bersani calls for a reinvention of ‘the relational possibilities of narcissism itself’ and notes that ‘Every theory of love is, necessarily, a theory of object relations’ (*intimacies* 76; 72). Crucially, I think that talking about even impersonal models of intimacy pushes Bersani towards the limits of the Lacanian purview, and, as Phillips points out in his response to Bersani’s thesis (Chapter 4, ‘On a More Impersonal Note’), towards ‘a language that is at once germane through rarely explicitly alluded to in Bersani’s words: the language of early development, of mothers and fathers and babies’ (*intimacies* 104). Phillips points in particular to Bersani’s section on Plato, where he writes that *Phaedrus* ‘undoes the opposition between the active lover and the passive loved one by instituting a kind of reciprocal self-recognition in which the opposition between sameness and difference becomes irrelevant as a structuring category of being’ (*intimacies* 86). Indeed the term ‘reciprocal self-recognition’, for example, would not be out of place in the work by Jessica Benjamin I cite throughout this essay.

The developmental psychoanalysis of the object relations school allows us to imagine affirmative relations that challenge the emphasis on queer negativity and the Lacanian fetishization of the impossible pleasure beyond the pleasure principle. Perhaps more surprisingly, it also offers plenty of room for queer ambivalence. Although the object relations view is that mother-infant relationship is paradigmatic of all models of subjectivity, Winnicott’s mothers and infants are, equally, not always or only mothers and infants. As Adam Phillips points out elsewhere, Winnicott often uses mothers and babies to talk about different kinds of relationships, enabling him to say things about sexual relationships that he wouldn’t otherwise be able to do (*Winnicott* x). Such a slippage, I want to suggest, points to the ways in which thinking about intimacy invites us to imagine spatial dynamics and affective bonds which challenge normative taxonomies of intersubjectivity. Equally, Winnicott’s writing is rooted in the logic of paradox in a way that allows us to honour the celebration of alternate and contradictory meaning in Hart Crane.[[13]](#endnote-13) Winnicott’s most well-known theory, that of the transitional object, relies fundamentally on ‘*the paradox, and the acceptance of the paradox*: the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object’: paradox is, Winnicott reminds us, the theory’s ‘essential feature’ (*Playing* 119). And, as we shall see, Benjamin’s theory of mutual recognition is equally dependent on the sustaining of paradox. But perhaps most vital of all for my reading of Crane, object relations psychoanalysis brings the body into focus: while Winnicott understands holding to encompass more than the physical he also, importantly, in no way obviates or obscures the literal and bodily. Maternal holding, he stresses, protects the infant from ‘physiological insult’, and takes into account ‘the infant’s skin sensitivity—touch, temperature, auditory sensitivity, visual sensitivity, sensitivity to falling (action of gravity) and of the infant’s lack of knowledge of anything other than the self’ (*Maturational* 49). Furthermore, the body in which Winnicott is interested is not simply a body dominated by drives, but a social and affective body. Phillips emphasises Winnicott’s belief that the infant sought contact with a person, not simply instinctual gratification from an object.: ‘The infant starts life as a profoundly sociable being: he clamours for intimacy, not only relief of tension – for relatedness, not simply for satisfaction*’* (*Winnicott* 9).

In the course of this essay I don’t simply (or only) want to mine object relations psychoanalysis for some theories that might help us to think about Crane’s queer intimacies. Rather I hope also to point towards the common reading practices invited by Crane’s poetry and object relations accounts of intersubjectivity. As Phillips notes, Winnicott rarely uses the word ‘insight’: his focus instead is in discovering, through pleasure and play, what interests one, rather than what one knows (*Winnicott* 144). This ludic tolerance for unknowing seems an especially hospitable reading position from which one might find delight and interest (as opposed to frustration or anxiety) in Crane’s particular brand of modernist obscurity. Jacqueline Rose describes the mode of reading invited by Christopher Bollas as an ‘ideal verson of how a mother would treat her child’: ‘Read me, hold me, but don’t crush me, don’t get too close. Above all, don’t think you know, and I would want to add, don’t expect to get it right’ (Rose, 121). I think Rose’s account of the negotiated, precarious, yet generative intimacies that become synonymous with a certain kind of reading practice could also serve as a description of the playful work of Crane’s poetry. In a move that implicitly yokes Crane’s modernism to his apparent sentimentalism, I want to suggest that Crane’s poetry gains the qualities for which it is notorious – ‘paradoxical’, ‘challenging’, ‘difficult’ – because of and not despite the intimacies it attempts to depict and produce.

**Leaky urns and loose girdles: the bounds of Crane intimacy**

In focusing primarily on scenes of intimate partnership, I do not wish to unqueerly celebrate that already-over-celebrated emblem of heteronormativity, the couple. While the relationship between ‘I’ and ‘you’ can, in Crane, in fact refer to a plural ‘you’, the exchange between self and other singular remains central to my consideration. The two in question might be the ‘nursing couple’ – the mother and infant – the two lovers on Brooklyn Bridge, the lyric ‘I’ and the reader, or the analyst and analysand. Yet sliding between and connecting such culturally distinct scenes of intersubjectivity – the erotic and the platonic, the sexual and the textual, the scene of familial dependence and, for instance, the scene of cruising – has its own kind of queerness. Merrill Cole argues that Crane’s poetry violates the carefully prescribed (but clearly precarious) boundaries of lyric intimacy by construing ‘fraternal feeling as sexual interest’: by ‘crossing the erotic boundary’, he renders ‘explicit what is supposed to remain closeted’ (123). But while Crane’s poetry remaps the homosocial conventions of lyric poetry, it also, more fundamentally, allows us to appreciate the messiness of intimacy. Intimacy often feels queer, Crane’s work suggests, because of its paradigmatic confusion between sexual and non-sexual registers and affects.[[14]](#endnote-14) In his correspondence with literary friends and mentors, Crane frequently draws on the language of immoderate feeling to express platonic intimacy: his letters are peppered with declarations of fidelity, jealous tantrums, accusations of betrayal, and dramatic break-ups. Crane’s correspondence suggests the kinds of discursive mixing through which intimacy in fact becomes readable.

While those who emphasise the solipsistic ‘pleasures’ of the death drive at work in Crane’s poetry might argue that queer sex has very little to do with intimacy, intimacy is, conversely, often understood as *really* being about sex. I suggest that we might think of Crane’s intimacies less as signs of queer desire, but as signs that intimacy itself challenges the taxonomies that govern our thinking about relationships. As Cole’s analysis implies, Crane’s intimacy refuses to make the distinctions between the erotic and non-erotic that heteronormative culture demands and, crucially, it suggests that there are forms of intimacy where intense affective and physical connections cannot simply be reduced to signifiers of sexual desire.

The early lyric ‘Praise for an Urn’ seems to dramatise some of these ideas as it plays with the notion of affect as spillage. Crane imagines the poem as a leaky container of feeling, where affect is coded as by definition excessive, discolouring, as messy. The poem strikes a strangely intimate tone for an address to someone whom Crane had not in fact known terribly well: it was written for Ernest Nelson, a mere acquaintance whose sudden death in an automobile accident had touched the poet (Fisher 141). The second stanza plays upon the idea of intimate address or ‘pillow talk’ in its reference to thoughts delivered ‘From the white coverlet and pillow’ (*Poems* 8). Whether this intimacy is read as that of the death bed or the lovers’ bed, the ambivalence clearly cannot be hygienically resolved in the manner suggested by RWB Lewis, who warns: ‘we should be careful about the reference to the coverlet and pillow. To one correspondent, who had evidently surmised a sexual relationship, Crane replied: “There were no accouchements there at all. Not even temptations in that direction. It is, or was, entirely ‘platonic’”’ (37). These quotations (and indeed Crane’s quotation marks around ‘platonic’), help us to appreciate how the language of intimacy must either flirt with the language of eroticism, or else risk remaining unreadable *as* intimacy. But furthermore, the anxieties that arise for those who encounter intimate poetics (‘we must be careful’) are encoded into the poem, functioning as productive taboos through which the intimate may actually be read.

The notion of inappropriate affect that becomes synonymous with intimacy is in fact the ground on which the poem is produced: Crane was not a lover or even a close friend of the man for whom he writes this emotionally-charged elegy. The sense of excessive, misplaced feelings is compounded by the fact that, as Lewis notes, the poem’s images of Pierrot’s eyes and Gargantua’s laughter had already occurred in ‘The Bridge of Estador’ before Crane had even met Nelson, who, besides ‘may have been Pierrotic but was anything but Gargantuan’ (38). Connected to this coincidence between the intimate and the inappropriate, out of place and mismatched, intimacy is also characterised by its insidious quality as that which leaks or creeps out from within: it is produced when boundaries fail to contain, when bodily integrity is compromised. Of course, such thinking assumes fully constituted boundaries between subjects and text, and if thinking about intimacy teaches us anything it is in fact that such boundaries are only ever relationally and precariously constituted.

The ostentatiously circumlocutory phrasing in this poem equally imagines intimacy as necessarily excessive and discolouring, as something that insidiously corrupts meaning and compromises clarity. In phrases such as ‘Once *moved us toward* presentiments’ and ‘*Touching* as well upon our praise’ intimacy is as unnecessary as it is insistent. A similar effect is achieved in the penultimate stanza when, with strange indirection, the speaker tells us:

I cannot see that broken brow

And miss the dry sound of bees

Stretching across a lucid space.

The primary meaning of ‘miss’ in this context would seem to be ‘to fail to notice’: the visual emphasis has been set up in the preceding line with ‘see’. But ‘miss’ in a context of loss clearly has affective connotations too, and is another example of how Crane characterises intimate language as uncontainable: it bleeds into other terms, insisting on an affective relationship even when it would risk confusing meaning and disturbing rational taxonomies. These signifiers of intimate feeling ‘spill out’ of the poem, coding such feeling as unmanageable and excessive**.**

Intimacy’s uncontainability is further suggested by the notion of the urn through which the poem is organised. Like many cremation urns, Crane’s poetic urn has a disseminating function: the final lines suggest that the contents of the urn/poem are to be scattered ‘Into the smoky spring that fills / The suburbs, where they will be lost’. The leakage upon which the poem’s intimacy is predicated in the poem is its ultimate undoing: as the intimate affects finally escape their container they are dispersed, and to give intimacy too much space is to kill it. Crane writes that his ‘well-meant idioms’ will be lost: what has made the lines ‘well-meaning’ (contingent on a particular affective orientation) and indeed ‘idiomatic’ (participating in a specific common and shared language) has depended not only on porous boundaries between subjects, but also on a form of containment. Crane implies that while intimacy between two subjects suggests the precariousness of borders, a degree of common holding might be required; a spatial relationship that requires imagined borders, not between subjects, but surrounding them. Intimacy, as I shall argue throughout this essay, paradoxically relies on a security and permeability of boundaries, on feelings of containment and escape; it both transgresses and delineates, suggesting the porousness of skins as it welcomes the notion of a second skin, an enclosing membrane that holds the two subjects in space.

The notion of intimacy as that which requires both containment and space is explored in another early poem, ‘My Grandmother’s Love Letters’. [[15]](#endnote-15) Here Crane elaborates how the feeling of intersubjective closeness relies on making enough room for the other. As Nickowitz points out, while excess often engenders anxiety in Crane’s poetry, in ‘My Grandmother’s Love Letters’ the question ‘becomes one of there being sufficient space for the spiritual and linguistic texts the grandmother provides’ (116). Crane meditates on ‘how much room’ there is for his memories; there is ‘even room enough / For the letters of my mother’s mother, / Elizabeth.’ (*Poems* 6). The connection between ‘how much room’ and ‘room enough’ means that expansiveness is equated with plenitude, and the notion of a comfortable expansiveness is emphasised by the repetition of the long vowel sound in ‘loose’ and ‘roof’. ‘Elizabeth’ takes up or marks out space, with the name occupying a single line, as does the repetition in ‘mother’s mother’, which Nickowitz understands in terms of excess, but I again read as an affectively positive plenitude.

If space is seen to be desirable in this intimate remembering, then a lack of space, or compression, is associated not with integrity but a risk of dissolution. Elizabeth’s love letters have been squeezed together so tightly that they are in danger of falling apart, ‘pressed so long’

Into a corner of the roof

That they are brown and soft

And liable to melt as snow.

Being held together too tightly is both a threat to the individual subject and to intersubjective intimacy: subjects risk becoming insubstantial, incoherent, and unrecognisable, just as Elizabeth’s intimate textual exchanges risk becoming a liquid mass. Yet alongside this fear of being too close, a similar threat to intersubjective relations (which is also to say a similar threat to the subject) is produced if the gulf is too wide: ‘Over the greatness of such space / Steps must be gentle’. The images of melting and treading on unsafe ground (where the risk is, presumably, abyss) differently express the threat of disappearing, and dramatise the dilemma of intimacy, which is destroyed by too little and too much space. These images also dramatise the fear that if the other is too close we might cease to exist as an individual subject, we might merely melt together, but if the space is too great, if they are too far away to recognise us, we might disappear entirely.

A key phrase for understanding the vision of intimacy explored in the poem is the ‘loose girdle of soft rain’ that provides room for memory. Like the ‘invisible white hair’, and trembling ‘birch limbs’, this image suggests a light and responsive holding rather than a form of touching that might result in oppression or destruction. While a tight girdle would constrict, shape and change the body, a loose girdle would offer containment *and* space, it would encircle while allowing room for movement. In this sense, the spatial dynamics of the ‘loose girdle’ are rather like those that Gaston Bachelard associates with the onieric qualities of intimate space, exemplified by the childhood home, which he characterises as an expanding, indeed elastic, space.[[16]](#endnote-16) Bachelard cites Georges Spyridaki, who refers to his house as ‘of the nature of vapour. Its walls contract and expand as I desire’ (51). Like Spyridaki’s breathing house, Crane’s ‘girdle of soft rain’ encloses and provides security for daydreaming, yet it also allows for breathing and expansion.

In this context of expansive containment, the self can emerge as other or as an object. The penultimate stanza is enclosed in speech marks as the speaker addresses himself: this kind of self-reflexivity can occur because of such expansive containment: the speaker is gently held together in this state of negotiated intimacy. The speaker’s concerns again turn to bridging the space that has, somewhat paradoxically, become the grounds for intersubjective exchange: he asks himself if his fingers are ‘long enough to play’ and if the music will get back ‘to its source / And back to you again, As though to her?’. The concern here is with covering space, making up ground: the inward-breathing motion that follows the breathing out, we might say, following Bachelard. The poem ends, significantly, with one of Crane’s intimate tableaux:

Yet I would lead my grandmother by the hand

Through much of what she would not understand;

And so I stumble.

Here Crane suggests the mutuality inherent in apparently unequal intersubjective scenarios: in leading his grandmother Crane’s speaker is acknowledging that his subjectivity depends on the presence of the other. He stumbles because he acknowledges his own dependence, the dependence upon which all independence is predicated, and which recalls the primary intersubjective scenes of infancy.

**Hart’s ‘holding phase’: experiencing unintegration**

In its depiction of intimacy as expansive containment, ‘My Grandmother’s Love Letters’ suggests, among other things, the conditions for the subject’s experience of unintegration. Much like in the scene with which this essay began, being held together allows the subject to safely undergo such potentially alarming affects as ecstasy without the threat of permanent dissolution. The ‘holding phase’ as understood by D.W. Winnicott is a state of absolute dependence, where the infant has not separated out a self from the maternal environment, yet it is also a stage in which crucial developments and a movement towards separation occurs: ‘All this leads right up to, includes, and co-exists with the establishment of the infant’s first object relationships and his first experiences of instinctual gratification’ (*Maturational* 49). At this early phase of development, the infant’s id-experiences are only meaningful when the mother ‘holds’ the environment: without this ego-relatedness desire is experienced as overwhelming assault. Significantly, when the infant is held well, unintegration, a bundle of different feeling states, can be tolerated and even enjoyed. At this phase, Winnicott argues, the infant begins to gain ‘unit status’ where the ego changes from an ‘unintegrated state to a structured integration, and so the infant becomes able to experience anxiety associated with disintegration’ (*Maturational* 44). ‘In healthy development at this stage’, Winnicott continues, ‘the infant retains the capacity for re-experiencing unintegrated states, but this depends on the continuation of reliable maternal care or on the build-up in the infant of memories of maternal care beginning gradually to be perceived as such’ (*Maturational* 44). A crucial difference must be stressed here between unintegration and disintegration, which is a pathological state. In the case of unintegration, one entrusts oneself to an environment where one can safely experience ‘a number of motility phases and sensory perceptions’ without the feeling of falling apart forever (Winnicott, *Family* 5). Disintegration, however, implies that there has been a failure in the holding environment:faulty holding by the mother gives the basis for ‘the sense of going to pieces’, ‘the sense of falling forever’, and ‘the feeling that external reality cannot be used for reassurance, and other anxieties that are usually described as “psychotic”’(Winnicott, *Family* 17). In the healthy adult unintegrated states recur in relaxation and in dreaming: indeed it is ‘out of the *unintegrated* state that the creative impulse appears and reappears’ (Winnicott, *Home* 29). Winnicott can therefore speaks of a creativity which is ‘a coming together after relaxation, which is the opposite of integration’ (*Playing* 86). The proposition that being held together allows one to safely come apart without fear of permanent and catastrophic dissolution can help to counter some of the negative readings of Crane’s poetic corpus.

A significant scene of unintegration in the presence of another occurs in the ‘Cape Hatteras’ section of *The Bridge*, where a depiction of falling apart is ‘held’ between intimate apostrophes to Whitman. The lines depict a kind of subjective crisis that is a condition of modernity, but which can be contained by Whitman. Lee Edelman, following Harold Bloom, reads the relationship between Crane and Whitman in Oedipal terms, and argues that Crane’s ‘revisionary binding displaces the violence directed toward the poetic “father” onto his figural practice’ (*Transmemberment* 189-90). I want to suggest, however, that an intersubjective model that allows for maternal structures of identification helps us to examine the complexity of Crane and Whitman’s relationship without suggesting an antagonistic quality to the relationship: difference and indeed opposition need not necessarily be a barrier to intimacy, Crane suggests, but they might even be the conditions for it.

In ‘Cape Hatteras’ Crane describes an expansive space in typically ambivalent terms as the place where desire and anxiety reside: ‘Space, instantaneous, / Flickers a moment, consumes us in its smile’ (*Poems* 89). The ‘cantos of unvanquished space’ suggest an excess of poetic space: the speaker does not comfortably inhabit his verse, but is unmoored and homeless (*Poems* 90). Yet, alongside this are repeated apostrophes to Walt Whitman, who is called upon as a figure who might watch over the poem as he watches over modernity and the American landscape, his eyes are ‘like the Great Navigator’s without ship’ and ‘undenying, bright with myth’ (*Poems* 89). Whitman’s ‘undenying’ eyes provide recognition; he is the witness whose holding presence is required to allow the poem’s speaker to experience the trauma of modernity, the ‘tournament of space, the threshed and chiselled height’ (*Poems* 91).

The central section of ‘Cape Hatteras’ describes the Wright brothers’ aeronautical adventures, a conquering of space that is affectively distinct from Whitman’s presence in space; it is destruction and dissolution (‘space-gnawing’) as opposed to plenitude: the aeroplane, that emblem of modernity ‘Hast splintered space!’ (*Poems* 91). Significantly, in the middle of ‘Cape Hatteras’ is the dramatic representation of an aircraft crash:

But first, here at this height receive

The benediction of the shell’s deep, sure reprieve!

Lead-perforated fuselage, escutcheoned wings

Lift agonized quittance, tilting from the invisible brink

Now eagle-bright, now

quarry-hid, twist-

-ing, sink with

Enormous repercussive list-

-ings down

Giddily spiralled

Gauntlets, upturned, unlooping

In guerrilla sleights, trapped in combustion gyr-

Ing, dance the curled depth

down whizzing

Zodiacs, dashed

(now nearing fast the Cape!)

down gravitation’s

vortex into crashed

. . . . dispersion . . . into mashed and shapeless de-

bris. . . .

By Hatteras bunched the beached heap of high

Bravery!

(*Poems* 92-3)

The aircraft is a ‘shell’: an enclosed space for ‘benediction’, apparently ‘sure’ and safe. But the shell turns out to be full of holes: its fuselage is ‘lead-perforated’.[[17]](#endnote-17) The shell or skin of the individual body in the excessive, hostile space is precarious and liable to rupture, even if armoured (‘escutcheoned wings’). This description of the aircraft brings to mind Crane’s prescription for the modernist artist in a 1920 letter to Gorham Munson, where a coat of mail is associated with brittleness and therefore vulnerability: ‘The modern artist has got to harden himself, and the walls of an ivory tower are too delicate and brittle a coat of mail for substitute. The keen[est] and most sensitive edges will result from this “hardening” process’ (*Letters*, 31). While the modernist must ‘harden’ him or herself to create the ‘keenest’ edge, and so in fact open the body towards others rather than enclose it in a protective shell, there is an even stronger sense in ‘Cape Hatteras’ that a solipsistic sealing-off is not the solution to the problems of modernity. [[18]](#endnote-18) While houses and other intimate spaces can provide a beneficial holding environment, too tight an enclosure, with no space for expansion, or breathing, or others, is not desirable for Crane’s modern subject.

The Kitty Hawk aeroplane crash includes some of the most obviously inventive verse in Crane’s oeuvre. The sense of falling apart is performed textually by the fractured syntax, which begins after the false assurance of the neat couplet, whose half-rhyme of ‘receive’ and ‘reprieve’ suggests the (false) hope and security provided by the armoured ‘shell’. After this illusion is shattered, both lines and words go to pieces. The section incorporates an intense pleasure in falling apart, a celebration of and enjoyment in destruction, yet the solipsistic emphasis of *jouissance* is inappropriate because such pleasure is, I contend, only possible because of Whitman’s holding presence. The description of the crash is ‘held’ in the middle of the poem, between Walt’s ‘undenying eyes’ and his arms: ‘But who has held the heights more sure that thou, / O Walt!’ (*Poems* 93).Whitman’s holding allows this potentially catastrophic scene to be experienced. The consequences of this scenario is renewed intimacy, as Whitman rises up from the dead to bring ‘tally, and a pact, new bound / Of living brotherhood!’ as opposed to the lone, semi-permeable membrane of the individual’s fractured ‘shell’ (*Poems* 93).

But while the ‘holding’ provided by Whitman suggests a form of one-sided dependence, the notion of ‘brotherhood’ suggests something quite distinct. A more mutual form of intimacy is implied by the reference to Whitman’s eyes as ‘tranquil with the blaze / Of love’s own diametric gaze’ (*Poems* 94). As opposed to Whitman’s ‘undenying’ gaze, which in the assurance it provides is simply another form of holding structure, being held in a ‘diametric’ gaze implies a more complex and mutual form of intimacy. A ‘diametric’ gaze goes back and forth, from one subject to the other: syntactically the gaze belongs to ‘love’ rather than Whitman, so must be understood in entirely relational terms as an intersubjective exchange. The notion of ‘diametric’ suggests not sameness but difference; a love based not on likeness or the blurring of bodily boundaries, as is integral to the notion of holding environments, but on recognition of a distinction between subjects. The scene thus ends with a key tableau of mutual intimacy akin to the biographical image of Hart and Emil bounding across Brooklyn Bridge:

yes, Walt,

Afoot again, and onward without halt,—

Not soon, nor suddenly,—no, never to let go

My hand

in yours,

Walt Whitman—

so—

(*Poems* 95)

Such an intense intimacy is troubling for theories that seek to elaborate Crane’s ‘poetics of negativity’ or to situate him within a particular kind of modernism. Indeed, two of Crane’s most attentive readers have sought to deny or dismiss the affective claims that stare us in the face. Edelman argues that Crane is ‘warily and uneasily bound’ to Whitman and so this scene ‘represents no simple and literal affirmation of an Eliotic sense of “tradition,” but rather, a complex and almost desperate gesture of submission and willed continuity’ (*Transmemberment* 188). Here complexity is bound to negativity and Oedipal opposition: the affirmative answer is the deceptively simple one. Brian Reed, contra Edelman, does not read Crane’s relationship with Whitman in repressed, Oedipal terms, but remarks: ‘Crane and Whitman walking off hand in hand reads like the schmaltzy finale of a B-movie romance’ (*Hart Crane: After His Lights,* 20). Reed’s comment hints at the embarrassment occasioned by Crane’s intimacy – his reference to ‘B-movie romance’ indicates an assumption that such intimacy is generically inappropriate; that it cannot be incorporated within the modernist purview. For Edelman the scene is affectively negative, for Reed it is simply ‘schmaltzy’. Both assumptions suggest that this intimacy is too easy, too obvious, to belong to a difficult genre like modernist poetry, and so intimacy and its complexities are conspicuously not read.

**Deep surfaces: skin, subjectivity, and ‘handling’**

As I have suggested, Winnicott understands the ‘holding phase’ as a vital stage of development: while the infant has not yet separated out a self from the maternal environment, this is the stage when the movement towards such separation occurs. During the holding phase, the psyche begins to ‘indwell’ in the soma: ‘The basis for this indwelling is a linkage of motor and sensory and functional experiences with the infant’s new state of being a person’ (Winnicott, *Maturational* 45). Winnicott describes how the environmental provision of ‘handling’, which necessarily includes the touching of skins, ‘corresponds loosely with the establishment of a psycho-somatic partnership’ (*Maturational* 62). The perception of a limiting membrane, equated with the surface of the skin, occurs as the infant begins to discern the distinction between the ‘me’ and the ‘not-me’. Describing the process he elsewhere calls ‘personalization’, Winnicott writes: ‘In favourable circumstances, the skin becomes the boundary between the me and the not-me. In other words, the psyche has come to live in the soma and an individual psycho-somatic life has been initiated’ (*Maturational* 61). For Winnicott, then, touching provides not only closeness and connection but, somewhat paradoxically, also produces the boundaries and integrity of self: the contact between skins is what allows us to feel that we are separate and coherent within our own bodies.

In ‘Carrier Letter’ (1918), an early poem about the separation of lovers, Crane’s speaker risks charges of adolescent sentimentality with the line: ‘My hands have not touched water since your hands’ (*Poems* 135) As I have argued, the language of intimacy must necessarily run such risks, and Crane’s poetics of intimacy indeed garners interest and complexity from such entanglements. In fact, Crane’s description of the apparently cliché desire not to wash one’s hands after touching the object of one’s affection tells us something important about how intimacy is enacted at the surface of the skin, how it seems at times to create a second membrane that might, in this case, be removed by washing. While touching allows us to experience the boundaries of our own bodies, or – in Winnicottian terms – facilitates somatic indwelling and personalization, it can also, conversely, challenge the distinctions between inside and outside, surface and depth.

In ‘The Dance’, contained within the ‘Van Winkle’ section of *The Bridge*, Crane offers a sensual description of an encounter with Pocahontas that suggests the productive qualities of touch:

And in the autumn drouth, whose burnished hands

With mineral wariness found out the stone

Where prayers, forgotten, streamed the mesa sands?

He holds the twilight’s dim, perpetual throne.

(*Poems* 70)

These beautiful, ethereal, disembodied hands are ‘burnished’, like precious metal. To burnish is to create a new surface by creating friction with another object: it is a form of touching that changes the quality of the object’s surface. In this case, the image of ‘burnished hands’ is suggestive of the way that skin contact changes the very nature of the skin itself, its outline is shaped by touch. And just as ‘burnished’ describes a process of touching and a physical quality, the notion of ‘mineral wariness’ imparts a metallic aspect to the body’s behaviour: the skin has taken on the qualities of the metal; it is defined and understood through what it has touched. Such mutual dependence between bodies is emphasised by the image of holding the throne, which is, of course, itself a holding device.

But the connections between of touching and subjectivity are perhaps most fully explored in is Crane’s early poem, ‘An Episode of Hands’ (1948), a work that invites us to imagine the complexities of the body’s surface. The poem describes a moment of intimacy between a middle-class man, the factory-owners son, and an injured blue-collar worker. In its muddling of erotic and fraternal registers, ‘An Episode of Hands’ again suggests intimacy’s anti-taxonomic qualities. Furthermore, while suggesting that intersubjective contact defines the surfaces and limits of the body and that bodily intimacy changes and shapes selves, the poem also challenges the distinction between penetration and surface contact.

In the poem, the phenomenology of touch replaces all other senses as one man lays his hands on the other’s: ‘And factory sounds and factory thoughts / Were banished’ (*Poems* 141). Crane makes a clear connection between touch and selfhood: the factory owner’s son’s shifting identity is suggested by his tactile memory of ‘books and tennis’ and ‘iron and leather’. In a sense, this defining contact between skin and the outside world suggests an emphasis on surface over depth: selfhood is not immanent but rather we are made and unmade by whom and what we touch. But just as Crane invests meaning in surfaces brushing against each another, he also figures intimacy as a kind of penetration, referring to ‘the bed of the wound’. Not only do ‘bed’ and ‘wound’ connect erotic intimacy and brutal penetration, but penetration is understood as a form of binding together by Crane’s playfulness with the heteronym ‘wound’: ‘As his taught, spare fingers wound the gauze / Around the bed of the wound.’ As a trope which productively incorporates difference and similarity, heteronym is itself apt in this context, and the nature of this particular play between wounding/winding emphasises the binding *and* individuating qualities associated with skin. The pain of the wound individuates the subject, yet this bodily integrity is only established through the constant policing of what is inside and what is outside. The painful pleasure of the scene is figured by the bleeding gash penetrated by a glittering ‘shaft of sun’ that falls ‘lightly, warmly, down into the wound’. The homoerotic implications of this cannot and should not be ignored: Crane describes a form of jouissance through the combination of violence and pleasure, bleeding and glittering, in this image of penetration. But the scene cannot be described as ‘self-shattering and solipsistic’ in the Bersanian sense: the sense of *intimacy* *between subjects* is crucial (217). While the shaft of sunlight ‘penetrates’ it does so ‘warmly’ and ‘lightly’. Breaking the surface of the skin is no more anathema to intimacy than it is queerly congruent with sexual pleasure.

Yet this is a poem that also explores the ways in which skin might confound or at least trouble the opposition between surface and depth. This paradox seems to have something to do with the factory owner’s son’s pleasure in the injured man’s hands: ‘The knots and notches,—many in the wide / Deep hand that lay in his,—seemed beautiful.’ ‘Knots and notches’ suggests grooves and indentations, and although texture is something that relates to the surface of the skin (they are indeed visible, ‘seem[ing] beautiful’) they also record previous penetrations, and remind us of the body’s inside. And as he registers the expansive surface of the hand this surface also figures depth for the son: the hand is both ‘wide’ and ‘deep’. In this sense the ‘depth’ might be primarily figurative or psychical, in the same sense that Didier Anzieu describes sex as producing ‘the deepest psychical contact and the most complete form of skin contact’ (10). This paradox of superficial depth, or deep surface, is imagined in the description of one hand laying *in* another: touching, surface contact between skins, is also conveyed as a form of penetration, going inside as well as alongside.[[19]](#endnote-19) This quality of intimacy is suggested in the poem’s final tableau: ‘smiled into each other’s eyes’.

A similar confusion between depth and surface is suggested in the blushing described in the first line: ‘The unexpected interest made him flush’. A flush is both underneath and on the surface of the skin and is, crucially, a scene of intimate communication between the two subjects.[[20]](#endnote-20) The flush makes the injured man readable to the factory owner’s son, and what it makes readable is the worker’s awareness that he has been noticed: it is, therefore, a complex feedback mechanism expressed on/in the surface of the skin. Blushing is, as Eve Sedgwick, following Silvan Tomkins, has written, at once individuating and communicative: it makes the blusher painfully aware of the boundaries of her own skin yet may also be experienced as an intimate communication between skins.

Similar questions of rupture, integrity, and border control govern both the representation of a room and the human bodies it contains in Crane’s significantly titled early poem, ‘Interior’ (1919). In fact, the poem, the sparse but protecting room in which the ‘stolen hour’ of intimacy takes place is itself figured as a kind of skin. The final stanza suggests that the feeling of intimate enclosure experienced by the lovers is predicated on knowledge of an outside, and the possibility of penetration from without: ‘And even if the world break in’ (*Poems* 140). The verb ‘shed’ in the first line (‘It sheds a shy solemnity,/ This lamp in our poor room’) mainly applies to just two nouns, ‘light’ and ‘skin’, and the idea of shedding skin again suggests a feeling of vulnerable enclosure. The poem oscillates between representations of two kinds of oneness – a separate solitariness on the one hand and a complete union between subjects that erases difference on the other – and the kind of besideness based on symmetry that recognises the boundaries of individual skins. The idea of singularity and oneness creeps into a poem that is ostensibly about ‘we’: there is the ‘shy *sole*mnity’ of the first line and the ‘n*one*’ in second line of the second stanza (my emphases). ‘None’ indeed incorporates negation *and* oneness: ‘one’ is only included through opposition in the articulation of *not one*. The phrase ‘shy solemnity’ suggests the idea of feeling stuck inside one’s own skin in a negative sense: shyness provides individuation through shame, but it is also about a failure (and a failed desire) to communicate. A shy skin would probably be a blushing skin, which, as I have suggested, indeed epitomises the insularity/communicatory paradox, while also questioning ideas of inside/outside.

Blushing is again brought to mind by the references to ‘blooms’ and ‘after-glow’ in the second stanza. But here the ‘after-glow’ is clearly the rosy afterglow of lovemaking, a signifier of intimacy following erotic pleasure. This kind of glowing skin celebrates a different kind of intimacy. Winnicott’s writing about the forms of intimacy experienced by post-coital adults might help us make sense of the poem’s playfulness about different kinds of intersubjective relationships, and its shifting depictions of union and solitude. Winnicott, responding to psychoanalysis’s silence on the positive *capacity* to be alone (as opposed to the *wish* to be alone or the *fear* of being alone), stresses that this capacity is in fact a paradox: ‘it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present’ (*Maturational* 30). Winnicott claims that this capacity is based on the experience of being ‘alone’ as an infant in the presence of mother, and is retained as the individual introjects the ego-supportive mother. In a term that productively upsets some of our assumptions about aloneness, Winnicott refers to ‘sharing solitude’ – a ‘solitude that is relatively free from the property that we call withdrawal’ (*Maturational* 31). Importantly, the state of ‘sharing solitude’, like the holding environment, allows for a state of unintegration to be experienced and enjoyed. When ‘alone (that is to say in the presence of someone)’ the infant can ‘become unintegrated, to flounder, to be in a state in which there is no orientation, to be able to exist for a time without being either a reactor to an external impingement or an active person with a direction of interest or movement’ (*Maturational* 34). The notion of ‘sharing solitude’ is another way to consider the idea of unintegrated states in a way that challenges the notion of solipsism, and further complicates the object relations of Crane’s intimate scenes.

**‘Twin shadowed halves’: mutuality and recognition**

The overall effect of reading Crane’s poetic corpus is the sense that intimate relations between subjects must necessarily be understood in terms that are mobile and shifting; as a constant changing of positions in relation to need, desire, and affect. The idea that intersubjective relationships *should* be fraught and unfixed is at the heart of Jessica Benjamin’s work in *The Bonds of Love*. In this final section I want to consider the ways in which Crane’s poetry dramatises the difficulty of achieving and sustaining what Benjamin considers to be the ideal form of human intimacy: mutual recognition.

For Winnicott, recognition by the (m)other is an essential component of a sense of personhood. Winnicott considers the concept of mirroring in intersubjective terms quite distinct from Lacan’s more well-known theory of the Mirror Stage in his essay ‘The Mirror Role of Mother and Family in Child Development'. Here Winnicott explains that when the infant sees himself in the mother’s face, the mother gives the infant back to himself: a sense of self therefore depends on being seen: ‘When I look I am seen, so I exist’ (*Playing* 151). Benjamin’s observations are rooted in both Winnicott’s insights and in what she sees as their limitations: chiefly, the way in which the mother’s subjectivity is denied as she figures as simply a mirroring object. Benjamin emphasises the need for *mutual* recognition; the need to see the mother as an independent subject. If recognition is to avoid becoming a form of domination, Benjamin asserts, the mother ‘should not merely reflect back what the child asserts; she must embody something of the not-me; she must be an independent other who responds in her different way’ (24).

Benjamin writes that the concept of recognition unifies theories of intersubjectivity as ‘the constant companion of assertion’ (21). She points to the fundamental paradox entailed in the need for recognition – a paradox ignored in classical psychoanalytic theory and Hegelian dialectics – that in order to affirm itself the self must acknowledge the other, which in itself it is to ‘deny the absoluteness of the self’ (33). ‘The ideal “resolution” of the paradox of recognition’ is, as Benjamin’s inverted commas imply, not a resolution as such but, in what is a very Winnicottian (and indeed Cranian) way of thinking, for the paradox to be sustained; ‘for it to remain as a *constant tension*’ (36, emphasis in original). Indeed Benjamin claims that, in order to better understand this notion, we might turn to Winnicott, who argues that one of the most important elements in feeling authentic is the recognition of an outside reality that is not one’s own projection: recognition effected by an object’s survival of the infant’s attempts to destroy it. Benjamin points out that if we ultimately destroy others then we will have negated ourselves as well, ‘For there is no one there to recognize us, no one there for us to desire’ (39). Benjamin’s crucial insight is that mutual recognition ‘cannot be achieved through obedience, through identification with the other’s power, or through repression. It requires, finally, contact with the other’ (40). The difficulties of sustaining this back-and-forth contingency, this relationship defined by constant tension and contact, are indicated by Benjamin’s acute awareness of how the search for recognition can become a power struggle. This focus on domination rather than mutuality constitutes a ‘kind of sticky, frustrating interaction’ where the child loses the capacity for feeling attuned or united, or for knowing the mother: ‘Neither separateness nor union is possible’ (28). While the failure of early mutuality leads to a premature formation of a defensive boundary between inside and outside, the positive experience of attunement leads, most significantly for our purposes, to a permeable boundary: the felt boundaries between inside and outside can be momentarily suspended: ‘The capacity to enter into states in which distinctness and union are reconciled underlies the most intense experience of adult erotic life.’ (29). This sense of permeable boundaries, and the simultaneous experience of individual distinctness and union, sameness and different are, as we have seen, key to Crane’s depictions of erotic (and also non-erotic) scenes of intimacy.

The way in which intimacy is characterised as a complex negotiation in Crane can thus be understood in two distinguishable but always and necessarily overlapping ways. First, when intimacy works in Crane it must necessarily be a negotiation because of the paradigmatically contingent nature of successful intersubjective interaction, or attunement. As we have seen, Crane’s most pleasurable intimate tableaux depict a constant oscillation between separation and union: Benjamin’s notion of a ‘permeable boundary’, like Winnicott and Anzieu’s similar metaphors of permeable membranes and skins, is reflected in Crane’s understanding that a mutually satisfying intimacy involves the suspension of felt boundaries of inside and outside. But secondly, Crane’s poetry suggests a negotiation between what we might term ‘immature’ and ‘mature’ forms of intimate contact: between complementarity and mutuality; between the desire to be held, and the desire for mutual contact; between seeing the other as answer to the self’s need and recognising the other as a subject. An exploration of these forms can be seen in the shift from an ‘undenying’ to a ‘diametric’ gaze in ‘Cape Hatteras’, as Whitman is conceived first as a holding presence and then as subject whose hand the speaker holds. Crane’s masterful sequence ‘Voyages’ equally charts an intimate journey from being held by a not-quite-good-enough mother, the ‘too wide a breast’ of the expansive sea, to a mutual and active touching (*Poems* 35). While the maternal realm brings freedom – ‘rimless floods, unfettered leewardings’— the scene of sexual consummation and blissful intimacy in ‘Voyages III’ is understood in terms of bridging space: ‘arrest all distance otherwise’ (*Poems* 36). Interestingly, the union involves containment in a smaller space, and the entrance into the body is described as an architectural structure: ‘through black swollen gates [...] Past whirling pillars and lithe pediments’ (*Poems* 37). Yet crucially this is an active body, made of responsive flesh rather than immovable stone: it is not simply an object that contains but its response to touch touches the speaker, who perceives it as *swollen*, *whirling*, *lithe*. And this complex image of entry and containment, in which the subjectivity of the containing one is recognized, then turns into an image of intersubjective touching: the non-containing touching between skins suggested by the verbs ‘wrestling’ and ‘kissing’. The final line reads as a request rather than a demand for mutuality, especially as it ends with an ellipsis: ‘Permit me voyage, love into your hands . . .’ (*Poems* 37). Intimacy here is a negotiation between subjects rather than something to be presumed, an active exchange, where being held is not a passive state but an active giving, a momentary, negotiated, and positive submission.

‘Voyages’ offers a terrifically affirmative depiction of mutuality achieved, in all of its complexity, but I want to conclude with a reading of the more fraught scenes of intimacy in ‘Recitative’. ‘Recitative’ records the difficulties of mutual recognition as it obsessively but playful considers different kinds of ‘twoness’: doubles, splits, repetitions, shadows, echoes, and mirrors. Crane here suggests the anxiety that one might displace or erase another, that ‘holding’ might equate to ‘capturing’, and considers whether ‘two’ means sameness or difference. The kinds of mirroring and doubling that occur in ‘Recitative’ variously suggest a relationship governed by mutuality and domination. Even title of the poem suggests two distinct kinds of relationality: a ‘recitative’ is simply a recital, and so a repetition or a reiteration, but it also means a musical declaration *between* singing and ordinary speech. The title therefore refuses to decide between the intermediary and the identical, between difference and sameness. And indeed at different points in the poem the sense of doubleness might be understood in both intersubjective and intrapsychic terms, as both relationality/dependence and a kind of fracturing of the self. Such division of the self is, I suggest, an unintegratation that can ultimately be tolerated precisely because of that way that the poet’s speaker imagines, at moments, being ‘held’ by another in a relationship of complementarity. Crane’s oft-cited lines about the poem are helpful on this point:

Imagine the poet, say, on a platform speaking it. The audience is one half of Humanity, Man (in the sense of Blake) and the poet the other. ALSO, the poet sees himself in the audience as in a mirror. ALSO, the audience sees itself, in part, in the poet. Against this paradoxical DUALITY is posed the UNITY, or the conception of it (as you got it) in the last verse. In another sense, the poet is *talking to himself* all the way through the poem, and there are, as too often in my poems, other reflexes and symbolisms in the poem, also, which it would be silly to write here—at least for the present. (*Letters*, 176)

Crane confirms that the poet is addressing himself *and* the audience; he and the audience recognise themselves in each other (but perhaps struggle to recognise each other as others); and the poem oscillates between a sense of separation and unity.

If we consider the opening scene as one in which the poet is speaking to his own reflection in a mirror *and* to another, then it appears to dramatise the distinction between truly recognising the other as an other and simply using the other as a reflecting object in order to affirm the self. The poem’s arresting opening phrase – ‘Regard the capture here, O Janus-faced’ – might be interpreted as ‘look at yourself being looked at’ or, as a more emphatic appeal: ‘look at *me* looking at you’ (*Poems* 25). In this sense the poem suggests the paradoxical logic of the mirroring, as the person who would look to *affirm* his own subjectivity is also absolutely dependent upon the other to grant that subjectivity. This notion of dependence is implied by the word ‘capture’: the subject is indeed held in and by the other’s gaze, and is a prisoner in the sense that he cannot exist outside it. The subject’s failure to ascribe any agency or indeed subjectivity to the reflecting other is suggested by the stanza’s final lines: ‘Such eyes at search or rest you cannot see / Reciting pain of glee, how can you bear! (*Poems* 25). Because the eyes in/of the mirror, the eyes of the other, only exist to reflect back the self, they are denied the autonomy of looking at anything but the subject: they are denied an active or affective life outside of their role to give the subject back to himself.

The playfulness of the title is continued throughout the poem, where different relationships between twos are repeatedly imagined alongside each other. To this end, the second stanza of the poem is worth quoting in full:

Twin shadowed halves: the breaking second holds

In each the skin alone, and so it is

I crust a plate of vibrant mercury

Born cleft to you, and brother in the half.

(*Poems* 25)

With its lack of punctuation or conjunction, the phrase ‘Twin shadowed halves’ suggests a sense of conflation, yet each term in fact troubles the last. ‘Twin’ suggests a relationship understood through likeness, literally kinship – twins are not replicas of each other but rather come from the same source – but while this similarity suggests equality, it is an equality that is based on a disavowal of difference. A ‘shadow’ on the other hand bears a substitutional relationship to another, who is by contrast the ‘real’; and ‘halves’ are of course two made out of one, and so suggests splitting and fragmentation. So while building up these terms might have the effect of suggesting unity, it also suggests that such unity might be based on a failure to work out the distinctions between self and other. The phrase ‘the breaking second holds / In each the skin alone’ is typically difficult but suggests, I think, a failed intimacy through mirroring: when the m/other (the ‘second’) holds the subject, each become separate, within their own skins. While such individuation would seem to be a triumphant outcome (and suggest that both selves have been given back to each other by mutual looking) the boundaries appear to be too rigid and impermeable: the word ‘alone’ hangs heavy in this stanza full of pairs and doubles. The reference to the ‘vibrant mercury’ of the mirror’s crust, or skin, is also troubling when we realise that mercury actually dissolves to amalgamate with other metals: it is absorbed and taken over rather than maintaining its integrity.

Benjamin’s warning that the search for recognition can turn into an attempt at domination is suggested by the high concentration of imperatives in ‘Recitative’, all of which – ‘Regard’, ‘Inquire’, ‘Defer’, ‘Look’, ‘Watch’ – are different versions of the same demand for recognition. In the line ‘Inquire this much-exacting fragment smile’, the smile might be characterised as ‘much exacting’ because it asks to be matched (*Poems* 25). However, in contrast to this – and preparing us for the image of mutuality with which the poem ends – the fifth stanza includes a turn, common in Crane’s poetry, from the first person singular to the first person plural: ‘Let the same nameless gulf beleaguer us, alike suspend us from atrocious sums’ (*Poems* 25). This line depicts a *shared* experience of a kind of bad holding. ‘Sums’ not only suggests collectively and community, groups (or pairs) of people, but, in the context of the poem’s obsession with the dynamics of two, suggests numbers and mathematical problems; fractions. Even at this moment of supposed unity against adversity, we are reminded of the fraught negotiations and calculations of intimacy. Does 2, we might still wonder, figure as 1+1, or ½, or as some other ‘atrocious sum’?

While the preceding image of the dawning ‘white buildings’ suggests comfortable domestic enclosure and a refuge for intimacy, the idea being suspended together that follows is more complex. If good-enough holding provides comfort to the Cranian subject, then this image of hanging is a bad form of holding. Indeed, the significance of the vertical posture of suspension is explored by Anzieu, who discusses the myth of Marsyas, who is suspended by the arms from a pine tree by Apollo. As opposed to the ‘positive verticality’ of standing on the ground, Marsyas suffers the punishment of ‘negative verticality’: hanging defenceless and humiliated, he re-experiences ‘the original distress of the infant either not held or held badly by its mother’ (Anzieu, 49). In ‘Recitative’, the subjects are held ‘like Absalom’, who was hung by his hair, and can return to the primal scene of bad holding precisely because of their symmetrical, mutually supporting intimacy with one another (*Poems* 25). Rather than one subject ‘holding’ the environment for another, holding itself becomes little comfort as the ‘gulf’, the expanse of space, beleaguers them jointly yet, crucially, does not become a gulf between them.

While ‘Recitative’ maintains is complexity throughout, the final line suggests one of Crane’s powerfully unequivocal and utopian visions of reciprocal brotherhood: ‘And let us walk through time with equal pride.’ These lines, like the mutual intimacies imagined with Whitman, are invested with a glorious simplicity that belies the difficult negotiations which are the necessary conditions of their production. Langdon Hammer, a critic who has appreciated better than most the ‘shared connections’ called for in Crane’s poetry, writes that ‘When a poem is truly and fully read, poet and reader encounter each other as equal and kindred “twin shadowed halves”; they recognize an essential relation beyond their random connection, assuaging the loneliness each of them feels in his body’ (159). Hammer’s analysis points to the ways in which Crane’s work posits an intimate, bodily relationship as a model for the ideal reading practice, yet the phrase he chooses to suggest this – ‘twin shadowed halves’ – in fact bears testament to the complex shifting of positions required to achieve a intersubjective relationship based on mutual recognition. Hart Crane’s work demands, finally, that we include the word ‘read’ in Benjamin’s list of ‘near-synonyms’ for recognition: ‘to recognize is to affirm, validate, acknowledge, know, accept, understand, empathize, take in, tolerate, appreciate, see, identify with, find familiar, ... love’ (16). If imagining a reading practice as an act of love sounds inimical to serious critical inquiry, if it sounds mawkishly, simplistically affirmative, we might do well to dwell on Crane’s elaboration of the difficulties and complexities of this act.

**Notes**

1. In Winnicott, ‘living with’ suggests true object relating after the infant has ceased to feel merged with the mother. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Brian Reed’s ‘Hand in Hand: Jasper Johns and Hart Crane’ for a fascinating discussion of how the hand prints in Johns’s artwork reach out to Crane’s hands. Reed contrasts the impossible utopian connection between Crane and the dead Whitman in ‘Cape Hatteras’ with that between Johns and Crane in the painting *Land's End*, which ‘highlights this unbridgeable gap between actual and virtual artists’ (‘Hand in Hand’ 40) ‘While the end of "Cape Hatteras" might depict poetry as a refuge from "time's realm," Johns cannot imagine himself gaining access to such a space while still "alive." In *Land's End* the two hands, the artist's and the poet's, can come together only via a parodic re-enactment of the close of "Cape Hatteras”’ (‘Hand in Hand’ 40). The significance of hands for Johns (and for Reed) ultimately relates to his investigation of artistic agency : ‘The "hand" of the artist became a "pressing" issue requiring investigation in a "hands-on" fashion’ (‘Hand in Hand’ 42). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The Crane *Concordance* lists 88 occurrences of *eye/eyes/eyes’* and 53 occurrences of *hand* or *hands*. Leibowitz (whose figures on word frequency tend to differ quite substantially from Lane’s in the *Concordance*) catalogues *lift* as Crane’s 16th most used word, occurring 31 times, and claims that *hold* occurs 25 times in the Crane oeuvre. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Alan Trachtenberg offers a standard metaphysical reading of the significance of the bridges and bridging motifs that occur throughout Crane’s oeuvre when he describes them as symbols of ‘crossing-over from one state to another’, clear signifiers of Crane’s quest for Romantic unity and his desire for ‘mediation [..] fusion, healing, transcendence’ (9). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The term ‘Middle Group’ refers to the ‘Independents’ within the post-war British Psychoanalytic Society (as opposed to followers of Anna Freud or Melanie Klein). Like the Kleinians, the Middle Group are classified as object relations psychoanalysts. Alongside Winnicott, notable members of this group have included Ronald Fairbairn, John Bowlby, and Michael Balint. In contemporary psychoanalysis, Christopher Bollas and Patrick Casement are considered to be members of the Middle Group. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In his analysis of the relationship between Crane and Elizabeth Bishop, Michael Snediker distinguishes ‘love’s reparative, resuscitative energies from the oppositely and variously destructive, undoing energies of desire’ (168). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Snediker challenges narratives of self-splitting by focusing on the *durability* of the smiles that occur in Crane’s poetry, reading them as signifiers of durability itself, and of the centrality of affirmation to his oeuvre. Despite our different explanations of why Crane’s work cannot be explained as a poetics of negativity, Winnicott also informs Snediker’s understanding of durability. In his introduction, Snediker explains that, for Winnicott, ‘an object’s durability as such signals that it *is* an object, and this durability is not recognizable to the Winnicottian subject without the fantasy of destroying it. The destructiveness that an object can withstand, for Winnicott, demonstrates not just the subject’s own integrity (an integrity from which the subject might subsequently learn), but its own capacity for loving in spite of feeling damaged, or even repelled, by the subject’ (10). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. There also seems to be something circular about this logic: critics turn to the concept of *jouissance* to emphasise Crane’s ‘failure’, and such ‘failure’ contributes to the sense that self-splitting is indeed the key to unlock his work. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Snediker’s *Queer Optimism* is indeed one such sign. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Dean writes: ‘Foucault’s strategic account of pleasure has misled many US queer theorists into viewing pleasure optimistically, as if it weren’t complicated by jouissance and could be extended without encountering anything but ideological barriers’. (‘Lacan and Queer Theory’ 251) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Although I’m specifically thinking of Crane’s poetry here, I’m also reminded of the real-world examples of queer life that escape the anti-social paradigm, such as the response of the *queer* community to the AIDS crisis, including the kinds of activities discussed by Ann Cvetkovich in Chapter 5 (‘AIDS Activism and Public Feelings: Documenting ACT UP’s Lesbians’) of *An Archive of Feelings*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See, for instance, Casement’s *Further Learning from the Patient* and Bollas’s description of ‘Ordinary regression to dependence’ in *The Shadow of the Object.* [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Paul Giles has demonstrated that *The Bridge* is ‘constructed out of a series of puns and paradoxes: indeed [...] the pun, a bridge between alternative meanings, is the structural principle behind the *The Bridge*.*’* (1) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Hammer, whooffers the most thoroughgoing and sensitive readings of intersubjectivity in Crane’s work, notes: ‘The codes and conditions of male homosexual fellowship inform Crane’s projection of a relation between reader and poet that is not properly sexual, perhaps, but peculiarly, even transgressively intimate, secretive, and physical’ (159). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Patrick Casement has emphasised this point about intimacy: ‘To be healthy, every intimate relationship needs space and personal boundaries, and a corresponding respect by each person for the “otherness” of the other’ (160). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Since medieval times ‘girdle’ had denoted a ‘cord or band, tied or buckled, encircling the waist or hips’ and was typically worn outside the clothes, yet in America from 1920s it began to refer to ‘an elasticated, rather than a boned, corset’ (Cumming, Cunnington, and Cunnington 93). At the time at which Crane wrote this poem, then, the meaning of the word ‘girdle’ was itself loosening, or at least becoming more capacious. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. This detail, and the fact that the Wright brothers never crashed at Kitty Hawk, suggests a conflation of their early flights with the aeronautical disasters of the First World War: Crane favours a dramatic depiction of the trauma of modernity over historical accuracy. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. That this section is about the crisis of modernity is emphasised towards the end of ‘Cape Hatteras’, when, addressing Whitman, the speaker exclaims: ‘Years of the Modern! Propulsions toward what capes?’ (*Poems* 94) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. The notion of ‘psychical depth’, and the semantic field of profundity, seems to exist in vestigial form in Anzieu’s argument. If one is to argue for the significance of surfaces (as Anzieu clearly does) then one might question the wider semantic opposition between ‘depth’ and ‘surface’. Claiming that intimacy provides a ‘deep’ connection might therefore appear redundant if one is to claim that meaning exists at the very surface. But ‘depth’ still carries rhetorical weight in Crane, just as surfaces become interesting, so I think that ‘deep surface’ remains a meaningful conceit within his poetics of intimacy. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The somewhat paradoxical location of blushing is suggested in the notion of the ‘deep blush’ in Crane’s ‘For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen’ (*Poems* 28). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)