Sabine Sielke

Introduction

> […] poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
> In the valley of its making where executives
> Would never want to tamper, flows on south
> From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
> A way of happening, a mouth. (Auden [1939] 1991, 248)

1 Making a Case for American Poetry

Opening a book on poetry with the (in)famous lines from W. H. Auden's 1939 poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" may seem a self-defeating move. Why even bother if poetry "makes nothing happen"? And why call on two canonical British poets, both dead and male, when the focus should be American verse in all of its diversity? In other words: why yet another "apologie for poetrie" in the tradition of Sir Phillip Sidney's 1580 (publ. 1595) rebuke of Puritan attacks on the power of the imaginary worlds projected by literary texts?

Such an opening, however, is highly appropriate for multiple reasons. First of all, Auden's lines in fact make a strong case *for* the significance of poetic texts. Literature and literary studies, all the more so poetry and its analyses, have repeatedly been on the defensive, as they are once again since neoliberal ideologies measure, weigh, and evaluate how time is spent most effectively. At the same time, poetry has persevered for millennia and currently undergoes, so it seems, yet another revitalization and peak, as it always does in politically pivotal times and when discourses on crises raise in amplitude. The aftermath of 9/11, for instance, resulted in a surge of poetic texts and their public recognition and revaluation. Such a rise of poetic practice in turn suggests that poetry can do things that other texts and dominant media formats, including visuals, cannot.

Indeed, by way of its proximity to music (↗3 Tuning in on Sister Arts) as well as its particular designs, shapes, forms, feels, and performativity, poetry involves us in specific aesthetic experiences. Therefore, the genre of poetry is most capable of showing what vistas literature may open that other discourses fail to envision and leave locked. No surprise therefore that Auden encourages us to keep reading on and read

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more closely: poetry "survives," it lasts, and matters as "a way of happening, a mouth." So poetry in fact does make something happen: when interacting with speakers – countenances ("mouth") as well as speaking perspectives that exist in poetic texture only –, we get involved in "happenings," in sonic events that know no limits and may move across geopolitical borderlines easily. Verse travels well because it reflects on both fundamental philosophical, if not 'universal' questions and systemic as well as local political issues as much as it enacts sounds and silences; it makes us smile or even laugh along with its particularly poetic take on humor. How poetry manages to do all that gets explored in the first four essays that make up part I of this handbook and that are concerned with issues at the core of its conceptual frame.

Of course, poetry makes different things happen differently in different places. Focused on American poetry, this book is about ways of poetic "happening" that first took shape in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, penned by writers like Anne Bradstreet who hailed from and published in England during the seventeenth century, and that meanwhile take shape and travel on digital highways. All of the poems the authors of this handbook discuss have emerged from, yet are not bounded by a specifically American cultural environment. Despite all its cultural specificity and in part due to its degree of diversity, American poetry has always conversed with what happened elsewhere – an elsewhere that has stretched from an analogue Europe to a more global and increasingly digital cultural and political scene. This far-reaching cultural dialogue American poetry has engaged in is laid out in the first section, "context," that introduces all essays in part II of this book.

Tracing five centuries of poetic production, this handbook cannot be comprehensive, though, and for parts of its journey it necessarily moves in big steps. Still, its aim is to take readers on a journey to crucial moments in the history of American poetry, from the Puritans to postmodernity and beyond, visiting the shifting forms and functions of lyric texts over five hundred years. The central goal of the essays presented here is to show how these texts converse with the world that gave rise to them. By way of "close readings" all contributions lay out how we can approach the universe of poems, which may seem distant, foreign, if not inaccessible to many a contemporary reader. They also examine the feedback loop entailed in such an enterprise by raising the question how these poems, read closely, in fact challenge conventions of reading poetry. Does poetry resist some of the assumptions readers bring to the genre? Does poetic practice have an impact on methods of historicizing and analyzing poetry and poetics? In fact, this book aims to take this matter even further: can poetry inspire theory? In their third section, entitled "Poetry into Theory?", some chapters in this volume provide preliminary answers to this query.

Why such complications, though? We may readily agree that poetry and poetics tend toward philosophical contemplation, self-reflexivity, and theoretical abstraction. They do so, in part, because poems constitute speakers and voices, they invent a lyrical "I" and reflect on the self, on subject constitution, and on what often goes by the label "identity." It may thus be surprising that poetry has not been central to debates

in theory ever since formalist and New Critical methods (↗14 The Poet-Critics, Regionalism, and the Rise of Formalism) gave way to more politically inspired approaches to literary texts in the 1970s. Instead, most theoretical and philosophical conversations in the field of literary and cultural studies make reference to narrative discourses, be they literary, visual, multi-medial, or material – a focus which reinforced the misleading assumption that all phenomena can be narrated and all of our experiences be told as 'stories.' Of course they can't, and the prime enterprise of literature and the visual arts has been to find modes for what resists such telling and representation, be it sexuality, violence, death, pain, or paradise. All these matters pose particular challenges to poetry as well – a genre that uses narrative, too (hence the term narrative poetry), yet is dedicated to complexities and unknowns, ambiguities and intransparency as much as to clarity and clairvoyance. Accordingly, while the term narrative, ubiquitous in many scholarly disciplines and applicable to multiple discourses, has lost its specificity, this trend has also pushed the persistent cultural power of poetry. And while dualisms between prose and poetry have certainly dissolved, this book delineates how poetry retains a particular proximity to conceptual thought, and vice versa, by attending to poems that are theoretically informed and reflexive of their own methods.

2 What This Handbook Does and How It Works

This book on American poetry defies the drift that tends to downplay the importance of poetic practice for literary and cultural theory as well as the crucial cultural work that this practice achieves. Its contributions make evident that poetry and theory are not at odds, that, quite to the contrary, poetry and poetics are in dialogue with issues of contemporaneous cultural discourse as well as with methodological and theoretical debates that now range from ecocriticism to thing theory to visual culture studies and negotiate parameters of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. At the same time, poetry paves its own particular pathways into matters, materialities, and subjectivity. More often than not its shapes and tonalities direct us down "the road not taken," "the one less traveled" that "made all the difference," as Robert Frost put it in his 1915 poem. Poetry may thus open unexpected, if not previously unknown vistas of how things happen.

All essays collected in the main part II of this book focus on two or more poets, a 'poetic school,' or a genre of poetry with historically relevant and current theoretical and methodological approaches and their central concepts. Interrogating the questions these approaches raise and the answers they propose, the chapters are geared to show, first, how poetry and theory are involved in productive dialogues and, second, how poetry encourages us to reassess 'theory' and debates on methods. At the same time, this handbook offers scholars an overview of the state of research and students a sense of

how American poetry has addressed issues and experiences central to human consciousness as much as to political life over five centuries of cultural practice.

By way of introduction, part I of this handbook, by contrast, presents four essays on core generic dimensions of poetry, the first on “Framing Modern Subjectivity: Poetry and Experience,” authored by Charles Altieri. Altieri is renowned for his eye-opening, influential work on twentieth-century poetry, poetry’s conversation with philosophy and the arts, the role affect takes in aesthetic experience, including that of poetic texts, and modernism’s responses to materialism; all of his thinking stands out for resisting trends in scholarship, methodology, and theory. Moreover, in his single-minded, momentous take on far-reaching modes of poetics, Altieri poignantly identified and analyzed the fundamental turns that poetry has taken over the last centuries, that from Romanticism to modernism certainly being the most crucial one, turns that are full of far-reaching and sustainable impact. This handbook maps some of these turns as American poetry has taken them since its beginnings in the seventeenth century. At the same time, its sections on “Poetry into Theory?” inquire into how our habits of reading and thinking about poetic texts have shifted along the way. In some sense this follows the direction of Altieri’s essay “What Theory Can Learn from New Directions in Contemporary American Poetry” (2012) which delineates (American) poetry’s recent shift to rhetoric, guided by issues of politics rather than poetics. Some of this book’s chapters may indeed exemplify how such privileging of (political) content over (poetic) form plays out.

In his contribution to this book, Altieri highlights the modernist moment of poetry’s turn away from Romanticism and follows the debate, inherent to that shift, on subject constitution and experience from Schopenhauer and Marx to Derrida. At the same time, his essay lays out the significant dynamics and specific contribution of American poetry to how modern subjectivity and experience unfold, in part by closely inspecting the work of three canonical modernist poets: William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), Mina Loy (1882–1966), and T. S. Eliot (1888–1965). In this way, Altieri showcases the fundamentals of poetry as a genre proximate to philosophy, yet driven by its own generic potential. While philosophy’s “critical vocabularies are suspicious of received models of subjectivity,” he argues, “none of them fully engages in providing an alternative way of thinking about subjectivity” that could live up to what poetry holds in store. Like no other discourse – and no other literary discourse for that matter – poetry has, since the Renaissance at least, served as a mode of imagining and projecting a speaker, a ‘self,’ a person that is not a (living) person. “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse,” nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) famously explained to her would-be-editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “it does not mean –me – but a supposed person” ([1862] 2024, 366). Poetry creates “supposed,” possible persons that never existed except in the moment of composition and in the reader’s experience of the poem.

At the same time, American poetry has also always already been political, while acknowledging that our sense of what is considered and called political is constantly

shifting and that there is little agreement on where the political begins. Poetry, in turn, also adds both more complications and more precision to this matter and, as Astrid Franke shows, resists the temptation to capture political struggles in dichotomies. Franke's essay "Poetry, Politics, and the Politics of Poetry: How Poems Interfere" lays out, with much clarity, the complex relation between political and poetic practice and examines how poetry occasionally adopts the register of propaganda, how it shares considerable ground with legal documents and political speeches, and how the forms and cultural functions of the politics of poetry have transformed over time. Even as we limit the discussion to poems that explicitly ponder a particular political issue – including wars and other historical events as well as social movements from Temperance to feminism to #blacklivesmatter – it is striking, Franke notes, how many prominent American poets dedicated their writing to political causes. In turn, our understanding of these texts reveals how deeply our readings rely on a sense of the author and the occasion as well as on the ideological and methodological framework our interpretations are embedded in. Tracing poems that deal with the deaths of political leaders from Elizabeth I to Malcolm X, that oppose military conflicts, and that attend to legal scandals and social movements, Franke introduces us to a series of writers – from Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672), Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784), Lydia Sigourney (1791–1865), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882), and Frances Harper (1825–1911) to Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980), Robert Lowell (1917–1977), Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000), and Adrienne Rich (1929–2012) – many of whom we reencounter in other parts of the handbook.

Whether being explicitly political or not, poetry has always been an intermedium, interacting with the visual arts as much as with the discourses of natural philosophy and the natural sciences. Due to a formal framework based on meter, rhythm, and rhyme, poetry, from its very beginnings up to current poetry slams, has been most proximate to music. This close kinship suggested that poetry and music were "sister arts." In the second essay of this handbook, "Tuning in on Sister Arts: Poetry and Music," Regina Schober explores how this intermedial relationship has played out at particular moments in the history of American poetry and delineates how poets have drawn from forms and rhythms of different musical traditions. Employing the concept of intermediality to open up new perspectives on poetic soundscapes, Schober discusses the poetics inherent to Emily Dickinson's nineteenth-century hymn stanzas, to the blues poetry of Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes (1901–1967), as well as to "rhapsodies" of current hip hop cultures. Foregrounding oral performance, embodiment, and improvisation, rap cherishes poetry "as a spoken art," Schober concludes, "that keeps finding new ways to (re)align itself with its sister art music."

Rhythm and rhyme may have yet another effect when coming to the fore in a lyrical text: they can create humor, as most evident in limericks or spoonerisms. Indeed, one misconception of poetry – possibly resulting from modernism's aesthetics as well as from scholarly preoccupation with certain poetic modes – is the assumption that verse is a serious matter and reading poetry per se means mostly work and very

little fun. Yet much of poetry is kin to comedy, as Calista McRae holds in her essay on "Poetry and Modes of Humor"; it aims at entertaining readers and making them laugh, and plays with ambiguity and irony, if not opting for outright satire. However, what is considered humorous varies from one culture to another; what a British audience welcomes as comical is supposedly far from American versions of funny. Exploring kinds, concepts, and theories of humor and a broad historical range of poems by authors reencountered in other contexts discussed in this volume, McRae's essay shows how poetic form and humorous effects interrelate and play out as distinct modes of humor in twentieth and twenty-first-century poetry. In concluding, she illuminates what comedy can do to a poetry that tends to increasingly revolve around a proclaimed inner self: rather than sealing off the speaking subject from an outside world, humor "radiates outward." It may antagonize, yet more often puts "people – two strangers on a bus, or writer and reader – in slightly closer relation."

3 A Short History of How American Poetry Has Made Things Happen

3.1 Beginnings to Romanticism

Part II of this volume engages American poetry circulated or published from mid-seventeenth-century colonial settings onward to the current era of digital media formats. In this long journey through American literary history, the seventeen chapters 5 to 21 discuss approaches to poetic texts in specific historical configurations, perform close readings, and make these poems turn a feedback loop on the theoretical approach that informed the readings they present. The essays also introduce central concepts of literary history, such as neoclassicism, Romanticism, and modernism, and put to use terms indispensable for close analyses of poetic texts, such as sonnet or apostrophe. In this way, they map a far-reaching cultural and literary landscape with numerous canonical and less canonical writers as crucial signposts, the first of whom is seventeenth-century poet Anne Bradstreet.

Now, the American lyrical tradition certainly did not originate with the work of Bradstreet and her contemporaries – much has been written, for instance, on the preceding oral poetics of Native American cultures.[1] In fact, poetry was a pariah in the religious colonial context: what now goes as Puritan poetry was officially no-go territory among settlers that took the Bible as literal truth and banished drama and other works of the imagination (literature not being a concept yet) as blasphemous. Still, poetry not only survived and resiliently shaped the early forms and functions of the

1 See, for example, Wiget 1996; Einhorn 2000.

American lyric in culturally specific ways. Even as unpublished manuscripts circulating among a select group of readers, poetic texts contributed to the formation of a unique cultural self-conception and became part of a discourse that shaped "America" as an ongoing work in progress. The Puritans "were a community that invented its identity *ex verbo*, by the word," Sacvan Bercovitch wrote, "and continued to assert that identity through the seventeenth century, expanding, modifying, and revising it in a procession of sermons, exhortations, and declarations, […] statements and restatements of that purpose—a stream of rhetorical self-definition unequaled by any other community of its kind (and proportionately, perhaps of any kind)" (1988, 34).

Aesthetically inspired by British poetic conventions as well as the unconventional metaphysical poets – who were celebrated once again, three centuries later, by their modernist successors (↗11 Modern(ist) American Poetry) – early American writers turned to poetry in part as a medium of meditation that allowed to test and affirm the state of one's faith and divine predestination. At the same time, Puritan poetics was highly political, as Philipp Reisner demonstrates in his essay on "Poetry and the Puritan Ethic: Anne Bradstreet, Samuel Danforth [1626–1674], Edward Taylor [c. 1642–1729]," and some of Bradstreet's texts have long been celebrated for their proto-feminist edge and appeal. In fact, Puritan poetry is, as Reisner notes, surprisingly wide-ranging: it ponders, among other issues, "manuscript and book history," "social structure and convention, the history of science," "settler colonialism," "climate and agriculture," and "the literature of classical antiquity." Thus, in its early American shapes, poetry was an instrument of faith and spiritual practice as much as a medium of reflection, instruction, consolation, and entertainment. Zooming in on the work of three canonical writers, Reisner's chapter builds a bridge between current critical perspectives and early American literary production, highlighting both the continuities and the ruptures between seemingly incompatible poetic discourses.

The chapter on "Neoclassicism and Nation-Building: The Poetry of Phillis Wheatley and Philip Freneau [1752–1832]," authored by Julia Straub, marks a considerable step ahead in both literary and cultural history. Putting the first published African American poet Wheatley, a slave, and her contemporary Freneau, hailed as "Poet of the Revolution," center stage, Straub explores the role poetry played in the second half of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, during a time of conflict over America's independence from Great Britain and the early republic. In this way, she showcases how contested a term "nation" was in a democracy founded on a radical contradiction: whereas the Declaration of Independence proclaimed the equality of "all men," the Constitution condoned slavery. The work of both Wheatley and Freneau adheres to neoclassical poetic conventions and resonates with patriotism; yet both poets also interrogate the conflictual, fundamentally feudalist ground the American nation state was built upon, in subdued, implicit, if not ironic manners and from highly distinct perspectives. While Wheatley's poetry reconsiders the experience of "Being Brought from Africa to America" as "mercy," Freneau concerns himself with "the Emigration to America and Peopling [of] the Western Country." This so-called "peopling" came at the cost of innu-

merous black and indigenous lives; the latter figure prominently as a "haunting" heritage in Freneau's "Lines Occasioned by a Visit to an Old Indian Burying Ground," a poem that acknowledges, yet also dismisses native cultures and customs as violent and vanishing. Straub's essay thus captures the "unruly energies" of neoclassical American poetry, energies that undermine its "ideals of order and control."

Freneau's gothic timbre clearly conflicted with Enlightenment thinking, just as his poetics already foreshadowed Romanticism, the major aesthetic and philosophical foil for nineteenth-century American poetry and its highly diversified poetics which adapted, challenged, and eventually rejected Romantic modes. Indeed, with the idiosyncratic writing of Walt Whitman (1819–1892) and Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) emerged what became modernist poetry. This handbook addresses this productive phase in the history of American poetry from unconventional vantage points: in "The Price of Poetry," Christoph Irmscher highlights how the poetry of George Moses Horton (1798–after 1867), Lucy Larcom (1824–1893), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882), James Russell Lowell (1819–1891), and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (1809–1894) came to sell; how, to some degree, (de-)canonization and marketability function as two sides of the same complex coin; and how poetry as product both fits and deforms the framework of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production.

Making poetry their "business" and considering its production for a wider readership as work worthy of financial reward, these writers professionalized the genre and established a literary infrastructure that persisted even when versification was no longer a lucrative trade. Literature's market value should not come as a surprise, however: while some can take to the business of writing because they are independently rich – as was the Beat poet and author William Burroughs (↗16 Poetic Modes of Early Postmodernism), for example – many writers produce books to make a living. Even as collections of poetry do not often become bestsellers, some did, such as mid-nineteenth-century anthologies of poetry by women, including Lydia Sigourney, Elizabeth Oakes Smith (1806–1893), Julia Ward Howe (1819–1910), and many lesser known "poetesses."[2] For the enslaved Horton, in turn, poetry was both a means of income and "a gateway to freedom," as Irmscher puts it, albeit to a clearly limited freedom.

While the marketability of poetry demystified author and literary product alike, Hannes Bergthaller's essay on "Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Environmentalism: The Poetics of Ralph Waldo Emerson [1803–1882], Henry David Thoreau [1817–1862], and Margaret Fuller [1810–1850]" reconsiders a group of writers who assigned the poet and his work with a new authority: for Emerson, nature was a "picture language" and the poet a "Namer," a seer and prophet, the "complete man" among all who are "partial" who "re-attaches things to nature and the Whole" ([1844] 1983, 452, 456, 448, 455). And that poet was, of course, presumably male; or as Dickinson has it

2 See, for example, Griswold 1842; May 1854; Socarides 2020.

in her poem "This was a Poet –" (Fr 446): "Of Pictures, the Discloser – / The Poet – it is He – / Entitles Us – by Contrast – To ceaseless Poverty –" (Dickinson [1862] 2005, 206).

Approaching modes of Romanticism resonant with Transcendentalist thought by way of ecocritical perspectives and the current debates around ecopoetics, Bergthaller foregrounds the Romantic baseline that keeps informing both environmental thought and what now goes by the name of "nature writing." The dynamic driving the Transcendentalists' Romantic desire to bridge the divide between self and world, "Me" and "Not-Me" (Emerson [1836] 1983, 8), emanated, in part, from the platforms of idealism and pantheism, the faith that God resides in all things. In such a scenario, poetry was deemed capable of mediating an intuitive perception of nature, and was bound to replace religion. Closely attending to poems from the margins rather than the center of Emerson's, Thoreau's, and Fuller's oeuvre, Bergthaller shows how, rather than attempting to approximate the natural world, these texts perceptively perform a "world-making" that transforms the reader's relationship to the world and turns words into action.

Even as Emerson, in his essay "The Poet," calls for a new, aesthetically innovative poetics, the poetry of the Transcendentalists themselves remained for the most part formally conventional. Instead, Emerson, in a letter addressed to Whitman on July 21, 1855, famously celebrated *Leaves of Grass* as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed" (qtd. in Whitman 1973, 739) and took Whitman's 1855 self-published collection as a transposition of Transcendentalist philosophy into poetic practice. Extending the line beyond the conventional iambic pentameter, Whitman's enumerative verse, replete with catalogues and parallelisms, as well as his use of paratactical syntax came to register as strategies of a "democratic" style, appropriate to sing both the "song of myself" and that of a multicultural America. Along with Dickinson, whose idiosyncratic experiments with short lines in variations of common meter made her poems burst out of their seams, Whitman became the most celebrated nineteenth-century poet, the first modernist, and the central reference point for innumerous twentieth- and twenty-first-century US-American poets ranging from the modernists William Carlos Williams and Langston Hughes to the Beat poets Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) and Dianne di Prima (1934–2020) and beyond. Consequently, the names Dickinson and Whitman echo throughout this book, their work being called up, recontextualized, and read from multiple viewpoints (↗2 Poetry, Politics, and the Politics of Poetry; ↗3 Tuning in on Sister Arts; ↗4 Poetry and Modes of Humor; ↗7 The Price of Poetry; ↗9 Mind, Body, and Consciousness; ↗10 Poetry at War; ↗19 Poetry as Feminist Critique).

Likewise, the essays by Eliza Richards and Thomas Dikant present us with Dickinson and Whitman in frameworks that are both contemporaneous and current. Published in most part posthumously – Dickinson called publication, in one of her poems, "the Auction of the Mind" ([1863] 2005, 351) and saw only ten of her almost 1,800 poems published, without her knowledge and against her will –, Dickinson gets paired with Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) in Richards's contribution on "Mind, Body, and Consciousness." The essay raises the question how Dickinson and Poe render "embodied

experiences of extreme mental distress" by way of poetry and its soundscapes. Inspired by the "cognitive turn" in literary and cultural studies, the chapter maps out "the field of an embodied poetics in the United States over the course of the nineteenth century" and highlights how psychology and neurology took shape in Poe's and Dickinson's verse long before these disciplines got established. In particular, Richards's essay demonstrates how poetry, composed at a time when feeling and thinking were recognized as a function of the human brain, "re-cognized" the imagination, intuition, and introspection and became a "key genre" for accounting for how mind, body, and (un)consciousness interact, interfere, and often battle with each other.

"Battle," in turn, is the key term for the context which frames Whitman in this book, next to his contemporaries Hermann Melville (1819–1891) and Stephen Crane (1871–1900), both better known for their fiction than for poetry. In his chapter on "Poetry at War: Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Stephen Crane," Thomas Dikant explores how verse by writers who did not actively participate in the Civil War (1861–1865) and the Spanish-American War (1898) respectively negotiates the civilian experience of these violent conflicts. Challenging accounts of war in other media formats and inherent in traditional notions of heroism and patriotism, Dikant's contribution highlights how war poetry emerging at distinct moments of nineteenth-century American culture displays "poetic practices that clearly speak to each other" and denies non-combatants the comfort of a safe distance.

3.2 Modes of Modernism

Whitman and Dickinson were modern *avant la lettre* and laid out the scope of what came to be a multiply diverse modernist poetics emerging on an international and intercultural scene during the early decades of the twentieth century. The different shapes this poetics has taken invite us to investigate modernism in the plural, ranging from so-called "high modernism" to its Harlem Renaissance practices, as does Heinz Ickstadt in the chapter on "Modern(ist) American Poetry." While Ezra Pound's plea "make it new" came to be the modernist imperative, other poets like T. S. Eliot and Marianne Moore (1887–1972) insisted that originality was hard to be had. Accordingly, they produced poems replete with intertextual references and citations, and, not unlike Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), acknowledged "series production" and repetition with variation as the sign of the times ([1935] 1985, 177). Both sides – and many operating in between and beyond – aimed at modes of writing that rejected the abstract verbosity of nineteenth-century (blank) verse and transformed the perception and representation of the world. In many ways, though, modernism's search for "the new" continues American culture's tradition of "beginning again and again" (Stein [1926] 1993, 497) – a fundamental longing that outlasts modernists and extends to the aesthetic innovations informing the post-modernist poetry of Robert Creeley (1926–2005) and Amiri Baraka (1934–2014)

as much as that of the language poets (↗16 Poetic Modes of Early Postmodernism; ↗18 African American Poetry; ↗20 Words in Performance).

Divided between writers who left for Europe and those who remained in the US, American modernism was not, Ickstadt notes, “a unified movement”; the work of its central protagonists displays a spectrum of aesthetic preferences and poetic diction: the favor for visually concrete images apparent in the poetry of Pound (1885–1972), Eliot, H.D. (1886–1961), Williams, and Moore; Williams’s focus on the “Now” in the “New”; and the particular American grounding of their work that both Williams and Hart Crane (1899–1932) aspired to account for. Nor was modernism a (white) male avant-garde affair: contemporaneous with the poetics of Moore and H.D., the experimentalism of Loy and Stein even added to modernism what was later acknowledged as a feminist twist. In turn, Ickstadt argues, the formal choices Harlem Renaissance poets made, such as adapting traditional meter for taboo contexts, also redefined experimentalism: Claude McKay (1890–1948), for instance, presented lines on lynching in the shape of the Shakespearian sonnet, a form that Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) employed playfully as well. Both thus challenge, revise, and write themselves into a tradition they had long been excluded from. Zooming in on poems by Wallace Stevens (1879–1955), Williams, Moore, Crane, Millay, and Loy as well as Jean Toomer (1894–1967) and Hughes, Ickstadt also finds new answers to the question what we actually talk about when we talk about modern(ist) poetry. “[O]pening up the concept of the literary toward the cultural modern,” he argues, allows to figure in modern conditions that emerged before the modernist movement, continue to this very day, and get shaped by, yet also extend the aesthetic framework that makes them legible, communicable. It is crucial, Ickstadt holds, to sort the modern from the modernist, a concept fitting for all poets he discusses.

Heinz Ickstadt’s expert analyses set the stage for contributions that enter the modern(ist) scene from specific directions or follow the fate of the modernist impulse under postmodern and contemporary conditions – conditions which have tended to revise and radicalize rather than unravel or even undo modernism. In the chapter “Modernist Materialities: Objects in Poetry,” Simone Knewitz approaches the poetry and poetics of Stein, Williams, and Moore from the vantage point of the new materialism and thing theory. Deeply concerned, in their own particular ways, with the perception and representation of solid things and their physical make-up – “[n]o ideas but in things,” Williams famously claimed ([1927] 1992, 6) – the three poets address our relation to a world of objects that, by the end of the nineteenth century, had extended into an increasingly pervasive consumer culture. In close readings attending to *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms* (1914) – a collection of texts Stein considered poems –, Williams’s most well-known poem “The Red Wheelbarrow,” and Moore’s syllabic verse “A Talisman,” among other texts, Knewitz shows how modernist takes on cultural materiality critically engage with current theoretical perspectives that, following philosopher Bruno Latour, propose the agency of things. Her analyses make evident, however, that rather

than destabilizing the subject, modernists preoccupied with objects in fact assert their own poetic authority and the power of the imagination.

Calling on three prominent ethnographers, the essay by A. Elisabeth Reichel on "Poet-Anthropologists and Boasian 'Culture': Edward Sapir [1884–1939], Ruth Benedict [1887–1948], Margaret Mead [1901–1978]" gives our sense of American modernist poetry yet another surprising twist. Sapir, Benedict, and Mead are well known for their contributions to the legacy of Franz Boas in cultural anthropology and his concept of pluralist and relativist culture, yet not for the verse they composed. While their poetry operates apart from an avant-gardist modernist agenda, these writers used poetry in idiosyncratic manners as an alternative inroad to debates on cultural alterity. As Reichel argues, Mead's "The Romanticist" (1924), for instance, both acknowledges and calls into question the impulse, on the part of anthropology, "to rescue primitive peoples from their supposedly certain demise in the face of modernization." Deeply invested in contemporaneous debates on the intersection of music and literature, Sapir, by contrast, considered poetry an acoustic experience capable of bridging diverse musical traditions, as Reichel demonstrates in her analysis of Sapir's "musico-poetic imagination" projected in "The Clog-Dancer" (1919). Finally, figuring in biblical and Maori creation myths and cosmologies, Benedict's poem "In Parables" (1926) manages to override boundaries inherent in Boasian anthropology. In this way, literary production allowed the "poet-anthropologists" to both plow through and circumnavigate the many minefields of their contested discipline.

The impact of modern(ist) poetry thus surpassed an intermedial dynamic within the arts and was certainly most effective within the field of literary studies itself. As Ickstadt notes, with prose texts praising verbal economy and impersonality Pound and Eliot created a critical discourse that "defined the boundaries of modern[ist] poetry" as well as the "aesthetic doctrine" of the New Criticism, a methodology that dominated readings of literary texts from the 1950s to the end of the 70s and beyond. By then, Ickstadt recalls, the "literary anarchism" and avant-gardism of the modernists had made way for canonization and a rhetoric of "formal control."

In his essay "The Poet-Critics, Regionalism, and the Rise of Formalism," Timo Müller examines, by way of the work of the poets and professional literary critics John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974), Allen Tate (1899–1979), and Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989), what he considers "one of the closest links between poetry and theory in the history of American literature." The careers of Ransom, Tate, and Warren exemplify how reading practices transformed into a methodologically grounded scholarly discipline, aspiring to the status of a science that was taught at universities and other institutions of higher education in the United States. Inspired by Russian formalism and I. A. Richards's influential 1929 book *Practical Criticism*, the New Criticism became the American version of a formalist approach adhering to the "faith," as Cleanth Brooks put it in 1951, "[t]hat form is meaning" (72), that content interdepends with style and aesthetics. This insight remains poignant to this very day, along with the concept of "close reading" which hails from New Critical practices of literary analysis

and functions as a subtitle in all chapters of this handbook's second part. By the 1970s and 80s, New Critical approaches were dismissed, however, as methods that could do with just a poem and the Oxford English Dictionary, and they made way to a variety of perspectives aimed at accounting for how poetry is embedded in and itself emerges cultural contexts. Hence the prominence of the term "Context" as first subhead of all contributions in part II of this handbook.

As part of the circle of the Fugitives, Ransom, Tate, and Warren sought to renew, to "modernize" Southern poetry, as Müller demonstrates, by innovative formal composition and by foregrounding the universal in the local. Their legacy lives on in the New Formalist criticism, which – after the turn of the millennium – reacted to an increasing reliance of literary studies on paraphrasing content by refocusing on poetic form and aesthetics. Likewise, at that same moment a group of poets, among them Dana Gioia (b. 1950) and Marilyn Hacker (b. 1942), chose the label new formalism for a poetic practice that explored the potential of rhyme, meter, and prosody instead of experimenting with supposedly 'liberated' lines (cf. Gioia 1987). Such practice is all but new, though, since traditional frames have never ceased shaping poetic texts. In turn, once it became the rule rather than the exception, free verse seemed the new convention. In his essay "Unconventionally Conventional: Elizabeth Bishop [1911–1979] and the Modernization of Traditional Forms," Andrew Gross turns to a poet who favored traditional genres over free verse, "an established poetic practice by the mid-twentieth century." Embedding Bishop's preference in the discussions over free form, from modernist to New Formalist interventions, Gross shows how this major mid-century poet employs the nursery rhyme, the villanelle, and the sestina unconventionally to "shape impersonal structures into subjective voice" while negotiating the social and political frameworks in which these genres once evolved. By doing so, Bishop not only reveals "how the inherited and collective aspects of language make innovation and individuation possible." As Gross demonstrates, her poetics also touches on the contemporaneous practice and debates around "confessional poetry" (↗17 Poetry as Confession?), reflecting on the emergence of the lyrical self by self-reflexively inquiring into the medium of poetry.

3.3 Postmodernist Poetics and Beyond

Contemporaneous with Bishop's modernist approach to poetic tradition are three groups of mid-century American poets who mark the emergence of postmodernist cultural practices – practices that also reassess and shift perspectives on modernism: the Black Mountain School, the Beat Movement, and the New York School. In his essay on the "Poetic Modes of Early Postmodernism," Aaron Nyerges reenters these literary scenes by way of Susan Sontag's account of "the new sensibility" that resonates in the work of writers such as Charles Olson (1910–1970), Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara (1926–1966), and Barbara Guest (1920–2006). In close readings, Nyerges shows how

their poetry reflects (on) an ever-shifting media ecology, interrogates technology, and affirms as much as questions the increasing commercialization of American life. Thus, from the 1950s onward, American poets indeed radicalized the preoccupations of their modernist predecessors: they reflected on modern temporality by recalling ancient myths, as did Pound and Olson; they revitalized the intermedial kinship between poetry and music by creating jazzy soundscapes, as did Hughes and Ginsberg; and they updated the practice of ekphrasis by embracing the visuality and materiality informing painting and sculpture, as did Williams and Guest. Based on this common ground, though, the poetry under scrutiny in this chapter displays, first and foremost, the remarkable scope and breadth of poetic discourse under postmodern conditions. In fact, as Nyerges shows, the work of the poets at stake clearly undercuts its categorization into schools. Exposing such conceptualizations – like that entailed in terms such as modernism and postmodernism – as necessary, yet not necessarily precise moves of periodization and marketability, this work exemplifies how poetry questions readings that prioritize contexts and biographies over aesthetic practice.

Like Elisabeth Bishop's verse, postmodernist poetry reengaged poetic traditions; yet, unlike her poetics, it also aligned with contemporaneous confessional modes. In his essay "Poetry as Confession? The Cases of Anne Sexton [1928–1974], W. D. Snodgrass [1926–2009], and Sylvia Plath [1932–1963]," Carsten Albers turns to that literary practice of the late 1950s and 60s which resisted the pull of an impersonal modernist poetry once propagated by T. S. Eliot. This resistance took multiple forms and drove the work of the Beats and the New York School just as well (↗16 Poetic Modes of Early Postmodernism). The so-called confessionals – including John Berryman (1914–1972), Randall Jarrell (1914–1956), and Delmore Schwartz (1913–1966) – seem to address this modernist dictum head-on. Ushering in an "autobiographical self," their poetry at the same time acknowledges that selfhood is prone to fiction, resists representation, and invites reflection on how the self can be written. Accordingly, "Plath and Sexton took great liberty with the facts of their lives," Albers concludes; "their intention was to create art, not autobiographies in verse." The confessionals thus probe a function central to poetic discourse for centuries: the constitution of a speaking subject (↗1 Framing Modern Subjectivity). What gave that crucial conversation a novel twist was their breaking the many taboos on what kind of lived experience a first-person speaker can and cannot reveal and share in a poem. As they figured in private sexualities, as in Sexton's "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" (1968) which Albers closely examines, and aired out matters from infidelity to abortion, the confessionals also produced a mode of American verse that shifted the scope, scales, and norms of scholarship.

In her contribution on African American poetry, Sharon L. Jones takes us "from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts movement and beyond" to delineate how black poets' interventions into poetic discourse renegotiated the relationship between subject matter and established poetic form. As it picks up from Ickstadt's pathway into modernism and transports us into the territory where and ↗21 How Poetry Matters Now, this essay maps the far field poetry by black authors has laid out ever since.

Closely attending to poems by Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Rita Dove (b. 1952), and Jericho Brown (b. 1976), Jones showcases a diversity within African American poetry that in fact defies limited notions of "(African) Americanness." Often responding to racial discrimination, poetry composed by black poets demonstrates how cultural critique adopts and transforms generic conventions, including the elegy, the sonnet, and free verse as much as the evolving aesthetics of the blues and jazz. Handed down as the framework for love poems and central to the modernism of McKay and Millay, the sonnet keeps returning both subtly, as in Brooks's "The Rites for Cousin Vit" (1949), and more prominently, as in Jericho Brown's award-winning collection *The Tradition* (2019). It shapes Brown's singular take, in the title poem, on police violence in the United States, projected as yet another American tradition. In this way, appropriations of poetic aesthetics and form have enabled marginalized ethnic groups to write themselves into mainstream cultures, while also asserting a considerable impact on how these cultures create meaning and value. Accordingly, black authors disagreed on how to position themselves within that double tradition. While W. E. B. DuBois rejected the label "Negro poet" in favor of just "poet," Hughes explicitly considered his writing "racial in theme and treatment." Thus, "black writers wrestled," as Jones notes, "with whether to emphasize black identity and the struggle for civil rights among African Americans in their writings or to focus on topics that might be considered more universal in an effort to appeal to a wider audience." Tuning in on distinct twentieth- and twenty-first century poetic voices and the ongoing debate on their significance within American literary traditions, Jones's chapter "challenges," as the author concludes, "interpretations of African American poetry by acknowledging a trajectory beyond modes of composition or dates of publication."

In the chapter on "Poetry as Feminist Critique," Judith Rauscher zooms in on verse composed by female authors during the 1970s and 80s and examines how these texts confront cultures prone to discriminate persons on the basis of gender as much as of race. By closely attending to the work of Sharon Olds (b. 1942), Audre Lorde (1934–1982), and Susan Howe (b. 1937), the essay not only features three authors who reconnected with and updated modernist poetics in distinct ways and drew on the innovations of postwar American poetics put forth by the Beats, the Black Aesthetics movement, and the confessionals, among others. Rauscher's choice also highlights the considerable differences within what was labeled "women's poetry" (while poems by male authors never needed such supplement; it was simply: poetry). Claiming verse as a space of political engagement and community, often in close conversation with the agenda of second-wave feminism, female poets marked poetic discourse as a decisive space of power, while also contributing to the ongoing revision of a male-dominated tradition of (American) poetry. Moving women's sexuality and intersecting gendered, racial, and class-contoured oppression center stage, these writers also traced and affirmed a literary lineage long obscured and continuous to this very moment. Most significantly, though, the essay aims to highlight how the very precision of

women's verse manages, at best, to dissect the destructive force of commonly accepted discourses that keep driving patriarchal systems globally. "Women's poetry invested in feminist critique," it turns out, goes beyond feminist theorizing, "engaging poetic language creatively to explore the obstacles to and possibilities for women's flourishing."

Entitled "Words in Performance: The Art and Poetics of Language Poetry," the essay by Hannah Moeckel-Riecke recontextualizes Susan Howe's work in an American literary movement that took off as an avant-garde in the 1960s and was deeply inspired by an international modernist tradition and its experimental forms and aesthetics, as displayed in texts by Stein, Osip Mandelstam, Paul Celan, and others. Contemporaneous with the rise of poststructuralist theory and the debates around language philosophy, most prominently the work of Jacques Derrida, the intense self-reflexivity of so-called language poetry creates a complexity that severely challenges its readers. Unraveling this charged intellectual framework, Moeckel-Rieke lays out how poets such as Clark Coolidge (b. 1939), Charles Bernstein (b. 1959), and Howe interrogate the processes cultures undergo as they construct meaning, assign value, and perform politics discursively. Postmodernist in an affirmative more than alternative manner,[3] this poetry is, as Moeckel-Rieke demonstrates, as politically charged and forceful as is Derridian deconstruction: subverting grammatical coherences, sequences of Coolidge's collection *Polaroid* (1975), for instance, both undermine and critically expose the symbolic order that creates and stabilizes hierarchies, legitimizes ideologies, and thus 'makes sense' of the world.

This poetic practice affirms what Roland Barthes in 1967 famously coined "the death of the author," which correlates with the (re-)birth of the reader. Language poetry makes perfectly evident that signification, meaning, and value do not emanate from individual voices but from an intertextual and intermedial web of sources handed down in cultural histories – a multitude of instances that cannot be retraced, even as they get partially reimagined by the reader. In his "Manifest Aversions" (2009), Bernstein ironically echoes this modernist insight: "I love originality so much I keep copying it." In turn, Howe's work, including her 1985 book *My Emily Dickinson*, is dedicated to recovering or reinstalling the authority of writers who were dispossessed of such power by processes of exclusion, marginalization, and cultural forgetting. Inspired by the arts, Howe's poems also recall and reempower the visuality residing in printed lines marking space on a white page. Like Mallarmé's and Stein's before hers, this poetics clearly privileges the materiality of language over its contested meaning. And this is part of what can make poetry "more interesting than television," as Bernstein has it, to an audience willing to invest effort in the act of reading.

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3 This useful distinction between affirmative postmodernism (of writers like Thomas Pynchon and Robert Coover) and alternative postmodernist modes (as practiced, for instance, by the Black Aesthetics Movement. feminism and literature by women, as well as ethnic literatures and cultures) was made by Andreas Huyssen (1984).

Bernstein's comparison of poetry and television offers a glimpse at a 1970s and 80s media ecology that, due to digitalization, has undergone a fundamental, in fact paradigmatic transformation ever since. That shift has cleared horizons for readers and scholars unimaginable even in the 1980s, horizons opened up by websites like those of the Poetry Foundation or the Emily Dickinson Archive.[4] It has also considerably entended the scope and shape of literary production, while remediating the prominent voices of, for instance, Eliot, Ginsberg, or Maya Angelou (1928–2014) and reinvigorating established genres, as Twitter did when advancing a novel pitch of the haiku. These moves in turn extend poetry's readership and audience. Accordingly, the final essay of this handbook addresses American poetry emerging in the framework of yet another "new sensibility." Lena Mattheis's take on "How Poetry Matters Now" discusses twenty-first-century poetry in oral, printed, and various digital formats, and focuses in particular on how such verse invites and allows for an interaction between audience, author, and poetic discourse in newly mediated manners. Tracing current American poetry across multimodal platforms – from the traditionally published collection to live performances to YouTube and Instagram (from which evolved the "Instapoetry" of Rupi Kaur (b. 1992), for example) – Mattheis moves spoken word artist Andrea Gibson (b. 1975) center stage whose poem "Orlando" (2018) she traces through its various versions in recordings, print, and on social media.

As Mattheis's reading indicates, this new media ecology not only modifies the creative process that informs parts of contemporary American poetry; it also has a considerable impact on critical perspectives, scholarship, and concepts of literary analysis. Assuming that contemporary poetry is "decolonial and global" in nature, Mattheis's approach signals how this debate tends to reinvigorate some of the terms that language poetry problematized, if not deconstructed, including authorial intention and individual expression. Speaking of the "digital realism" of American poetry online recalls what media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, at the onset of this century, pinpointed "our culture's contradictory imperatives for immediacy and hypermediacy" and coined "the double logic of remediation": "Our culture wants to both multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation; ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them" (2000, 5).

The longing for immediate and authentic poetic voices is itself an effect of digitalization and hypermediation; its side-effect is the revitalization and honoring of critical approaches to poetry that were dominant decades ago. It is thus indeed poignant to plea, as Mattheis does, for "critics and academics" to "open themselves more to emergent *forms*, as a new generation of scholars already does" (emphasis mine). Just as important is to recall Altieri's incentive that we "learn to value what can be produced if we stress how writing reframes illusions of presence. This learning leads to appreci-

4 See https://www.poetryfoundation.org/; https://www.edickinson.org/.

ating literary states that have nothing to do with truth to experience or direct involvement in what an artist can express."

4 American Poetry's Presence and Futures

Interestingly enough, as the realm of American poetry has expanded, adding multiple angles to how poetry matters, the ambition of poets, Mattheis grants, remains to put out and get recognized for a printed collection of their texts, published at best by a prominent press. This format is certainly paramount and becoming for some poems – as, for instance, those of Vietnamese-American poet Ocean Vuong; others prosper from the power of their soundscapes more than from delineations on the page: African American poet Amanda Gorman received global attention for her performance on the big political stage when she was chosen to present her poem "The Hill We Climb" during the inauguration of President Joe Biden in January 2021. Perfectly in line with this official framework, Gorman beautifully and quite effectfully embodied the rhythm of a text that celebrates fundamental ideals of US-American culture in fairly conventional manners. Offering this musicality as a central "black" component of her art, Gorman could not help but rehearse a stereotype that Langston Hughes already targeted as such.

As the first US National Youth Poet Laureate, Gorman also rejuvenated a tradition initiated by President John F. Kennedy who, in 1961, invited Robert Frost to read from his work the day he was sworn into office. The fact that poets have only adorned inaugurations of presidents from the Democratic Party adds to American poetry's liberal communal appeal. As does the office of poet laureate on smaller local scales: as I write this, the city of Boston advertises the search for the new representative in this office, currently held by black American poet Porsha Olayiwola and claimed to be "a significant fixture in Boston's cultural and artistic arena," "rais[ing] the status of poetry in the everyday consciousness of Bostonians."[5]

The shapes and sounds of poetry are indeed part of the everyday, and American poetry presently matters and makes things happen in multiple and multi-medial ways. As this handbook lays out, American verse has come a long way – and its many presences promise that it will survive and thrive in the future.

5 https://www.boston.gov/departments/arts-and-culture/city-boston-poet-laureate.

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