

**21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
AMERICAN  
POETRY** **4 ESSAYS**



Brian Shields, journal page

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21st Century American Poetry:  
Against Loneliness

**What I remember about poetry  
at the turn of the century  
was being lonely. Loneliness  
seemed like my lot in life.  
I felt a terrible thirst for touch, a  
hysterical awareness of the  
tightening borders of my own skin.**

I could barely concentrate and recognized that palpable desperation, escape, and possibility that I sensed in those lines from *The Waste Land*, “I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street.” I had just moved to New York and it was the fin de siècle of neoliberalism. I was young then and am today middle-aged, which I suppose means that I assume youth to be a time of delightful, entrepreneurial leisure. How easy to forget the actual feelings you feel when you are young: the adventures, yes, and also insecurity and doubt and anxiety, that sense that you must discover who you are in the world, while also struggling to prevent that failed person you secretly suspect yourself of being. I remember reading the *Village Voice* greedily, splaying its pages on the roof of the plastic newspaper box as if unfolding a map that would lead me to who I would become. I loitered in the snaking aisles of magazine shops, a cramped Alexandria for agoraphobes, the flat bony light carrying the odor of newsprint. So many places no longer exist: one year five indie bookstores shuttered simultaneously in my neighborhood; I can still hear one of the booksellers playing the piano mournfully while bibliophiles pilfered through his mostly emptied shelves. I wandered the overpopulated circuits of New York, wondering what encounters might reveal themselves.

Too impatient for novels, I found it easier to read two literary forms that shared a mutual commitment to density and thrill-power: poetry and comic books. These two genres occupied opposite poles in the cultural hierarchy, but my reading revealed curious affinities. The dominant poetic mode, twenty years ago and now, was lyric confessionality, whose narrative structure my friend Mayumo in college had jokingly described as “I go to Safeway, see a jar of olives and have an epiphany.” When I came to the climactic end of these poems—typically, a crescendo towards some heart-rending emotional crisis—they reminded me of the superhero crossovers I would read. Both enacted an affective paradox: they insisted on earth-shattering emotional stakes (The poet is telling their Truth! The Multiverse is in danger!) and did so incessantly enough that their sincerity began to feel questionable. Of course, I would read the occasional searing work and feel a little less lonely in the world. Did the confessional lyric stick around because it expressed some enduring voice of humanism? Sure, why not—but we might also note the curious match of a poetics of pious solitude for a neoliberal age, one that has transformed all of us into atomized loners. I had realized that my own loneliness was not simply psychological, maybe it could be literary, that old-fashioned wan melancholia. My next realization should’ve been that loneliness is not an individual trait. It is the affect of deindustrialization, the suburbs, union collapse, and the sacking of the welfare state.

Your emotions are essentially public in nature, and so when assessing poetry in the 21st Century, one should avoid identifying major events, new texts inducted into the canon, and leading figures, judgments that a significantly more bearded leftist might deride as bourgeois criticism. (Indeed, this essay ignores many of my favorite writers.) Instead, we should ask how changing economic structures have transformed poetry’s social role—one that in the 21st century, you could now envision as a professional one. When the MFA program exploded in the mid-1990s, many critics asked if one could really teach something as oracular as poetry. This was not just residual Romanticism: we could more charitably describe such fears as anxieties about reification, the discomfort that poetry, that magical substance beyond wage labor and objectification, would simply become another commodity. The story of 21st century poetry so far has been about how new institutions of poetry—MFA programs and nonprofits—have created new economies of poetry, pouring capital into and inventing economic

structures out of the previously undeveloped world of amateur verse-makers. When conservative critics claimed poetry could not be taught, they missed the point. Poetry would be taught *too well*, and the incorporation of poets into the academic labor market would transform what it meant to be a poet.

### **The Rise of the MFA Program**

When I imagine the dawn of 21st century poetry, I picture a Borg cube levitating over planet poetry and projecting down its tractor beam on the poor clueless inhabitants. This assimilating spaceship was the MFA program. Before the MFA, most poems been written out of leisure, created maybe to impress friends and win awards, but not envisioned as products of labor. After the MFA, you could earn a salary as a writer, but instead of employment as a “poet,” you would become a semi-precarious academic professional who needed ways to translate your writing into career outcomes. A poetry book became a bullet point to add to your CV, a career milestone required to apply for creative writing program teaching jobs and for tenure, and the subjective strangeness radiated by exalted weirdos became simply a tool that you too could use. While other academic programs focused on a research project, the creative writing MFA served as a laboratory for its own norms, creating a surge in self-consciousness: poems about poetry, blogosphere debates about poetics, and grouching about this new hiring system’s fundamental nepotism (“Pobiz”). The social site of poetry became the workshop, a competitive atelier that required ever more tricks to teach, more ways for students to strut their stuff, and for instructors to differentiate themselves in the hiring pool. I remember one undergraduate telling me she hated experimental poetry until her professor (now a very famous poet) told her she never knew when she’d need to reach into her back pocket and pull out French surrealism. In the workshop environment, something like surrealism (historically, a communist tendency) simply became another tactic. But where would the form-famished poets of the early 21st century find even more techniques? The American lyric had suffered an allergy to style, seeing such plumage a blemish on the austerities of the soul, so more curious lyric poets began drawing on experimental traditions such as the New York School and Language Poetry. The synthesis of these two styles created, according to Andrew

Joron, a dominant post-avant garde style. These traditions could be cannibalized as students began to fulfill one of the workshop's essential purposes: as a place for poets to show off. Showing off is not just a matter of temperament. It is how you demonstrate your value in a packed labor market. While the Marxist discourse of production comes greased with the oily connotations of WD-40 and the factory, this term help us understand what happened in this moment: namely, that an overproduction of poet-artisans began cramming each poem with an overproduction of form.

One reason why such “post-avant” poetry seems retrospectively inevitable is because experimental and lyrical confessional poetry at once rejected and required each other. Their dichotomy had been structured around two opposing but related values: *subversion* and *legitimation*. The Language poets had wanted to create a poetry that could not be easily absorbed by the reader, mutual meaning-making rather than a product. And so they felt a natural horror to see their project simply turned into gizmos to be reverse-engineered. Many of these new works were lexically “experimental” and differed not in form but in deploying something long derided by the Language poets: what a normal poet would call voice and what we might instead call affect. The difficulty of most famously hard books typically is not formal, but affective. Readers can happily plunge into lexically challenging books, as long as there is enough subjectivity, desire, and motivation for them to swoop through the chillier tundra of the book as if on the track of a luge. The Language poets had fumigated their work of voice, often avoiding the lyric poets’ vulnerability or exhibitionism, depending on your perspective—which may be why the more influential ones now seem to be the wilder, more slippery women, who elided the voice while maintaining elusive glimpses of affect. If the Language Poets had invited the reader to rub their palms together and generate static electricity from a few austere fragments, their successor post-avant poets electrocuted their poetry, clamping the jumper cables onto portable generators, freestanding turbines, and nuclear fission plants, why the hell not! The charge that coursed through these poems was its diction: an effusive *frisson* of slang, French theory, and quantum mechanics—but were these just words? The blogger Ron Silliman, who somehow ended up presiding over the 2000s poetry discourse like the Comic Book Guy from *The Simpsons*, saw these poems as a form of selling out. The maximalism of these post-avant poems contained everything in the world, except

for politics. Then again the political program of Language poetry had never been a left utopia. Rather than some radical imaginary, it provided the project of a left in retreat: subversion. Sabotage requires a normative order, something readily supplied by Official Verse Culture, which only valued poems where the emotion was “earned,” a metaphor that implied both fairness and labor. Consider how *The Waste Land* and its scandalizing quotations, footnotes, and fragments had been read first as modernist gibberish and then as the authentic expression of an entire generation’s suffering. Certain experimental works could be legitimated, as long as one could domesticate the text and explain its strangeness as *symptoms*, experimentalism as the author’s genuine emotional expression. The mutual interdependence of experimental and conservative poetics can be gleaned by the title of a period anthology called *Legitimate Dangers*. One could identify subversions to approve, heterodoxies that could be permitted. That nearly every contributor to the anthology taught creative writing demonstrated how so many poets found themselves assimilated into the Borg cube.

The MFA remains an easy target for romantics who decry its secularizing craft orientation and leftists who correctly characterize its fundamentally neoliberal nature, but it is worth noting its positive impacts. The MFA program “developed” the literary field. It institutionalized a new structure that could employ writers in a country lacking European social democratic subsidies for artists, but confined to the MFA’s own economic logic: that of the corporatized university starving for state funding. Now there existed an employment stream for many small press writers who would never sign an advance or earn a royalty check, just as there could also now exist precarious adjunct instructors, students locked into debt traps that predominantly hit women of color, and the faint nervous suspicion that the Jenga tiles of this pyramid scheme might come tumbling down at any moment. At least the writer could now be employed and find community within academic departments that sprouted up seemingly overnight—at once compensation for artistic labor and the opposite of loneliness. This was no small feat in a country whose right-wing fought the culture wars by attacking public arts funding. Now that poets could be employed, they could also be accused of careerism—a charge that illustrated the paradox of the MFA system, since aesthetics had been idealistically imagined as untainted by economic relations. Poetry had been an enlightened pastime because its authors had been the gentry who

could escape the wage. The poets of Modernism had been either wealthy beyond the wage relation (Stein, Yeats) or strivers in upper middle-class vocations (Eliot the banker, Stevens the insurance executive), and their often conservative ideologies reflected their class status. The multilingual erudition of *The Waste Land* could only have been achieved by someone who possessed the means to stockpile leisure time and cultural capital, essentially completing a PhD at a time when most Americans did not even attend college. Many of the virtues of Language poetry, such as its challenging intellectualism, happened to match how Bourdieu described the cultural practices of the upper class: disembodied, abstract, and pleasureless. The fragmentation of Language poetry could be read generously as an invitation for the reader to participate, but for a more traditional reader, this illegibility looked like disdain. From their perspective, the Marxist refusal of exchange suggested a patrician distaste for bourgeois vulgarity and the marketplace. The diffusion of experimental practices, then, may have reflected simply the avant-garde's democratization into the middle class. Poetry's institutionalization meant more people could be a poet without possessing extreme wealth or living on the lumpen-proletariat fringe. For better or worse, they could write poetry that reflected the values and ideas of a new middle class of poets.

### **The Escape from Form**

Largely ignoring politics or content, the workshop presented itself purely as a space for "craft," but craft could so easily become contaminated by the malware of experimentalism. Once a poem could be unlatched from the fetters of one's weighty interiority, the accelerating pace of formal invention levitated the poem above normal life. Zaniness became a sign of jejune mastery, the rictus grin of a jouissance that hid overproduction. Poets found themselves locked in an arms race of virtuosity, each poem hyperactive, self-conscious, and increasingly labor-intensive. How could they escape from the hamster wheel of formal innovation? Flarf suggested a post-Internet virtuosity, an automatic system update; Conceptual Poetry "disrupted" the business model of the lyric, but these options suggested simply new hamster wheels rather than transformation. There were three currents of experimentalism that did go in stranger directions. First, some poets took post-avant poetry's maximalist wordplay towards

more fugitive, illegible syllabaries, such as the syncopated globalized polyglot of LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs's *TWeRK* and the speculative world-building and cyberpunk pidgin of Cathy Park Hong's *Dance Dance Revolution*. If the typical post-avant poem saw diction as a delivery system for the author's wit, these poets of heteroglossia swung the gates of language open beyond national borders. Second, another challenge to the essentially American nature of the lyric poem came from Joyelle McSweeney, Johannes Göransson, and their press Action Books, who created a translational zone for excess and abjection. Their poems of body horror exhibited a toxic splendor that one couldn't read without feeling some physical discomfort. Third, still other poets pried poetry away from the confines of the page and enacted it as performance art, such as the Black Took Collective, CA Conrad, Cecilia Vicuña, Jennif(f)er Tamayo, and Anne Carson. The poetry wars had been waged between experimentalist partisans of "form" and partisans of "content," a mind-body dichotomy that Conceptualism maintained. Three new literary modes—heteroglossia, excess, and somatics—did something different. Collapsing form and content, these were affective. They were affective poetics that innovated through the body. They were also roads not taken. Many poets simply leapt off the treadmill towards another solution: they abandoned lexical dexterity and adopted a faux naïve primitivism. Writers like Ariana Reines and Tao Lin discovered the curiously negative freedom in laying down the verbal Stradivarius and creaking open a window to let in the breeze. Where did such vernacular poetry come from? The rise of smart phones, chat windows, and social media transformed every computer into an epistolary machine. Perhaps a poem didn't have to be a Rube Goldberg machine, when it could look more like a text message or AOL Instant Message. The opportunity came to suddenly write alongside style, rather than labor under its weight—an opening avoided by the post-avant writers. You could experiment not on the microscopic level of the line but on the plane of the narrative, as seen in Bhanu Kapil's thematic projects, which often overlaid a speculative aesthetic (an invented interview, schizophrenia, cyborgs and mutants) over a situated political context (gender in India, the Partition, racialized immigration).

The impasse of style had been resolved, but I have often wondered if the eclipse of form had something to do with the developing economics of the MFA program. Ever since the 2008 financial crisis, the Modern Language Association has reported a

continued decline in advertised job openings, which dropped about 40% from 2008 to 2009. This no doubt reduced the number of academic poets who traditionally comprised experimentalism's more scholarly community. On the expense side, creative writing programs share the same incentives as humanities departments to reduce teacher salaries and switch towards adjunct labor, which now make up about 75% of instructors. But they differ from literature programs on the income side, since they can drive revenue by increasing student enrollment. If traditional humanities suffered a deterioration similar to public services, MFA programs experienced an opposite pattern, the pernicious growth more common to capitalist bubbles. In the early 2000s, it was not impossible to believe that you could earn a graduate degree in creative writing and then land a job as a tenure-track instructor. Only a few thousand people had MFA degrees and they competed for perhaps a 100 jobs—a tight job market, but one where well-positioned elites could differentiate themselves by demonstrating their mastery of the latest linguistic technology. After all, new creative writing programs kept proliferating and new faculty would need to teach at them. There were only 64 MFA programs in 1994, and this number nearly doubled every decade, growing to 109 programs in 2004, and then 229 in 2014. But the fecundity of MFA programs also dramatically reproduced the labor pool of potential instructors. The number of new teaching jobs meanwhile stayed relatively flat, hovering between 78 and 171 new open positions annually between 2006 and 2017. This was an impossibly small number of job openings, especially if one compares it to the number of total number of people who had graduated from MFA programs after the year 2000—a number that Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young put at more than 30,000 writers. In other words, as many as 30,000 writers competed for fewer than 200 jobs each year. The MFA degree increasingly possessed a necessary but fantastical relationship to a teaching job. If mastery of experimentalism functioned almost like a vocational skills certification, then perhaps such styles seemed uselessly baroque if your fate ultimately lay in adjunct instruction or simply heading off to do other work. Why hone your technical mastery for a job you would never have? A crucial but invisible tectonic shift came from the explosion in the number of poetry students and graduates, which increased the share of writers from outside the urban metropolises and small arts schools, two traditional incubators of experimentalism. The post-avant style had developed from a productive

tension between a majority style (lyric confessionalism) and a fringe one (experimental writing), but the burgeoning number of MFA graduates meant even this compromise style would be seen as too abstruse. The annual churning out of poetry writers and readers exacerbated the most mainstream aspects of the medium. If the first MFA wave created writers competing to be a “poet’s poet,” such a focus on technical complexity receded as poetry became a more overtly social medium—simply one more space to work out the antagonisms of identity that came to define liberal culture as a whole.

### **Some Horizons of Opposition and Inclusion**

Was it true that the MFA program sought to include everyone? I had written a draft of this essay, much of it in that abstruse tone that I call my Perry Anderson impersonation voice, when my wife pointed out that I had erased from history everything I’d spent the last decade working on. I am seemingly one of the few poets who never earned an MFA and have generally not earned a living teaching creative writing. In 2008, I became the Executive Director of the Asian American Writers’ Workshop, which was founded in 1991 as part of a growing wave of literary nonprofits dedicated to racial justice. Two other nineties precursors were Cave Canem, which Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady founded as a retreat for Black poets in 1996, and VONA, which Elmaz Abinader, Junot Díaz, Víctor Díaz, and Diem Jones founded in 1999 as a multi-genre workshop that centered writers of color. The nineties chronology is key: those who founded these organizations were born during that key moment when racial liberation struggles and the 1965 Immigration Act transformed this country’s demographics. Generation X comprised the children born after the Civil Rights Movement, the first generation born from that first wave of post-industrial immigrants. By the early 21st century, these children were now adults who could erect the infrastructure for a new culture. These late twentieth century writers of color created new journals, critical works, reading series, poetry slams, and a key intervention: new identity-themed anthologies, which, like much work by women, have often gone under-recognized. Cave Canem and VONA alone fostered almost 4,000 writers, who went on to publish more than 650 books, and the former inspired the creation of Kundiman, Canto Mundo, and RAWI. These group’s retreat model differed somewhat from my

approach at the Asian American Writers' Workshop, which I saw as creating a radical anti-colonial public sphere for both readers and writers, leftists of both socialist and intersectional persuasions; then again, AAWW had also been founded as a space for professional development, as the second half of its name implies. While one could characterize these groups as simply the extension of writers of color into the MFA empire, such dismissal assumes that a workshop is a neutral form. Like any social unit, a workshop will transform depending on the class of people who comprise it. A retreat like Cave Canem does not simply advance individuals into an otherwise segregated system—it temporarily convenes a space of Black intellectual privacy, what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have called “Black Study.”

While these organizations may seem like institutions now, they originated in opposition to the two dominant power centers of American literature: the New York publishing world and the creative writing educational system, which Junot Díaz famously counterpoised against writers of color (“MFA vs POC”). Not focused on selling books or increasing student enrollment, these POC literary groups possess a different economic structure, one not oriented towards earned income. Sometimes influenced by the community-organizing model common in racial politics, their goals were more tactile, more situated: they wanted to create racially liberated community spaces that did not exist. The impact can be seen in the writers who came out of these organizations. Cave Canem's first book prize published Major Jackson, Dawn Lundy Martin, Donika Kelly, Natasha Trethewey, and Tracy K. Smith, the latter two later becoming Poet Laureates. The Asian American Writers' Workshop was a formative site for writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Alexander Chee, and Ocean Vuong, who I remember seeing read as a seventeen-year-old in our open mic series; other former staff and fellows include Tina Chang, Cathy Park Hong, Monica Ferrell, Monique Truong, Lisa Ko, Solmaz Sharif, Anelise Chen, Tanaïs, Jen Hyde, Wo Chan, and Yanyi. This vibrant cultural legacy belies the paltry financial resources on which such organizations have usually relied. Cave Canem and VONA historically operated on budgets whose annual income hovered around \$250K, though Cave Canem broke the \$400K threshold a few years ago. If you want to get a sense of how little money this is, consider that the Poetry Foundation reported a net investment income of \$14.5M in its 2018 tax return. This means that one year of its endowment passively churning out dollar bills,

like the stone of the Holy Grail spitting out meat, would support an organization like VONA for 58 years.

The Poetry Foundation had famously received a \$200M behest from the pharmaceutical heiress Ruth Lilly in 2002. But even its assets are miniscule compared to those of an Ivy League college, like Harvard whose \$39B endowment is more than 15,600% of the Poetry Foundation's. The Poetry Foundation's increased funding appeared to mean that Official Verse Culture would no longer exclude. *Poetry* hosted special roundtables on Flarf and Conceptualism, created thematic issues dedicated to each ethnic identity, and its blog *Harriet* frequently featured essays from *Jacket 2*, books by Nightboat and Timeless, Infinite Light, and interviews with even esoteric writers like the expansively imaginative digital poet Tan Lin. The debates across individual poetry websites vanished. Online corporate siloes, like the Poetry Foundation website and Twitter, replaced the blogosphere's amateurism, which could not have been monetized into longevity. In the early 2000s, the poetry wars were so vociferous, you might as well have carried garlic and holy water to readings. The 2010s marked a different age: not the ideological melees between kooky bloggers (mostly erudite white men) of the 2000s, but the management and absorption of difference within higher education and nonprofits.

The center renewed itself by incorporating two heterodox poetics from the outside. First, process-based techniques became mainstreamed. The idea of writing a poem by redacting or quoting another had once seemed parasitical, since many Conceptualists had manipulated a well-known novel or poem as a source text (most notably, Vanessa Place's treatment of *Gone With the Wind*). It is worth comparing this endogamous, hermetic approach with the way that Black writers had long engaged with primary sources that were historical rather than literary in nature. A work like Robert Hayden's *The Middle Passage* did not intervene in the canon, but quoted from the evidence of transatlantic oppression and rebellion. A key 21st century work in this vein is M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, a radical textual rearrangement of a court decision regarding the slave ship Zong, whose crew threw enslaved captives overboard to reap insurance dividends. Published in 2011 but performed as early as 2006, the book sliced into its source text at the level of the phoneme and the syllable. By splaying apart language

below the plane of the word, her molecular surgery created entirely new ways to pun and generate multiple meanings from sounds. In the following years, Robin Coste-Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus* won the National Book Award, and Solmaz Sharif's *Look* and Layli Long Soldier's *WHEREAS* each landed on the shortlist. When executed by a writer of color, process techniques became affectively legible. What legitimated these works was their political subtext—a curious turn, for it made conceptual processes seem less about tactics of quotation and erasure than about illuminating the aura of history.

The second heterodox poetry to be incorporated was the spoken word scene, which had always existed at the literary outskirts, a racialized undercommons. A prior generation had fostered the communities of performance poetry, writers like Tyehimba Jess, Suheir Hammad, Ishle Yi Park, Willie Perdomo, and Patrick Rosal. Now a new generation of spoken word poets, most notably the Dark Noise Collective, would further explore poetry's mode as a primarily ethical art. If the academic poet seemed like an over-educated neurotic suffering from anemia of the ego, these fierce young poets of color seemed capable, as Virginia Woolf wrote of her rowdy Americans peers, of inventing new words. They were simultaneously bawdy and pious. They radiated a moral swagger. Often running in an alternate economy of speaker fees, spoken word poets embodied the promise of a social democracy (rather than Language Poetry's semiotic democracy): the boldness of an artist of color speaking truth to power. Many younger poets followed in the footsteps of Patricia Smith, who future literary historians might read as the most influential poet of her generation. This future historian might also understand these works, despite their ferocity, as devotional lyrics, hymns toward a more just society.

The ground had shifted from the supremacy of form to a new age of content. While a prior generation strummed melodies of stunning complexity, the Prog Rockers of early 20th century poetry, now writers found themselves influenced by social justice discourses, influenced by Black Lives Matter and discourses around intersectionality, migration, and queer/trans identity. Even outside mainstream circles, experimental poets found potential in an avant-garde of political substance, as seen in the Mongrel Coalition or the explosive didacticism of a poet like Sean Bonney. If younger poets looked technically deskilled to the preceding generation, the prior generation

now seemed comparatively unsophisticated in sensing out the political or moral implications of a text. Poetry transitioned from a medium of lexical experimentalism to one of ethics, and the writer who best exemplified this transformation was Claudia Rankine. While her early books felt like post-avant poetry (kaleidoscopic diction meets affective dissociation), she switched to a plainer anti-style in her two later books: *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, a zine-like elegy that anticipated the flat autobiography and image insertion that would later become widespread, and *Citizen: An American Lyric*, the most obvious 21st century classic and a book most remembered for its opening catalogue of racial slights and microaggressions. Rankine wrote these deeply jarring scenes by gathering anecdotes and memories from her friends; *Citizen*, in other words, can be considered a process-based text informed by multiple collaborators. The book's power comes not from its style, but from this performance of inter-subjectivity. When you read *Citizen*, you found yourself implicated, uncomfortably identifying yourself as the one dishing out or receiving racial abuse. *Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère!* Many book reviewers found the book's austerity puzzling—where was the prosody, the metaphor, and the flamboyant fruitiness of verse?—but *Citizen's* subtitle indicated its intended status as lyric poetry. The lyric had been defined as an ahistorical European mode linked to ideas of aesthetic purity, but now this book articulated an explicitly American lyric of social beauty, a poetry of national failure and national redemption.

### **The Perils of Inclusion**

Is it possible there's never been a better time to be a poet of color? If so, the perils increasingly involve inclusion, as well as exclusion. Poets of color find their works circulating through a paradoxical institutional landscape. Even if they write for other poets of color, the majority of their workshop classmates will likely be white or at least from outside their imaginary readership. So too will be their administrators, editors, publishers, and most importantly, their readers. Their creative production takes place against a backdrop of important institutions, which may not be poetry institutions but the broader civil society of diversity liberalism: philanthropic foundations, media outlets, local arts councils, grantors of awards and fellowships, reading series, writers

in the schools programs, college clubs, and the publishing industry. While these organizations have sought to elevate people of color, they have more often ended up managing difference. Diversity has become an easy punching bag for leftists, but such management may not be intrinsically bad; one can imagine that any left institution would need to implement similar programs to negotiate difference. More intractable problems arise when inclusion happens without a redistribution of power, which especially in the arts has remained held by upper middle class white cultural brokers. The comical nadir of this phenomenon arrived when Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* became the bestselling book of the George Floyd insurrection era: a book in which a white woman explains to white people how white people respond to non-white people. That the book topped an otherwise all-Black bestseller's list suggests the curious, contradictory way that the cosmos of diversity ultimately orbits around the white reader. "What are the consequences of writing for an audience that may not understand you? The last few years have fostered a remarkable outpouring of artistic production by such writers and it seems likely the early 21st century will be looked on as a renaissance of multiracial literature. At the same time, this system of readership encourages the reduction of wild complexities to a level intelligible to a reader outside the author's community, as well as rewards writers who serve as curators of our own racialization. The process of racial translation is one of necessary simplification, the chiseling away of lived experiences of identity into a commodity, a difference capital. We now have delicate new calibrations of virtuous pain, virtuous cruelty, and self-flagellation—a way of reading through the lens of a moral sadomasochism. The flaunting of ethnic difference, the most vociferous denunciations of racism: these can now be read as those exotic anomalies whose assimilation proves the system's inherent progressiveness. And in this new zone of racial translation, accessibility can be read as an *ethical* value: if you identified with a text, you saw yourself represented and if you did not, you receive the poem credulously as an authentic message ferried to you across a racial divide that many came to read as ontological.

As anti-racism solidified into its own marketing category, its often memoirist genre found its twin within confessional lyric poetry, which had also been a style of heroic individualism. The packaging of something as unruly as racialization, the honing of it—this is an inevitable result of a culture that seeks to raise up a few individuals as a

paltry form of representation. What does it mean to *represent*? The injunction of the person of color to “represent” has always been a tricky one. Representation is valuable. We can recognize this while also noting that a politics of representation will often mutate into a game for elites, a technology of tokenism. In literature, the word “represent” also suggests the most legible style of writing, a mimesis that views complexity as a crack marring the mirror. If some experimental communities frequently erased and ignored social reality, contemporary poetry occasionally suffers the opposite problem. Poems now sometimes feel maximally legible, so they can be best assessed for their social beauty. In such poems, the narrators feel too stabilized into a worthy conductor of moral sympathies. This type of contemporary poetry-making is inherently *rhetorical*—you can feel authors constantly peeping over their shoulder to see how the audience is reacting. This awareness of audience presents a new impasse of self-consciousness: in creating a poem that feels morally streamlined and aerodynamic, one can sometimes enclose the reader in a textual object that feels ideologically claustrophobic.

### **Collectivities from the Crisis**

One last 21st century poetry memory. I remember attending a poetry event at UC Berkeley on the night of the Presidential contest between George W. Bush and Al Gore. As the light passing through the window of the Maude Fife Room began to fade, the poets stepped up to the lectern to read their work when something curious happened. Members of the audience began leaping up from their chairs and calling out despondently. They were announcing the latest exit polls. It was so quiet, you could hear the florescent lights vibrate quietly between each word. This moment was, with one exception, my only college memory of politics occurring at a university-sponsored poetry event. The politics emerged as interruption: random individuals jerking up like auction-bidders to announce the latest Republican victory—a gathering of increasingly panicked literati, not a collective. Most of us have spent the 21st century feeling politically alone, the typical liberal unable to imagine any horizon outside the neoliberal consensus. The resurgent Islamophobia, the War in Iraq, New Orleans, the Patriot Act, the Tea Party: the Bush election feels in retrospect like our zero-year, the Y2K glitch, the inflection point that triggered our current dystopian timeline. I am

writing this from the precipice of pandemic, protests, and economic collapse. Many colleges and universities already faced decreased state funding and dealt with it by hiring a baroque structure of high-paid administrators and their inverse, the uninsured nomads of adjunct instruction. This already unsustainable structure has been hit by a new crisis: not the Coronavirus, but the unwillingness of the state to intervene against the pandemic's economic assault. As colleges begin cutting faculty salaries and laying off adjuncts, one glimpses the frailty of the traditional humanities or creative writing program, how easily it could simply disappear. One day, we may look back on our sad academic labor market where increasingly spare resources go to a lucky few with a sense of nostalgia. If the MFA hobbles on in a more decrepit incarnation, it may no longer serve as a way to employ large numbers of writers—a change that will transform once again what it means to a poet.

What will poetry become in its next age? In 21st century film, the cutting edge came not from new styles but from new forms of *social* production, in the work of directors like Pedro Costa and Miguel Gomes. Enrolling in an MFA program meant you had to take on exorbitant student debt, if you were not subsidized, and your reward was becoming a teacher, half guild-master, half service worker. But the MFA structure did not contain the possibility of workerist poetics that arise from manual labor or care work. This project forms the core of Mark Nowak's Workers Writers School, whose poets are what we have now come to call essential workers: taxi drivers, domestic workers, service workers, the rank-and-file of social reproduction. Nowak's book *Social Poetics* illuminates a tradition of workshops attached to left-wing movements, such as the pedagogy of June Jordan. When she taught youth poetry workshops in 1967, Jordan's teaching reports for Teachers & Writers Collaborative indicted the failed New York City public education system, which has still never desegregated. From the ruins of state failure, she wrote, "We have somehow and sometimes survived the systematic degradation of America. And therefore there really are black children who dream, and who love and who undertake to master such white things as poetry." Because such community poetry workshops do not focus on individual mastery or employ large number of writers, they have little relationship with the canon and cannot economically replace the creative writing program. Jordan's own teaching artist role quickly lost funding

and she moved to California, where she ran Poetry for the People as a class that convened in two sites: UC Berkeley's insurgent ethnic studies department (its final performance was the only college poetry event I remember where politics was the point, rather than an interruption) and a workshop that Janice Mirikitani taught in Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco's Tenderloin District. Constellations of simultaneity thrown into the open world! In poetry, perhaps innovation should be gauged not merely in formal terms—it can be also measured by how much a poet builds out from academic institutions towards more radical socialities.

What seems increasingly unimaginable today is counterculture, the intersection of artists and communities of color intermingling outside the gates of the system that would incorporate them. Corporate publishing has offered a version of anti-racism premised on individual ethics, a way of disciplining oneself through your superego, not a project for a community, like a bohemian arts scene or the mass movement-building of the old communist left. What does it mean to be off the map in a poetry culture whose main institutions seek to assimilate everything? Much interesting work today does not come from the metropolises but from the smaller, less expensive spaces bordering them: in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh (C.A. Conrad, Dawn Lundy Martin, at one point Sueyeun Juliette Lee), the small town literary metropolis of the Twin Cities (Douglas Kearney, Sun Yung Shin), Austin, Texas (Hoa Nguyen for a moment), in Oakland and the peripheral edges of the Bay Area (Ronaldo Wilson, Commune Editions), and the edges of LA (Sesshu Foster). Sometimes a formalist analysis can erase as much as it reveals, things like geography and politics and movements. Consider how Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge was first published not by the Language Poets, but in the pages of Ishmael Reed's multiracial journal, *Yardbird!* Experimental poetry seemed like a pleasing puzzle to me as a late-nineties student, but it often contained its own solutions within it, like a New Critical urn. This could not have been said of wilder writers, like the mystical agit-prop of Diane Di Prima or the virtually erased, multicultural feminist postmodernism that had been created by writers like Jayne Cortez, Bob Kaufman, Maxine Hong Kingston, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Marilyn Chin. What seems missing from 21st poetry is this sense of countercultural writing, inassimilable because of its communal or working-class character: the lovely image of Wanda Coleman reading Bukowski poems in the bookstore aisle because she

couldn't afford to buy them. When Governor Cuomo responded to the pandemic by boosting the NYPD budget and slashing public services and the wealthy scampered away to their summerhouses—many New Yorkers felt a sense of historical déjà vu, the return of the glorified disaster that was New York in the '70s. And as the protests geared up, I found myself recalling the tribulations of the New Left and wondered if our culture would venture back down these more mongrel paths.

This explosive rise of left agitation and institution-building has been what's given me hope in the 21st century—and it has been paralleled by the rise of more radical poetics by writers of color. An incomplete and heterogeneous list might include: Sonia Guiñansaca, Tongo Eisen-Martin, Jennifer Hayashida, Jasmine Gibson, Eve L. Ewing, Don Mee Choi, Daniel Borzutzky, Ama Codjoe, Simone White, Zaina Alsous, Mercedes Eng, and Raquel Salas Rivera. Our moment has seen an exciting wave of new work that directly engages with the history of racial oppression, intersectional feminism, and queer identity. In its more mainstream incarnations, the trauma of the poet has seemed to represent a flaw in the American project, allowing the reader's act of empathy to function as a way to heal this wound. The curious near history of the lyric is that, while seemingly gesturing towards a universal beauty outside of time, its current incarnation has become aligned with expressing the promise of the American creed. The more radical poets do not seem to deploy appeals to empathy, nor do they see America as a redeemable project. Raquel Salas Rivera ends *The Tertiary*, an interrogation of Puerto Rico and Marx's theories of debt, by writing a rousing call for cannibalism: the reader should “devour the hearts of our benefactors” for “the help we need is freedom!” Much of this work by radical poets of color is grounded in geographies of labor and racialization (as opposed to assuming that either race or class can be engaged purely as abstractions), while simultaneously opening towards more transnational horizons beyond the American project. More than a few of these poets do not work in the MFA program and have found their role directly within mass social movements.

The last year has created a paradoxical social milieu: a year of pandemic loneliness and protest collectivities. In the lockdown, we are simultaneously one and multiple. Will this new moment resurrect us from our necrotic stasis and create a radical future of

abolition democracy? I came to poetry because a poem made me feel less lonely in the world. Those low currents of empathy that course between the reader, the author, and the text represent a special form of human connectedness, a way of relating to one another that is not transactional or monetary. At the same time, such feelings of belonging are feelings. An imagined community is important, but must lead to an actual community, an actual movement. Writing this, I realize that when I'd discussed the writers who'd passed through the Asian American Writers' Workshop, I had forgotten to mention the many writers who hadn't been incorporated into mainstream literary professionalization. The undocumented poets leading protests against ICE. Muslim journalists interviewing Yemeni feminists in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. Korean communists delivering food to seniors in public housing after Hurricane Sandy battered the Lower East Side. Beat-writers documenting the gentrification of Chinatown in English, their third language. Investigative reporters mobilizing against Duterte. The prison abolitionists. The Dalit annihilators of caste. The Palestinian spoken word artists. All the diasporic dissidents. The next step after empathy must be that coming into solidarity that reminds you there is no such thing as an individual. You can be more than a reader. You can even be more than just a writer. In the end we are all together, swimming against the tides.