

**‘Committing Poetry’:  
A Review of Timothy Yu (ed.), *The Cambridge  
Companion to Twenty-First-Century American Poetry*,  
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Laurent Milesi\* and Arleen Ionescu\*\*

\*Shanghai Jiao Tong University; \*\*Shanghai Jiao Tong University  
E-mails: milesi@sjtu.edu.cn; anionescu@sjtu.edu.cn

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Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced  
on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory  
social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

With its foregrounding of issues of especially race and ethnicity, as well as gender and various manifestations of the socio-politico-economic, alongside the oft-repeated, variously modulated plea for institutional changes in academic mappings of the poetic canon, Timothy Yu’s impressively dense *Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First-Century American Poetry* will be seen as very much a product and sign of its changing times to readers attuned to the poetic debates of the century’s last decade. Yet whoever expects this *Companion* to address equally the full range of contemporary American poetics, whether conventional or experimental, mainstream or marginal, is likely to feel slightly short-changed by the slanted coverage, which excludes as unworthy of a separate chapter those post-language-poetics movements, especially conceptualism and flarf, which it sees mainly as extensions of an established avant-garde lineage with its inherited polarisations (8). The prevalently racial-ethnic agenda has also inflected the choice of the generous amount of supporting evidence, examples and references throughout, and while this is to be expected in the first four chapters, devoted to non-white poetics, or in a genre like slam poetry still largely associated with people of colour,<sup>2</sup> this tendency also percolates into the presentation of the following essays, irrespective of theme and topic: feminism(s), disability, queerness and bioethics, trauma, climate change and ecopoetics, anti-capitalism and the critique of neo-liberalism, etc. However, regrettably for a companion whose *mot d’ordre* is to update referential and

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<sup>1</sup> Donna J. Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’, in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 16.

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, see Arleen Ionescu’s interview with Cristina A. Bejan in this issue (151-60).

critical frameworks, poetic responses to the world-damaging COVID-19 pandemic are entirely missing from the volume.<sup>3</sup>

As Yu unambiguously states on the very first page of the Introduction, the overall aim of the volume is '[to shift] our attention away from individual, canonical writers and from dominant critical narratives' in order 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.' (1) While this timely re-pointing and enterprise of redress is not entirely new – witness the trajectory between the two anthologies co-edited by Claudia Rankine<sup>4</sup> as well as some titles compiled by Timothy Yu and Caroline Hensley in the 'Further Reading' section (234-7) – it bears stating that it is now being promoted in an acclaimed series of a major academic press.

Keith D. Leonard opens the volume with a chapter entitled 'Belonging to New Black Aesthetics: Post-Civil Rights African American Poetry', followed by Michael Leong's 'Traditions of Innovation in Asian American Poetry', David A. Colón's 'Locations of Contemporary Latina/o Poetry' and Mishuana Goeman's 'Sovereign Poetics and Possibilities in Indigenous Poetry'. These four chapters take up different facets of the centrality of race and ethnicity for 21<sup>st</sup> century American poetry: the freedom of the individual black self from 'individual and collective, from social and cultural limitations of all kinds, including those within black culture' (Leonard, 18); the freedom of Asian identities to develop what Leong calls 'counter-modes' in response to both racialized constraints and established poetic practices: a surreal mode, a documented mode and a phenomenological mode (33-44); the freedom of the Nuyorican self, represented by Bonafide Rojas, to return to his ancestral homeland as a diasporic subject (Colón, 48); finally, the freedom gained by contemporary Native American and Indigenous poetry in 'disrupting, crossing, and transgressing boundaries set up by settler states who enact policies and promote an erasure, elimination, and eradication of Native culture, political authority, and [...] our very nonconforming subjecthood' (Goeman, 61).<sup>5</sup>

With these intersections from one 'self' to another, contemporary American poetry looks squarely entrenched within identitarian assertiveness and political commitment, to the detriment of the more 'exclusively' literary and cultural, despite Yu's caveat in the Introduction that this view of a divide between political, cultural content and experimentation with poetic forms no longer obtains in writers of colour (5; also 12, where Yu recalls Helen Vendler's charge against Rita Dove that she privileges 'multicultural inclusiveness' over aesthetic value). From the Pulitzer Prize winner Gregory Pardlo (2015), whose manifesto reads 'The poem I write is not only a reflection of how I view the world; it is a reflection of how I choose to view the world'

<sup>3</sup> Possibly in the works during a similar time frame as Yu's companion, at least one such collection appeared in the same year: *Poetry and COVID-19: An Anthology of Contemporary International and Innovative Poetry*, ed. Anthony Caeshu and Rory Waterman (Swindon: Shearsman Books, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> *American Poets in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The New Poetics*, ed. Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), and *American Poets in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Poetics of Social Engagement*, ed. Claudia Rankine and Michael Dowdy (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the complex relationship between Native writing and settler colonialism in North America, see Goeman's *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press, 2013).

(from ‘Logic of Ekphrasis’, quoted in Leonard, 22), to Patricia Smith’s focus on the body and Nikki Finney’s poems on Black Arts movement thoughts, we discover novel ways of shaping today’s poetic avant-garde, which also includes self-proclaimed surrealist Asian poet John Yau’s ‘complex prosopopoeics, a making of performative faces’ as ‘racialized impersonation’ (33), taking the form not of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* but of deformed ‘gnawed leaves’, a ‘punning maneuver of poetic composting’ (34), or his ‘post-Poundian ideogram’ invoking ‘fragmented animal imagery’ that brings to mind ‘the deliriously disjunctive poetry of Paolo Javier developing ‘a Dionysian poetics of extremity’ (35). Equally fascinating, and illustrative of the phenomenological counter-mode, is Asian poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge delving both into Husserlian phenomenology and a Heideggerian dwelling in language, which Leong sees as ‘a complex nested construction of many margins even as she risks rhetorical disjointedness’ (44).<sup>6</sup>

On the subject of language and dwelling, Colón’s chapter deals with Rojas’s *Notes on the Return to the Island*, which interlace English and Spanish. Colón emphasizes that the Latino/a diasporic self cannot be reduced to transnationalism, which ‘implicitly retains nationality as a quantifiable category that can be combined and recombined, hybridized even’ (49), but should rather be seen as a ‘post-transnational’ intervention insofar as ‘to identify as a diasporic Puerto Rican (much like identifying as Chicano/a) is to assert contact zones, not nationality, as sovereign.’ (49) Other themes in Colón’s essay include the ravages of global capitalism, as evinced in Valerie Martínez’s poems ‘rooted in the borderlands where “Ciudad Juárez sits at the front lines of globalization”’ (52), the theme of tourism via poets such as Francisco Aragón and Aracelis Girmay, as well as the forward-thinking drive of *Latinxfuturist* collections of verse, also read at poetry readings and performances, for which ‘speculating on what it will mean to be Latina/o is the vanguard of our sense of self in the present.’ (56)

Indigenous poetry is characterized by ‘attention to the place-based and to the connections we have with each other’, also crossing the realm of the nonhuman, with a view to rethinking categories such as race, gender and sexuality (62). For Goeman this view often involves a ‘sovereign poetics’ that confronts ‘the imperial-colonial work of those modes of Indigeneity that operationalize genocide and dispossession by ideologically and discursively vacating the Indigenous from the Indigenous’ (Joanne Barker quoted in Goeman, 63). Janet Rogers’s poems in *Peace in Duress* (2014) and Layli Long Soldier’s poetry bring to mind ‘the settler practice of telling history and then providing an insincere apology’ (67), while Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s collection *This Accident of Being Lost* (2017) shows Indians’ awareness of all political implications of settlers’ colonialism (68).

With so much care devoted to ethnicities ‘minorized’ by established critical canons, one would expect Yu’s compendium to eschew the trap of committing a similar sin of exclusionism. Yet one cannot but be struck by the absence of other diasporic groups, such as Jewish Americans<sup>7</sup> or immigrants from Eastern Europe – and one of the two reviewers may be forgiven for drawing attention to the latter on account of her own

<sup>6</sup> In this respect, the reader is referred to Ming-Qian Ma’s phenomenological reading of Andrew Joron’s poetry in this issue (47-58).

<sup>7</sup> Despite *The Bloomsbury Anthology of Contemporary Jewish American Poetry*, ed. Deborah Ager and M. E. Silverman, featuring in the ‘Further Reading’ section (234).

origins, and for wondering whether this blanking out of some ‘white minorities’ should be chalked up to these groups’ colour assimilation to dominant ideologies...<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 5 onwards concentrates on issues such as New Feminisms (Ann Vickery), the nearly Baroque (Stephanie Burt), disability aesthetics (Declan Gould), Queer Poetry and Bioethics (Sarah Dowling), trauma and the avant-garde (Sueyeun Juliette Lee), all bringing what Yu calls in his introduction the rejection of notions 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’ (6).

Vickery’s, Burt’s and Dowling’s essays interconnect to the extent that all deal with feminism, gender and queer studies, although from different perspectives, while Gould’s and Lee’s share some conclusions on disability and cultural trauma poetry. While the ‘second-wave feminism and the emergence of new communication technologies’ enriched American women’s poetry in the 1990s, the third feminist wave defined by Arielle Greenberg as ‘gurlesque’ put forward the experimental poetry of Lee Ann Brown (through *Polyverse*, 1999) and Dodie Bellamy (through *Cunt-Ups*, 2001) with a new understanding of gender ‘as social construction rather than essence’ and the capacity of poems like those written by Cathy Park Hong and Catherine Wagner to ‘break taboos’ (72). Finally, the fourth wave, more digitally- and networking-savvy, deemed to be ‘often more overtly political’, brought about hip-hop and performance poetry (73), poetry that settles legacies of colonial and racial violence (see, among many others, Layli Long Soldier’s *Whereas* (2017), Kimiko Hahn’s ‘Foreign Body’, Myung Mi Kim’s *Commons* (2002) and *Penury* (2009)), poetry involving digital technologies (like Cleo Wade’s Instagram poetry (80) and conceptual poetry resorting to psychoanalytic methods (81-3)). Vickery identifies ‘post-language poetics’ as a feature of the new millennium, which entails ‘writing that is linguistically innovative and embodied’ (78), or else involves a transgression of genres and memory, as in the case of the work of Maggie Nelson and Lisa Samuels (80). Another trademark that appears almost exclusively in the realm of women’s poetry and is formally traceable to Marianne Moore (91) is what Burt calls ‘the nearly Baroque’ in her eponymous chapter. With a ‘self-conscious interest in beauty’ and ‘its concomitants: the pretty, the stylish, the attractive, and the femme’ (90), poetry associated with the styles called rococo and Baroque can be found in Robyn Schiff’s *Worth* (2002), whose poems’ titles find correspondents in species of finches or houses of fashion, Lucie Brock-Broido’s ‘theatrically overextended sentences’ (94) and in Angie Estes’s staircase-shaped ‘spiraling lines’ (93).

Making it clear that by ‘queer’ she does not refer ‘only or specifically to 2SLGBTQ+ identities, relationships, or experiences’, Dowling starts her chapter on queer poetry by showing that in the new millennium this genre is also represented by Indigenous poets and poets of colour who make their ‘poems practice and theorize other forms of relation – which go well beyond what “queer” has hitherto meant – in order to speak to, from, and through intimate and intricate connections with land, with air, with water, and with innumerable and interdependent forms of life’ (120-1). Instead of surveying a vast number of groups of poets, unlike other contributors, Dowling mainly discusses Tommy Pico’s book-length work *Nature Poem* (2017), which seems to

<sup>8</sup> For an insight into the Romanian diaspora poetry scene, see Arleen’s Ionescu’s interview with Cristina A. Bejan in this issue (151-60).

epitomise the main features of 21<sup>st</sup>-century queer poetry: lyric conventions demonstrating ‘the profoundly sympoietic ways in which our lives are interlinked with and dependent upon those of other beings’, a capacity for creating ‘complex assemblages of human and nonhuman beings’ and an argument that goes against ‘the bounded, autopoietic concepts of personhood that undergird the lyric’, thus responding ‘to the racialization of personhood itself’ (122).<sup>9</sup>

As pointed out in a previous issue of *Word and Text* on ‘Encounters between Disability Studies and Critical Trauma Studies’, the medical model had an overall negative impact on disability studies and was replaced by the ‘social model’, since the former did not acknowledge ‘that the response to the difficulties encountered by disabled people cannot be restricted to medical treatment and social welfare.’<sup>10</sup> Declan Gould goes further and asserts that the medical model played an oppressive role on American poets with disabilities, such as Larry Eigner, Josephine Miles, Hannah Weiner and Vassar Miller, who ‘tended to leave disability out of their poetry or to refer to it only indirectly’, with the notable exception of Adrienne Rich, who openly wrote about the severe rheumatoid arthritis from which she was suffering (106). Later on, poets like Laura Hershey, Jim Ferris, Kenny Fries and Stephen Kuusisto involved themselves in the Disability Rights Movement. Putting disability at the centre of the poetry by writing primarily for disabled readers, they helped shape the distinctive genre of ‘crip poetry’, which is aimed primarily at disabled audiences and ‘places itself within a tradition of disabled culture and activism’, versus ‘disability poetry’, aligned with the disability rights movement, which ‘draws on a wide range of aesthetic influences’ (11). One such development is ‘Deaf poetry’, consisting mainly of American Sign Language (ASL) poems performed rather than written (107). Deaf poets like Douglas Ridloff, Sean Forbes, Dack Virnig and Angel Theory use Deaf poetry to preserve ASL, while Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha invites readers to reflect on the way in which the structure of our language perpetuates ableism and audism. From the same perspective, and also with the aim of bringing disability liberation (111), in their collaborative work *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story* (2008) Petra Kupperts and Neil Marcus debate about the pros and cons of reclaiming the notion of ‘crip’ (the abbreviation of a historically derogatory term: ‘cripple’). Constance Merritt’s poetry offers in *Blind Girl Grunt* (2017) a form of witnessing and what Gould calls a testament to the ongoing injustice produced by the invalidation and violence experienced by many people with disabilities (112). Moreover, a new tendency within disability studies poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that poets like Eleni Stecopoulos, Tito Mukhopadhyay, Jennifer Bartlett and Adam Mitts do not write primarily for disabled audiences, since their purpose is to point out ‘socially constructed aspects of disability’, while others have strong ties to other identity groups and/or schools of poetry beyond disability (Michael Davidson, Norma Cole, Pattie McCarthy, C. S. Giscombe, Susan Schultz, Rachel McKibbens, Khadijah Queen,

<sup>9</sup> It is worth signalling that the use of the term here and elsewhere in the volume, in relation to poetic constructions of a lyrical ‘I’, seems to bear little relation to, let alone even acknowledges, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela’s classic *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980 [1972]), which combines cybernetics, systems theory and the philosophy of biology to explore the concept of ‘self-creation’.

<sup>10</sup> Arleen Ionescu and Anne-Marie Callus, ‘Encounters between Disability Studies and Critical Trauma Studies: Introduction’, *Word and Text – A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 8 (2018): 5.



Canadian poet Jordan Scott, and British poet and performance poet Aaron Williamson) (114).

Given this sweeping thematic coverage, which includes a discussion of David Wolach's *Hospitality* and, more generally, considerations about the relation between literary creation and medical condition – cf. the recall that ‘confessional poets Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton and New York School poet James Schuyler wrote some of their most well-known poems while undergoing treatment at mental institutions’ (116) – there is surprisingly no mention of Katie Degentesh's *The Anger Scale*, the titles of whose poems come from questions on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, a test widely used by mental health professionals, then government and business in the United States after WW2, but this perhaps deliberate oversight may have to do with the flarf-related ‘parasitic aesthetics’ of her Google-fuelled citational bricolage.<sup>11</sup>

Trauma poetry is likewise very much concerned with social justice, as Lee's chapter makes clear from the outset, by revisiting several major events that broke out between 2013 and 2015 around work by conceptual writer Kenneth Goldsmith, which made public ‘the tensions between avant-garde practices, cultural trauma, and appropriate authorship’ (133). A self-confessed advocate of ‘uncreative writing’<sup>12</sup> whom Lee labels ‘a provocateur’ (133), Goldsmith was lambasted for ‘exploiting’ the death of black teenager Michael Brown, shot six times by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, in Summer 2014, when he staged a performance ‘remix’ of the 18-year-old's autopsy report as ‘The Body of Michael Brown’ at an academic literary conference – a scandalous event that is also singled out for comments by Yu in the Introduction (4-5) and by Dorothy Wang in the volume's final chapter (228).<sup>13</sup> In her essay ‘Shock and Blah: Offensive Conceptual Poetry and the Traumatic Stuplime’, Lee had coined the phrase ‘traumatic stuplime’,<sup>14</sup> to which she returns here, explaining that ‘[t]he conceptual simplicity of such works creates an entangled psychological response from audiences and readers – the implication being that those who feel outrage are not sophisticated enough to appreciate the clever critique in the work’ (135), thus to show that white supremacy culture, which she considers to be still dominant in art institutions, ‘is incapable of adequately or meaningfully addressing black pain’ (136). Going through the works of Douglas Kearney and Dawn Lundy Martin in the context of

<sup>11</sup> Katie Degentesh, *The Anger Scale* (Cumberland, RI: Combo Books, 2006), and, for an account, V. Joshua Adams's review in *Chicago Review* 54.3 (2009): 156-61; available at <http://chicagoreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/adams-review-for-web2.pdf> [accessed 18 November 2022].

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> For what it's worth contextually, it should be recalled that ‘The Body of Michael Brown’ (March 2015) was a late addendum to *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (Brooklyn, NY: powerHouse Books, 2013), titled after a series of Andy Warhol paintings, in which Goldsmith had gathered the transcriptions of historic radio and television reports of national tragedies: the John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and John Lennon assassinations, the space shuttle Challenger disaster, the Columbine shootings, 9/11, the death of Michael Jackson. One could therefore venture a more generous, less stereotyped understanding of this gesture by an officially recognized poet who saw it fit to add to the range of national tragedies and high-profile assassinations a representative case epitomising racially motivated abuse of power.

<sup>14</sup> Sueyeun Juliette Lee, ‘Shock and Blah: Offensive Conceptual Poetry and the Traumatic Stuplime’, *Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics* 41 (May 2014); available at [www.thevolta.org/ewc41-sjlee-p1.html](http://www.thevolta.org/ewc41-sjlee-p1.html) [accessed 14 November 2022].

black pain and the excess of black signification, Lee considers that ‘any productive understanding of cultural trauma in a North American context must account for our collective anti-blackness’ (136). Lee also makes an insightful analysis of Bhanu Kapil’s *Schizophrene* (2011), meant to re-present a ‘failed “epic on Partition”’ from a memory studies perspective, connecting Kapil’s space to that of Hirsch’s concept of ‘postmemory’ (141-2).<sup>15</sup> From this perspective, as an heir to the postmemory of an event in which she never took part, Kapil represents the Partition as abjection, suggesting that ‘she can only address this cultural trauma by turning aside’, since ‘abjection emerges as a structural schizophrenia’ (142-3). Similarly to Kapil, another South Asian diaspora poet, Divya Victor, redefines whiteness through a process Lee calls ‘compos[t]itional witness’ (133; cf. also the section on ‘Composting Whiteness/Composing Witness’, 140 ff).

Jonathan Skinner’s ‘Blockade Chants and Cloud-Nets: Terminal Poetics of the Anthropocene’ deals with poetry emerging under the anthropogenic climate change in a century in which the first two decades seem to point towards a feeling of the ‘terminal: Y2K, 9/11, War on Terror, Katrina, Great Recession, Deepwater Horizon, Brexit, and Trump’ (147), while Javon Johnson and Anthony Blacksher’s ‘Give Me Poems and Give Me Death: On the End of Slam(?)’ looks back on the institutional acceptance of an alternative poetic genre practised by ‘many slam and spoken-word poets who have become well published and entered the academy to earn degrees, awards, faculty positions, and significant literary grants’ (170), focusing on the phenomenon of Button Poetry, an online platform that has grown into a wildly popular multimedia platform known for producing viral poetry videos (175).<sup>16</sup>

The emergence of an emphatically anti-capitalist poetry following the global financial crash of 2008 is described by Christopher Nealon<sup>17</sup> as the rather marginal enterprise of a group of poets working outside academia (such as Daniel Borzutzky and Wendy Trevino), whose work came to life either in the ‘so-called independent publishing’ or in ‘ephemeral journals’ (189). Stephen Voyce’s ‘Of Poetry and Permanent War in the Twenty-First-Century’ can be read as some sort of companion essay to Nealon’s, focusing as it does on the United States’ post 9/11 policy to conduct a ‘borderless war both global in scale and endless in scope’, with two full-scale wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and other military operations in Libya, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Syria and elsewhere, all of which ‘have cost by some estimates a million lives and fueled the largest refugee crisis since World War II’ (191). Relying for his theoretical approach on Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* (2004), Voyce takes examples of poetry that represent these events: *Poets Against the War* (2003), ‘arguably the most visible collection of American protest verse published in response to the invasion of Iraq’ (195),

<sup>15</sup> See Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); ‘Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 5-37; *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> See also Javon Johnson, *Ain’t Never Not Been Black* (Minneapolis: Button Poetry, 2020). Johnson is also the author of *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Nealon is known as the author of *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), whose fourth and last chapter, ‘Bubble and Crash: Poetry in Late-Late Capitalism’ (140-66), offers a historical retrospective for some of the points developed in his present chapter.

as well as the poetics of witness, developed by Philip Metres, Lawrence Joseph, Juliana Spahr and Solmaz Sharif.<sup>18</sup>

But poetry has also been produced and institutionalised in the ‘program era’, to echo the title of Mark McGurl’s 2009 book chosen for the topic of Kimberly Quioque Andrews’s contribution.<sup>19</sup> A key issue in McGurl’s book is that of autopoiesis, seen previously, and defined here as writing’s linkage to ‘questions of individualization as expressed through methods of perspective-creation’ (207), which leads to mixed considerations, via Charles Bernstein’s castigation of ‘official verse culture’ and early call to see the political implications in poetic form,<sup>20</sup> about the advantages and drawbacks of poetry’s academicization. Wondering about the value of ‘academic avantgarde’, since she does not trust the experimentalism of the avant-garde when it ‘stays in school’ (217), Andrews prefigures some of Dorothy Wang’s final discussion.<sup>21</sup>

It is in this context that Andrews brings up for more than a passing mention the name of Marjorie Perloff, that all-powerful gatekeeper of poetic experimentation<sup>22</sup> who, on account of her distrust of poetry fuelled by identity politics, therefore becomes, via Cathy Park Hong’s diatribe in ‘Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde’, a punchbag crystallising the white elite’s sinful exclusion of other, ethnic poetics in need of identitarian affirmation (210).<sup>23</sup> At stake in the expressive ‘making’ (*poein*) of poetry this century, therefore, would be its intimate connection to how the poet’s identity fares in the socio-politico-economic world at large, as demonstrated in Myung Mi Kim’s poems, shot through with a ‘concept of the self as an immutable part of “the world’s contents”’ (214), as evidence of the necessity to confront and ‘account for the social locations that shape the politics and form of poetry’ (6).

<sup>18</sup> For more on the poetic avant-garde’s activist engagement with war, see Voyce’s book-length study *Poetic Community: Avant-Garde Activism and Cold War Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). Of relevance for this chapter will be Andrews’s book *The Academic Avant-Garde: Poetry and the American University*, to be published early 2023 by the Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>20</sup> See *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Berkeley, CA: Roof Books, 1986), as well as ‘The Alter(ed) Ground of Poetry and Pedagogy: Conversation with Charles Bernstein’, in Marjorie Perloff, *Poetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays*, ed. David Jonathan Y. Bayot (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 71-91, and Hank Lazer, ‘The Politics of Form and Poetry’s Other Subjects: Reading Contemporary American Poetry’, *American Literary History* 2.3 (Autumn 1990): 503-27.

<sup>21</sup> Again, see Ionescu’s interview with Bejan, in which the poet discusses the near-impossibility to get published unless one has taken an MFA degree (157; 159).

<sup>22</sup> Witness, for instance, in the witty joust between Vanessa Place and Drew Gardner on the respective merits of conceptualism and flarf, Gardner’s ironic summoning of Perloff’s critical fiats pro and contra in his response to Place, originally posted on Flarf’s dedicated weblog on 19 April 2010: ‘Why Flarf Is Better Than Conceptualism’, reprinted in *Postmodern American Poetry*, ed. Paul Hoover, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York and London: Norton, 2013), 944-6; originally posted on 19 April 2010 at <http://mainstreampoetry.blogspot.com/2010/04/why-flarf-is-better-than-conceptualism.html> [accessed 19 November 2022]. For a discussion of the troubled overlaps between the two movements, see Laurent Milesi, ‘Countertexting One Another: Conceptual Poetics, Flarf and Derridean Countersignature’, *CounterText* 1.2: ‘Toward Countertextuality’, ed. Ivan Callus and James Corby (2015): especially 215 ff.

<sup>23</sup> Cathy Park Hong, ‘Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde’, *Lana Turner* 7 (2014); available at <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/delusions-whiteness-avant-garde> [accessed 19 November 2022]. Perloff comes in for another mild ticking off, for her innocent assumption of the white face of poetry devoid of ethnic signifiers, in Leong’s essay (33).



As can be expected from its programmatic title and its position as coda to the volume, Dorothy Wang's 'The Future of Poetry Studies' gives a spin to the *Companion's* brief and tonality, kicking off with the following flourish:

Poetry studies 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. (220)

Recalling that the strength of the 2013 Black Lives Matter was to shed light 'on the anti-black practices of law enforcement and the state' (220), Wang asserts her conviction that '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.' (221) To demonstrate the 'LangPo-ConPo monopoly franchise' (Language Poets at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of California at Berkeley, plus Conceptual Poets at the University of Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania and the Museum of Modern Art), Wang takes issue with those poetry scholars who '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', and deflect the voicing of issues of race and racism (unlike gender and class) in poetry by tarring them with the dismissive labels of 'identity politics', 'autobiographical writing' or 'expressivity' (221). Wang cites the example of Caroline Levine's 2016 *Forms* (winner of MLA's top prize for best book of literary criticism in that year) which revolutionised thinking about form and context in various fields, from literature to politics. She approves of Levine's objection to the binarizing of the formal and the social but becomes suspicious of an omission lurking behind an all-inclusive, plural possessive ('Who is the assumed "We" here in the phrase "our critic"?' (223)<sup>24</sup>) which seemingly negates work on the inseparability of the formal and the social by the likes of 'Stuart Hall, C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, Amiri Baraka, Édouard Glissant and, more recently, Fred Moten and the Afropessimists' (223). Hence Wang's verdict, repeated in different modulations, one of which goes as follows:

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. (223)

For Wang, there is a growing need to do 'painstaking work at the level of the concrete and the material' in order to conceive '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' (224). Wang's arguments against the wrong way poetry is still being taught nowadays are couched in

<sup>24</sup> A similar diffidence towards the all-encompassing first-person plural occurs on the previous page, in connection with the wording of the presidential theme for the 2018 MLA convention (222).

ironic innuendos: the ‘most brilliant literary critics’ fail to see both the ‘horizontal’ links between poetry, poetic methods and their immediate socio-political and ideological contexts of production/reception and the ‘vertical’ links across historical time ‘so that a contemporary poem can be read in relation to transhistorical ideologies and material practices’; the elite status of English as a field is ‘a byproduct of the power and prestige of the British Empire’; scholars lack the ability to think ‘the micro (formal elements) and the macro (colonialism, eugenics) together’ (225). Wondering whether ‘our poetic techniques do violence as well’ (228), using as example Goldsmith’s ‘borrowing’ of ‘the autopsy report of a murdered black body in the name of poetry’ (228), she formulates her view that young scholars of colour find the work of writers and critics like Christina Sharpe, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Sara Ahmed, Jared Sexton, M. NourbeSe Philip, Bhanu Kapil more revealing than the literary studies programmes offered by English departments, and thus take up other specialties such as critical race studies (especially black studies), indigenous studies, American studies, performance studies, and gender and sexuality studies (229).

Wang’s remedial solution to all the above is expressed as a manifesto of sorts with six ‘tasks’: 1. ‘Doing archival work [...] to uncover and recover forgotten BIPOC poets, working-class poets, women poets’ in order ‘to undo the whitewashing<sup>25</sup> of English poetry history’; 2. ‘Decentering white poets and poetry scholars as the sole or primary objects of focus in poetics’; 3. ‘Looking to alternative poetic and formal models of poetics and poetic thinking’ which might make ‘nonwhite poets are seen not just as examples of “difference” but also as creators of core concepts of 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’, in the sense that those white scholars who write about race and racism should become active citizens who fight against racism in real life; 6. ‘Taking seriously the work that poems themselves do: as means of theorizing, as presenting possible alternative ways to think and interpret.’ (229-30)

Notwithstanding their concrete, practical edge, there is nothing entirely new about these programmatic tasks, which have been bandied about and (arguably slowly) set in motion in one form or another ever since the so-called canon wars began in the late 1980s-early 1990s, when multiculturalists who campaigned for inclusion of more works by women and non-white ethnicities faced off against entrenched traditionalists bent on maintaining a curriculum of classic works of literature. What makes these renewed calls for action somewhat jarring in Yu’s collection, however, is that its contributors (most of whom incidentally ply their trade in highly-respected academic institutions where they can do their share of reforming the curriculum) not only convey the impression that no real change – they might say, not enough change – has happened over the last thirty years or so, but also occasionally resort to needlessly pugnacious language which detracts from the otherwise excellently documented evidence and arguments. In the bygone days of ‘high theory’, deconstruction had taught ‘us’ that merely overturning binary opposites in a hierarchy (in this case, meeting exclusionism with counter-exclusionism) performs a gesture comparable to the original wrongdoing, but it seems that this is a lesson unlearned or inapplicable here.

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<sup>25</sup> The word is also used in essays by Leonard and Leong, i.e. a black and Asian scholar respectively.

Serious as issues of '[g]ender, race, or class consciousness' (cf. Haraway's epigraph) must be seen, should the mission of teaching and reading poetry, or literature more generally for that matter, become primarily a commitment to ideology and militancy, with seemingly as ultimate goal, in this case, the 'washing away of whiteness' from the canon to make way for 'forgotten BIPOC poets'? If so, it is no coincidence that 'avant-garde' appears a 'mere' 90 times, around twice as much as words related to / derived from 'experiment', but vastly overpowered by all markers of race and ethnicity, from 'white' (mostly in contexts denoting hegemonic power) to the dominant 'black' and African, but also Asian and Indigenous. The phrase 'cancel culture', which burst on the scene soon before this volume was presumably in the works, does not rear its ugly lexical head anywhere – and 'woke' appears only once, tangentially, in an endnote to Wang's essay – but it could sadly prove to be the next step in the restorative process of de/re-canonisation if a more unconditional conception of all-inclusiveness is not borne in mind...

We are now in 2022, one full hundred years after the bumper year and heyday of High Modernism. Judging from the piecemeal references salvaged from what happened in the last century after T. S. Eliot and his contemporaries, one may suspect that an alternative counter-history from modernism onwards is being roughed out leading to the expurgation of whiteness from the panorama of contemporary poetry. This hunch is borne out by the notorious absence of even one single index entry for some talented representatives of a newer generation of 'white' poets, such as Craig Dworkin or Katie Degentesh (true, allied with conceptualists and/or flarfists, most if not all given at best a lukewarm treatment), Noah Eli Gordon, Ben Lerner (both putting in an appearance in the prefatory Chronology, however) and suchlike, while Christian Bök is begrudged a mere passing endnote. Paul Hoover's expanded 2013 edition of *Postmodern American Poetry*, commendable for showcasing a more all-inclusive canon, is not even worth a name-drop, and it is clearly one of the implicit touchstones against which Yu's decidedly 'post-postmodern' volume wishes to pit itself.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, from its initial, crucial question 'Does a literary-historical narrative that begins in 1945 still provide the most useful context for understanding American poetry through 2020 and beyond?' (2) to wondering about the continued relevance of '[a]n avant-garde lineage that might have been traced from language writing through flarf to conceptual poetry' on account of 'critiques of conceptual poetry's racial politics and of the broader "whiteness" of the avant-garde'(13), Yu's volume wants us to take stock of how much time and distance now separate us from the shaping of a lineage chiefly descended from the historical avant-garde of T. S. Eliot and his contemporaries via post-World War II movements. Enlisting Eliot's famous lament about contemporary history in his laudatory assessment of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Yu proposes to read it 'against the grain' as indicative of the plight of 'any historian of "the contemporary" who would seek to impose structure on the welter of current events' (1). Such wrong-footing had already been done more maliciously by none else than Charles 'Maximus' Olson, alleged founder of an avant-garde post-Poundian postmodern poetics, who had opposed him as a reactionary to Pound in his own 'ABCs' ('the reverend reverse is /

<sup>26</sup> *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Paul Hoover (New York and London: Norton, 2013).

Eliot / Pound / is verse'<sup>27</sup>), and the flaming torch is picked up and actualised by Lee in the 'Coda' to her essay when she denounces Eliot's 'work and rampant orientalism as an early manifestation of what we wrestle openly with now' (145).

Other 'white landmarks' in a received history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American poetics come in for similarly scant treatment or snubbing. While Ezra Pound himself is expectedly referenced in the chapter on Asian American poets for his ideogrammic method (see the discussion of Yau's post-Poundian ideogram in Leong, 35), Walt Whitman, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century national icon standing for communal proto-all-inclusiveness, is unfavourably conjured up in relation to Yau's poetry which liberates itself from 'Whitmanian identity in a grotesque register' (Leong, 34) and in connection to Layli Long Soldier who makes 'room in her poetry for grasses unlike in all of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*', where the word 'grass' never appears in the plural (Skinner, 163). Vickery appreciatively evokes Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Purple Passages*, which adumbrates the end of the 'patriarchal poetry' represented by a recognizably mainstream (post)modernist line of descent in its subtitle<sup>28</sup> (82). To round up this spot-checking of absent or downsized predecessors, e. e. cummings and William Carlos Williams, Robert Duncan, Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac are not mentioned once, while postmodernist luminaries like (again) Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, but also Allen Ginsberg and Frank O'Hara, all no doubt standing also for 'this [old] chestnut of postmodern poetics' (Andrews, 213), appear only in connection with Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* (1960), whose 'ensuing binary setting the "new American poetry" [...] against the more traditional aesthetics of writers such as Robert Lowell, James Merrill, or Elizabeth Bishop' has 'structure[d] most overviews of contemporary American poetry' (2; see also 10).

There is little doubt that readers of this volume will discover unknown poetic voices whose relative obscurity would strengthen the collection's overall claim about their minorization by a predominantly white canon. Yet we plead that these be appreciated for their innovativeness and craft, which are aplenty, rather than first for their ethnic belonging and the colour of their skin, and that their 'individual talents' are built into a truly open-minded sense of multicultural, multi-ethnic 'tradition' of American poetry for the new century rather than used as fodder for a counter-canon. Scanning its contents in anticipation, we are hopeful that the forthcoming *Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry* (scheduled for January 2023), edited by Craig Svonkin and Steven Gould Axelrod, even though it will include contributions by what some of the contributors of Yu's volume would see as suspiciously mainstream authorities like Marjorie Perloff and Co., may fulfil the promise of offering a more reliably balanced, more inclusive and less exclusionary 21<sup>st</sup>-century guide to the rich diversity of US poetries and poetics than what Yu's *Cambridge Companion* ultimately delivers, and not only on account of being double its size.

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Olson, *The Distances* (New York: Grove Press; London: Evergreen Books, 1960), 13.

<sup>28</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley, and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2012).

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