

The Anxious Lyric: Subjectivity and Politics in American Experimental Writing during the 1970s

Presenter

- John (Jack) Chelgren, Senior, English UW Honors Program

Mentor

- Eva Cherniavsky, English, Gender, Women, & Sexuality Studies

Session

- [Poster Session 1](#)
- Commons East
- Easel #82
- 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM

The 1970s were a distinctive period in American culture and national identity, a time before the advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s when social, political, and ideological crisis touched all aspects of society. In this climate of conflict and upheaval, a number of prominent writers of poetry and popular music produced works that rejected traditional modes of expression for more impersonal, ambiguous statements. These pieces feature exaggerated and contradictory representations of identity; many also exude a salient tone of anxiety, an affect concerned with the security and integrity of the self. My research thus begins by examining the relationship between anxiety and the estrangement of subjectivity and narrative voice in lyric writing. To consider this affinity, I will close read and compare several artworks produced in New York City in the 1970s, primarily Talking Heads's albums *77* and *Fear of Music* and John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*—the former two representing a popular form, the third a more “high art” one (a distinction that I mean to investigate in itself). To understand how these works reproduce and resist contemporary aesthetic and ideological trends, I will read them in conversation with critical theory on affect, subjectivity, and popular and political culture—writers like Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and Fredric Jameson. My investigation furthermore asks whether questioning straightforward depictions of selfhood is inherently counterpolitical, or if estranging anxiety might have some political utility. Does art need to be direct, polemical, (self-)expressive, or overtly political to do political work? In the broadest sense, this project weighs the merits, relevance, and influence of esoteric art, a concern that lies at the core of much scholarship in the humanities.