

Free verse, historical poetics, and settler time

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Abstract

This article pushes back against the ongoing literary historical tendency to narrate the emergence of free verse forms in the modernist era as a salutary break with the poetic practices of the nineteenth century. Using the methods of historical poetics, I read key texts by the modernist poet and activist Mary Austin, who helped to invent Native American poetry as a field, to show that the concept of free verse was a tool of settler cultural domination as much as it was a democratization of poetic language or a formal innovation. Austin framed free verse poetry as a technology for managing time—specifically, for integrating Native Americans into the relentlessly linear march of what Mark Rifkin has recently theorized as settler time. Austin's theories of free verse had significant, distorting effects on the way Native American oral expressions were presented as poetry in modernist anthologies. Remembering that debates about rhythm, meter, and poetic form were also debates about temporality, space, and identity fundamentally challenges our critical assumptions about the hierarchies of form and genre that implicitly structure our literary historical narratives.

Modernist studies seems to be at the beginning of a long-overdue process of reckoning with the white supremacist origins of the field. To be sure, particularly since the inception of the New Modernist Studies in the late 1990s, there has been much careful scholarship on race, colonization, empire, diaspora, and the literature of the modernist era, but this attention tends to be directed toward modernist artists and institutions rather than toward the academic institutions and structures that have created the field of modernist studies. In 2013, Michael Bibby (2013) published a clarion call in *Modernism/modernity* for scholars to attend to “the central role of racism in the formation of the academy's conception of modernism” and to “an unexamined color line in modernist studies that has persisted ever since the field emerged in the midcentury” (p. 486). Bibby's concern is specifically the segregation of New Negro poetry and modernist poetry, but he argues that this segregation “is not simply a problem of terminology or

canonicity alone," but is rather "*structural* to a disciplinary field that can be understood as a racial formation of whiteness" (p. 487). Writing four years later, Kirby Brown (2017) called attention to what he named the New Modernist Studies' "Indian Problem." Brown's eye-opening survey of work done in modernist studies since the transnational turn in literary criticism shows that, while the New Modernist Studies has successfully brought attention to "the multiple geographies and socio-political contexts in which writers, artists, intellectuals, and others attempted to represent profoundly uneven conditions and experiences of modernity," the field has remained remarkably unengaged with Native American artists (p. 287). In his survey of scholarly monographs and collections from the past decade or so, Brown finds only a handful of extended treatments of "Native American writers or US settler colonialism" (five, to be exact) (p. 290), and he concludes that indigenous authors "are conspicuous not in their recovered presence made possible by these democratizing critical shifts [in Modernist Studies] but in their ongoing absence from these conversations" (p. 290). How can it be that, after decades of culture wars and canon expansions, we are still dealing with such fundamental omissions and gaps in literary scholarship? Work like Bibby's and Brown's challenges us to think seriously about the ways modernism in particular and literary studies in general remain racial formations of whiteness, to use Bibby's turn of phrase. If literary studies is to be oriented toward liberation from the hegemony of white supremacist ideologies, such work suggests, it is not enough to expand the types of texts scholars engage with or to work transnationally and comparatively (important as this work remains). We also have to think seriously about how our fields remain racial formations, and about how we can dismantle and replace their compromised foundations.

My aim in this article is to show that historical poetics is one tool that can be used to chip away at the foundational whiteness of literary studies.¹ Scholarship in the field of historical poetics begins with the simple idea that the definitions of terms like poetry, rhythm, meter, and prosody change over time, and that reading period theories of poetics can help us to see the various kinds of cultural and political work that poetry has done. Such work also helps to denaturalize the reading practices that have been developed in the academy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—reading practices that are structural parts of the white racial formations of literary studies—by recovering the variety of poetic and reading practices that existed prior to the development of the modern university system. Put simply, historical poetics shows that the terms we use to describe and understand poetry are not stable, and do not exist as transhistorical or apolitical concepts.² As a practitioner of historical poetics, I am especially concerned with how white supremacist ideologies inhere in our assumptions about the relative values of various poetic forms, and particularly in our assumptions about the development of free verse poetry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Elsewhere I have argued that modernist debates about free verse forms were fundamentally about race.³ Interdisciplinary conversations among scholars of ethnography, anthropology, philology, and literary studies in the modernist era gave rise to the communal origins theory of poetry, which posited that poetry was originally the product of primitive "throngs" that sang and danced together. The communal origins theory was in turn used to promote free verse as an expression of a distinct White race imagined to be emerging in the New World in the 1910s and 1920s. Although forgotten today, the communal origins theory was inescapable both inside and outside the academy in the early twentieth century, and it has had profound and lasting effects on the classification of what counts as modern or modernist poetry.⁴ This discourse was especially consequential for the development of Native American poetry as a field of study. In what follows, I read key texts by the modernist poet, activist, and communal origins adherent Mary Austin, who helped to invent Native American poetry as a field, in order to push back against the ongoing tendencies within modernist studies to align free verse with a progressive narrative of the rise of democratic institutions and nations and to position the emergence of free verse forms as a real break with the poetic practices of the nineteenth century. Through a discussion of Austin's poetics, I show that the concept of free verse was a tool of settler cultural domination as much as it was a democratization of poetic language or a formal innovation. This case study matters because it shows that, as long as we continue to take terms like "free verse," "rhythm," and "poetry" to be relatively consistent across time and across linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries, and as long as we retain "modernism" as a valorized term that can be neatly opposed to all that came before it, we will continue to tell many of the same stories about modernist poetry and about indigenous literatures as we did before the

New Modernist Studies. Remembering that debates about rhythm, meter, and poetic form were also debates about time, space, and identity fundamentally challenges our critical assumptions about the hierarchies of form and genre that implicitly structure our literary historical narratives.

1 | MARY AUSTIN'S SETTLER POETICS

Like so many White modernists, Mary Austin is a vexing figure. Austin created a position for herself in the 1910s through the 1930s as one of the foremost “interpreters” of Native American poetry and cultural traditions. She was appointed to the School of American Research in Native American Literature in 1918, authored the “Aboriginal Literature” entry for the *Cambridge History of American Literature* in 1921 (Goodman and Dawson, 2008, p. 221), and published widely on Native American literatures and cultures in popular magazines like *The Nation* and *Atlantic Monthly*. She managed to attain this stature in spite of the fact that she spoke no Native languages and generally worked from the ethnographic reports of non-indigenous ethnographers rather than with indigenous collaborators.⁵ I am both deeply conflicted about spending time with Austin’s work (as opposed to say, spending more research time with the archives of Native poets) and deeply committed to ensuring that we understand the legacies of Austin’s interventions in debates about free verse and Native American poetry. It is especially crucial to attend to Austin now because there is a great deal of investment in casting her as an ecofeminist whose work can help us understand our ever-accelerating environmental crisis. Such work often positions Austin as an important ecofeminist thinker in spite of her problematic ideas about race and culture, even though Austin made it clear that her views on race, gender, and environment were inextricable from each other. She did, after all, describe birth as “the clima[x] of [woman’s] racial function” (Austin, 1932, p. 285), showing that she in no way understood gender and race to be separable concerns. Austin’s racism went hand in hand with her feminism and her environmental activism. Forgetting or downplaying this fact risks suggesting that we can understand environmental crises apart from the crises of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and ethno-nationalism—an error we simply cannot afford.

My work on Austin thus seeks to understand Austin’s major contributions to modernist poetics and to the formation of Native American poetry in all of their politically contradictory fullness. For while Austin herself might be a minor figure today, she was hugely influential in shaping what was read as Native American poetry in the twentieth century. She also engaged in effective forms of political activism and lobbying with indigenous peoples, and she did have some knowledge of the cultural practices of specific tribal groups, gathered during her sustained interactions with Native communities.⁶ But, in attempting to advocate for the importance of Native American poetry, which she presented as the earliest known form of free verse, Austin also turned free verse into a tool of cultural domination. In all of her work on poetry and poetics, but particularly in the 1918 collection *The Path on the Rainbow: The Book of Indian Poems* and in her 1923 treatise *The American Rhythm*, Austin abstracts meter—itsself already an abstraction—into “rhythm,” which she then turns into a figure for social relations. This process of increasing abstraction allows Austin to invent free verse poetry as a technology for managing time—specifically, for integrating Native Americans into the relentlessly linear march of what Mark Rifkin (2017) has recently theorized as settler time. Austin’s theories of free verse had significant, distorting effects on the way Native American oral expressions were presented as poetry in modernist anthologies. As I will show, the logic of these anthologies mirrored the logic of allotment, the land use policy the US government pursued from 1887 to 1934. Under allotment, reservation lands were broken up into parcels, or allotments, which were to be owned by individuals, and turned into farmland tended by nuclear family units. If one accepted such an allotment, one was promised eventual U.S. citizenship, obtained at the price of one’s tribal enrollment. The aim of allotment was to do away with tribal identities entirely, and to make Native Americans “productive” Americans. By the end of allotment, Native Americans and White Americans were supposed to be less distinguishable from each other. Austin and other anthologists applied the logic of allotment to the presentation of Native American poetry, textualizing and spatializing oral expressions in ways that emphasized that Native forms would naturally give way to white free verse “re-interpretations” of those forms, so that Native poetry would

eventually become the product of White American poets. The same way that supposedly unproductive, unimproved tracts of land were supposed to be turned into modern farms that would power the national economic engine, Austin and her White collaborators presented Native linguistic arts as the untapped raw materials that would be turned into a living national literary tradition by non-Native poets. While free verse is still all too often mapped onto historical narratives about progress and democratization, Austin's work shows that ideas about free verse were in fact part of settler attempts to control and mediate Native cultural expressions in a way that benefitted non-Native artists and literary cultures.⁷

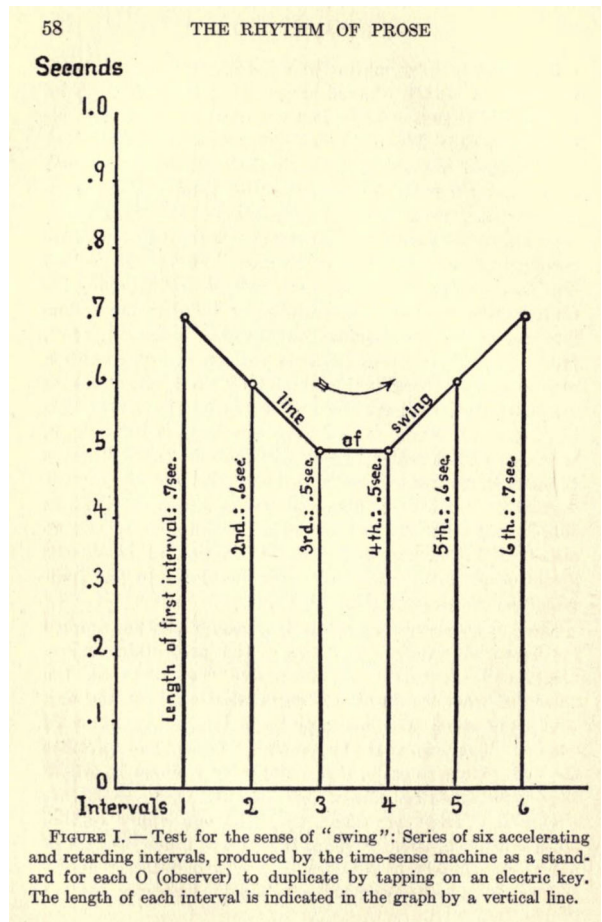
Austin shared an interest with many of her contemporaries in finding ways to cut through what she saw as unnecessary academic jargon in discussions of poetic form. Throughout her career, she consistently argued that terms like "meter" obscured the essential bodily basis of poetic rhythm, and that the term rhythm also obscured what actually mattered about poetry: its ability to coordinate diverse individuals into a coherent community. Austin, as an adherent of the communal origins theory of poetry, believed that groups of people began to conceive of themselves as a community only when they sang and danced together, harmonizing their unruly bodies in the shared rhythms of what she called the "poetic orgy" (Austin, 1923, p. 36). She advocated for a return to "primitive" modes of poetry, in which there was supposedly no distinction between song, dance, and verse, so that modern poets and readers could access the community-building function of poetic rhythm.⁸

Many of Austin's contemporaries shared her sense that there had to be something more elemental at play in poetic rhythms than the complicated metrical terms that had developed over centuries. Austin was especially interested in contemporary scholarship that tried to measure the rhythms of poetry in laboratories. She was keyed in to the work of William Morrison Patterson and Amy Lowell, who engaged in experiments at Columbia University and who published their findings in a series of articles and books in the 1910s. Patterson and Lowell argued that poetic rhythms were fundamentally made up of units of time, and that a good sense of rhythm was nothing more than the ability to group those units of time into coherent sequences. Patterson and Lowell argued that this insight was crucial to any understanding of free verse rhythms, which seemed at first to be haphazard and unsystematizable, but which were in fact effectively coordinated units of time (Figure 1).⁹

It is still possible to find scholars pursuing scientific solutions to what they frame as the problem of poetic rhythm, and to find calls to refine poetic terminology to better reflect its bodily basis. What such work misses, then and now, is that these attempts to simplify complex, messy terms like "meter" and "prosody" into the seemingly simpler and more bodily "rhythm" are part of a long and fruitless tradition of searching for the transhistorical, universal answer that could finally demystify exactly what makes up the linguistic patterning of a poem, as if particularities of time, place, and culture could be effaced in a grand unified theory of rhythm. Important work in historical prosody by scholars including Yopie Prins, Meredith Martin, Jason Rudy, and Jason David Hall has traced the contours of historical debates about meter and rhythm, and has shown that "meter" is itself already an abstraction, in the sense of the word meaning the collapse of discrete phenomena into an overarching umbrella category. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was no consensus about what English meter was or how one could properly analyze the meter of English-language poems—instead, there were all kinds of competing systems for metrical analysis in different historical times. English meter can be (and has been) repeatedly reformulated, leading to Austin's sense that "meter" was hopelessly obscured by the technical terms that had been generated by the various attempts at systematization.

In spite of the long history of prosodic debate, however, Austin believed that her generation of poetic thinkers, because of their access to findings by scholars in the newly institutionalized fields of ethnography and anthropology, was poised to finally answer fundamental questions about poetic form once and for all.¹⁰ Austin believed that these final answers were most clearly to be found through the study of Native American poetry. Austin combined her understanding of free verse as a time management tool—a technology that could make unequal units of time into equal units—with the communal origins theory of poetry to posit that Native American poetry was not only the oldest available form of poetry, but that it was also the foundation for a new form of free verse destined to be developed in the United States by non-Native poets. She argued that scholars were correct in positing that poetry was

FIGURE 1 A graph of intervals produced by William Morrison Patterson's "time-sense machine" at Columbia University, from Patterson's *The Rhythm of Prose* (1916). The graph was meant to illustrate the innate sense of rhythmic "swing" in individuals tested in Patterson's lab. Time measured in seconds is mapped on the y axis and the length of intervals subjects were meant to respond to is mapped on the x axis



originally used to create social cohesion out of a group of diverse individuals—it coordinated them into a "throng"—but that scholars had missed opportunities to study such primitive poetry in situ. Austin (1923) explained that while scholars fixated on "degraded" European ballads that had fallen far from their original oral forms, Native American cultures remained, "for the most part of the type called neolithic" (pp. 20–21).¹¹ Native Americans were, in other words, the primal throng, living, breathing, and dancing in the United States, and just waiting to be studied by scholars of poetics. She argued that in this seemingly most ancient form of poetry, "the combination of voice and drum...is never for any other purpose than that of producing and sustaining collective states. Among primitives there is no other distinction between prose and poetry than this. Prose is the medium of communication, but Poetry is the mode of communion" (1923, p. 23, emphasis in original). Poetic rhythm became for Austin not just an abstraction of meter—a term more general and unspecific that could encompass a wide range of phenomena—but also an abstraction of social relations—an ideal of communality that could only be achieved through poetry. Austin believed that unlocking the secrets of how this "Neolithic" verse linked together the rhythms of individual bodies into a cohesive group rhythm was especially crucial for non-Native Americans, who lived in a diverse nation full of individuals with competing interests and identities and who had lost the practice of communal dancing and singing. For non-Native poets, getting back to primal rhythms would also mean strengthening a sense of national identity.

Of course, as Mark Rifkin's (2017) recent work reminds us, theories of temporality were intensely debated in the modernist era, and had serious consequences for Native communities. Rifkin takes up the vexed problems of what he calls settler time and indigenous temporal sovereignty, explaining that, in response to discourses that position indigenous peoples as eternally ancient, locked into the past, there has been a scholarly tendency to insist on the

temporal co-presence of Native peoples and settlers. Rifkin argues that this approach, though it has important political uses, risks normalizing and reifying settler time. Settler time orients events according to the trajectories of the nation-state and modernity, and conscripts Native lives and stories into histories determined by those settler trajectories. As Rifkin argues,

settler superintendence of Native peoples imposes a particular account of how time works—a normative language or framework of temporality that serves as the basis for forms of temporal inclusion and recognition. Settler time reduces the unfolding and adaptive expressions of Indigenous peoplehood to a set of points—the supposedly shared now of the present, modernity, and national history—within a configuration that is positioned as the commonsensical frame in ways that deny the immanent motion of indigeneity. Native people gets plotted in ways that deny the movement inherent in its ongoing emergence. (p. 26)

The tendency to think in terms of temporal co-presence, in other words, has resulted in a lack of creativity in thinking about temporality in general and a consequent foreclosure of possibilities for thinking about temporality beyond settler time. Rifkin argues for an approach to temporality that thinks through the lens of relativity. He reads Henri Bergson's idea of duration as an important move away from the concept of time as homogenous, empty, and divisible into equal units which can then be spatially plotted, as along a timeline. Rifkin reads such a spatialization of time as complicit with settler colonial violence, both literal and epistemological. Rifkin explains,

against this uniformity of division, Bergson presents *duration* as the transition among qualitatively differentiable sensations such that they permeate each other in ways that defy enumeration. ... Rather than seeking to divide time into discrete, homogeneous units, Bergson conceptualizes it as “a continuous or qualitative multiplicity with no resemblance to number.”...From within Bergson's analysis, an insistence on “natural” time—that everyone occupies a singular present—looks like a mathematizing abstraction that effaces the experience of duration. (p. 22)

Though Bergson's concept of duration had obvious effects on modernism, it did not have an appreciable impact on modernist conceptions of free verse rhythms, which were conceived as made up precisely of “discrete, homogeneous units” of time. According to prosodic theorists like Patterson, Lowell, and Austin, free verse was the balancing of unlike units of time into new and equal units, as in bars of music. As Austin (1923) argued, “even in the freest free verse there is a subjective disposition to set up temporal equivalence between a single strong and many weak syllables” (p. 64). Free verse rhythms were, in other words, ways to make sense of time by dividing it into units that could be made equivalent to each other and plotted on a graph, making such rhythms useful tools for the implementation of settler time on Native cultural expressions.

It is thus especially important to attend to Austin's linkage of free verse with Native American poetry. This move has been read as an attempt to gain greater recognition for Native American art and as a sign that free verse did indeed open up poetry to a greater range of poets and readers. But viewed in another light, it is also possible to see the ways in which it was an imposition of a normative framework of temporality that became the basis for forms of recognition, to borrow Rifkin's phrase, and to see how recognition as a paradigm has continuously failed Native communities, as Glen Sean Coulthard (2014) has argued.¹² In what at first might appear to be a move toward a Bergsonian or Einsteinian understanding of temporality as relative and nonlinear, Austin repeatedly argued that Native poetry had rhythms that seemed to be unsystematizable, or that at least were unsystematizable according to the rules of English-language prosody. According to Austin (1923), the units of Native American rhythms could not be weighed out into equal units, as the rhythms of English-language poetry could be. She explained that “The Amerind has no system, of which he can give an account, of coordinating rhythmic impressions” (p. 33), and that Native American poetry was comprised of “rhythms which the

white man cannot always perceive and not easily resolve into mathematical indices" (p. 29). However, rather than theorizing what might be unique and interesting about an approach to rhythm that was not based on temporal units, Austin constructed systematizable, spatializable rhythms as a technology that could manage time and integrate histories that seemed violently incompatible at first glance. She explained that accent in poetry was "a device for establishing temporal coincidences" (p. 63), and that, unlike in English-language poetry, "accent does not appear to have any place in Amerind poetry" (p. 61). This meant that, while un-accented Native poetics were firmly rooted in their "Neolithic" moment, accented English-language poetry would be able to bring that Neolithic form into the future, making English-language translations and "interpretations" of Native verbal arts privileged forms. Non-Natives (and only non-Natives) could create a "temporal coincidence" between the beginnings and the ends of poetry, according to Austin, through their use of accented poetic rhythms in "aboriginal" free verse forms. It had been the technology of poetic accent that had allowed Vachel Lindsay to create "points of simultaneity" between "the Mississippi and the Congo" (Austin, 1923, p. 32) in his free verse poetry, and it would be the technology of accent that would lead non-Native poets to nurture "the common root of aboriginal and modern Americanness" (p. 54) into what she called "the rise of a new verse form in America" (p. 9). The right poetic rhythms, in other words, wielded by White poets, could create material linkages between the past and the future, making history visualizable and graphically representable as the rhythms of modern poetry. Rhythm was a time machine that moved between the "unaccented dub dub, dub dub, dub dub, dub dub in the plazas of Zuñi and Oraibi" (Austin, 1923, p. 11) and the accented "chuff chuff of a steam engine" (Austin, 1923, p. 64). This translation across time would make those primal unaccented rhythms intelligible to the non-Natives on board the forward-moving train. Not coincidentally, Austin repeatedly returned to this image of a train as a sort of time machine running back and forth on a single track between the rhythms of "primitive" man and modern man, a la *Back to the Future Part III*. Running this track, according to Austin, allowed both rhythmic systems and both types of man to merge into a singular and inevitable creation—namely, the modern American. It is hard not to hear an echo in this particular metaphor of Teddy Roosevelt—a personal friend of Austin's—who famously declared that "The General Allotment Act is a mighty pulverizing engine to break up the tribal mass" (Roosevelt, 1901). For Austin and for others, the logic that seemed to justify the material dispossession of Indigenous groups seemed also to justify manifold forms of cultural dispossession.

Austin's understanding of free verse as a time management technology that could modernize Native art and indigenize non-Native poetry had a major impact on the way Native American poetry was presented to White audiences in popular anthologies, to which Austin was a frequent contributor. Austin argued that, because Native American poetry was a type of free verse, it had a unique relationship to the blank, white space of the printed page. She explained that printing what had been oral expression as free verse poetry revealed that, much like with Imagist poetry and other compressed forms, "the supreme art of the Amerind is displayed in the relating of the various elements to the central idea" (1923, p. 56). Austin claimed that this economy of form showed that "the Amerind excels in the art of occupying space without filling it" (1923, p. 56), both literally and literarily. This rather stunningly naked claim that Native Americans left plenty of space open for non-Natives to occupy affected the design of anthologies of Native American poetry in the modernist era, and those designs echoed and reinforced the logic of allotment that was then being used to control Native lands and cultural practices.

Take, for instance, the aforementioned anthology *The Path on the Rainbow* (1918), to which Austin contributed the introduction and seven "interpretations" of ethnographic translations of Native American songs. The anthology was hugely commercially successful, and is sometimes still credited with "reveal[ing] a rich Native American poetic tradition" that had been previously unavailable to non-Native readers (Castro, 1983, p. 20). The form of the anthology was widely imitated well into the twentieth century. And that form is deeply influenced by the logic of allotment, in which the supposedly unused resources of Native cultures become the property of non-Natives. Austin begins the introduction to the collection by arguing that,

Not often does there fall to the writer of prefaces an opportunity equal to this ... Probably never before has it occurred that the intimate thought of a whole people should be made known through its

most personal medium to another people whose unavoidable destiny it is to carry that thought to fulfillment and make of that medium a characteristic literary vehicle. (p. xv)

Austin cordons off Native American poetry as racially other—it contains the “intimate thought of a whole people” previously unknown to non-indigenous Americans—but also anticipates this poetry’s metabolization by White poets—a metabolization the anthology performs in its very design. The anthology first presents literal translations of Native American songs and oral expressions, made by non-Native ethnographers and divided into “Songs from the Eastern Woodlands,” “Songs from the Southeast,” “Songs from the Great Plains,” “Songs from the Southwest,” “Songs from California,” “Songs from the Northwest Coast,” and “Songs from the Far North” (Figure 2). Labeling these works as “songs” may seem to indicate an awareness that “poetry” and “verse” are non-Native categories, but the anthology works to fit these transcribed and translated oral expressions into a stadial theory of generic evolution, in which the earliest poetry was a communally authored oral expression that included ritual dance as a necessary component, and in which the end goal of generic evolution is individually authored printed poems. In the table of contents to *The Path on the Rainbow*, the translators of the collected “songs” are named, but they are not named in the text of the anthology itself, reinforcing the idea that the songs were anonymously or communally authored. These ethnographic translations are followed by “Interpretations” by Constance Lindsay Skinner, Mary Austin, Frank Gordon, Alice Corbin Henderson, and Pauline Johnson. Where the ethnographic translations are marked by the names of their collectors and the tribal groups that produced them, the “interpretations” do not have consistent textual apparatuses to explain which sources, if any, the poets were interpreting, indicating that the cultural specificity of the oral arts of different Native groups mattered less to the

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FIGURE 2 The table of contents of *The Path on the Rainbow* (1918). The names of ethnographers who “collected” the included songs are included in the table of contents but not in the text of the anthology itself

anthology's editors than the ways those oral cultural productions were interpreted by non-Native authors (Figure 3). The message of this design is clear: as "primitive" poetry, Native American verbal arts were waiting for more "advanced" literary artists to polish and perfect them. The Native American poetic tradition begins at the moment when the raw ethnographic materials of Native poetry are handed off to White America for refinement.¹³ Indeed, the anthology is dedicated "To those who have labored faithfully in the collection and transcription of the Art Forms of a Vanishing Race," underscoring the seeming need for non-Native Americans to write Native American poetry.

This textual presentation of Native American verbal expressions echoes the logic of allotment. Allotment affected different tribes unevenly, but many tribes found their "surplus" allotments sold to White settlers, whose presence on reservation land was meant to hasten the dissolution of tribal communities. Native Americans were supposed to become Americans, and Americans were supposed to become Natives, so that there was no distinction between the lifeways, expressions, and temporal frameworks of Natives and non-Natives. The aim of the "mighty pulverizing engine" of allotment was to do away with tribal identities entirely, and to make "use" of the land that was, to borrow Austin's words, "occupied but not filled" by Native Americans. *The Path on the Rainbow* and the many anthologies it spawned applied the same sort of logic to Native American oral expressions, enacting a type of poetic

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FIGURE 3 The table of contents of *The Path on the Rainbow* (1918). The "Interpretations" by non-Native poets do not indicate the source material those poets were interpreting

allotment through the spatial organization of poems on the page. By first presenting translations of Native art, which “occup[ied] space without filling it,” followed by “re-interpretations” of that art by White poets, which filled the white space left “open” by the economical originals, these anthologies suggested that the logical “evolution” of Native American poetry was its incorporation into the bodies and texts of White poets. The same way that allotment was meant to “Americanize” Native Americans, the textualization of Native American oral expressions as free verse on a printed page was meant to permanently change Native cultures so they could be integrated into modernity. The anthologies made Native American poetry “productive” for American literature. Its seemingly unsystematizable, unaccented poetic rhythms would be incorporated into the system of English-language poetic rhythm, meaning that Neolithic Native cultures would be brought into the modern world on settler terms. Austin’s introduction ends with a call to action for non-Native poets: “The long divided Muses of poetry, music and dance must come together again for the absolute rendering” (xxxii). The translators of Native American poetry had done their job, according to Austin, but “The interpreter’s work is all before him” (xxxii).

2 | THE PATH AND THE CIRCLE

In case the logic of the anthology’s design was lost on readers, *The Path on the Rainbow* ends with an essay by Constance Lindsay Skinner entitled “The Indian as Poet,” in which Skinner reiterates that Native American poetry will be perfected by non-Native poets. Skinner, like Austin, used a transportation metaphor to figure the connection between Native and non-Native poets, arguing that, “To interpret the native heart of this New Earth, poets must travel, via the Rainbow, in the footprints—still discernible, happily—of the first, the Native, American bards.” These footprints would lead non-Native poets along “The Path of the Rainbow,” or “Poetry’s Highway” (p. 341). Poetry’s American Highway, according to Skinner, ran from a “primitive poetic impulse” expressed in a “little stammer” (p. 341–342) to “the cosmic song of Whitman,” especially “that single great kinship song in which he relates Lincoln to the Springtime of Democracy through the image of the lilac-bush a-flower in the dooryards of the home-making men and women for whom the Emancipator spent and gave his life, to interpret to them their oneness with each other and with their Soil” (p. 345–346). Skinner’s choice of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” as the acme of Native American poetry is both an especially apt and an especially grotesque example of the violent logics of temporality and spatialization that underlie modernist settler poetics. Whitman was of course also invested in tying modern American poetry to Native languages, and to mourning and memorializing supposedly dying cultures in English-language poems, making him an obvious roadside attraction on Poetry’s American Highway.¹⁴ Yet to trace a straight line—indeed, a highway—from Native American oral expressions to an elegy for the president who authorized the hanging of thirty-eight Dakota men following the so-called Sioux Uprising—the largest legally sanctioned mass execution in U.S. history—is to exhibit a particular kind of historical tone-deafness, to say the least. Skinner’s metaphor of the highway, like Austin’s metaphor of the locomotive, reinforces the idea that Natives and non-Natives are connected in a linear fashion, and that while it is easy and natural for settlers to travel from point B to point A and back again, Native Americans do not have the capacity or the technology to travel in the same evolutionary path. They remain rooted at point A, eternally waiting for settlers to notice, appreciate, and perfect their arts, to transplant those generative arts into the soil around settler homes.

I want to close with a provocation: modernist studies is still traveling along Skinner’s highway. By continuing to promote the idea that modernist poetry constituted a real break with nineteenth-century poetic and prosodic practices, in spite of abundant evidence to the contrary, modernist studies has given credence to the ideological figuration of historical changes in poetic forms as a linear evolution to more “advanced,” more “free” forms of verse. Theorizing modernist poetry in terms of revolution and rupture papers over the settler colonial, white supremacist ideologies that were used to explain and justify modernist poetic forms to various reading publics. The absence of Native poets from accounts of modernist poetry is not a fluke; it is the logical outcome of discourses we have inherited from White modernists like Austin. If we are to address this structural problem in the field, we have to ask questions about poetry in the late nineteenth and early

- ⁴ Frances Barton Gummere is the scholar who first fully developed the communal origins theory in the 1880s; he is still cited ten times in the 2012 edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*.
- ⁵ As Margaret Bruchac (2018) argues, such posturing was typical of the salvage ethnography era in all fields in which “Indigenous cultural material[s]...were collected and sorted,” leading to a situation in which “speculative theories and opinions,” uninformed by “Indigenous knowledge-bearers and without consideration for Indigenous philosophies and sensitivities,” could be “routinely accepted as fact...if voiced by a prominent enough researcher” (p. 13).
- ⁶ For more on Austin's interactions with and knowledge of Indigenous communities, see especially Hoyer (1998) and Metcalfe (1999).
- ⁷ My reading of Austin's poetics diverges sharply from existing scholarship. Austin's poetics are generally read as having supported the salutary effort to create more “organic” forms of poetry, and as having promoted the intrinsic value of Native American poetry and literature. Take, for instance, Michael Castro's (1983) influential reading, which posits that Austin helpfully “Dissociat[ed] poetic rhythm from predetermined forms imposed...by convention” (p. 40), and that in the process she also positioned Native American poetry as the fountainhead of all modern poetry (p. 43). In Castro's telling, which has influenced almost all of the scholarship on Austin's poetics to this point, Austin's advocacy for free verse forms dovetailed with her advocacy for Native American cultural expressions, and both forms of advocacy were progressive. But when we look more closely at Austin's theories of poetic rhythm, a much more complicated picture emerges.
- ⁸ On the misrepresentation and fetishization of oral traditions, see Brooks (2008), Konkle (2004), Teuton (2008), and Womack (1999).
- ⁹ See Lowell (1914) and (1920) and Patterson (1918). Though Lowell and Patterson understood their insight to be unprecedented, Coventry Patmore's theory of isochronous intervals, and the many theories that grew outward from Patmore's, beat them to the punch by half a century. See Prins (2005).
- ¹⁰ Not coincidentally, Patterson and Lowell pursued their images of speech patterns on the same campus where Franz Boas was remaking anthropology during this era.
- ¹¹ For more on the idea of “degraded” and “genuine” ballads, see Cohen (2015), especially chapter four, “Old Ballads and New Histories.”
- ¹² Coulthard (2014) argues that, in discussions of “Indigenous-state relations,” there is “a perceived relationship between the affirmative recognition and institutional accommodation of societal cultural differences,” and an erroneous assumption that a move away from assimilationist state policies toward “mutual recognition” automatically results in better conditions for indigenous communities (pp. 2–3). Though Coulthard's analysis focuses specifically on “the colonial relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state” (p. 3), it has broad applications for understanding colonial relationships as they are constituted by legal, political, cultural, and literary systems, among others. Coulthard calls for analysis of how settler-colonial relationships “continue to facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority” (p. 7); here I am suggesting the ways in which Austin and other white literary tastemakers dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their self-determining authority within the realm of literary production.
- ¹³ Pauline Johnson (Mohawk) is obviously a complicating figure here. However, only two of her poems are included, where other contributors are allowed between five and ten poems, and George Cronyn, the anthology's editor, publicly proclaimed that he was pressured into including her by his publishers, and that her poetry was objectively bad compared to the non-Native poets included in the collection. Reviewers of the anthology echoed this sentiment repeatedly. See Castro (1983), p. 43.
- ¹⁴ My thanks to Matt Cohen for pointing out that this argument is implicit in “Mannahatta,” and for calling attention to Ed Folsom's (1998) analysis of “Yonnonidio.”
- ¹⁵ Important work by Robert Dale Parker (2012) suggests much English-language poetry by Native poets was published in newspapers and remains uncollected outside of his landmark volume *Changing Is Not Vanishing*. See also Calcaterra (2015), Cohen (2017) (especially chapter four, on Native American readers' responses to Whitman), Grewe (2017), Hickey (2015), Salzer (2004), Taylor (2016), and Zink (2015).

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