My dissertation investigates the poetry of mid-century New York poet Frank O'Hara in relation to the cultural and intellectual history of the turbulent early Cold War period. Specifically, I argue that O’Hara’s poetry resists the pervasive societal expectations around the heteronormative performance of masculinity, the paranoias about Communism and the Soviet Union, and 1950s American norms about capitalism and consumerism. Through a close reading of his poetry, I argue that, rather than supporting monolithic American expectations of masculinity, O'Hara instead confounds it with autobiographical, journal-like poems chronicling his everyday urban flâneur experiences in New York City. O’Hara’s new poetic form, often resembling twenty-first-century social media posts, consists of interior dialogue as he walks through the city: what he eats for lunch, shopping errands, paintings he’s seen, his friends, their house parties, and sharp commentary on current events he sees in newspaper headlines. By elevating these commonplace daily events into art with his voluminous and often unedited poetry, O'Hara left a record of his version of the masculine life in the center of the mid-century New York art world. Through this subversive lens, O’Hara’s work becomes transcendent rather than merely trivial and silly.

O’Hara’s poetry career coexisted with his decade-long career as a curator in the International Division of the Museum of Modern Art. O’Hara’s traveling Abstract Expressionism exhibits were furtively financed by the U.S. government as “cultural warfare,” displaying abstract art as emblematic of democratic freedom.

O’Hara’s everyday poetry foreshadowed the explosion of consumer objects and media images in pop art. As Abstract Expressionism began to wane, the new generation of visual artists were, like O’Hara, some of the first generation of the new urban homosexuals – artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Indiana, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol, all of whom took the international art world by storm. O'Hara died in a freak accident on Fire Island in 1966 at the age of forty, and the vast majority of his poetic oeuvre was only published posthumously.