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PAIDEUMA

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY
POETRY AND POETICS

VOLUME 45



THE NATIONAL POETRY FOUNDATION
ORONO, MAINE

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ERIN KAPPELER

THE RETURN OF THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY

This piece is adapted from a "Provocation" delivered at the Historical Poetics Now conference held at the University of Texas at Austin, November 7–10, 2019.

What might modernist studies look like if we took seriously Max Cavitch's claim that "Poetry's liberation from the shackles of meter is one of the most important nonevents in late nineteenth-century literary history" (33)? My aim in this piece is to start to sketch the contours of a new history of modernist poetry, using the insights and methods developed by scholars working in the field of historical poetics. It is my contention that a literary history of modernist poetry that starts not with Ezra Pound's supposed breaking of the pentameter, but rather with Meredith Martin's recognition that "the first 'heave' was really Pound's misreading of nineteenth-century meter" (183), can help to elucidate some of the ways that modernist studies remains entangled with its white supremacist foundations.¹

Historical poetics scholarship is varied in its approaches and methods, but in general, a historical poetics approach to literary study pushes scholars to ask which terms we hold stable in order to narrate the literary histories that emerge in our scholarship.² Work in historical poetics starts from the premise that, as Michael Warner puts it, the modern academic critic is "a historically unusual sort of person" (36) whose habits of critical reading are markedly different from the habits of most other kinds of readers. Academic critical reading is very good at elucidating certain kinds of poetic texts, but many poetic texts have been illegible to modern literary scholars—for instance, most of the poems written and circulated in the United

States in the nineteenth century. This situation meant that, for a few decades at least, nineteenth-century American poetry was essentially disappeared from English departments, aside from works by Whitman, Dickinson, and maybe sometimes Poe. As Kerry Larson writes in the introduction to the 2011 *Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*, "It cannot be said of nineteenth-century American poetry that it needs no introduction" (1). For generations of scholars, it seemed self-evident that convention, rhyme, repetition, and imitation were marks of bad poetry, and that bad poetry isn't worth the investment of time required to make it yield interesting knowledge. Hence, nineteenth-century American poetry was simply ignored. Historical poetics scholarship, along with feminist recovery projects, book history studies, and any number of allied fields, has fundamentally reoriented our view of the nineteenth century in the Americas, pushing critics instead to see how twentieth-century literary critics "ask[ed] questions that nineteenth-century American poetry didn't seem [able] to answer," in the words of Mary Louise Kete (15). The scholarship that has investigated how to ask the questions that nineteenth-century American poetry *does* answer has been as varied in method and scope as nineteenth-century American poetry itself. In general, though, such scholarship can be said to push back against the once pervasive ideas 1) that readers have always understood capital P Poetry to be a meaningful generic category, 2) that conventionality is a mark of bad artistry, and 3) that poetic forms and genres evolved in any kind of progressive way. This latter strand of criticism is the strand I want to pick up in this piece.

As a practitioner of historical poetics, I am interested in the consequences of the return of nineteenth-century American poetry for the field that has relied on its disappearance for its own existence. Taking recent work in nineteenth-century studies seriously means acknowledging that modernist poets, poetic theorists, and prosodists weren't looking for a way to break free from a stultifying metrical tradition; rather, they were trying to make sense of an overwhelming mass of contradictory prosodic models and theories. And yet, when scholars of modernism talk about free verse, they more often than not still position it as a real break with the prosodic experiments of the nineteenth century. This narrative covers over the white

supremacist theories of meter that developed in the modernist era and makes it possible to ignore the ways that these racist prosodic theories continue to exert an influence on scholarly assumptions about the relative values of various poetic forms. Terms such as rhythm and meter, however transparent or settled they might seem, are never without their historical and ideological underpinnings. Historical poetics reminds us that we cannot disregard this insight without deracinating our critical conversations about prosody, losing sight of the way this discourse has always been, at root, a discourse about social relations. In the modernist moment in particular, the increasing abstraction of notions of meter and rhythm went hand in hand with fantasies about the racialized American body, helping to shape public debates about what constituted an American identity.³

With the space I have remaining, I want to present a case study in historical poetics, to show what happens when we no longer hold generic and formal terms—especially terms such as meter and prosody—stable as we analyze poetic texts. I'm offering here an abridged study of the prosodic theories of Mary Austin because Austin's work is part of one chapter in the racialized development of free verse in the Americas in the early twentieth century.⁴ Austin is perhaps best remembered today as an environmental activist. She spent most of her adult life in California and New Mexico, which provided her with the materials for the many short stories, essays, plays, and poems she wrote in the first three decades of the twentieth century. She was involved in artists' colonies in Taos, New Mexico, and Carmel, California, where she helped to found the Forest Theater. Austin and her husband played a role in the California Water Wars, fighting against the ultimately successful plan to drain Owens Valley to supply Los Angeles with water, and throughout her life Austin was an outspoken advocate for women and native peoples. Her 1903 book *The Land of Little Rain*, about the California Desert, remains an important text for ecocritics, though it was Austin's "interpretations" of Native American poetry in volumes such as the 1918 anthology *The Path on the Rainbow* that helped to make her reputation in her time.

Austin was interested in Native American poetry (or Native American song or chant or verse, as she alternately and indiscriminately

named it) partly because she was interested in salvage ethnography—preserving the records of cultures perceived to be disappearing—and partly because she believed that Native American song was the ur-form not just of poetry but of all art. In a 1931 pamphlet for the Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts, for instance, Austin argued that “Indian poetry is the key . . . perhaps to all art among all peoples everywhere” because it was “the formal expressiveness into which a man puts the whole of himself” (“Indian Poetry” 209). Native American poetry, according to Austin, was nothing less than “the abstraction of an experience sketched upon the audience with the poet’s self as the tool” (“Indian Poetry” 209). Indeed, to Austin, the history of poetry was the history of the abstraction of socially meaningful gestures into poetic traits and the gradual forgetting that those traits had ever encoded social relations. She explained that, “In the passage of poetry from its aboriginal expression by the whole man—pounding feet, shaken rattle, singing voice, leaping body—into the printed page, poetry has taken on an infinity of devices . . . such as assonance, alliteration, rhyme, both internal and terminal, and stanzaic pattern” (“The Road to the Spring” 206). These verse traits had come to be seen as merely literary devices, but they were in fact keys to primal experiences, according to Austin. Native American poetry was thus important to her because she believed, as an oral, communal form, it reintroduced the social element to modern poetry. Austin explained that Native American poetry “is never for any other purpose than that of producing and sustaining collective states. . . . Prose is the medium of communication, but Poetry is the mode of communion” (*American Rhythm* 23). Austin was supported in this move to abstract social relations into verse traits by many contemporary ethnologists, who believed that “primitive” peoples were better able to coordinate themselves into a collective group than more “advanced” civilizations because they were in the habit of singing, dancing, and chanting as a group. Poetic rhythm, in this view, was primarily a means of social organization, only becoming an aesthetic achievement after its fall into print.

But, according to Austin, this process also worked in reverse, with literary techniques and technologies providing clues to new modes of human experience and development. Austin argued that Native

American poetry, which she posited was one of the earliest forms of free verse, was “for the most part of the type called neolithic” (*American Rhythm* 20) and was incapable of being translated into the modern world without the technical resources of the English language. Austin’s logic went thusly: she argued that “accent does not appear to have any place in Amerind poetry” (*American Rhythm* 61). This mattered because accent in poetry was “a device for establishing temporal coincidences” (*American Rhythm* 63), both metrically within a poem and in a larger historical sense. Without the technology of accent, Native poetries were destined to remain firmly rooted in their “Neolithic” moment. By being translated into English-language poetic forms, however, that Neolithic verse could be brought into the future, so that non-Native poets and readers could benefit from its ability to help create social cohesion. 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 English-language rhythms in “aboriginal” free verse forms. This was precisely what Vachel Lindsay had done, according to Austin; his accented free verse poetry created “points of simultaneity” between “the Mississippi and the Congo” (*American Rhythm* 32). She argued that accented free verse poetry was the tool that could, in a similar way, show that there was a “common root of aboriginal and modern Americanness” (*American Rhythm* 54) that would inevitably lead to “the rise of a new verse form in America” (*American Rhythm* 9). The future of American poetry, in Austin’s view, was in the hands of white poets who were willing to “re-interpret” ethnographic translations of Native American verbal arts in order to modernize them.

Austin’s theories of Native American poetry as Neolithic free verse affected the design of anthologies of Native American poetry in the modernist era, such as the 1918 anthology *The Path on the Rainbow*, to which Austin contributed the introduction and seven “interpretations” of ethnographic translations of Native American songs. Though the anthology’s purpose was ostensibly to educate non-Natives about the richness of Native American poetic traditions, the design of the anthology reinforces the message that English-language interpretations of Native verbal arts, and not those Native arts themselves, were privileged poetic objects. Without English-language free

verse interpretations, the anthology suggests in implicit and explicit ways, the fossil poetry of Native verbal arts would remain inaccessible to white audiences and would consequently be forgotten as Native American communities disappeared. The anthology opens not with Native-language texts, but with English-language translations of Native songs, collected largely from nineteenth-century ethnographic texts. These translations are presented as "songs" from various geographical regions. The translators of the "songs" are named in the table of contents, but not in the text of the anthology itself, which reinforces the dubious idea that the songs were anonymously or communally authored and unmediated by their ethnographic collectors. The translated "songs" are followed by "Interpretations" by Constance Lindsay Skinner, Mary Austin, Frank Gordon, Alice Corbin Henderson, and Pauline Johnson. None of the "interpretations" explains which sources, if any, these contemporary poets were interpreting, indicating that the original works of Native American artists mattered less to the anthology's editors than the ways they inspired non-Native poets to create new free verse poems.⁵ The message of this design is clear: as "neolithic" poetry, Native American verbal arts were waiting for more "advanced" literary artists to polish and perfect them. The anthology 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 reinforced this sense of the inevitability of Native verbal arts becoming the property of white artists in her 1923 treatise *The American Rhythm*, arguing that printing what had been oral expression as free verse poetry revealed that "the supreme art of the Amerind is displayed in the relating of the various elements to the central idea" (56). Austin claimed that this economy of form showed that "the Amerind excels in the art of occupying space without filling it" (56), leaving plenty of white space to be filled by white poets "reinterpreting" Native materials.

* * *

I would venture to guess that, since the advent of the New Modernist Studies, most scholars of modernism would consider themselves to be historicists in some way. For decades, the field has been committed to creating an ever more expansive, transnational, historically informed view of modernist literature. And yet, as Michael Bibby and Kirby Brown, among others, have argued, the field remains fundamentally shaped by the white supremacist, settler-colonial assumptions that were crucial parts of the formation of modernist literature and modernist studies in the twentieth-century academy. In the case study I've presented, I've tried to show that accepting one historically situated understanding of a poetic form can perpetuate these exclusionary, racist, colonialist lines of thought. To continue to narrate the advent of free verse as a break with the metrical past, without acknowledging the white supremacist colonial thinking that helped to create that idea of a prosodic break, seems to me to be a pretty serious problem. If the history of modernist poetry becomes, not the story of the liberation of form from arbitrary constraints, but the story of competing ideological investments in ideas of rhythm, meter, and poetry, we may find it easier to dismantle the color line that remains shockingly persistent in contemporary scholarship.⁶ One can historicize a poem without ever questioning the ideologies that have convinced us that it is a poem worth attending to, but it is harder to historicize a poetic term or form or genre without questioning how ideological investments have shaped and continue to shape our literary histories. This, from my vantage point, is what historical poetics approaches offer to scholars working in any historical period.

NOTES

1. Michael Bibby's "The Disinterested and Fine: New Negro Renaissance Poetry and the Racial Formation of Modernist Studies" remains one of the clearest explanations of the white supremacist origins of modernist studies. As Bibby argues, "Despite individual scholars' racial ideologies, and regardless of the historical evidence that reveals American modernism to be the product of a complex, diverse, and profoundly multicultural social moment, as a disciplinary field modernist studies has been organized around a persistent and coherent emphasis on the cultural production of whites. ... [This problem] is *structural* to a disciplinary field that can be understood as a racial formation of whiteness" (487).

2. For a detailed history of historical poetics, see the website of the Historical Poetics working group at historicalpoetics.com.
3. This is a case I make more fully in "Editing America: Nationalism and the New Poetry" and in my book manuscript in-progress.
4. I discuss Austin's prosodic theories in more detail in a forthcoming article in *Literature Compass*.
5. Pauline Johnson is of course a complicating figure here, but she has the fewest poems in the anthology, and George Cronyn publicized that he had been pressured to include her work by the publishing company even though he considered it to be inferior work.
6. Michael Bibby and Kirby Brown each quantify the whiteness of modernist studies through analyses of authors and topics covered in journals devoted to the study of modernism.

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J. PETER MOORE

What alternative version of literary history or alternative appraisal of poetry's past would you like to see reflected in current scholarship? Do you think such an alternative is necessary to account for where we are at the present moment?

I think perhaps the best way for me to answer this question about the future of history is not to point out impediments, but rather to encourage a re-examination of a valuable, if underappreciated, work that exemplifies what I see as a model for moving forward. The text that I have in mind is Maria Damon's *Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Poetry*. Far from obscure, the book was published by a major university press (Minnesota) in 1993; and it is cited consistently, most often for its pioneering efforts at bringing the poet Bob Kaufman to the attention of the larger academic community. What makes Damon's cultural studies approach to avant-garde literature useful to the future of scholarship is the same thing that makes it seem uncharacteristic of the past. Twenty-five years after its publication, the book remains scandalous in its methodology. No chapter better represents this sense of conspicuous irregularity better than the one entitled "The Child Who Writes / The Child Who Died." Focusing on what she calls the marginalization of childhood, Damon brings together two counterpoised literary contexts, applying a comparative frame to the pedigreed poems of Boston Brahmin Robert Lowell and the juvenilia of three unknown teenage women writing from the D Street Housing Projects of South Boston. Returning to the text now, with your question in mind, I can see at least four distinct characteristics that lay out a basis for the kind of scholarship I desire to write and read.

First, the chapter challenges the familiar narrative of innovative practice. Rather than letting the writer's conception of his or her