

The Future of Poetry Studies

Poetry studies¹ as we have been practicing it for almost a century in the Anglo-American context is no longer viable in the twenty-first-century – unless we commit such mental and psychic acts of delusion that we in English Departments become the academic equivalents of those who wish to make America great again – states of psychosis, which, as we know from our political sphere, can be frighteningly durable.

It just seemed yesterday that we were speaking in English literary studies of having arrived at being “post-race,” with some arguing that racial identity was elective (kind of like an after-school activity). Then there was the fist-pumping for having achieved the enlightened state of being “beyond identity.”²

In 2014 and 2015, in the middle of our first black president’s second term, various unpleasantries ruptured the normally smooth and corporate functioning of Poetry, Inc. – or at least Avant-Garde Poetry, Inc. (“experimental” and “avant-garde” themselves being not un vexed or uncontested terms, of course). Perhaps most visible in the poetry world was the intense pushback, mostly by poets of color, to Kenneth Goldsmith’s performance of reading Michael Brown’s autopsy report as “poetry” at Brown University in mid-March 2015. Goldsmith’s re-rend(er)ing of the autopsy to end on Michael Brown’s penis occurred the same weekend as the second convening of the first national conference on race and creative writing, founded by the poet Prageeta Sharma, at the University of Montana.³

Yet things had already been percolating in the poetry world and the world at large before that weekend: The Black Lives Matter movement, founded in 2013 in response to multiple murders of black men and women on the streets by police, had gathered force and was focusing a light on the anti-black practices of law enforcement and the state, holdovers from the days of slavery. The first Thinking Its Presence conference on race and creative writing, as mentioned above, had taken place in April 2014, four months after my book by the same name had been published. And, last but not least, there were the brilliant social media interventions of the anonymous Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo, which enraged, as if on cue, good

liberals in the academy and in the poetry world on both ends of the aesthetic spectrum.

In other words, people of color and the issue of race had become the counter-friction to the whirring cogs of high-profile professional careers, mostly at elite institutions; their efforts exposed the machinic elements of racism at work among even the hippest-of-the-hip wordsmiths and cosmopolitans.

I think it is safe to surmise that the keepers of the Poundian-Objectivist-New York School-Language-Conceptual tradition were completely blind-sided: The last place they thought a serious challenge would come from was from those brown folks on the sidelines, with their overly sincere and not-so-good “identity” poems. Up until that point the LangPo-ConPo monopoly franchise had seemed secure and had entrenched itself institutionally, with the Language Poets at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of California–Berkeley and their anointed successors, the Conceptual Poets, at Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Museum of Modern Art. Between them, they pretty much had a lock on what was considered “avant-garde” American poetry.

Likewise, what was considered Modern or Postmodern seemed fairly clear, the latter still hewing to High Modernist forms, such as the fracturing of syntax. For example, various Electronic Poets use Beckett’s work as source texts, processing it through various “electronic” formats but leaving the fundamental literary and cultural assumptions intact.

What I argued in my book now seems shockingly self-evident: It is possible to pay close attention to formal properties of a poem *and* take into account the historical and sociopolitical contexts of a poem and the large role ideologies and institutional structures and practices play, both in the production and in the reception of poems.

We have been told forever and ever that form and content are not separable. Yet poetry scholars continued – and continue – to read poetry by minority writers primarily as ethnographic reportage or, in the rare case of the work of pet experimental poets, as the exceptional exception. While many avant-garde poets can deftly address language’s imbrication with capitalism and hold forth on issues of class (and, at times, gender), the issue of race and – horrors – racism has too often been deflected by such coded (or not so coded) putdowns as “identity politics,” “autobiographical writing,” or “expressivity.”

In December 2013, *The Lyric Theory Reader* came out from Johns Hopkins University Press, coedited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, the leaders of the “New Lyric Studies.” Not a single entry was written by a US minority scholar and not a single entry or even passage touched on

the issue of race and the lyric. Though there are five essays included in the section on “The Lyric and Sexual Difference,” there is no section on “The Lyric and Racial Difference.” In this respect, the “New Lyric Studies” seemed a lot like the old lyric studies, and “historical poetics” did not seem all that historical.

A little over three years later, in March 2017, a special issue of the *Journal of Literary Theory* devoted to “Theories of the Lyric” also omitted any discussion of race. No one bothered to consider that core concepts undergirding our idea of the lyric, such as the notion of the poetic speaker, are deeply racially inflected. After all, whose interiority was for centuries deemed worthy of expressing? Why are the musings of a speaker in a poem written by a white straight middle-aged gentleman farmer in Vermont automatically read as universalizable, while those of a speaker in a poem by an Asian American female poet from Oregon are inevitably read, even by well-trained poetry critics, as if they were transcriptions from her diary? (And this problem goes beyond what Jonathan Culler pinpoints as the general tendency to read lyric as dramatic monologue.)

In announcing the presidential theme for the 2018 MLA convention, “#States of Insecurity,” Diana Taylor, the incoming president of the association of around 20,000 members – the largest organization of humanities scholars in the world – wrote: “This theme invites reflection on how our intellectual, artistic, and pedagogical work in the humanities offers strategies for navigating the crises of our time: political volatility, fluctuating financial markets, fear-mongering media, and increasingly hateful acts and rhetoric that contribute to a general sense of malaise” (n. pag.). She then goes on to say: “We can begin by reexamining our own epistemologies, disciplines, technologies, and organizational and governing structures.”

For the most part I agree with Taylor, though for many BIPOC and academics of color the danger is not simply a “general sense of malaise” but something much more threatening. Who is the “our” here? Who is the “we”?

Let me say that there are ways to engage with the crucial issue of race and poetics and there are ways to *seem* to engage with race and poetic/literary studies.

In 2016, Caroline Levine’s book *Forms* – described by her publisher as “a radically new way of thinking about form and context in literature, politics, and beyond” – won the MLA’s top prize for best book of literary criticism for the year. Levine has been seen as a primary leader of the “New Formalism,” which is usually characterized as bringing formalism and politics together for the first time. Levine begins her book with a passage from *Jane Eyre* to illustrate how contemporary critics would tend to interpret it:

Traditional formalist analysis – close reading – meant interpreting all of the formal techniques of a text as contributing to an overarching artistic whole. A contemporary critic, informed by several decades of historical approaches, would want instead to take stock of the social and political conditions that surrounded the work's production, and she would work to connect the novel's forms to its social world. She would seek to show how literary techniques reinforced or undermined specific institutions and political relationships, such as imperial power, global capital, or racism [note the “or” here] . . . But would our critic be right to distinguish between the *formal* and the *social*?

(1, emphases original)

Like Jonathan Culler, Simon Jarvis, and those touting Surface Reading (such as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus), Levine has become skeptical of “historicism” – meaning primarily New Historicism and Jamesonian Marxist analysis.

Levine is right to point out the binarizing of the formal and the social, but I want to ask (as I did with the Taylor quote), “Who is the assumed ‘We’ here in the phrase ‘our critic’?”

I pointedly ask because there has been a long and substantial tradition of black intellectuals and cultural critics and practitioners who have thought hard and at great length about the inseparability of the formal and the social in the “real world”: Stuart Hall, C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, Amiri Baraka, Édouard Glissant, and, more recently, Fred Moten and the Afropessimists, among others. Many of these thinkers did not or do not work inside English departments. By occluding an entire tradition of black thought that has engaged with the problem of form and larger sociopolitical structures, such as those of colonialism and white supremacist racial hierarchies, the “New Formalism” betrays the telling and endemic provinciality of Anglo-American literary studies.

One major conceptual problem within poetry and literary studies today is hardly news, and has been pointed out by not only Levine but the proponents of deconstruction for decades: the tendency to binarize concepts and categories. None of these oppositions seem surprising to us: the mainstream versus the “avant-garde”; formalist analysis versus cultural-studies approaches; theory versus empiricism; race versus class; the cool theorizing of postcolonial studies versus the slightly embarrassing political protestations of ethnic studies.

Poetry studies today also suffers from an inability to engage with concrete materialities and structures of power so as to fully look at the topic of race and colonialism and its relationship to the cultural artifacts that are produced and received in the habitus and ether of these ideologies – a relationship that is not only contextual but inheres in the very *forms* of the works. English

poetry was used not only as an example but as an active cudgel of Britain's vaunted inherent and natural might and superiority. Colonialist arguments, explicit and implied, for the moral, ethical, imaginative, intellectual, and racial superiority of white Englishmen were often made on the basis of the achievements of its Great Poets. Most poetry scholars do not like to think of poetry in relation to violence and power. It feels like a violation of the special "imaginative" and "private" nature of poetry.

What I am asking we do more of is not the surface historicizing of New Historicists or the often abstract theorizing of Jamesonians – those whom Levine and others are reacting against – but the kind of difficult and necessary work that is deep, not surface, the type of historicizing that is often seen as too depressing and "heavy" (for example, slogging through archives to follow the money trail – as Noam Chomsky so often reminds us is the key to what is actually happening – as Eunsong Kim has so brilliantly done in her essay on the creation of the Archive for New Poetry at the University of California San Diego).

Yet painstaking work at the level of the concrete and the material can and should be coupled with risk-taking leaps in the realm of the imagination: thinking new possibilities for what American and English-language poetry might be, not simply what we have been bequeathed by centuries of British colonialism and white supremacist ideology and race science.

In the United States, these Enlightenment beliefs about biological and poetic capacities began from the first days of the republic: Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* lays out his "scientific" case why black bodies such as Phyllis Wheatley's lacked the biological capacity to write poetry:

Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their [black people's] love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet . . . The improvement of the blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their mixture with the whites, has been observed by every one, and proves that their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life. (266–267)

Jefferson, of course, would know firsthand about this mixing.

The question of who has the capacity to write poetry haunts literary studies to this day, and the link between pseudo-scientific discourse and literary methodology has been largely obfuscated even up to the present moment.

John Guillory's research on the history of close reading draws out the influence of the ideas of the English neurophysiologist Sir Charles Sherrington (1857–1952) on the thinking of I. A. Richards in the formulation

of his Practical Criticism. In a 2010 piece in the publication of the Associated Departments of English, Guillory writes,

In his two great works of the 1920s, *Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Practical Criticism*, Richards constructed a psychology of reading on the foundation of the stimulus-response model emerging in Russia by Ivan Pavlov, in the United States by John Watson, and in Britain by Charles Sherrington, author of *The Integrative Action of the Nervous System*, the work that strongly influenced Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism*. This scientific or perhaps quasi-scientific origin of close reading is often forgotten in current accounts of our disciplinary practices. (12)

He then goes on to make the connection to literary study:

Richards understood his task in teaching Cambridge undergraduates as the training of their literary judgment, which he hoped to put on a surer, scientific footing. The faculty of judgment is what he meant by the term “literary criticism” in the *Principles of Literary Criticism*. But judgment, he argued, depended on an underlying cognitive potentiality, which is the focusing of attention in reading. (Guillory 12)⁴

What Guillory does not mention is that Sherrington was, in fact, a member of the Eugenics Society in Britain – not surprising, as eugenics was considered a reputable and respected science at the time.⁵ As Columbia University professor emeritus of history Nancy Stepan writes in her 1982 book *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960*, many major British thinkers of the era were members of the Eugenics Society, including not just Sherrington but John Maynard Keynes, Havelock Ellis, and Arthur Balfour, who, of course, was a loyal servant of British colonialism and the author of the Balfour Declaration (119).

Why is it so difficult for even the most brilliant literary critics to see, first, the “horizontal” links between poems or poetic methods and their immediate sociopolitical and ideological contexts of production and reception and, second, the “vertical” links across historical time so that a contemporary poem can be read in relation to transhistorical ideologies and material practices, such as colonialism and race-science-inflected classificatory systems and hierarchies – long since naturalized – that undergird current methodologies and institutional structures?

Is it not self-evident that the elite status of English as a field – coming slowly to an end in the twenty-first-century – was a byproduct of the power and prestige of the British Empire?

The inability to think the micro (formal elements) and the macro (colonialism, eugenics) together could be, one might argue, a problem of the

periodization of the discipline. Yet poetry critics have no problem ranging across millennia in speaking of the lyric – from the ancient Greek writings of Sappho to the twenty-first-century poems of Louise Glück.

Let me emphasize that what I am speaking about is not simply contextual and thematic but formal and structural – about how even the most foundational and seemingly neutral or “objective” elements of poems and of critical methodologies carry within them ideologies and assumptions that are unmarked and made to seem “natural.” The link to power, violence, and war does not hold only for poetic products that are obviously marked as “political” but also for those poems read as “nonpolitical” – as delicate, nuanced, and, yes, “beautiful.”

Take, for example, the poetic issue of tone. This is crucial to notions of the poetic speaker on both sides of the aesthetic spectrum: For traditionalists, it is linked to “voice”; for those hewing to the experimental side of things, it is a key rhetorical aspect tied to the deployment of language. Indeed, so many avant-gardists love the work of John Ashbery precisely because his tone is so often read as ironic and mediated, not simplemindedly sincere. Likewise, their affection for Frank O’Hara, whose poems radiate an urbane cosmopolitanism and a performatively throwaway-while-still-affecting tone. Yet one might ask, “Who has the privilege to be endlessly ironic?” “Why is sincerity in a poem seen as incredibly gauche?” Some poets must constantly regulate not only their stanzas, lines, and meter but also the rhetoric of the speakers in their poems and the tone of these speakers, so as to conform to the dictates of a dominant white culture and the logic of racial hierarchy.⁶ And, it goes without saying that poets of color must also self-regulate in their lived lives – and I mean not just the slave Phyllis Wheatley but also the young black poet sitting in an all-white writing workshop or in her other English classes or walking down the street.

What is the link between the politics of the self/speaker and the politics of (poetic) regulation? What does it mean to strike the “right” or “proper” tone in a poem and in person? Preferably not too angry (“too black”) or uncontrolled (“lacking in rigor”). Are emotional distance and an endlessly distanced and ironic pose in poetry the byproducts of colonial imperatives? Is an imperious tone tied to the imperium?⁷

Poetry scholars have largely failed to ask these important questions about both aesthetics and politics. Even internet hackers working on behalf of the Russian state to disrupt US electoral politics understand something that critics of American poetry seem – or choose – not to: that race is a core aspect of our society and conditions all social interactions, the flow of capital, our ideas of beauty, our ideas of imaginative and cognitive capacities, and so on. In response to the ruptures into the status quo of poetry studies brought

about by a few unruly unmodel minorities in recent years, some poetry scholars have resorted to palliative responses, while others continue doing business as usual.

There are a number of typical moves that scholars still make to evade deeper structural and concrete material change in our thinking about poetics and race and about how our institutions and fields deploy their power in the service of racialized assumptions. One of these is tokenism: The inclusion of one or two black or brown bodies in a special journal issue, conference, or event, or the inclusion of one work by a minority writer or artist in a volume so as to foreclose the charge of racism is not new, of course, but it seems to have stepped up in recent years. Caroline Levine writes a chapter on the TV show *The Wire*, set in black Baltimore, in *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy Network* (2015), and Jonathan Culler includes snippets of Jay-Z's lyrics in his section on rhyme in *Theory of the Lyric* (2015). Yet neither engages more deeply with the long tradition of black critical thought or speak in their work of the historical circumstances that produced that work. Can one talk about hip-hop without discussing structural racism and centuries of rhetorical strategies used by black people as a means of sheer survival?

Another technique is the old colonial standby of divide and conquer, which involves making a sharp distinction between “good” POC mascots and angry “difficult” ones.⁸ In his sympathetic piece on Kenneth Goldsmith in the October 5, 2015, issue of *The New Yorker*, staff writer Alec Wilkinson blatantly deployed what he implicitly characterizes as loyal black and brown poets against stridently angry Asian American poets and critics who criticized Goldsmith and the whiteness of the poetry avant-garde. Wilkinson's article also reduces the critique by Asian American scholars and poets of racism within the poetry world to either the petty *ressentiment* of individual poets against Goldsmith for his career success or the aggregated resentments of individual poets of color who were just “pissed off.”⁹ To have identified how Goldsmith's actions were an unacknowledged function of his white privilege and unmarked racial entitlement would have implicated Goldsmith – and Wilkinson himself. In short, Wilkinson deflects the focus to individuals – whether to the good intentions or the hurt feelings of well-meaning whites or to the actions of individual “good” or “bad” POC – rather than the larger edifices and ideologies structured by racial privilege and racism.

Let me be clear: I am not interested in whether individual persons are “racist” or not. My point is about something much larger: ideologies and structures as they intersect with our aesthetic practices – that is, reading and writing – and, most importantly, what we knowingly and unknowingly impart to our students about what poetry is and what the limits and

possibilities of poems, including their poems, are. How do these imbedded racialized aesthetic and colonial ideologies limit the poetic means by which young poets of color might fully realize themselves and become poetic and political beings through language? What avenues of intellectual and meta-physical exploration, what means of creating new worlds through the forms of poetry are abrogated for them as they imbibe the explicit and implicit “universal” and objective” poetic concepts saturated with racial assumptions that are promulgated in an English poetry class or in a writing workshop?

In the poetic “tradition” we are usually taught, the perceptive feeling and thinking poetic speaker is almost always white, often male, and usually straight. He possesses the “freedom of the imagination.” He is sensitive. His white interiority is rich and complex and contradictory and fine-grained. What gets conveyed to a young poet of color when almost every poem she reads is about the feelings and thoughts of white poetic speakers – their broken hearts, their erotic desires, their descriptions of starlings and wood thrushes and pine trees, or (as in Goldsmith’s *Soliloquy*) the transcription of every word they utter in a week?

Let us think of the privileged links among the perceptual, perceptivity, the perceiver, and perceptiveness when it comes to poetry and the question of the gaze and the wider visual field in the world and on the white page. Let us not forget the aural too: Which rhythms, accents, tones are counted as proper, poetic? And whose?

What kind of violence is done to the potential a young person (white or of-color) might have – and only fleetingly or briefly possessed – to fully realize who they can be as poets and thinkers when what they are taught in poetics sends the unspoken message that the white poetic speaker, the white perceiving intellect is central – modernist, postmodernist – while the poetry of writers of color is only an ethnic sidebar, whose presence functions primarily as a means to inoculate white gatekeepers from the charge of racism?

How do our poetic techniques do violence as well? What constitutes “rigor”? “Craft”? Should a poet have the right to “borrow” the autopsy report of a murdered black body in the name of poetry? Like Goldsmith, Wilkinson the journalist sampled the words of people of color – in this case, Asian American critics and poets – stripping them from their contexts. Is this sort of extractive violence structurally akin to the extractive violence of British colonialism?

I am not saying that every poetry scholar should be a political activist, but one cannot be a responsible textual scholar if one pretends that literary analysis is a “neutral” activity and that the foundational concepts of our field are exempt from history. The technique of description is not a neutral exercise because the gaze of the (white) poet is not a neutral gaze.

It is intellectually dishonest and, yes, sloppy to willfully blind oneself to the social and political contexts, systems, structures, and histories that poetics come out of and are received. No wonder young scholars of color who study poetry (and often write it, too) have turned away from literary studies and English departments and have moved toward fields such as critical race studies (especially black studies), indigenous studies, American studies, performance studies, and gender and sexuality studies. The work of scholars and writers such as Christina Sharpe, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Sara Ahmed, Jared Sexton, M. NourbeSe Philip, Bhanu Kapil speak to them more than do the writings of traditional poetry scholars.

One might ask then, “Who cares what poetry scholars in the academy do then?” I myself do not want to turn my back on poetry studies, though I completely understand why so many younger scholars of color find good reason to, given the dismal current state of affairs. There are personal reasons for my attachment to literary studies but also, more importantly, realpolitik ones: What happens in English departments in the United States has a significant effect on not only US students but students around the world. I have seen firsthand the power *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* has on English professors and students in Palestinian universities and the mesmerizing hold the pronouncements of English professors at Harvard and other elite institutions have on English professors in China and Japan.

We are a superpower not only in the political world realm but in the literary one as well, and while the public image of Conceptual Poetry may have taken a hit in the United States, it still stands as the representative example of the American poetic avant-garde abroad, especially in the contemporary art world and especially in Europe.

I see at least six tasks worthy of taking on as poetry scholars and critics in the era of both Trump and Black Lives Matter and beyond:

1. Doing archival work (without fetishizing the archive) to uncover and recover forgotten BIPOC poets, working-class poets, women poets so as to reconceive/reframe/recontextualize literary history and to undo the whitewashing of English poetry history. The Lost & Found project at The CUNY Graduate Center, under the direction of Ammiel Alcalay, is a real spot of brightness in doing this kind of valuable work.
2. Decentering white poets and poetry scholars as the sole or primary objects of focus in poetics.¹⁰
3. Looking to alternative poetic and formal models of poetics and poetic thinking, such as Glissant’s “poetics of relation” or Moten’s idea of fugitivity. We need to focus on texts by a broader range of poets – including

non-English-language poets and those poets writing in English outside the United States and the UK – so that nonwhite poets are seen not just as examples of “difference” but also as creators of core concepts of poetics. Experimental minority poets can and do expand our ideas about English-language poetry and poetics.

4. Questioning supposedly “neutral,” “objective,” and “universal” concepts and assumptions of poetics.
5. Doing concrete acts, not making vague abstract and generalizing gestures, in one’s scholarship and in one’s life in a department, an institution, a professional organization. A white critic who gets cred for writing on race and African American poets cannot stand by silently when scholars of color are attacked for speaking out about race/racism, even if the white scholar would prefer to avoid “conflict.” Silence is not neutrality but an active position one has chosen. Silence allows the status quo to remain, violence to continue, damage to be done. As Diana Taylor writes: “The academy cannot be separate from the political, economic, and ideological turmoil of our time: #States of Insecurity calls on academia to uphold its commitment to critical and historical reflection, inquiry, and intervention” (“2018 Presidential Theme”). Intervention, however, often entails taking concrete and uncomfortable action – not smooth armchair theorizing – for example, naming names (to do so seems uncollegial, unseemly).
6. Taking seriously the work that poems themselves do: as means of theorizing, as presenting possible alternative ways to think and interpret.

Despite the somewhat skeptical cast of this chapter, I am actually optimistic about what young poet-scholars, who are now just undergrads, grad students, and untenured professors, will bring about in the coming years. I am confident that in a few decades those in poetry studies will look back and think, “How did we ever think that we could do close readings of poems without also at least acknowledging the institutional and socio-historical contexts of the work?”

There is an urgent need to decolonize and desegregate poetry studies and literary studies in general – this would be beneficial to white students and white professors as well as students and professors of color. A *radical* revolution of aesthetics and politics is needed, a wholesale overturning and rethinking of English-language poetry and poetics from the foundations up, taking into account the ongoing and long-lasting effects of colonialism and racial capitalism and the racial ideologies they have produced (which of course, cannot be thought separately from class and gender). We do not need more ameliorative and tokenizing “diversity” practices. The myths of

multiculturalism, “color-blindness,” the “post-race,” and the discourse of “diversity” have acted as smokescreens and impediments to intellectually honest and historically accountable scholarship on English-language poetics and poetry.

I end with a quote from Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*, in which he makes a crucial distinction between two modes of thinking, knowing, relating:

[T]hought of the Other is sterile without the other of Thought.

Thought of the Other is the moral generosity disposing me to accept the principle of alterity, to conceive of the world as not simple and straightforward, with only one truth – mine. But thought of the Other can dwell within me without making me alter course, without “prizing me open,” without changing me within myself. An ethical principle, it is enough that I not violate it.

The other of Thought is precisely this altering. Then I have to act. That is the moment I change my thought, without renouncing its contribution. I change, and I exchange. This is an aesthetics of turbulence whose corresponding ethics is not provided in advance.

If, thus, we allow that an aesthetics is an art of conceiving, imagining, and acting, the other of Thought is the aesthetics implemented by me and by you to join the dynamics to which we are to contribute. This is the part fallen to me in an aesthetics of chaos, the work I am to undertake, the road I am to travel. Thought of the Other is occasionally presupposed by dominant populations, but with an utterly sovereign power, or proposed until it hurts by those under them, who set themselves free. The other of Thought is always set in motion by its confluences as a whole, in which each is changed by and changes the other.

(Glissant 154–155)

Notes

1. By this term I make a distinction between work on poetry and poetics done by scholars in the academy and discussions about poetry and poetics in the “poetry world” – done mainly by poets and increasingly on online platforms, especially social media. While I am of the opinion that the walls between the two worlds should be broken down and am acutely aware that what happens in academic poetry studies lags far behind the discussions online, poetry scholarship still produces significant effects – even if not immediate or visible – for students of poetry, reviewers, practicing poets, literary critics, teachers at all levels, and others, as I discuss later in the chapter. I am aware that the discussions of race and poetry have been more “woke” in nonacademic settings though it remains to be seen whether those discussions – and the awarding of poetry prizes to a few poets of color in recent years – will shift the structures of power within English departments, MFA programs, and the literary world.
2. Though this chapter was written before the George Floyd protests, the facility and speed with which heads of corporations and universities were able to reel out their

- “anti-anti-blackness” messaging – even as these same institutions continue to damage and destroy black, indigenous, and POC (BIPOC) bodies – demonstrate how neoliberal racial capitalism is endlessly adaptive to new challenges so as to insure its stranglehold on the world.
3. A few days earlier, on March 9, “Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde,” a forum curated by Stefania Heim and me, went live on the *Boston Review*’s online site.
 4. In the idea of “underlying cognitive potentiality,” one can hear echoes of Jefferson’s “quasi-scientific” judgment that black bodies lack the cognitive-imaginative apparatus to appreciate, much less write, poetry.
 5. When I raised this connection to eugenics in the Q&A after a talk Guillory gave at Williams College in 2017, Guillory said he was unaware of it and did not seem in the least interested in the link (his talk was entitled “I.A. Richards and the Neurophysiology of Reading”).
 6. Thanks to Emily Vasiliauskas for planting the seeds of this thought.
 7. I am indebted to David Lloyd for this idea.
 8. For example, a major poetry scholar marshaled her Asian American dissertation student to denounce the work of another Asian American poetry scholar.
 9. Tan Lin, one of the poets mentioned in the article, objected to his treatment by Wilkinson. In a letter to the editor, he wrote, “My comments about racism were not grounded in feelings of individual exclusion, as Wilkinson seems to suggest. Goldsmith’s work needs to be evaluated by taking into account the complex role of race in contemporary poetry, and its context within national conversations about race. Many African-American poets objected to Goldsmith’s performance, and their voices are almost entirely absent from Wilkinson’s piece. The African-American poetry community merited more serious engagement than it got in the article. Just as troubling, the piece comments on a broad social problem having to do with racial inequality and reduces it to an individual grudge by a person of color” (n. pag.).
 10. I must note that no BIPOC scholar of poetry has ever won the MLA’s major book awards: the James Russell Lowell Prize or the first book prize.

Works Cited

- Culler, Jonathan. *Theory of the Lyric*. Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing. The University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Guillory, John. “Close Reading: Prologue and Epilogue.” *ADE Bulletin* no. 149, 2010, pp. 8–14.
- Hillebrandt, Claudia et al., editors. *Journal of Literary Theory* vol. 11, no. 1, March 2017.
- Jackson, Virginia, and Yopie Prins, editors. *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *Thomas Jefferson: Writings: Autobiography / Notes on the State of Virginia / Public and Private Papers / Addresses / Lectures*, edited by Merrill D. Paterson. Library of America, 1984.
- Kim, Eunsong. “Appraising Newness: Whiteness, Neoliberalism, and the Building of the Archive for New Poetry.” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* vol. 1, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1–40.

The Future of Poetry Studies

- Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Stepan, Nancy. *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960*. Macmillan Press, 1982.
- Tan, Lin. “Mail.” *The New Yorker*, October 12, 2015, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/19/the-mail-from-the-october-19-2015-issue
- Taylor, Diana. “2018 Presidential Theme: #States of Insecurity.” *Modern Language Association*, 2018, www.mla.org/Convention/Convention-History/Past-Conventions/2018-Convention/2018-Presidential-Theme
- Wilkinson, Alec. “Something Borrowed.” *The New Yorker*, September 28, 2015, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/05/something-borrowed-wilkinson