

MY AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation, *my America*, is partly a series of poems written from the perspective of Modernist photographer Edward Weston. The first section, “Tina mia,” is situated in the late 1920’s, when he had left his lover and model, Tina Modotti. These poems are imagined as unsent letters written to her from his studio, at the bitter points of poverty and solitary work that leave him with nothing but his images of her for comfort. But the Weston persona describes how little he can get from them, and comes to understand that the images are artifacts of his own gaze. The next section, “my America,” takes place before World War II, when Weston took pictures for a 1942 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The poems make a stage for what I invent as Weston’s confrontation with Whitman—a celebration of the self in collision with the witness of a country pushed into turmoil by selfishness. The last section, “To protect his writing from the perils of publication . . .,” is set near the end of Weston’s career, when he allowed his journals to be published, but famously cut parts out with a razor beforehand, the contents of which are unknown. I imagine the contents of those fragments, including quotes and photographs.

My dissertation also contains a critical article on Lucie Brock-Broido, whose work, like Weston’s, brings contexts into collision. I begin by discussing her work in the context of Virginia Jackson’s work on the lyric genre, that opens poems generally considered lyric to the possibility of other definitions. I then draw on Stephen Burt’s discussion of Brock-Broido’s tendency to present different, divergent selves; drawing on both Gorgias and Homer, I present that tendency under the lens of epic, such that her proliferation of selves challenges perceived epic ethics. From her first book’s persona poems to her recent work, I argue that what she offers may be seen as an epic web, in which both identity and interconnection are charged with a new power.