Josephine Miles

by Erik Muller

Western Writers Series — No. 164

Boise State University Western Writers Series Number 164

Josephine Miles

By Erik Muller
Eugene, Oregon

Boise State University, Boise, Idaho

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Muller, Erik, 1941-
Josephine Miles / by Erik Muller.
p. cm. — (Boise State University western writers series ; no. 164)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN-10: 0-88430-164-8 (alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-88430-164-6 (alk. paper)
1. Miles, Josephine, 1911-1984. 2. Poets, American—20th century—Biography. 3. College teachers—California—Berkeley—Biography. 4. Women and literature—United States—History—20th century. 5. Editors—United States—Biography. I. Title. II. Series.

PS3525.I4835Z76 2005
811'.52--dc22

2005008393

Western Writers Series
English Department
Boise State University
1910 University Drive
Boise, ID 83725-1525
(208) 426-1190
wws@boisestate.edu
westernwriters.boisestate.edu

Printed in the United States of America by
Boise State University Printing and Graphic Services
Boise, Idaho

Josephine Miles

Josephine Miles

"You could say I saw California grow up. Right along with me!" So Josephine Miles linked her life and region (Childress 40). The link between her poetry and California has not always been declared by the poet or detected by her readers. Miles mused upon the problem: "Sometimes there's a certain kind of critic that says I'm a California poet [. . .] he says I have a lot of loose lines and a lot of locale. But then another critic will say, 'She's not to be identified as anything but English because her poetry is rather neat and universal'" (Marie 37). While Denis Donoghue cannot find "a California element in her sensibility" (443), Donald Davie detects in Miles "that California aspiration" to place poetry back into "the humdrum of daily life" (85).

While few of her critics have discussed her identity as a California poet, Miles, from her first collection in 1935 to her last in 1983, presented California landscape in its timeless aspects: its expanse, its largesse, its beauty. Yet she realized that settlement of the west could be shaped by commerce and raids upon the environment. Smog and sprawl could compromise the region's space and light, what Wallace Stegner called "the geography of hope" (153).

A major theme in Miles's poetry is what to make of this opportunity for settlement. Her answer, which welcomes the gifts of western landscape, focuses mainly on the city, specifically Berkeley, where Miles taught and wrote. Recording the place and its inhabitants in short lyrics and then later in long multi-vocal poems, she could represent western culture in the making. Many of her poems

present an urban west energized by civic discussion and celebration. *Collected Poems, 1930-1983* reveals a poet who paid attention to California and portrayed the natural and constructed settings of its various inhabitants, the local measures of its speech, and the humdrum of its daily life. *Collected Poems* shows that, while Miles continually used stanza form and rhyme, she began after the 1950s to write in free verse and created longer poems whose point of view was decidedly not that of a single speaker. Miles employed voices and forms that expressed not just the surfaces of Bay Area life but its civic spirit.

BERKELEY POET AND SCHOLAR

When Josephine Miles, born in 1911, was nine months old, her father moved the family from Chicago to the Bay Area because of an insurance company transfer. In Berkeley at age four, Miles had corrective surgery for a congenital hip problem. When a cut made while changing the cast became infected, she contracted the rheumatoid arthritis that she suffered from all her life (Larney 4). Her father was soon reassigned to Detroit, where the family lived until Miles was six. The deterioration of young Jo's health prompted a return to California, this time to Palm Springs, which Miles represented in a late, autobiographical poem as an oasis of healing ("Trip," *Collected* 205). She explained in an oral autobiography, "Finally, they said, there's nothing to do but let me be happy in a warm place. They said I wouldn't possibly live" (Larney 5).

But Jo rallied in Palm Springs, and later, in Los Angeles, she attended grammar school in a cast or wheelchair and was sometimes taught at home by visiting public school teachers. "I didn't have much chance for friends in grammar school because I was in a cast a lot of the time," so Miles relied on family and neighbors for "a sense of sustaining force" (Clark 22). During this time Miles

began writing poetry, though none of her family ever saw much point to it. In 1918, her first poem commemorated Armistice Day, demanding "No more war!" (Childress 40).

From 1924 to 1928, Miles attended Los Angeles High School, "out in the fields of the Wilshire district" (Kizer 24). Writing pieces for the yearbook and sonnet assignments after Milton, being a member of The Scribblers, admiring Sandburg and Whitman poems in Louis Untermeyer's 1921 anthology *Modern American Poetry*, Miles was developing her creative and critical mind. Asked about whether she had women role models, Miles named one, her nurse, Miss Babcock, "kind of a battle axe," who encouraged her to send out her first poems. In high school, her model was "a little old dyspeptic man," her Latin teacher "who pushed us hard to do a lot of good work" (Marie 1-2). In an English class taught by a woman, she recalled, "I rebelled against sentimentality." She remembered disliking the lack of "direct observation of what was going on in the text" and the "immediate over-response" (Larney 29) and once piped, "Why don't we quit reading Sara Teasdale and read some jazz records or something?" (Marie 2).

At UCLA, where her friends were going, Miles was told by the dean of women that she could not enroll because she would have to ask too many favors. After she arranged for someone to register her and drive her onto campus, she encountered the dean, who exclaimed, "What are you doing here?" (Larney 38). Because of its stairs Miles could not use the university library, so she used the public library instead. At UCLA, Miles remembered, "I had to make my own makeshift world as far as modern poetry went. UCLA hadn't really caught up with the modern world of poetry, so I was in a curious kind of limbo" (Larney 39). Well-trained in Shakespeare and Spenser, she had no idea that "there was poetry in town, except for what my friends and I were writing" (Larney 39).

Though it was a small college town of 27,000 in 1933 when Miles arrived for graduate study, Berkeley was a vibrant literary community that helped facilitate her early accomplishments. Still in her twenties, she earned degrees in English—the MA in 1934 and the PhD in 1938—all the while publishing her poems in *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, and *Poetry*.

Miles described her plunge into Berkeley: "Immediately we were in the soup. I mean everything was circulating" (Larney 45). At the university, James Caldwell organized readings and taught poetry writing. Verna Grubb invited Miles to inspect a garret full of poetry manuscripts. Under the name Ann Winslow, Grubb was editing *Trial Balances* for Macmillan, an anthology of forty young poets who were introduced by established poets. Louise Bogan introduced Theodore Roethke; Marianne Moore introduced Elizabeth Bishop. Other introducers included Wallace Stevens, Allen Tate, and William Carlos Williams. Other poets included Muriel Rukeyser and J.V. Cunningham. Jessica Nelson North introduced "Local Habitation," eighteen poems by Josephine Miles, seven of which were retained in *Collected Poems: 1930-1983*. (All poetry quotations in this booklet are taken from this final volume.)

In Berkeley, Miles found a "very potent little circle" led by C.E.S. Wood and which included Stephen Vincent Benet and William Rose Benet, whose editorship of *Saturday Review* provided an access to eastern publishing "that was always important to have" (Tovey 2). Miles felt she occupied Jeffers' territory: "We all read Jeffers with great enthusiasm" (Tovey 2). One of the first nationally recognized California poets, Robinson Jeffers had stature enough to define a regional consciousness. Miles considered then that "Jeffers was an iron link between Carmel and Berkeley—a link of literary awareness electric in its strength. He was both fighter and poet, truly like Walt Whitman in that sense"

(Childress 87). Miles never located her poetry in the granite wilderness of mountain and ocean as Jeffers did, though her poems were sometimes set in the light and space of California's coast and valleys. Her faith in human will and its role in human events contrasted with Jeffers' fatalism. Nonetheless, Miles admired his example.

In those early years in Berkeley, Miles enjoyed the diverse literary scene, as she did later during the San Francisco Renaissance. There was what she called "a counter-group" at Stanford, convened by Yvor Winters and Janet Lewis. This group, thinking Jeffers "not the best model," suspected "long, loopy lines as being careless and sloppy" (Larney 51). In the Whitman tradition, the San Francisco/Berkeley poets were expressing political themes in open forms. Miles later paraphrased how J.V. Cunningham, a former student of Winters at Stanford, sought poetry for the *Chicago Sun Times*: "I'd like to print some stuff from California except, as usual, the stuff from California is so loose and sloppy, and the lines are so long, and it takes everybody so long to say anything" (Larney 53). Late in life, Miles remembered this Berkeley–Stanford debate as a "pull and tug" and "exploration of new ideas" (Larney 52). For the next four decades, Miles continued to experiment not only with line length but with her poetic representation of California.

In 1935 Miles won the Shelley Memorial Award for her poems in *Trial Balances*. Her first book soon followed, *Lines at Intersection* (1939). In 1939 Miles received an American Association of University Women Research Fellowship to continue her dissertation study of English Romantic poetry. During the 1940s Miles found "a steady advisor" in John Crowe Ransom, editor of the *The Kenyon Review*. Later she appreciatively recalled, "Every time I wrote a batch of poetry I would send it off to Ransom. He would write back, always accepting some and writing me notes about some [. . .]" (Tovey 14).

Miles's next three poetry books reveal the poet's exploration of styles suitable to her choices of mundane subjects. In *Poems on Several Occasions* (1941), she wrote about sporting events, shopping, and committee meetings and mimicked the language of the stock report, injunction, and university lecture. The "measures" of *Local Measures* (1946) refer to her ease with using the vernacular in traditional forms, as well as to the book's focus on how local citizens cope. *Prefabrications* (1955) introduced some of Miles's first multivocal sequences, "Two Kinds of Trouble" and "Ten Dreamers in a Motel." From then on, each new collection included long, discursive poems.

Her work did not go unobserved or unappreciated. Miles won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1948 and the 1958 Blumenthal Award for Poetry. *Poems 1930-1960* (1960) collected a significant body of poetry.

The University of California, Berkeley, hired Josephine Miles as an English instructor in 1940. The male-dominated profession had reservations about her as a woman, and a disabled one. She remembered being told in the first year to "bring a box of books and a suitcase and don't plan to stay because it may not work" (Larney 63). Someone cautioned, "We would not want to tenure such a fragile soul" (Marie 8). Yet in 1947 Miles became the first tenured woman in Berkeley's English Department. Later she could savor the irony: "They hesitated to give me tenure because I was a poor actuarial risk. Well, they finally did, and I kept teaching until I was 67. I've been at the university for 50 years" (Larney 1). Miles was promoted to full professor in 1952 and then in 1972 became the first woman appointed university professor, requiring her to lecture at all nine university campuses. She retired in 1978.

Flourishing in an academic setting, Miles was clearly tougher and more productive than many expected. Among her critical studies are *The Continuity of Poetic Language* (1951), *Eras and Modes*

in English Poetry (1957, 1964), *Style and Proportion: The Language of Prose and Poetry* (1967), and *Poetry and Change* (1974), winner of the Modern Language Association's James Russell Lowell Prize. In her studies of style, Miles found that poets work in a shared time, with shared conventions and influences. Examining the diction of English and American poets, she theorized that style is characteristic of an era and mode more than an individual poet. Set against her own era's demand for a poet's uniqueness, Miles argued for the social character of the language, what she called "the common materials of language, the full powers of the medium itself" (qtd. in Burr 67-68). During the period of these studies, Miles used common language in her own poetry, considering that an era gives a voice to the poet rather than the poet to an era.

As the leading poet at her university during the 1950s and 1960s, Miles observed the Bay Area poetry scene to be as multi-dimensional as it was during her student days in the 1930s. With Winters still at Stanford, Kenneth Rexroth led the San Francisco poets. Miles found her poetry community somewhere between these two: "Berkeley was always a little too academic for the San Francisco poets and not academic enough for [. . .] Winters' poets" (Larney 53). At the university, Miles coordinated poetry readings and poetry writing courses, some taught by her graduate students, themselves playing key roles in the scene: Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, Robert Duncan.

In his study, *The San Francisco Renaissance* (1989), Michael Davidson described Miles as "an academic fellow traveler rather than an active participant of the movement": "she was a supporter of the movement and offered a certain academic imprimatur to many of the more extravagant bohemian gestures of the post-'Howl' generation" (Davidson 175, 198). Her contribution to a movement known for its dominance by white men and its solely

male mythologizing narrative may not yet be fully recognized (Davidson 198; Hamalian 226).

Most poets of the San Francisco Renaissance rejected the academic handling of the poem as written text, separated from its historical circumstances and its life as spoken word. Miles shared in the ambitions of Bay Area poets, as Linda Hamalian describes them, doing "their best to build a vibrant community that nurtured and supported all its inhabitants, no matter what their vocation [. . .] to create a new sense of community and a pluralistic social order" (220). These aims motivated Miles as a poet, citizen, and teacher.

Unlike most poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, Miles was neither apocalyptic nor exotic in her choice of themes. She continued to favor the humdrum of daily life and the voice of bemused neighbor, not agitated prophet. With her grounding in Emerson, not Zen, she did open herself to an informing universe, as Davidson says many of her Bay Area contemporaries did (17). Miles was not a poetry performer, but was one activist among many building a Bay Area literary culture. Though she would increasingly employ open forms, Miles never abandoned an interest in formal, objective poetry, nor in the music and compactness of lyric. In these ways, she kept faith with the New Critics, whose journals—*Sewanee Review*, *The Kenyon Review*—had published her poetry in the 1930s and 1940s.

Miles adapted and grew as a poet and teacher during the Free Speech Movement and Vietnam War protests of the 1960s. She recalled that the decade's "embattlement had a certain kind of power to foster poetry and foster solidarity and enthusiasm" (Larney 74). Through the Vietnam years Miles allowed her classes to write and publish protest work. She edited *American Poems* (1970), a volume of protests from Berkeley poets. Miles was exhilarated by "instant

poems and instant publication" of her chapbooks and broadsides, some of which were distributed at rallies at the People's Park.

In *Kinds of Affection* (1967), Miles adjusted her poetry to changes in her civic and creative worlds. Her subjects were a 1960s compendium: war and assassination, race and class, bureaucracies and corporations, and the environment. She struggled to meet this book's challenge: "What do we do / When the formulas buckle / And men beat their heads on the pavement / In pure anger?" (153) Miles urged being "Softer" (153). To move beyond conflict, she urged discussion and conciliation (166).

Miles reached out to readers in the untitled poems of *Kinds of Affection*. Their first lines, extended to the left, functioned sometimes as topic sentences, sometimes as starting threads of conversations or narratives. Varied stanza lengths signaled that each poem was a singular effort to define affection. Using short and long lines and frequent enjambment, Miles approximated the movement of conversation. Her personae included people debating before the local city council. Her versions of Hindi poems, the only translations to appear in her books, spoke from a distant culture.

In 1978, when she retired from the University of California, Josephine Miles became the thirty-seventh poet of the Academy of American Poets. In her last new volume of poetry, *Coming to Terms* (1979), Miles for the first time wrote specifically about her disability, later commenting, "There's a sense of scope within human limitation and human limitation within scope. It's a matter of learning the tools, coming to realization as well as experiment" (Hammond 618). In 1980 Miles was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Senior Fellowship.

Miles in old age preserved an ardent clarity. Fellow poet James Schevill wrote: "[N]o one laughs harder amidst the pyramid of knowledge" (*Berkeley* 17). William Childress described Miles in 1974 as "[a] tiny, wrenlike woman with short-cropped hair and

sparkling eyes [. . .]" (40). Edward Mycue recalled, "When I first met Josephine Miles, she was carried into the living room by a student attendant. She was so small and wizened, with gnarled hands and a radiant smile." Sally Kuzma, who assisted Miles in the early 1980s, described the poet's daily life:

> So much sitting and waiting, so much attention to whatever and whoever came her way. It was a discipline of hospitality. Even in considerable pain and fatigue she made room for guests. From her chair she'd question them in much the way an ant flexes its antennae, to receive and perceive, to get information, images, stories. In between visits she'd write, in this not very private place, with a lapboard across the chair's arms for support. (Kuzma, n.p.)

Miles saw her most complete gathering in *Collected Poems: 1930-1983*. Presenting three hundred of her four hundred published poems, nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and still in print, *Collected Poems* is the evidence upon which any assessment of Miles must be made. She died in Berkeley in 1984.

CRITICAL ASSESSMENTS

In reviewing books by Miles, critics for decades have examined her poetry through a modernist, New Critical lens. That lens has produced plentiful observations on the niceties of her craft and on her coolness toward her subjects. This criticism, while finding much to praise, has not considered Miles as a poet who draws images and motifs from California, particularly from the Bay Area. In criticizing her for holding back from self-expression, modernist critics have not considered her great interest in placing poetry back into daily life.

As early as 1935, Jessica Nelson North established many of the terms used to evaluate Miles's poetry. Introducing Miles in *Trial*

Balances and reviewing her first book, *Lines at Intersection*, in *Poetry* in 1940, North was explicit about her critical preferences. North admired how the young poet presented minute objects and then clipped off emotions before they flowered (Introduction 23-24). North praised how she could "paint at brush-length the microcosm of daily life" with humor and immediacy ("Revivifying" 279). These first assessments formed a base for subsequent Miles criticism dependent mainly upon the critic's taste or distaste for a poetry of everyday subjects handled objectively (Burr 73).

Through her career, Miles heard from critics that her subjects, and thus her poems, were small—not merely short, but trivial. In 1946, Randall Jarrell criticized *Local Measures* as "one more product of the Miles method for turning out Miles poems" (488). Jarrell characterized her poetry as the work of an insufficiently bold female: "Miss Miles specializes" in writing "individualized cultivated little affairs," and to write better, Jarrell advised,

> she would have to have a change of heart—or else spend years on a corrective, some violent emotional epic, and thus in the end be dragged back to a better and more ordinary poetry. But in some way she must come to be possessed by her daemon, instead of possessing him so complacently. (489)

A. Alvarez, who like Jarrell confused the personae of the poems with the poet herself, grouped Miles with the Imagists in his review of *Prefabrications*. Alvarez defined Imagism as "the first full-scale feminist movement in poetry [. . .] founded on qualities at which women are clearly better than men" (321). Alvarez trivialized this movement by suggesting it is the province of the gracious hostess: "But to be a good Imagist all that was necessary was a feeling for detail, as in arranging a drawing room, and sufficient good manners to keep it up" (321). Miles, he wrote, employed "the tininess of Imagism," a school that produces verse, not poetry,

with its successes and failures lying "in its sense of chaste limitation." Alvarez, like Jarrell, asserted that a poet's use of detail could lead somewhere, depending "upon the poet's disturbance" (322).

Neither Jarrell nor Alvarez singled out poems illustrating their criticisms, yet "Housewife" might be one of the tiny, cultivated lyrics they had in mind. In three quatrains Miles describes how Bay Area fog blocks the view of a housewife who on clear days goes out "in the submetropolitan air." This morning, "She is put to ponder / A lifeline, how it chooses to run obscurely / In her hand, before her" (62). Miles captures her subject's unrest, which is a function of being a housewife, surely, but of being mortal as well. The weight of the poem comes from the housewife's need to ponder, to consider the obscurity, the fogginess, of her future. In this compact poem, Miles captures an Edward Hopper moment just as the woman who is looking out turns to look within. The crisis is clearly rendered, and, while it is not presented as the poet's own crisis, we can imagine it is a common one. Far from being merely cultivated, the poem risks some unusual diction and quick jumps. If the subject seems limited, Miles discloses its possibilities. Those who dismiss twelve-line lyrics should be cautioned—Reed Whittemore compared Miles to Emily Dickinson, whom he judged minor because "she made no effort not to be 'circumscribed'" (13).

Some critics acknowledged that poems such as "Housewife" revealed Miles's social concerns. As early as 1940 in comments on *Lines at Intersection*, Morton Dauwen Zabel grouped Miles with earlier realists such as William Carlos Williams and e.e. cummings, poets whose social comment was combined with aesthetic achievement. Zabel called her poetry "lyric realism" (594), noting its "swift seizure of her decade's peculiar accent and color" (600). While dismissing Imagists, Alvarez granted that Miles pared down her poems "until she is left with a poignant, bare, minimal poetry

of judgments," which could be "tense and concentrated" (328-29). Rather than disparaging the use of the ordinary in her poems, Denis Donoghue observed, "Many of her themes are domestic properties, for if thought is to come alive it ought to come on ordinary days, not just on exceptional occasions" (442). In reviewing *To All Appearances* (1974), Donoghue picked his favorites for an imagined anthology. He included "Midweek" (74), spoken by a moviegoer who has a chance to win a Cadillac in a drawing in which the fates make all but one of the audience "heart-rent." For this poem about ordinary days, Miles adopts a persona who reports just enough for us to see people's need to escape work and to hope for a windfall.

Whether or not Miles is a considerable poet seems to depend on how critics answer one question: What is the relation between her craft and choice of subjects? Critics agree that Miles has fine skills. They disagree about whether her subjects merit attention. Critics who expect personal intensity in a poem consider her subjects trivial and her craft a barrier to expression. Critics who see Miles drawing social commentary from ordinary subjects praise her fitting of content and craft.

Two critics from the 1950s extended the critical discussion by noting the development and coherence of Miles's books. Anthony Hecht, reviewing *Prefabrications*, singled out "Two Kinds of Trouble" as "more adventurous and ambitious than many of Miss Miles' more tightly worked pieces" (451). Hecht commented on a type of poem that other critics overlooked—long, discursive pieces showing Miles as other than a lyric poet.

Robert Beloof moved beyond the craft/content discussions to an appreciation of Miles's vision in the first four books. He found that Miles consistently presents "the middle distance" between the experience of the ordinary and the metaphysical. Experience is shown as a surface that might offer glimpses of marvels, miracles,

and blessings. The tension of this middle distance contributes to "the deepening of her later poetry" (Beloof 284). According to Beloof, Miles is drawn "to the individuals of the community and to the great abstractions that order them" (281). Her poems connect these realms, raising fact to significance and showing the universal in the ordinary.

During the campus disturbances of the 1960s, students and critics caused Miles to question her approach to poetry. She recalled in a later interview her response to the disparaging comments about her first collection, *Poems, 1930-1960*: "Here I am an ancient lady of fifty now. And this is probably the last book I'll write" (Larney 71). Like the critics, her students dismissed her kind of poetry. Asking "What's my kind?" Miles recalled one student's answer: "Those neat little Christmas packages, all tied up in bows" (Pinsker 86). Miles reflected on the role of poetry in troubled times, noting how poems in the popular anthology *New Poets of England and America* (1957) were "giving too many easy solutions [. . .] bringing things to conclusions" (Pinsker 86). A chastened, yet resolute, Miles observed, "After 1960 I'm sure I thought an awful lot about a freer form" (Pinsker 86).

Notably absent from this body of criticism, preoccupied as it is with poetic form, has been a consideration of Miles as a western poet. Through five decades there have been only passing remarks about Miles being a Californian, though her strong connection to place is revealed in the poetry and in interviews and biographical materials. While critics have long recognized the influence of Big Sur on Robinson Jeffers and of the Salinas Valley on John Steinbeck, critics of Miles have overlooked place in her poetry. Now that we have critical frameworks to help us read women who write in the west and also women poets who employ a public voice, we can see that the link between Miles and California is indeed vital to her poetic practice and achievement.

While some of her poems present a California of limitless nature—truly in the footsteps of nineteenth-century writers and painters—Miles often focuses on the urban west, the Berkeley of her imaginative vision, a populated west that includes workplaces and human aspirations. Yet she locates this city within wider, more enduring spatial elements. Berkeley is enhanced by coastal light. Residents are invited by the Sierras and the Pacific Ocean to expand their views. Instead of being opposed, the human and natural worlds exchange influences. As "Center" indicates, Miles is interested in how people transform space into place:

> How did you come
> How did I come here
> Now it is ours, how did it come to be
> In so many presences? (232)

Her interest in community fits with the recent scholarship that foregrounds western women and others underrepresented by official history.

Krista Comer explains why the regional element of women writers of the west has been neglected. Comer's essay in *Updating the Literary West* (1997), like her extended study, *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (1999), asserts that western literary criticism is "saddled with male-centered [. . .] aesthetic ideals" so that the categories of "West" and "woman" appear mutually exclusive ("Feminism" 19). Comer asserts that Wallace Stegner, an influential interpreter of western culture and literature, represented the west as a wilderness and focused primarily upon male responses to that space. Stegner wrote, "A Westerner trying to examine his life has trouble finding himself in any formed or coherent society. [. . .] His confrontations are therefore likely to be with the landscape, which

seems to define the west and its meaning better than any of its forming cultures [. . .]" (*Sound* 11). Comer resists what she calls the Stegnerian field of western study because, by privileging wilderness above culture, it pushes to the margins both rural women and urban women and men (*Landscapes* 55-56).

In countering this widely employed spatial model, Comer insists on redrawing western space and then reinterpreting its women writers, who have all along tried "to write themselves into dominant western history" and thus change the conditions of telling "official" history (*Landscapes* 29). Also keen on redefinition, Michael Kowalewski indicates that "one important way in which historians have been reinterpreting Western history is by altering the paradigm of single-handed masculine conquest and resistance and emphasizing the neglected domestic elements of family and community" (1). Whether new space or new paradigm, enter women, minorities, the town and city.

Krista Comer senses the irony that "the rural wild [is still] an implicit yardstick which measures the one, best west" even though since 1945 half of the west's population has lived in cities (*Landscapes* 62). In prose writers such as Joan Didion and Maxine Hong Kingston, Comer notes not just the emergence of California women as regionalists, but their urban locations. Prior to Comer, Annette Kolodny wrote in *The Land Before Her* (1984) that pioneer women, like men, have used landscape as a medium by which to express their culturally shared dreams and to make them actualities. However, while men envisioned exploration and alteration of the land, "women claimed the frontier as a potential sanctuary for an idealized domesticity. [. . .] They dreamed [. . .] of locating a home and a familial human community within a cultivated garden" (xiii). Where men saw opportunity for mastery, women saw opportunity for community.

Without benefit of this reclaiming of women's stake in the west, many critics of Miles, as we have seen, identified her as a poetess

doing refined work on circumscribed subjects or as a university intellectual whose poems, while insightful, did not originate from any specific place or address any specific citizenry. Both views have kept Miles from being read as a western writer. Both have done a disservice to Miles and our current sense of what constitutes western literary achievement.

Starting with her first published poems, Miles used images and themes drawn from the American west. Interested in how the west was being settled, she observed human activities on the wide stage of western landscape, its light, air, and ocean. Among the poems Jessica Nelson North introduced in 1935 in *Trial Balances*, "After This, Sea" sums up in the tradition of pioneer narrative one family's coming to California. It is the most ambitious poem in the gathering, manifestly western, even Californian, in its imagery and theme. While the father and the child who speaks the poem have left behind "the stale place," they do acknowledge that "This is as far as the land goes." They both long to climb the hills and swim the sea, but, again, with the recognition that "here we are at bay" (6). The land itself sets a limit to their wandering. Here they will settle:

> Nowhere are so still as here
> Four horizons, or so clear.
> Whatever we make here, whatever find,
> We cannot leave behind. (6)

In an essay published sixty years after this poem, Linda Hamalian identified poets who followed Robinson Jeffers in their use of California landscape. While Hamalian does not mention her, Miles should be included among the poets who felt the "spell of California spaces" and found "a sacramental presence" and "a palpable background against which they could articulate philosophical and political concerns as well as highly charged emotions"

(Hamalian 219). In Miles's poetry, setting is hardly ever without people. It is never just scenery. In her poems nature may dwarf the humans, yet it draws them toward expansion.

"Center," Miles's last full statement about how California impacts immigrants and is itself impacted, describes the arrival of many kinds of people to California, those working on DNA or the PTA, emerging "out of old space into the universe" (234). The poem depicts culture as a building whose concrete is still open to the generous local space and light. Not only does the structure need completion, "it needs our lives / To make it live" (234). After decades at the university, Miles envisions California's future as an expansive campus, still in the making, still welcoming arrivals from all over the world.

Between "After This, Sea" and "Center," between 1935 and 1979, Miles wrote about city people coming to terms with California's nature. With its extreme drought and heat, nature can be a curative:

> From San Juan to Carmel and then down
> Over the ridges of chaparral burns the sun away,
> The great oven of air ladling herbs
> To grill the ground, as ripe a medicine
> As ever breathed corpse its new message,
> Earth will consume and save. ("Two Kinds of Trouble" 89)

Likewise, the Bay mornings suggest possibilities:

> The beautiful intense light of intense morning
> Allows the fullest speculation toward the day,
> The reach of every hand and hope outward
> To come what may. ("Contained" 61)

Miles finds a meeting of natural space and human place at the edge of San Francisco Bay: "Freight whistles reach here and the

fire engines / Coming from town, foundry hammers / Among the wash of waves" ("When I telephoned a friend" 151).

Miles sees the west as space that needs to be inhabited. She places her settlers on a physical and figurative journey, which allows her to comment on success and obstacles to success. Indeed, Miles employs commonplaces long popularized by advocates of manifest destiny: the individual and national journey are one and the same; the west is a microcosm of America; progress is inevitable; and in some poems, western land is empty land, so it demands settlement.

Like a historian of manifest destiny, Miles senses a pull toward the Pacific:

> [. . .] I saw the long labs and markets
> In Illinois, of afternoons not yet ending,
> High plains, Boulder, the descent
> To Salt Lake, cattle and presses driving in Boise,
> And somebody practicing sailing on the Bay.
>
> ("West from Ithaca" 246)

In an updated version of the classic westering tale, motel travelers wake in "Ten Dreamers in a Motel" "Into the thunder and silence of the unfolding / Durable journey" (101-02). The journey, Miles admits, may have an uncertain end. In "Evangel" the west might deliver storms or fallout from bomb testing (83). Another panorama, "Brooklyn, Iowa, and West," shows westward movement as a duststorm carrying away topsoil, its "thought" uncertain "like a guess" (131). The course of a west-running river signals what travelers may find in California:

> What could it believe when it came finally
> Into fog, salt and deceptive, into dust
> Dry and sandy, the logs, bars, nets

Shells, mixed debris, mixed decisions
Of the ambiguous ocean? (132)

Like the river, those coming to the Pacific may find deceptions and ambiguities. By the mid-twentieth century, they are sure to find the view blocked and earlier settlements deserted. In "Summer" the "prefabricating panels" of new housing cut off the view (84), and in "Ten Dreamers in a Motel," those going to the sea in order to establish "great foundations" find shanties built already and already torn down, "empty to the tide" (99).

Miles observes how settlement can change a place without respect for the local resources. On this point she agrees with Wallace Stegner, who considered the west vulnerable to "the economics of the raid," a history of looting furs, then minerals, then water and land, and now scenery (*Sound* 32). Thus, a speaker in one poem who rides a municipal railway from the city becomes puzzled about where she is: "On which of the many hills / Of suburbs out beyond the State Fair on Saturday morning / Did we pasture our goats?" (99) The speaker sees development obscuring the once-familiar landscape. Similarly, in a late poem, Miles tallies the environmental degradations caused by developing Berkeley's waterfront. Citizens who fear development argue to save the delicate shallows:

Otherwise we will get a bowling alley,
A car park and golf course, with financing,
Sift up the shallows into a solid base
With sand dredged from the deeper channels, brought in scows
Or hopper dredges, and dumped on the fish, and then paved over
For recreation with no cost to the city.
("When I telephoned a friend" 149)

Raids upon pasture and bay result in a city of cement, of the "clean-cut and durable" established not in nature but in "street and linoleum" (15). The realtor in the poem "$7,500" pitches "the white, delicate, and new" qualities of a house in "this empty field" (12). Walking through a completed development, the door-to-door salesman suffers "how flat the blocks ahead are and how hot" (19). Stucco houses "cut square into the sky" form a "straight cement horizon" (22). California's "jerrybuildings of tomorrow's life" (81) look so much alike that "your house can be mine / As well as the next" (244).

Having arrived at the "mixed debris, mixed decisions / Of the ambiguous ocean," Miles expresses contradictory feelings about settlement. Settlement has at least two sides, the unfinished, dynamic campus of purposeful immigrants and the tract housing built by speculators for anonymous residents. She laments and fears raids on nature, yet she can find saving elements in the city's economic activity. As much as education and art, commerce binds its citizens.

The speaker of "The Plastic Glass," like the saint who saw the world suspended in a golden globe, delights to see

> Shattuck Avenue and the Safeway Stores
> In Herndon's globe of friendly credit.
>
> And where the car moved on, there the whole trash
> Flats of Berkeley floated in suspense,
> Gold to the Gate and bellied to the redwood
> Cottages. (102)

She speculates that the vision, a reflection in the cheap signage of a loan office, is a judgment upon the city's materialism. But the vision is a blessing that "Falls not from above; the grace / Goldens from everyman, his singular credit / In the beatitude of place" (102). Miles enjoys naming the streets and stores and offering the

vision first as a bright reflection seen from a car, then as reflection on the credit and beatitude of her fellow citizens and their locale. California the golden is revealed by glimpses. "The Plastic Glass" transforms plastic into esemplastic, the imagination's power to unify and shape. Critic Lawrence R. Smith noted this power: "Miles does not try to escape the dreariness of industrial society; she only tries to reveal the magical world which dwells within its physical manifestations" (26).

While some poems show the works of nature and humans irreconcilably at odds, other poems show them merged and mutually supportive. Thus the gold sunshine exalts the trash flats of her city. The natural and human are in harmony in a poem from *Kinds of Affection*, which begins with the speaker's admission of being bound by streets and knowing only a reduced nature:

> Apart from branches in courtyards and small stones,
> The countryside is beyond me.
> I can go along University Avenue from Rochester to Sobrante
> And then the Avenue continues to the Bay.
>
> ("Apart from branches" 170)

The speaker's sense of journeying, of going along familiar streets toward the ocean and back in time to her birthplace in foothill country, creates a rich meditation in which the city streets are her conveyance from the efforts at backyard landscaping to the unlimited landscape of Indian country and the ocean, "blue and Mediterranean." She imagines herself at the coast, taken up by wind and wave:

> There I break
> In drops of spray as fine as letters
> Blown high, never to be answered,
> But waking am the shore they break upon. (170-71)

To the speaker's refreshment, the waves roll in "as if they lived here" and the dry wind "sweeps up the town and takes it for a feast." Her recognition of nature's power to energize her leads to the poem's epiphany, a moment when the speaker becomes totally identified with the ability of the streets to mediate such a transformation, one which has not necessitated a single step, but has occurred in the imagination: "Then Rochester to El Sobrante is a distance / No longer than my name" (171).

Nature, then, may be "beyond" the city dweller, but accessible. Miles presents a city enhanced by the rich givens of nature, especially light, such as "The beautiful intense light of intense morning" (61) and the moonlight that allows warehouses to rise up and shine "marble and magnificent" (72). A city graced by such light belongs to everyone. And in some lights, the city itself seems part of nature:

> So it was that we came to our street from a different view,
> Saw our neighborhood from aside and below,
> Stacked up the hill our houses in their shrub,
> Their windows empty as an evening sky. (100)

Even the glow of streetlights shining over the citizens can seem natural: "When they run out to get ice cream it is the light that shines over them" (35).

In numerous poems set in city and suburb, Miles illustrates what Krista Comer insists western writers must do to bring their writing close to the realities of living in the west. Comer observes that the region's "very metropolitan environments" force new definitions of the west that depart from the "wilderness bias [that] underlies conventional definitions [. . .]" (*Landscapes* 119). Any search for the western elements in Miles's poetry must look at the foreground of settlements, which have risen up quickly, but not in a vacuum. The background—actually, the ground—of such

settlements is the richly endowed California landscape. Her poetry creates a dialogue about settlement because Miles conceives that local inhabitants are in a dynamic relationship with their locality, sometimes competing with it, sometimes reconciling and cooperating. In many of her poems the deepest insights derive from the experience of these two great orders, the human and the natural, acting as one.

POETRY OF ADDRESS

Krista Comer's reframing of western literature enables us to recognize the importance for Miles of the metropolitan and natural environments of Berkeley, California. In her poems, we find the specific address of her settings and subjects. We find a regional Miles.

Zofia Burr, like Comer, provides a critical framework that allows us to read Miles in another new way. In *Of Women, Poetry, and Power: Strategies of Address in Dickinson, Miles, Brooks, Lorde, and Angelou* (2002), Burr argues for interpreting the women she studies as public poets who write a poetry of address. Rather than being measured by intensity of self-expression, the work of these poets should be measured by what Burr calls "addressivity and situatedness" (66). That is, Miles and the others are unusually attentive to who speaks and who listens to their poems and to the time and place of the poem's occasion. Such attentiveness comes directly from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: Any alert communicator understands that situation elicits speech and speech adapts to situation. Burr's reading presents a rhetorical Miles, whose stance in relation to her subject and readers influences her poetic aim and poetic method.

Although Miles is not primarily interested in self-expression, readers have judged her against their expectations for confessional and personal lyric poetry. Too often, Burr observes, critics have

applied the wrong measures to her poetry: "yardsticks of self-expression, poetic grandeur, and timelessness" (71). No wonder her work has come up short and has been considered "overinterested in technique [. . .] and limited to narrow, superficial, occasional, and time-bound subjects" (71). Burr insists that this criticism is mistaken, for "when we circumscribe the resonance of published writing according to what it illuminates about the writer, we undermine the impact and implications of writing whose goals and interests are public" (93). Burr argues that the poems do not "articulate Miles herself. Instead, through their staging of the interplay of voices and silences, her poems explore the multiplicity of perspectives that stand behind the emergence of any one account as authoritative" (84). Just as overlooking the regional Miles has led to misreadings, so has overlooking the rhetorical Miles.

By calling her a "public poet," Burr refers to Miles's use of dialogue, not her politics or ideology. The public poet can address civic themes for the purpose of examination and exchange. And even when the dialogues are not political or civic, Burr values their presenting of multiple views. Miles writes public poetry, as Burr defines it, for both private and civic occasions.

Although Burr does not examine the influence of region on public poets and does not discuss Miles as a westerner, we have already established Miles's California address. Now we can link to Berkeley the elements of her public poetry—its personae, multiple perspectives, vernacular language, and habits of inquiry and exchange. Our reading of Miles can benefit from the perspectives of both Krista Comer and Zofia Burr.

Personae

Burr warns readers not to confuse the author with the poetic persona (75). Miles employs a variety of personae, ranging from first-person speakers who somewhat resemble her to those who are

not at all like her. Frequently, she uses narrators who do not intrude upon their stories, whose reticence and fallibility allow the relation of teller to story to be savored. Miles, who thought "our identities flourish in relation to others," very seldom presents her private identity (qtd. in Burr 71). The impetus for poetry is her meeting with others in the occasional observation, encounter, or exchange. The results are poems "so patient and selfless in their manner that the reader can miss their power [. . .]" (Donoghue 443). Lisa M. Steinman admired the fact that Miles in her lyric poetry does not make the world too tidy or too emblematic of the self. Steinman attributed the inclusiveness of Miles's lyrics to the poet's character, "which involves a judicious emptying out of self sufficient to embrace difference and complexity" ("Putting" 137). Miles described this rhetorical stance: "I scarcely think of the 'I' analogous to myself in writing a poem [. . .] I would respond to an attitude that interests me. It's like trying on clothes, to see how a person would think if you worked it through [. . .]" (Hammond 628-29). Miles aimed in her poetry to give voice to others, explaining:

> [T]he special quality that I would like to have in [the lyric is] that it tries to capture a little bit of the drama of somebody else's thought; that is, there's a quality of dialogue in it, and that the speaker or the speakers aren't necessarily speaking for me or from my point of view [. . .] and I would like to entertain those [viewpoints] even if they aren't mine. (qtd. in Burr 98)

Two early poems cited by Burr illustrate how Miles entertains viewpoints. Aptly named, "Dialogue" (4) records the conversation between a "he" and "she" who we might assume are lovers. In urging her to wake up and "move with the fierce motion of the sea," the man does most of the talking. His demand for intensity

prefigures the demands of many of Miles's critics. The woman replies by directing his attention to a red pebble. Perhaps the woman's soft reply and her focus on things, not ideas, wins us over, but the man's call to acknowledge oceanic emotions is legitimate, too.

In the better-known "Government Injunction Restraining Harlem Cosmetic Co." (30), Miles reports the regulators' judgment, but exaggerates the importance of their prohibiting the sale of hair straighteners and skin whiteners. The indirect report that mocks both the injunction's pompous language and the advertiser's extreme claims creates ambiguity: "They say La Jac Brite Skin Bleach avails not, / They say its Orange Beauty Glow does not glow" (30). Does Miles disapprove of such cosmetics? Does she criticize the heavy-handed regulation? The poet refrains from answering these questions, but instead holds up for our examination and pleasure the claims and language of both parties.

Even when the "I" of a poem seems to parallel what we know of the poet's biography, Miles includes "facts" that are true for her personae but not for her. For example, in "After This, Sea," the speaker identifies with those who have a need to climb local hills and swim in the Pacific, which Miles herself was never able to do. In "Apart from branches. . ." the speaker mentions Indian country "where I was born" (170). In both poems the "facts" do not fit with what we know of Miles, but they add to our sense that we are hearing someone who speaks with the authority of her California birthright. The personae thus dramatize and localize viewpoints.

Miles often uses a limited first person who is present at events but not the central interest, certainly not the agent of epiphanies. Insight thrusts itself upon this fallible speaker, as we have seen in "The Plastic Glass." In "To Make a Summer," Barney's daughter exclaims "joy, joy," so the speaker feels her heart relieved of the "sting of the singular." Her isolation is lessened by a feeling

initiated by Barney's daughter that "starts moving / In the easy early Berkeley air / What we incommunicably share" (129).

In "Yesterday evening as the sun set late" (177), another witnessing speaker is parked with friends to watch the sunset over the Pacific. They are distracted by a yellow-haired girl in a Volkswagen beside them, who "looked at us with a radiance / Hardly receivable." Outside her car, where it is clear she is agitated and cared for by friends,

> Her blown voice said to the three with her,
> I know why you brought me here,
> To love these mixed-up people, and I do!
> See, they are smiling at me, poor sad
> Mixed-up people. (177)

The girl's purpose to love may or may not be Miles's own prescription. The message comes from the girl, transforming her, impressing the speaker enough to record what she saw and heard, but hardly transfiguring the setting. Miles sets up a possibly transcendent scene, brings in a kind of sibyl, and keeps the narrator safely in the company of others. Nonetheless, the girl's message is clear and may even be more credible because Miles mutes the prophetic elements of the episode by using ordinary language and a matter-of-fact last line: "A trawler crossed between us and the sun" (177).

Miles focuses narratives away from herself. In "Family" she reports back the near drowning and rescue of "you," a swimmer in distress, whose family misinterprets his cries. A helicopter happens by whose expert pilot realizes somebody is drowning: "And it is you. You say yes, yes, / And he throws you a line. / This is what is called the brotherhood of man" (201). The final line may be creed for Miles, but here it is her narrator's claim about the meaning of the incident. Another witness might have made a claim for luck or favorable gods. This one maintains that it is not the

dramatic convention of *deus ex machina* but a man in a machine who offers the saving line, a trope for brotherhood. Miles might enjoy suggesting that a poet, a writer of lines, helps in rescues, too.

By using various personae and by placing herself in the background, Miles creates a poetry that is peopled by others, varied in tone, and ambitious to represent the multiplicity of the world she inhabits.

Multiple views

Zofia Burr argues that "Miles's writing shows us that lyric poetry need not be confined to the domain of the personal or to the articulation of a distinctive, individual voice; it can be a poetry of the multiple voices and diverse occasions urged upon us by a public world" (112). Burr warns us that the poems do not "cohere" as a body of work to articulate Miles herself (84) and that no one of her poems "represents a singular voice" (97-98). Instead of searching for some authentic Miles by generalizing about the poet's oeuvre and signature style, Burr chooses to examine the poet's responses to a multiple, diverse world.

In her life as poet, teacher, and citizen, Miles developed her habits of listening, considering alternatives, and resisting premature conclusions. She recalled that, even as a child, she was struck by how her parents lived with their frequent disagreements: "That's a source of strength, to see people argue without fighting, always coming to different conclusions but still getting along. I found that very powerful and good" (Clark 21). Sally Kuzma, her personal attendant in the 1980s, remembered that Miles "had a wonderful way of disagreeing. 'Isn't that interesting!' she'd say sweetly. 'I feel just the opposite!' She'd then elucidate what was to her a fascinating contrast" (Kuzma).

During her writing career, Miles enjoyed her place between poetry groups that were more or less conservative than she was. She remembered, "We weren't coalesced opposites. [. . .] I don't believe in things being split apart. [. . .] We didn't have factions or feuds—everybody has accepted everybody" (Larney 52-53). In her classes, randomly gathered to start and readily dispersed at semester end, Miles recalled her effort at melding the group: "I work very hard in my classes to get them to become a group" (Clark 22). Miles tried to achieve what she describes as "a hard thing to capture, this feeling of osmosis that comes from a lot of people in a group" (Larney 74).

Late in life, Miles could state her principles of diversity:

> I want to keep stressing diversity. The more variety, the more people disagree, the more different ways there are of doing things, the more limitations each person faces in terms of his strength, the more chance there is that when cohesiveness develops it will be a good one because it will be hard won and complex. (Clark 23)

Similarly, in "So you are thinking of principles to go on," a poem of conversation with the educator Alexander Meiklejohn, Miles states, "We are engaged upon diversity" (166). Even before she articulated such principles, her book titles were invariably plural: *Trial Balances*, *Lines at Intersection*, *Poems on Several Occasions*, *Local Measures*, *Prefabrications*, *Neighbors and Constellations*, *Kinds of Affection*, *Fields of Leaning*, *To All Appearances*, *Coming to Terms*. Sensing this pluralist inclination, Lisa M. Steinman reflected on the way Miles handles the variety of her characters by "affirming community within diversity" ("Putting" 131).

In "When I telephoned a friend," Miles writes a long poem of multiple voices for a public occasion, a hearing on developing Berkeley's bay shore. This first poem in *Kinds of Affection* (149)

illustrates better than short lyrics such as "Housewife" and "Dialogue" how Miles can entertain one or more views, not necessarily her own. The poem begins and ends with a friend's "light voice" in the city hall chambers. Other people speak more loudly: a developer, a student, a columnist, a statistician, and a chorus that urges "Saving the Bay." Each voice has its individual timbre. Eleven sections lay out appeals to reason and emotions, to economic and environmental values, to short and long term impacts.

True to Burr's sense of a public poet, Miles withholds her own judgment, creating space, as the poem explains, "so we hear the sides, the margins speaking" (149). Chanting as if moving to music, the chorus extols margins as meeting places:

> Boundary and margin, meeting and met,
> So that the pure sea will not forget,
> Voracious as it is, its foreign kind,
> And so the land,
>
> Voracious as it is, will not redeem
> Another's diadem.
> Saving the shores,
> Saving the lines between [. . .]. (150)

If Miles has a thesis, the repetition of "between" might hint at it, as the poem maintains the importance of the balance between sea and land and of the exchange between citizens of different views. The shore and sea are figures of contesting views that meet and clash, yet preserve their differences. Miles has the chorus choose

> [. . .] no homogeneous dredge
> But seedy edge
> Of action and chance
> Met to its multiple and varied circumstance. (150)

She directs this suite of voices, introducing strong opinions and moderating stridencies. The medley of verse types, the lively

jumps between human and nature, the local debate being an occasion to celebrate the bay by the city and the city by the bay—these make Miles a public poet for both the particular issue and for the community itself. Miles later summed up her preference for connectedness, "So—families, a neighborhood—I like the whole idea of community" (Clark 22).

Miles felt at home in her city during the period when another California poet, writing from his outpost at Big Sur, opted for wild nature, despised cities and most fellow humans, and scorned the idea of social progress. In "Shine, Perishing Republic," Robinson Jeffers counsels his sons to "keep their distance / from the thickening center; corruption / Never has been compulsory [. . .]." When the cities decay, the mountains remain. And most of all, "boys, be in nothing so moderate as in love of man, a / clever servant, insufferable master" (97). For Jeffers, the California coast is not a beginning, because, to his credit, he remembered the decimated local tribes. In "The Torch-Bearers' Race" Jeffers describes "a thick stone pillar upon this shore," a monument to the end of civilization, a finish line for the frenzied westward circling of the globe begun in Asia and proceeding to Europe and America. This migration ends in exhaustion and oblivion (Jeffers 104).

Unlike Jeffers, Miles never lived as if this or any other single narrative were authoritative. Jeffers' stone pillar contrasts with the evolving campus of "Center," where people gather to "ponder, celebrate, and reshape" what they may become (232). In "Makers," her poem about the California poets she knew, Miles says she could never have been like Jeffers, for "Jeffers bore / Human interest at its darkest" (231). Miles chose other paths, urged on perhaps by her parents, by her need for help as an other-abled person, and by her own desire to help as a teacher and citizen. Whether an interest in community leads to a poetry of many voices or a practice of writing such poetry leads to community,

Miles linked these two so that both the life and the work were open to other people and how they might respond.

Vernacular

On the cover of *Kinds of Affection*, Miles refers to "lyrics of speech or talk rather than of song." For much of her life as teacher, scholar, and committee member, Miles needed to listen. The talk she refers to is that of others, which she said contributed to her poetry:

> Sometimes when I hear people say something, hear spoken language or see language written, there's a kind of special energy to it which makes me feel that's something I ought to try to keep hold of. Soon, or maybe a long time after, I try to shape it up a bit as a way of keeping it. There's a source of vitality from people. The sense of meaning in what's being said—that's probably where I contribute something. (Clark 21)

In another interview, she added,

> I am very much interested in what people say or do, especially in circumstances where they are confident or unguarded. I think these things are very beautiful. It brings tears to my eyes this minute. I just think it's a very poetic thing. And I try to capture it. (Pinsker 85)

Miles describes a practice of capturing, contributing, and keeping. What she captures may not at first seem worth keeping. She is attracted by its unguarded energy. Later she is perhaps able to discover its meaning and with her contribution make that meaning available to others. Her poems provide contexts for such exclamations as, "I know why you brought me here, / To love these mixed-up people, and I do!" (177) and "Look down there, there is

somebody drowning. / And it is you. You say, yes, yes, / And he throws you a line" (200-01).

Lisa Steinman observed Miles's ability to work with found language and to preserve its integrity even as she reveals its meaning ("Putting" 133). For Steinman, "Reason" (93) illustrates a deft capture of two voices arguing about a parking place: "Said, Pull her up a bit will you, Mac, I want to unload there. / Said, Pull her up my rear end, first come first serve" (93). Miles, the listener, allows each speaker "his otherness," so for Steinman the poem "constitutes Miles' contribution [. . .] her authorial act of affirming community within diversity" ("Putting" 131). The vernacular the two men use reveals the linguistic community they share.

In discussing Miles, Steinman cited Marianne Moore's statement about the vernacular: "We have literature [. . .] when we impart distinctiveness to ordinary talk and make it still seem ordinary" ("Magnanimity" 324). Both poets, according to Steinman, show interest in the daily and in language's relation to the public and the poet. The "genuine" for Moore includes the world and the poet's power to make sense of that world ("Magnanimity" 325). Miles, too, uses ordinary materials, to which she adds without domination or condescension. Indeed, Steinman surmised that Miles might have learned from Moore "the social and ethical dimensions of form" ("Magnanimity" 326), the inclusion of others and their worlds, of what Miles calls the mix of "ugly truth, lovely value" (155), the buzzing confusion of "intense miscellaneities" (152) from which may emerge a remarkable commonality. In "Reason," when the old lady emerges from the car, the argument stops. Both men help her to the curb, one apologizing, "All you needed to do was just explain; / *Reason*, *Reason* is my middle name" (94).

Miles's vernacular poetry—representing other people speaking as well as her own speech and thought rhythms as she loosened formal constraints—shows a dedication to the operation of language

here and now, in specific contexts. To embed her poems in such contexts, Miles sequenced *Lines at Intersection*, her first full collection, from morning to night, setting scenes in her city populated by individuals—a newsboy, a pianist, a seer, a door-to-door salesman, a baseball fan—whose everyday living contains intimations of a larger, abiding order. Much later, during the troubled Free Speech Movement and Vietnam War protests, her interest in poetic contexts motivated her local publication of chapbooks: *Civil Poems* (1966), *Saving the Bay* (1967), and *Fields of Learning* (1968).

A late poem, "Views from Gettysburg," emphasizes Miles's continuing interest in constructive, vernacular dialogue, or allowing people "to parley" (198). It tallies many events, as it develops from a description of the battlefield site into a meditation on American power and government. With cinematic cuts from one historic struggle to another, from era to era, various speakers—soldier, university lecturer, miner, astronaut—have their say. The sequence proceeds to answer the question, "Where is the vantage?" Where is the point from which America in its plenitude might be seen? Miles is emphatic that "Man himself / Taken aloof from his age and country / and standing in the presence of Nature and God" (198) cannot help us. Miles has traveled to Gettysburg in the company of students—Charles, Neil, Cathy Caulfield. Their group is not aloof, but engaged, touring and asking questions. The poem's final lines not only speak the vernacular as antidote to what has been said to and about Nature and God, they speak about a culture of equals as well:

> Get down to the ground
> Walk over the plain ground,
> To parley, in the presence of age and country,
> The chief and level theme
> Of civic life. (198)

On this stage, no one is advantaged or aloof. On plain and level ground, the task is to discuss a unifying theme. Civil war is superceded by civil life, in which there are no caveats about what to say or how to say it.

Inquiry and exchange

Other people matter to Miles because they speak truth as they see it. Faced with diverse and often contradictory truths, she urges mediation or further investigation, since truth will continue to be debated or to be partly known. Zofia Burr describes how Miles faces such an indeterminate world: "Speaking, in her work, is not simply a matter of declaration or even of self-expression but is rather a mode of inquiry and exchange with others" (69). Miles uses interrogatives throughout her work. She seems more confident in asking questions than in declaring truths, although her personae do both. As a scholar, citizen, and poet, she practices her faith in collective inquiry and exchange.

In poems about education, images of waking up and walking express becoming alert and proceeding in the company of others. For Miles, we are "students all" (198) who "start out / At first daylight into the fields" ("Fields of Learning" 181). "Paths" offers a morning landscape:

> Going into the fields of learning,
> We shake the dew from the grasses.
> All is new.
> The paths we make through the wet grasses shine
> As if with light. (184)

The goal is "Knowledge of you, knowledge of all the world" (122), with praise for plentiful studies, "Your hundred courses" ("Curriculum" 123). In the lifelong journey, "The bafflement comes to the resting and tiresome foot / Of a thousand of roads / All

open, all asking traverse" ("Barricade" 219). Knowing that *course* and *curriculum* derive from the verb *run*, Miles represents learning as a "heavy seeking" (184). She saw her own education as travel, remembering in "Study" her progress from home and public schools to the university: "Out of that shabby gentle world of Melrose, / Out toward the sea and the ranges / Of Greek and geology" ("Teacher" 211). This poem repeats the sea and mountain images of the early "After This, Sea." Miles visualizes both westward settlement and learning as pioneering in spaces to explore and settle.

Both settlement and learning depend upon community. Miles chooses the company of seekers, rather than knowers. She can dismiss traditional formulations of the west as too static and aloof:

> Both the dry talkers, those old Indians,
> And the dry trollers, those old pirates,
> Say something, but it's mostly louder talking,
> Gavel rapping, and procedural delays.
>
> ("Apart from branches" 171)

She can also dismiss the narrow interests of the profit taker, satirized by the entrepreneur chicken:

> He was not boss or mayor, but he certainly was
> Right on that spinning wheel which spun the public
> In and out of his stores, and his pleasantries
> Began to spin the flesh right off his bones.
>
> ("The entrepreneur chicken" 159)

Miles remained in touch with her students during the 1960s when they doubted the university curriculum's relevance to war and civil rights. She used questions to meld groups, explaining, "I have a moral-political nexus. It's the power of question over answer. We have so few answers, but if we could ask the questions,

it would be a start" (Hammond 624). This preference for question over answer is evident in her dozen poems about education and more pervasively in her frequent use of questioning, no matter the poem's subject. In one poem, Miles tells students she expects "querying" (37) not merely note taking; in others, she advises them "to reject most of the lecture" (200) and to grapple with "the question of diverse answers" (54). In "Center," a mural of California immigration, every newcomer might contribute questions. One inquirer among many, the speaker asks,

> Did you come
> With a handful of questions
> Leaping like jewels
> To shock answers, to start
> Sparks of inquiry into the evening air? (233)

Questions throughout "Center" help to order one hundred and fifty lines of Whitmanesque tallying. Indeed, sampling her poetry reveals Miles as an habitual questioner: "See this red pebble?" (4), "What do the trees do?" (18), "Played ball yourself once, mister?" (21), "My quiet kin, must I affront you / With a telling tongue?" (37), "Where is the world?" (67), "For God's sake, is this a free country or what?" (93), "At home. But which?" (151), "If it is right and good / Where you are / Why are you not here?" (175), "Have I outgrown you?" (178), "What are we here for?" (234).

Such a battery might be overwhelming were it not for the company Miles kept. Recollecting her years at the university, she felt encouraged because

> [w]hen a good bunch of people gets together to work on a problem, their minds turning over, responding to each other, meeting the difficulties, shifting position in terms of what the others have said, that's community. I've been on a number of committees at Berkeley that had that quality.
>
> (Clark 22)

In fact, Miles once confessed to wanting to write "a really good poem about committee work" (Clark 22). The poem "Friends in our questions" shows, too, that Miles imagined inquiry as a communal act:

> Friends in our questions, we looked together
> At several mysteries
> And argued them long and lightly, whether
> Their no or yes. (155)

One such friend, Alexander Meiklejohn, converses with Miles's speaker in a long poem that suggests Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" in its search for reassurance. It is a dialogue, unlike Arnold's dramatic monologue, but its atmosphere is equally unsettling as the late November "night comes in / Upon the lamp." Instead of feeling the ebbing faith of Arnold's poem, the speaker is heartened by Meiklejohn's confidence in turning deadlocks into mutually beneficial resolutions, in finding a process for living in a complex world. In answer to the speaker's search for "principles to go on," Meiklejohn "proposes": "Our mien of survival, to know our separate natures / And allow them. Allow / Dividing light" (164).

Observing the poetry's efforts at inquiry and exchange, Zophia Burr concludes that, "From Miles's perspective, the voices or persons of her poetry are responses to other voices" (98) and that even in her most autobiographical poems Miles sets the stage for an imagined interaction between poet and reader (103). Address, in both senses of a talk and a location, characterizes the rhetoric of Miles's poetry. The poems respond to others and invite response. Their speakers usually shy away from propounding answers. Answers come to them from outside, from experience of the world and exchange with others. Their vernacular language signals they are of a place and time shared by other users of the language, and their engagement with uncertainties signals that Miles creates a

world that is open to exploration and unaccounted for by any single view, any presumed mastery.

It is fitting that a poet whose earliest gathering was titled "Local Habitation" and whose imagery from the first pictured California scenes be recognized as a regional poet, with all the strengths of that identification: immediacy, relevance, truth to experienced life. With current western literary studies recognizing women writers in urban communities, we can appreciate Josephine Miles as a poet of Berkeley. We can answer criticism that marginalized her as a craftsperson working on limited subjects and as a timid female who never found her voice. It is fruitless to measure her work against the expectations of those wanting confessional or lyric poetry of a singular style. If we can understand that Miles developed in the direction of writing a public poetry, a poetry of address, then we will be able to measure her achievement by more appropriate standards. We can see a poet who achieved much, once we accept her civility as a strength and her civic concerns, not as limitations of time and place, but as a source of fresh response to a world of diverse people.

Selected Bibliography

WORKS BY JOSEPHINE MILES

Poetry

Civil Poems. Berkeley: Oyez, 1966.
Collected Poems: 1930-83. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1983.
Coming to Terms. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1979.
Fields of Learning. Berkeley: Oyez, 1968.
Kinds of Affection. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1967.
Lines at Intersection. New York: Macmillan, 1939.
"Local Habitation." *Trial Balances*. Ed. Ann Winslow. New York: Macmillan, 1935. 14-24.
Local Measures. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1946.
Poems 1930-1960. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1960.
Poems on Several Occasions. Norfolk: New Directions, 1941.
Prefabrications. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1955.
Saving the Bay. San Francisco: Open Space, 1967.
To All Appearances: Poems New and Selected. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1974.

Books Edited

American Poems. Berkeley: Cloud Marauder P, 1970.
Berkeley Street Poems. Berkeley: An Other Ways Book, 1969.
Classic Essays in English. Boston: Little, Brown, 1961.
Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment. With Mark Schorer and Gordon McKenzie. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948.
The Poem: A Critical Anthology. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1959.

Interviews

Clark, Naomi. "Interview with Josephine Miles." Kizer 21-23.

Hammond, Karla M. "An Interview with Josephine Miles." *The Southern Review* 19 (1983): 606-31.

Marie, Jacquelyn, and Gail Offen-Brown. "Interview: Josephine Miles." 16 May 1978. Manuscript. Bancroft Library, U of California, Berkeley.

Pinsker, Sanford. "A Conversation with Josephine Miles." *San Jose Studies* 5.3 (1979): 80-89.

Tovey, Eloyde. Interview. 18 May 1981. "The Poetry Scene at Berkeley, 1918-ca.1956." Manuscript. Bancroft Library, U of California, Berkeley.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Altizer, Nell. "Collected Poems, 1930-1983." *13th Moon: A Feminist Literary Magazine* 9.1-2 (1991): 144-50.

Alvarez, A. "Imagism and Poetesses." *Kenyon Review* 19 (1957): 321-29.

Beloof, Robert. "Distance and Surfaces: The Poetry of Josephine Miles." *Prairie Schooner* 32 (1958-59): 276-84.

The Berkeley Poetry Review 6-7 (1978). Josephine Miles Issue.

Burr, Zofia. *Of Women, Poetry, and Power: Strategies of Address in Dickinson, Miles, Brooks, Lorde, and Angelou*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2002.

Childress, William. "Afternoon with a Poet." *Westways* 66.11 (1974): 40-43, 87.

Comer, Krista. "Feminism, Women Writers and the New Western Regionalism: Revising Critical Paradigms." *Updating the Literary West*. Ed. Thomas J. Lyon. Fort Worth: Western Literature Association and Texas Christian UP, 1997. 17-34.

———. *Landscapes of the New West*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999.

Davidson, Michael. *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetic Community at Mid-century*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1989.

Davie, Donald. "The Twain Not Meeting." *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 8 (1980): 84-91.

Donoghue, Denis. "The Habits of a Poet." *Times Literary Supplement* 3.816 (25 Apr. 1975): 442-43.

Hamalian, Linda. "Regionalism Makes Good: The San Francisco Renaissance." Kowalewski 213-30.

Hecht, Anthony. "Poetry Chronicle." *Hudson Review* 9.3 (1956): 444-57.

Holscher, Roy. "Violence and Moral Action: An Admiration of Josephine Miles." *Epoch* 31 (1982): 82-89.

Jarrell, Randall. "The Poet and His Public." *Partisan Review* 13 (1946): 488-500.

Jeffers, Robinson. *Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems*. New York: Modern Library, 1935.

Kizer, Carolyn, ed. *Woman Poet—The West*. Reno: Regional Editions, 1980.

Koch, Vivienne. "Continuity of Poetic Language." *Poetry* 79 (1952): 360-67.

Kolodny, Annette. *The Land Before Her*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984.

Kowalewski, Michael, ed. *Reading the West: New Essays on the Literature of the American West*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Kuzma, Sally. Untitled article. *Praxis Post: The Webzine of Medicine and Culture*. Online. Internet. 10 December 2002. http://praxis.md/post

Larney, Marjorie, ed. *Josephine Miles, Teaching Poet: An Oral Biography*. Berkeley: Acacia, 1993.

Miles, Josephine. *The Continuity of Poetic Language: Studies in English Poetry from the 1540s to the 1940s*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1964.

———. *Eras and Modes in English Poetry*. Rev. ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1964.

———. *Poetry and Change: Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, and the Equilibrium of the Present*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1974.

———. *Style and Proportion: The Language of Prose and Poetry*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1967.

———. "A Vision of Light." Photographs by Ansel Adams. *California Quarterly* 78.5 (1968): 33-64.

———. *Wordsworth and the Vocabulary of Emotion*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1942.

Mycue, Edward. "Edward Mycue's Ten Favorite Books." Online. Internet. 20 July 2003. http://www.staceys.com/archives/stafffaves-ed.html.

North, Jessica Nelson. "Revivifying the Familiar." *Poetry* 55 (1940): 277-79.

———. Introduction to Josephine Miles. *Trial Balances*. Ed. Ann Winslow. New York: Macmillan, 1935. 23-24.

Randall, Julia. "Dickinson with a Difference: The Poetry of Josephine Miles." *The Hollins Critic* 17.3 (1980): 1-12.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "The Vibrant Politics of Josephine Miles." *Epoch* 31 (1982): 62-76.

Smith, Carolyn H. "Old-Age Freedom in Josephine Miles's Late Poems, 1974-1979." *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity*. Eds. Ann M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rosen. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1993. 271-95.

Smith, Lawrence R. "Josephine Miles: Metaphysician of the Irrational." *A Book of Rereadings in Recent American Poetry*. Ed. Greg Kuzma. Lincoln: Pebble and Best Cellar Press, 1979. 22-35.

Stegner, Wallace. *The Sound of Mountain Water*. NY: Doubleday, 1969.

Steinman, Lisa M. "The Magnanimity of a Poetry Which Transfigures What It Values, Marianne Moore and Josephine Miles." *Marianne Moore: Woman and Poet*. Ed. Patricia C. Willis. Orono: National Poetry Foundation, Inc., 1990. 321-34.

———. "Putting on Knowledge with Power: The Poetry of Josephine Miles." *Chicago Review* 37.1 (1990): 130-40.

Wakowski, Diane. "The Epigrammatic Verse of Josephine Miles." *Epoch* 31 (1982): 77-81.

Whittemore, E. Reed, Jr. "The Poet and Society." *New York Herald Tribune Books* 17.51 (17 Aug. 1941): 13.

Zabel, Morton Dauwen. "Two Years of Poetry: 1937-1939." *The Southern Review* 5 (1940): 568-608.

About the Author

For thirty years Erik Muller taught English in community colleges in Eugene and Coos Bay, Oregon. He is the author of a rhetoric textbook *Opening Arguments* (1994) and *Vern Rutsala* (1998) in the Western Writers Series. One of the founding editors of *Fireweed: Poetry of Western Oregon* and the current editor of Traprock Books, which publishes Oregon poets, he won the Stewart H. Holbrook Award in 2001 for contributions to Oregon's literary life. His poetry appears in *From Here We Speak: Oregon Poetry* and in several chapbooks.

Acknowledgements

Cover photo of Josephine Miles by Imogen Cunningham, Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

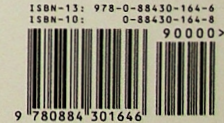
Western WRITERS SERIES

Founded in 1972, this continuing series provides brief but authoritative introductions to the lives and works of authors who have written significant literature about the American west. Our attractive fifty-page booklets are useful to the general reader as well as to teachers and students. Titles include:

4 **WALLACE STEGNER** by Merrill and Lorene Lewis
5 **BRET HARTE** by Patrick Morrow
19 **ROBINSON JEFFERS** by Robert J. Brophy
23 **GERTRUDE ATHERTON** by Charlotte S. McClure
30 **CHARLES WARREN STODDARD** by Robert L. Gale
31 **VIRGINIA SORENSEN** by L. L. and Sylvia Lee
34 **RUTH SUCKOW** by Abigail Ann Hamblen
41 **JANET LEWIS** by Charles L. Crow
43 **JOAQUIN MILLER** by Benjamin S. Lawson
44 **DOROTHY JOHNSON** by Judy Alter
55 **MABEL DODGE LUHAN** by Jane V. Nelson
62 **WESTERN AMERICAN LITERARY CRITICISM** by Martin Bucco
77 **GERALD HASLAM** by Gerald Locklin
78 **HELEN HUNT JACKSON** by Rosemary Whitaker
84 **KENNETH REXROTH** by Lee Bartlett
99 **JAMES D. HOUSTON** by Jonah Raskin
104 **BESS STREETER ALDRICH** by Abigail Ann Martin
108 **PEGGY POND CHURCH** by Shelley Armitage
111 **ANN ZWINGER** by Peter Wild
117 **MARK MEDOFF** by Rudolf Erben
118 **JANE GILMORE RUSHING** by Lou H. Rodenberger
124 **RICHARD RONAN** by Jan VanStavern
125 **JANET CAMPBELL HALE** by Frederick Hale
130 **GARRETT HONGO** by Laurie Filipelli
131 **ALBERTO RÍOS** by Peter Wild
132 **VERN RUTSALA** by Erik Muller
133 **JOY HARJO** by Rhonda Pettit
142 **READING GARY SNYDER'S *MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS WITHOUT END*** by Eric Todd Smith
143 **DANA GIOIA** by April Lindner
149 **NEW FORMALIST POETS OF THE AMERICAN WEST** by April Lindner
159 **MICHAEL McCLURE** by Rod Phillips
160 **LAWSON FUSAO INADA** by Shawn Holliday
162 **MAXINE HONG KINGSTON** by Charles L. Crow
163 **ANA CASTILLO** by Sara L. Spugeon

See our website for additional titles:
westernwriters.boisestate.edu

ISBN-13: 978-0-88430-164-6
ISBN-10: 0-88430-164-8



BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY