TIMOTHY YU

Introduction

Any effort to characterize, much less comment critically upon, the literary production of a century of which less than a quarter has elapsed is a task that is more than usually humbling for the literary critic. The scholar cannot rely on established canons (or counter-canons) of major authors, or on a broad consensus about the era's characteristic aesthetic trends or styles that might become visible with greater historical distance. The events, debates, and controversies that consume the attention of writers and critics today may well be forgotten tomorrow, while writers and issues that might have seemed marginal at the time may come to seem to later readers like the most significant developments of that era. The scholar of poetry as it is happening *now* cannot even rely upon standardized historical narratives that might provide context for today's poetry, since we are as likely to debate what has actually *happened* in the twenty-first-century so far as we are to debate the work of the writers who are working within it. T. S. Eliot's lament, in his assessment of Joyce's *Ulysses*, that "contemporary history" is an "immense panorama of futility and anarchy" can perhaps be read (against the grain of Eliot's intention) less as a condemnation of modernity than as a description of the situation of any historian of "the contemporary" who would seek to impose structure on the welter of current events.

Yet the distinct challenges of writing twenty-first-century literary history may also have salutary effects. Shifting our attention away from individual, canonical writers and from dominant critical narratives is in fact very much in keeping with the multiple centers of gravity that increasingly characterize American poetry. The turn of the twenty-first-century provides an opportunity for critics to reevaluate, revise, and rewrite the frameworks that dominated the discussion of American poetry in the second half of the twentieth century, frameworks that often highlighted certain developments in poetry (and history) at the expense of others.

The increasingly broad scope of the term "contemporary American poetry" points to the need for such a reassessment of our scholarly

frameworks for American poetry. Does a literary-historical narrative that begins in 1945 still provide the most useful context for understanding American poetry through 2020 and beyond? Standard scholarly accounts of post-1945 American poetry still often begin with Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945–1960* (1960) and its ensuing binary setting the "new American poetry" of Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, or Frank O'Hara against the more traditional aesthetics of writers such as Robert Lowell, James Merrill, or Elizabeth Bishop. Whether this binary was characterized as the "raw" vs. the "cooked," the "academic" vs. the "outsider," or the "mainstream" vs. the "avant-garde," the face-off between such binaries has tended to structure most overviews of contemporary American poetry. Even when such binaries are not evoked, they can be glimpsed in a critic's choice to focus either on individual canonical authors or on groupings or movements.

The rise of a critical discourse around language writing in the later 1980s and 1990s can, in retrospect, be seen as replicating many of these binaries, with writers such as Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, and Lyn Hejinian granted the mantle of the avant-garde in opposition to what Bernstein himself would call "official verse culture." Indeed, by the later 1990s and early 2000s, many poets seemed inclined to seek a truce or accommodation between these perceived binaries between the "mainstream" and the "experimental," visible in the titles of the self-consciously boundary-straddling journal *Fence* or the anthology *American Hybrid* (2009).

In questioning the continuing relevance of this particular critical binary for twenty-first-century American poetry, I am not arguing that this binary has somehow been transcended, or that "mainstream" and "avant-garde" have successfully fused. Indeed, as we shall see, the poetic "avant-garde" continues to be a topic of debate and controversy. Yet the terms of that debate are no longer what they were in the 1960s or even the 1990s. Perhaps the simplest way to characterize the way such discussions have shifted is that our understanding of "insiders" and "outsiders" in American poetry has changed significantly in the twenty-first-century, thanks in part to changing historical, social, and literary contexts.

From the critical perspective of the twenty-first-century, perhaps the most striking thing about both the post-1945 "new American poetry" and its supposed antagonists is their whiteness. The two anthologies often said to inaugurate the opposition between insider and outsider in contemporary poetry – Allen's *New American Poetry* and Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson's *New Poets of England and America* (1957) – contain between them only a single poet of color: LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka). The poetic avant-garde in particular has often seemed to be the exclusive

province of white men; even in the 1980s, the group of poets associated with language writing was not only almost entirely white but so male-dominated that some of its practitioners felt compelled to ponder the question, "Why don't women do language-oriented writing?"[1]

While there is nothing new about the whiteness of dominant accounts of American poetry – or of American culture more generally – the first decades of the twenty-first-century have seen more vocal and activist efforts to diversify the main currents of American culture, whether through the contents of literary anthologies or the casts of Hollywood films. Yet part of the argument this collection hopes to make is that a late-twentieth-century narrative of the increasing diversification of an established poetic canon is inadequate to the task of describing the rapidly shifting landscape of American poetry. Such an additive, incremental approach arguably continues to position the canon of white male writers (both "establishment" and "avant-garde") at the center of the conversation, incorporating other writers in a tokenistic fashion insofar as they conform to the terms of an already-established poetics. Efforts to articulate categories such as "women's experimental writing" or "black experimental writing," particularly in the 1990s, existed in tension with what the poet Harryette Mullen, in her essay "Poetry and Identity," called "The assumption . . . that 'avant-garde' poetry is not 'black' and that 'black' poetry, however singular its 'voice,' is not 'formally innovative'" (30).

Yet there have always been numerous traditions and communities within American poetry – a theme already well-established by the 1990s that scholarship has increasingly taken up since 2000. Much of this discourse has been driven by growing attention to African American poetry and poetics. Scholarship of the 1990s, such as the work of Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Nathaniel Mackey, established distinct and long-standing traditions of experimentation with African American poetry, laying the groundwork for an explosion of work on African American poetics in the early twenty-first-century by scholars such as Keith D. Leonard, Evie Shockley, Meta DuEwa Jones, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Anthony Reed. The past decade or so has also seen the appearance of the first full-length studies of Asian American poetry, from Josephine Park's *Apparitions of Asia* (2008) to Dorothy Wang's *Thinking Its Presence* (2013). The recent emergence of Latinx literature as a major category of US literature has also led to new scholarly work on Latinx poetics, such as Frederick Luis Aldama's *Formal Matters in Contemporary Latino Poetry* (2013), while poets and scholars such as Janice Gould, Robert Dale Parker, and Dean Rader have helped build a substantial critical discourse around Native American poetry.

At least three traits distinguish this new scholarship from earlier work in the field. The first might simply be thought of in terms of critical mass: for the first time, a substantial scholarly literature now exists on a diverse range of African American, Asian American, Latinx, and Native poets. Second, these shifts signal a shift in the makeup of the academy itself, as much of this work is *by* scholars of color and Native scholars in addition to examining work by such writers. Perhaps most importantly, twenty-first-century scholarship has made (or affirmed) the case for distinct poetic traditions informing the work of poets of color and Native poets. Rather than seeing the work of such writers as voices from the margins that have gradually been incorporated into a traditional poetic canon still defined by white writers, recent scholarship has increasingly argued for placing the work of African American, Asian American, Latinx, and Native poets at the center of discussions about contemporary American poetry.

Such shifts in scholarly discourse track shifts in the public profile of American poetry and its institutions. Two examples bookend this period: The premiere of *Def Poetry Jam* on HBO in 2002 opened the twenty-first-century by giving new mainstream prominence to the long-established culture of spoken word performance, often placing poets of color front and center; and, in the mid-2010s, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2014) not only became one of the most widely discussed books of the decade within the poetry world but became a mainstream bestseller and even made a cameo appearance in the 2016 presidential campaign, when a woman was seen reading it as an act of protest at a Donald Trump rally.[2] *Citizen*, in particular, with its treatment of racist microaggressions in a wider history of violence against African Americans, resonated deeply with the Black Lives Matter movement and the centrality of contemporary debates about anti-black racism in US society.

What may be most characteristically new about twenty-first-century poetry is that such critical conversations about race and poetry have increasingly not been seen as "only" the province of writers of color but have shaped conversations about *all* American poetry – including by white poets. One of the most heated recent controversies in poetry focused on Kenneth Goldsmith's 2015 performance of "The Body of Michael Brown," in which Goldsmith read an edited version of the autopsy report of Brown, an unarmed young black man whose killing by police in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 sparked widespread protest. Goldsmith, a prominent leader of the "conceptual poetry" movement who had read his work at the White House, faced fierce public backlash for what was seen as his exploitation of Brown's death, with the ensuing controversy reaching the pages of *The New Yorker* and *The Guardian*. As Sueyeun Juliette Lee discusses in more detail in Chapter 9 in this

collection, the Goldsmith controversy represented a reckoning of sorts for the category of the poetic avant-garde, which, in seeking to comment upon race, unexpectedly found its own whiteness the subject of critique.

These episodes represent, among other things, a forceful challenge to the binary between poetic form and content, which has too often broken down along racialized lines; the work of writers of color has been more often read for its political or cultural "content" rather than its use of or experimentation with poetic form. Yet formal choices, of course, take place within social and political contexts as well. Spoken word, for instance, has still received relatively little scholarly attention and remains largely outside academic accounts of contemporary American poetry; however, it has, over the past several decades, developed distinct forms, aesthetics, styles, and institutions that are largely independent of traditional venues such as the university or elite publishing houses. Rankine's complex negotiations with form, from her deep investment in the lyric to the mixture of poetry, essayistic writing, and visual art that characterizes *Citizen*, reveal a poetics that approaches race *through* form, inquiring into the various forms the black body takes, and is seen through, in US public space.

The present collection acknowledges the centrality of race in twenty-first-century American poetry by opening with chapters on African American, Asian American, Latinx, and Native American poetry. While each of these chapters are grounded in the deeper histories of their respective poetic traditions, each focuses primarily on how writers of color and Native writers have responded to, critiqued, and advanced these traditions since the year 2000. Keith D. Leonard (Chapter 1) elucidates what has been called a "post–civil rights" aesthetic in recent African American poetry, focusing on four broad trends: a poetics of introspection that turns away from politics; a critical reexamination of African American history and heritage; a personalization of collectivist protest in the tradition of the Black Arts Movement; and black literary collective action. Michael Leong (Chapter 2) follows a parallel path in describing the "counter-modes" that twenty-first-century Asian American poets have developed in response to both racialized constraints and established poetic practices; these surrealist, documentary, and phenomenological modes, pioneered by writers of the 1980s and 1990s, have been developed into mature traditions since 2000. David A. Colón (Chapter 3) argues that the locations that have traditionally grounded Latinx writing are increasingly destabilized in the twenty-first-century; his account of the field focuses on the legacies and effects of colonialism, transnationalism, and migration. And Mishuana Goeman (Chapter 4) emphasizes a twenty-first-century "trans-indigenous" poetics that crosses the boundaries of settler colonial states.

Taken together, such approaches form the foundation of a twenty-first-century scholarship that rejects any notion of a neutral, universalizing poetics in favor of a poetics that is deeply implicated in the social and historical structures and conflicts that have characterized the early twenty-first-century. Even late-twentieth-century claims on behalf of the "politics of poetic form"[3] have increasingly been confronted with the need to account for the social locations that shape the politics and form of poetry. If, in the US context, race and indigeneity have arguably been at the center of such an implicated poetics, the politics of twenty-first-century poetic form has equally been conditioned by shifting discourses of gender and sexuality; by geopolitical upheavals, from the 9/11 attacks to ongoing US wars in the Middle East; by a renewal of protest and political resistance, from Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter; by a rising sense of environmental crisis and catastrophe, centered on climate change and the notion of the Anthropocene; and by a rapidly evolving media landscape, with the dawn of the Internet and the rise of the social media age.

Accounts of twenty-first-century American literature have often taken the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as violently inaugurating a new historical era. The notion of a "post-9/11" literature corresponds to the widespread public sense of a sharp rupture that altered Americans' sense of themselves and the world. Yet as the US response to the attacks rapidly shifted from shock to war, many poets found themselves in familiar postures of protest and resistance – even if in a new context. As Stephen Voyce's chapter in this volume (Chapter 13) reminds us, the post-9/11 US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq give rise to our current era of "unending" and "everywhere" war, as well as to what Voyce calls a post-9/11 "poetry of war resistance." The 2003 collection *Poets Against the War* began when the poet Sam Hamill was invited to the White House by First Lady Laura Bush; the event was postponed after Hamill made it known he would use the event to protest against the war in Iraq. Hamill solicited poems protesting the war through a website – a fact that seems trivial today but that served as one marker of the way poetry was quickly adapting to the new media of the internet age; the site ultimately received submissions from more than 13,000 poets.

Did American poetry change after 9/11? Some critics have argued that it did. Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray's 2012 anthology *The New American Poetry of Engagement* claims that, after 9/11, American poets "turn[ed] toward a more engaged poetry" (6), writing under a new pressure to "incorporate, chronicle, or allude to public events" (3) – a claim echoed in Voyce's observation of a resurgence in documentary poetry. Keniston and Gray suggest, in short, that post-9/11 poetry is a newly public poetry, a turn

away from modernist hermeticism and post-confessional solipsism. As I have argued elsewhere, however, such sweeping statements about what American poetry as a whole is doing in the twenty-first-century are increasingly likely to miss large swaths of the poetic landscape, in part because they are tied to outdated assumptions of which poets and themes are "central" to US poetry.[4] Keniston and Gray's anthology is focused almost entirely on the work of white poets whose relationship to global violence and trauma is that of observers. Yet, as Voyce correctly observes, some of the most powerful American poetry written in response to the post-9/11 era has been produced by Arab or Muslim American poets, who emerge from communities that have been targets of discrimination, profiling, and violence since 2001. The question of American poetry's political engagement in the twenty-first-century looks very different – and, indeed, more continuous with the work of the twentieth century – when white poets are decentered from the discussion.

The desire to claim new political relevance for American poetry in the twenty-first-century is also, of course, a response to perennial discussions of poetry's decline into irrelevance. The 1980s and 1990s saw a number of such laments, from Joseph Epstein's "Who Killed Poetry?" (1988) to Dana Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?" (1991) to Vernon Shetley's *After the Death of Poetry* (1993). While such commentators identified various culprits in poetry's decline, the general symptoms seemed clear: new books of poetry seldom sold more than a few thousand (or a few hundred) copies; general-interest magazines and book reviews (themselves in sharp decline) discussed poetry with decreasing frequency; and trade publishers were increasingly retreating from publishing any poetry at all. If poetry appeared to be in ongoing retreat in its traditional venues, however, the early 2000s also offered new contexts and new spaces for poetry's ongoing relevance. In particular, the expansion of poetry beyond the traditional printed page and into new media – from television to the Internet – created both new audiences and new opportunities for cultural critique.

In 2002, *Def Poetry Jam* premiered on the HBO cable network. Presented by hip-hop producer Russell Simmons, *Def Poetry Jam* featured poets including Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, Beau Sia, Willie Perdomo, and Staceyann Chin. As Javon Johnson and Anthony Blacksher discuss in more depth in Chapter 11 in this collection, *Def Poetry Jam* brought the genre of spoken word – whose contemporary history encompasses the Nuyorican Poets Café of the 1970s and the emergence of the poetry slam in the 1980s – to a broad national audience. In addition to popularizing (and, as Johnson and Blacksher suggest, possibly ossifying) the distinctive style of spoken word, *Def Poetry Jam* primarily featured poets of color, thus offering a (perhaps too easy) dichotomy in American poetry at the dawn of the

twenty-first-century. If "poetry" was dying in America at the end of the twentieth century, the rise of spoken word seemed to indicate that it might be a certain traditional mode of poetry, focused on the printed page and dominated by white writers, that was in decline; but that a new mode of poetry, grounded in oral performance, aimed at younger audiences, and led by poets of color, might be supplanting it. Although academic scholarship on spoken word poetry is still limited, future histories of American poetry will certainly see the mainstreaming of spoken word as a significant feature of the early twenty-first-century – a mainstreaming that would only accelerate in the internet era.

In fact, by the early 2000s, TV itself seemed in danger of becoming a "legacy" technology, as increasing access to the Internet and the growing popularity of the Web threatened to erode TV's place as the dominant medium of mass communication. The discourse of this era frequently tied the precipitous decline of print culture – of books, magazines, and newspapers – to the rise of the Internet. It was perhaps fitting, then, that one of the first poetic movements of the twenty-first-century to be graced with a recognizable label was defined by its relationship to online culture. The term "flarf" emerged in 2001 – appropriately enough, on an email list – among a small group of writers to describe what poet K. Silem Mohammad called "liberal borrowing from internet chat-room drivel and spam scripts, often with the intention of achieving a studied blend of the offensive, the sentimental, and the infantile" (qtd. in Magee). Its signature technique was what its practitioners came to call "Google-sculpting," in which the results of often nonsensical or absurd Google search-engine queries were appropriated, arranged, and collaged.[5]

In retrospect, a number of elements stand out about flarf. As an (often ironic) avant-garde or literary movement, it extended the tradition of the twentieth-century poetic avant-garde – a position that had been occupied for much of the 1980s and 1990s by language writing – into the twenty-first-century. Yet while many of its techniques were familiar, its source material was the new forms of digital media. Moreover, in retrospect, flarf may be most striking for being tethered to a very particular era of the Internet: the relatively static, text-based world of chat rooms, listservs, and the early Web, before the era of social media and streaming video. As a response to the cultural shift toward online media, flarf might be seen as a claim on the Internet as an extension of print culture, into which traditional text-based poetry can still make a powerful intervention.

The rise of flarf is part of an era in which a range of poets flocked to new media venues and forms, responding to the utopian potential that still clung to the Web's early days. An active group of poets embraced the emerging

form of blogging, particularly on the Blogger platform, beginning in 2002 and 2003. As with flarf, poetry blogging displayed important continuities with the poetry communities of the 1990s, particularly through the prominence of the blog of Ron Silliman, one of the central figures of language writing. Yet the format also attracted younger poets from around the country, especially from the San Francisco Bay area, and including somewhat more women and poets of color than actively participated in 1990s online communities such as the Buffalo POETICS email list.[6]

If the Internet seemed in this period a new potential space for creating poetic community, a longer-lasting impact was arguably made by some of the more formal organizations of poets that emerged during the 2000s, particularly among poets of color. This new development was spearheaded in the mid-1990s by Cave Canem, founded by the poets Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady to address what the organization's mission statement calls "the under-representation and isolation of African American poets in the literary landscape." The 2000s saw the appearance of two additional organizations inspired by and modeled on Cave Canem: Kundiman, serving Asian American writers, in 2004; and Canto Mundo, serving Latinx writers, in 2009. All three organizations sponsor an annual retreat for writers from their respective communities, while also supporting a range of other programming. All three groups can be seen as squarely within the lineage of earlier literary movements that argued for distinct traditions and spaces for writers of color, particularly from the 1960s forward: the Black Arts Movement as well as the Asian American and Chicano literary movements. At the same time, these poetic formations of the 1990s and 2000s were quite different from their 1960s and 1970s predecessors, focusing more on formal institution-building and shifting from an oppositional, outsider stance to one arguably more oriented toward gaining access for poets of color to "mainstream," historically white-dominated literary institutions (publishing, prizes, and academic employment). The remarkable literary success of poets from all three groups, which includes Pulitzer Prizes, MacArthur "genius" grants, and hundreds of book publications, speaks to their effectiveness as formations that have used the idea of distinct literary spaces for writers of color to reshape the wider literary landscape.

Of course, Cave Canem, Kundiman, Canto Mundo, and other comparable groups have emerged in a landscape of literary institutions that has shifted dramatically from the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first-century. The poetry culture whose "death" was decried in the 1980s and 1990s was one tied to a mid-twentieth-century US intellectual landscape, centered on New York City, in which prestigious literary journals, book reviews, and general-interest magazines, aimed at the abstract ideal of an educated general

reader, shaped national tastes in poetry. Robert Lowell, who died in 1977, is often cited as the last of the "great," undisputed central figures whose poetry mattered to this imagined general public, before its splintering into obscure subcultures or its retreat into the academy. Of course, so-called academic poetry had been the target of critique by other poets for decades; Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* made "academic verse" the adversary of its poetic avant-gardes. By the 1990s, however, the "academic verse" against which some critics railed was more likely to be of a different kind: that produced by graduates of university creative writing programs. Vernon Shetley, who dubbed such writing the "MFA mainstream," was not alone in regarding academic creative writing as a dulling and conformist influence in contemporary poetry, a view shared, as Kimberly Quiogue Andrews notes in Chapter 14 of this collection, by partisans of the avant-garde such as Marjorie Perloff and Charles Bernstein.

From the perspective of a couple of decades into the twenty-first-century, such debates around the impact of academic creative writing now seem almost quaint: for many American poets today, the world of poetry and that of the creative writing program have become essentially coextensive, with the university now serving, as Andrews puts it, as "the foremost patron of the poetic arts." While discussion of the influence of the MFA in the 1990s focused primarily on the effects of the "workshop style," a twenty-first-century examination of poetry and the academy must be far more attuned to the institutional and economic conditions for poetry set by the university creative writing program. Aspiring young poets are increasingly likely to see pursuit of the MFA (or even the PhD) in creative writing as *the* path to becoming a "professional" poet and to adopt the professional goal of academic employment alongside those of journal and book publication.

New contexts for the production and reception of poetry in the twenty-first-century United States have inevitably given rise to new preoccupations, and new stylistic expressions, among contemporary poets. The chapters in this collection highlight a number of these evolving concerns. Christopher Nealon (Chapter 12) and Jonathan Skinner (Chapter 10) examine poets who respond to the twenty-first-century's increasing sense of global crisis, from the financial crash of 2008 to the rapidly progressing threat of climate change. Nealon traces the ongoing development of an anti-capitalist poetry that can be seen as part of a renewal of political poetry in the current century, seeing in poets such as Daniel Borzutzky, Allison Cobb, and Wendy Trevino a politically radical poetics that "explores links among kinds of violence – racial, sexual, economic – and kinds of depredation – colonial, environmental – that liberal political language has tended to grasp in parallel, rather than as part of a totality." Environmental crisis has become an especially urgent topic for contemporary

poets; Skinner examines how poets such as Juliana Spahr, Danez Smith, Stephen Collis, and Layli Long Soldier write "under the sign of the Anthropocene," grappling both with this term's potential for creating global solidarities and with the inequalities that it may efface.

New contexts and content have given rise to new formal developments in twenty-first-century poetry. Ann Vickery (Chapter 5) examines the impact of third- and fourth-wave feminisms in a wide variety of recent poetry by women, including the coining by Arielle Greenberg of the "gurlesque," one of the first new poetic tendencies of the new century to gain a recognizable label; Greenberg and other practitioners see the gurlesque as embodying a more "playful" and "brash" relationship to signifiers of femininity than is characteristic in the poetry of second-wave feminism. Vickery also traces new feminist trajectories for styles that bridge the transition from the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first, including performance poetry, post-language writing, and digital poetics. In Chapter 6, Stephanie Burt's articulation of a "nearly baroque" style in poets such as Angie Estes, Robyn Schiff, and Lucie Brock-Broido similarly identifies this mode as a "femme aesthetic" that "defend[s] traditionally feminine ideas of beauty and extravagance" as a way of mapping "the aspiration, and the limits, in the contemporary lyric poem."

The intersection of poetics and disability has been another arena in which a developing and maturing political movement has given rise to an increasingly complex formal landscape. Declan Gould's chapter in this collection on disability and poetry (Chapter 7) maps an emerging distinction in twenty-first-century poetry between a "disability poetry" that is aligned with the disability rights movement and draws on a wide range of aesthetic influences and a "crip poetry" that is aimed primarily at disabled audiences and that places itself within a tradition of disabled culture and activism.

Finally, the status of the lyric in contemporary poetry has been an ongoing concern in twenty-first-century poetics. If the late twentieth century saw a heightening of skepticism over the project of lyric poetry, with challenges to the "lyric I" of confessional and post-confessional poetry issuing from the ranks of experimental writing, the early twenty-first-century has seen, if not precisely a "return" to lyric, then a renewed interest in exploring the potential of the category of lyric to be turned to new, and often more politically engaged, ends. The work of Claudia Rankine again has been a touchstone of this effort, with both her 2004 collection *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and her 2014 *Citizen* bearing the subtitle *An American Lyric*. Sarah Dowling's chapter in this collection (Chapter 8) offers an argument for the way queer indigenous and queer of color poets in particular are reimagining the twenty-first-century lyric, showing how the relationality characteristic of lyric poetry is exploded and

expanded into a "queer bioethics" in work such as Tommy Pico's *Nature Poem* (2017).

If the theme of much of this account of twenty-first-century American poetics has been contemporary poetry's shifting centers of gravity, it is also true that those shifts have not been without resistance. Many of the controversies that have occupied poets and scholars of poetry – and even attracted national and international media attention – in the first decades of the century can be seen as symptoms of these seismic shifts in the poetic landscape, particularly around issues of race. The year 2011 saw two such events. The first was a debate between poets Claudia Rankine and Tony Hoagland that began with a panel discussion at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) conference, which has taken on increasing importance as the major professional conference for academic creative writers. Rankine offered a critique of Hoagland's poem "The Change," in which Rankine wondered whether Hoagland's depiction of a thinly veiled version of Venus Williams – a "big black girl from Alabama" with "some outrageous name like Vondella Aphrodite" – defeating a white opponent was "a performance of the n-road." Rankine also shared a response from Hoagland, who called Rankine's reading "naïve"; the poem was not "racist" but "racially complex," expressing the fact that Americans "drank racism with our mother's milk." Hoagland's declaration that "it seems foolish and costly to think that the topic of race belongs only to brown-skinned Americans and not white-skinned Americans" reveals his debate with Rankine as a struggle over *ownership* of particular kinds of poetic content – and, in particular, over the conversations about race that continue to dominate American public discourse.

If the Rankine/Hoagland debate was mostly an "insider" conversation – one that happened between poets, staged at a conference for creative writers – a far more public incident occurred later in the year, one that brought competing narratives of contemporary poetry into open conflict. Helen Vendler, one of the most eminent critics of contemporary poetry, published a sharply critical review in *The New York Review of Books* of the new *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2011), edited by Rita Dove. Vendler charged Dove, a Pulitzer Prize–winning poet who was the first African American writer to hold the title of US Poet Laureate, with privileging "multicultural inclusiveness" over aesthetic value, to which Dove replied that Vendler was displaying "the wild sorrow of someone who feels betrayed by the world she thought she knew" (n. pag.). If the sharp distinction Vendler makes between "inclusion" and "quality" seems increasingly dubious in the multipolar world of twenty-first-century poetry – a point Dorothy Wang takes up in her coda to this collection (Chapter 15) – it is

an opposition that has not entirely been abandoned either, as Dove also asserts that "literary merit" was her only criterion.

Perhaps the larger point to be taken away here is that late-twentieth-century narratives of American poetry have been irreversibly disrupted in the early twenty-first-century – largely, if not solely, by issues around race. An avant-garde lineage that might have been traced from language writing through flarf to conceptual poetry[7] has been challenged by critiques of conceptual poetry's racial politics and of the broader "whiteness" of the avant-garde. Several of the highest-profile poetry controversies of the mid-2010s, from the backlash against a poem by Calvin Trillin about Chinese food[8] to a white male poet's use of the name "Yi-Fen Chou" in *The Best American Poetry 2015*,[9] were sparked by the growing influence of younger writers of color, whose social media responses led to wider mainstream coverage. All of these cases revealed that old assumptions about who is reading and writing poetry must be discarded: readers and writers of color, in particular, are in the room and cannot be erased in favor of a concept of the (presumptively white) general reader of poetry.

If the discourse of the "death" of poetry that dominated the 1990s has not completely disappeared,[10] it has seemingly given way to a new optimism about the state of poetry in America. A survey released in 2018 by the National Endowment for the Arts reported a surge of poetry readership from 2012 to 2017, with *Washington Post* book critic Ron Charles reporting that "The share of adults reading poetry grew by an astounding 76 percent" and that "The percentage of poetry readers age 18–24 *doubled* during that period" (n. pag.). Many observers have attributed this surge in poetry readership to social media, and in particular to Instagram, which has become a platform for some poets to reach thousands, even millions, of readers. Rupi Kaur, a Canadian poet who has become the most famous poet of Instagram, has parlayed her nearly 4 million Instagram followers into eye-popping book sales, with more than a million copies of her book *Milk and Honey* (2014) sold.

The success of Kaur and other Instagram poets provides a striking bookend to the tentative, critical, and at times utopian relationship with digital technology that characterized the first years of the twenty-first-century. If flarf and the poetry blogosphere can be seen in retrospect as attempts by existing poetry communities to establish new networks and incorporate the emerging world of online discourse into traditional poetics, Instagram poets appear to have created an entirely new poetry world, one whose connection with traditional poetries is limited, but also one whose frank approach toward marketing and monetization has created a new poetic economy distinct from the nonprofit economy of the university and small-press publishing. While many poets and

critics have bemoaned what they see as the poor quality of Instagram poetry, it might be more accurate to say that Kaur and other Instagram poets have further revealed the multiplicity of poetry worlds, economies, and audiences that characterize twenty-first-century poetry.[11]

This collection can best be understood, then, as an effort to define new paradigms that might help us grasp the unfolding projects of twenty-first-century American poetics. Understanding that the narratives and binaries of twentieth-century poetry have come under increasing scrutiny and challenge, these chapters map both continuity and change, while acknowledging how deeply poetry is implicated in contemporary social and political upheavals. What emerges is a nexus of subjects for contemporary poetry – race, gender, sexuality, disability, war, neoliberalism, the environment – that shape, and are being shaped by, a new array of poetic forms and aesthetics.

Notes

1. See Armantrout. Armantrout's essay responds to a question posed by Charles Bernstein.
2. The incident was widely reported in the media; for more, see Brown.
3. For example, see Bernstein.
4. See Yu, "Engagement, Race, and Public Poetry."
5. Andrew Epstein's "Funks of Ambivalence: On Flarf," which reviews the 2017 *Flarf: An Anthology of Flarf*, provides a useful overview of the movement and its reception; see also Bernes and Damon.
6. For an account of this period from an active participant, see Corey.
7. The close links between flarf and conceptual poetry were evident from the staged "rivalry" between the two movements around 2009–2010, including essays and readings by Goldsmith, Vanessa Place, and Drew Gardner.
8. Trillin's poem in the *New Yorker,* "Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?", was widely criticized, particularly by Asian American writers, for its representation of Chinese culture. See Yu, "White Poets Want Chinese Culture Without Chinese People."
9. The author, poet Michael Derrick Hudson, revealed in a contributor's note that he used the name "Yi-Fen Chou" as a means of increasing his chances of publication. The incident received coverage from the *Guardian* (UK), NBC News, and *Slate*. Roundups of the discussion can be found at the Poetry Foundation, "Yi-Fen Chou Is a Real Person," and the Asian American Writers' Workshop, "After Yi-Fen Chou."
10. An interesting example of the new context for such sentiments is Bob Hicok's essay "The Promise of American Poetry," in which Hicok laments that he is "dying" and increasingly neglected as a poet, but links this to his status as a straight white male writer at a time when the "hottest" writers are poets of color or queer writers. For a response to Hicok, see Yu, "The Case of the 'Disappearing' Poet."

11. For further discussion of Instagram poetry and what it reveals about the economies of contemporary poetry, see Yu, "Instagram Poetry and Our Poetry Worlds."

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