Review
Four Approaches to Teaching Poetry

Erin Kappeler

Bialostosky, Don. *How to Play a Poem*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2017. 235 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8229-6437-7

Burt, Stephanie. *Don't Read Poetry: A Book about How to Read Poems*. Basic Books, 2019. 306 pp. ISBN: 978-0-465-09450-9

Endsley, Cristal Leigh. *The Fifth Element: Social Justice Pedagogy through Spoken Word Poetry*. Crystal Leigh Endsley. SUNY Press, 2016. 160 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4384-5986-8

Kleppe, Sandra Lee, and Angela Sorby, editors. *Poetry and Pedagogy Across the Lifespan: Disciplines, Classrooms, Contexts*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 378 pp. ISBN: 978-3-319-90432-0

If pandemic teaching has taught those of us working in higher education anything, it has perhaps been the oft-learned lesson that engaging students in work they do not want to do or are not readily equipped to do is *hard*. For those of us who teach poetry in general education courses or in courses for nonmajors, ideas about how to make poetry exciting to students who have not read much poetry before are always welcome. The four books reviewed here offer a variety of ways to get reluctant, resistant, or confused students invested in poetry and, hopefully, to keep them reading long after classes end. These books vary widely in scope and in intended audience, from Stephanie Burt's general introduction to poems to Crystal Leigh Endsley's meditation on

Erin Kappeler is an assistant professor of English at Tulane University. Her work has appeared in *Modernism/modernity*, *Literature Compass*, and the Wiley-Blackwell *Companion to Modernist Poetry*, among other venues and has been supported by the ACLS, the Mellon Foundation, and the NEH. She is currently working on a book manuscript that presents the first historical account of American free verse poetry as a racialized form.

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the specific ways spoken word poetry becomes activism to Don Bialostosky's Bakhtinian guide to reading poetry to Sandra Lee Kleppe and Angela Sorby's edited collection on teaching poetry across disciplines and in a wide variety of classroom settings. All, however, offer people who teach poetry or who want to teach more poetry exciting ideas about how to make different kinds of poems come alive for students of all ages and interests.

For the Love of Poems, *Don't Read Poetry*

Read poems, not poetry. This is the message of Stephanie Burt's book, aimed at the poetry-curious reader who may have little experience with poetry or who may have been turned off by classes focused on technical terms. Burt explains, "I started to write this book because I got frustrated with books that told their readers, and teachers who told their students, that poetry was one thing . . . So: don't read poetry. Don't assume *poetry* ever means only one thing . . . Instead, find ways to encounter kinds of poems and learn different reasons to read poems" (7–8). In response to this call, Burt models on William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (17), providing six such reasons to read poetry: feelings, characters, technique, difficulty, wisdom, and community. *Don't Read Poetry* is casual and conversational; reading it is like talking to your bibliomaniac friend who wants to tell you why you should love the books they have been reading lately. This aspect of the book is hugely pleasurable, and I was happy to be turned on to some more contemporary poets whose work I was not yet familiar with. Particularly for the lay reader, Burt's penchant for analogizing poetry and aspects of poems to other forms of art, sports, and even to Pokémon and to the New York City subway system is a helpful way to think about poetry as something people make and enjoy and use rather than as a rarefied, mystified realm that requires specialized technical knowledge to enter.

While I was largely charmed by this book, I also found myself pushing back against the stealth argument regarding the history of poetry that moves underneath these seemingly ahistorical chapters. Though Burt notes that "poetry" has been an elastic term that "[u]ntil about two hundred years ago . . . could mean 'imaginative literature,' anything made up, or not real, or not true in prose or verse" (5), she also attempts to argue that "lyric poetry . . . is far older than the English language, and older than the words we now use to describe it" (30). Both of these statements can't be true, unless one is attempting to apply and naturalize a modern concept of poetry to writing produced under conditions other than those of modernity. This may seem like quibbling on my part, but the move to universalize modern Anglo-American critical categories has a history (a much longer one than I can engage here), and that history can help to advance imperial

goals as easily as it can help to link cultures or epochs for humanist pedagogues with aims of liberal inclusivity. The universalizing of Anglo-American critical categories is particularly clear in "Feelings," which attempts to present a Romantic model of lyric poetry as evidence that human emotions have remained, at some level, the same across time and cultures. One of the first examples Burt offers of a poem that expresses emotion is Catullus 85 ("I Hate and I Love"). It seems contradictory to follow up the introduction's argument that different poems do different things for different readers at different times with the argument that Catullus was writing lyric expressive poems rather than working within literary cultures very different from those developed by European Romantic poets. It also seems counterintuitive to try to link Catullus with Frank O'Hara, Laura Kasischke, George Herbert, Morgan Parker, and A. E. Housman, among others, as Burt does, with the argument that "to read lyric poetry [one might also say, to read lyrically] is to discover commonalities of human feeling—however approximate, however conjectural—across time and space" (32). I'm not sure why we would want these poets' work to do the same things, particularly if it is true, as Burt argues, that "the reading of poetry, like the reading of anything, takes place in history," and that "all literary traditions, all poems, come to us in some context" (191). Why, then, make a claim for universal human emotion rather than context-specific forms of writing? The critic can't have it both ways, though Burt tries.

Other chapters work better because they universalize less. I found the final chapter on "Community" to be particularly instructive. Here Burt turns to work by contemporary poets to show "how poems can address, imagine, and even call into being versions of community, showing what holds groups of people together and how some poems speak to many people at once" (231). Through engaging readings of poems by poets associated with the Nuyorican Poets Café, Polish dissident politics, queer and trans communities, Native nations, and deaf culture, among other scenes and schools and traditions, Burt helps to bridge the gap between formalist analysis and political action, showing how the writing and reading of poetry can be world-building actions. Especially for readers new to poetry, this call to think about how poems can help to bind communities together helps to make clear why poems continue to be important to so many readers' private and public lives. Ultimately, *Don't Read Poetry* succeeds in its aim to introduce readers to "many more poems and parts of poems, and more poets" (19) and to encourage readers to "evolve [their] own reasons for liking poems . . . however [they] find more of them" (266). Especially for those who are more concerned with getting students to read poetry at all rather than getting them to understand the histories of different genres and forms of poetry, Burt's model may be instructive.

Taking Poems beyond the Classroom

The Fifth Element begins where Burt ends: with the power of poetry to build communities and sustain activist work. The book details Crystal Leigh Endsley's experiences mentoring the spoken word/performing arts group Collective Energy at Penn State University. While the book adds to research in feminist pedagogy, it primarily offers a narrative of discovery as the author navigates her expectations for community-engaged learning and activism with the messy realities of translating idealism into action during her first years of teaching. For educators thinking about how to link activism outside the classroom with the poetry studied inside of it Endsley's narrative offers much food for thought.

The book a-chronologically charts Collective Energy's formation, performances on Penn State's campus, and their travel to Trinidad and Tobago, as well as Endsley's further travels to Tanzania with a separate group of students. While *Fifth Element* offers a clear argument that spoken word poetry is "a tool for social justice, for critical feminist pedagogy, and [is] an element that is crucial to developing new ways of teaching and learning about identity" (xvi), readers looking for clear narrative lines will be frustrated. Such readers may find it helpful to begin at the end; the appendix describes both the form and the aims of the book with greater directness than the more impressionistic prologue. In the appendix, Endsley explains that she uses "fictionalized autoethnography, lyrics and poetry, and the format of a script" in order to offer, not a total representation of the many experiences participants in Collective Energy had, but "several possible entryways and threads to begin tracing this multidimensional and evolving entity" (137). It is unclear what "fictionalized autoethnography" means here, especially since Endsley, at the request of her students, uses the real names of the Collective Energy members. Endsley argues that the nonlinear nature of the text is intentional and is meant to "deman[d] the coperformance of the reader" (138). One may also argue that this structure reflects the research process, which Endsley concedes was "somewhat like a breeched birth—it has come out feet first," as Endsley collected data about Collective Energy in the form of recorded meetings and participant interviews "prior to having a firm research question" (142).

The book balances attention to Endsley's "position as researcher and artist" (1) with attention to the students' experiences finding their voices and testing out ideas through spoken word. Endsley posits that "spoken word poetry can be utilized as a new discursive practice by marginalized youth as a means to invert the practices of power within their own social and political context" (5), and her interviews with the students in Collective Energy bear out this hypothesis. Endsley's case studies show students using spoken word to navigate everything from

family dynamics to racism on Penn State's campus. Of course, "invert[ing] the practices of power" is not a simple proposition, and some of the most thought-provoking parts of the book take up the complications of using spoken word poetry as a means of doing anti-racist work at a predominantly white institution. For instance, Endsley reflects on the experience of inviting white students from a language and literacy education course to attend an open mic night for extra credit, expecting a positive transformative experience for those students. Instead, those students reported feeling personally attacked by performers who described experiences with racism and oppression. Endsley notes that through this experience she "came to understand that the transformative power of performance was not a 'feel-good' time for the students from whom the power was shifting" (64), suggesting the need for more pedagogical scaffolding for such students.

Similarly, Endsley's discussion of using spoken word for social change in an international context raises important questions about the difficulties of translating racialized identities and experiences across different cultural contexts. As Endsley notes, "it is a dangerous game to assume that an audience consisting of people with limited exposure to Black and Brown life in America will critically consume a performance production by live artists inhabiting these subjectivities" (117). In describing the experiences of students in a women's studies course on "Arts as Global Activism" in Arusha, Tanzania, Endsley notes that a commodified version of hip hop conditioned the way some in the Tanzanian audiences reacted to American student performers. In particular, Endsley narrates an instance where an MC at an open mic event referred to a Black male American student with a slur, and describes how this caused the American student harm and distress. The story remains unresolved; Endsley explains that "Our disconnect with each other on a micro-scale was clear instantly but a way to address it was not" (119). It is somewhat surprising, then, for the chapter containing this anecdote to ultimately argue that "the spoken word performance is politicized, marking the artist as a potential threat to the state and capitalist economy" (125).

The Fifth Element's refusal to be prescriptive about teaching is part of what makes it an engaging text. In highlighting and sharing the difficulties of negotiating student identities and investments—particularly when those identities and investments conflict with each other—Endsley raises a number of theoretical questions about community-engaged and activist teaching whose answers are context-dependent and variable. As she notes, the lesson she learned in mentoring student performers was "that community building takes a variety of autonomous forms. Performance can function as a way to build community in ways that cannot be measured or predicted" (57). For educators doing community-engaged teaching, Endsley's reflections on the power of this unpredictability will be generative.

Playing With Poems

In *How to Play a Poem*, Don Bialostosky sets out to save poetry from everyone who would take the enjoyment out of interacting with poems—in his account, New Critics, politicians who mandate standardized testing, priests, lawyers, and Plato, among others. Positioning himself against these deadening influences, Bialostosky attempts to inspire readers who may have been turned off by poetry to "bring poems to life for themselves" (xv). The book attempts to teach readers inside and outside the academy to understand poems as something that can be played, like music or games or parts in plays (5). Bialostosky presents his method of reading as important for bridging the divide he sees between poetry's still vibrant role in public life and its diminished status in shrinking English and humanities departments (xxiii–xiv). He asserts his approach to poetry as "a new and improved way to name what we do with poems," and that he has "a new and improved definition of what they are" (4). The claim to newness is overstated, but in repackaging some fairly familiar concepts, Bialostosky helpfully reminds teachers of poetry of some good pedagogical principles, such as meeting students where they are and helping students use knowledge they already have to interpret unfamiliar texts.

At its core, *How to Play a Poem* offers a Bakhtinian/Voloshinovian approach to poetry as a type of utterance made up of familiar speech genres. As with *The Fifth Element*, readers may want to begin at the end; an appendix explains in detail why Bialostosky finds Bakhtin—particularly in the essay "The Problem of Speech Genres"—to be crucial for understanding poetry. In the course of seventeen chapters, Bialostosky walks the reader through the steps required to develop such a reading. The first, "Reanimation," argues that, because poetry is printed on a page, it is "inanimate and silent, dead," and hence that "reading a poem is raising the dead" (13). The problem for contemporary readers, according to Bialostosky, is that "We are much more experienced as spectators than as reanimators of works of art" because we spend so much time with such narrative forms as movies, television, and prose (16–17). Academia does not help students learn to reanimate poems; instead, it encourages "symbol-hunting and theme-identifying," which "alienate[s] students from potentially shareable feelings and attitudes in poems" (17). Bialostosky proposes that perhaps, if we shift focus away from interpretation and towards finding "the *signs of life* that indicate tones and gestures and the *cues* that make available the world in which and toward which those gestures are directed" (20, emphasis original), then students and readers will be more invested in engaging with poems than if they are being directed to interpret themes and symbols.

Bialostosky develops this idea by presenting poems as utterances in the Bakhtinian sense—"words uttered, outed, delivered, voiced, intoned. They take time and place and turns. They are eventful interactions, responsive to utterances that precede them, provocative of others that follow" (21). The book instructs readers how to find the "signs of life" that can reanimate the dead poem printed onto the page into a living utterance, including tropes and rhetorical figures, "figures of thought," tone, and versification. If these categories seem somewhat old school, it's because they are; the newness comes in the way Bialostosky encourages readers to put these pieces together into a scene (one might even say a narrative scenario). As he puts it, "What I have in mind in this book is that we each learn to enact the poem for ourselves, … not necessarily in an oral performance, but in worked-through scenarios for such performances, not for the sake of an external audience's response, but for the pleasure of making the poem do what it can do" (9). This approach has the benefit of getting students to think about the multiple voicings often present within poems and the many different positions from which to consider the way a poem creates meaning. In Bialostosky's terms, the student reader becomes the "cocreator" of the text (26)—a move that certainly gives students much more agency than what they might experience in studying poetry for an AP or final exam.

While Bialostosky's writing is for the most part engaging, chapters occasionally struggle to decide whether they are written with a general audience or an academic audience in mind. For instance, some parts of the text assume that readers already understand the theory of the death of the author, and the text frequently includes long block quotations from academic monographs. At the same time, the book pushes discussions of other academic theories to the appendix, which is presumably aimed at a more specialized audience. There were also a few moments that gave me pause as an educator, such as when Bialostosky suggests that students should not find versification stressful because "meter's basis in English is so natural that we don't even notice it" (127). I cannot think of a worse way to introduce students to versification than telling them that approaches to meter are natural or instinctive, since any history of versification will tell you that this is far from the case, and this approach is likely to alienate confused students even further. I was also taken aback by the statement that "the mobile position I am inviting readers to take opens possibilities of imaginative activity and pleasure, of communication and community not available to those who hold to or are held by fixed identifications and investments" after a discussion of feminist approaches to reading (27). The rather outlandish implication is that being a cis man (especially a white cis man) offers one mobility rather than the "[fixity of] identifications and investments," as if one could ever truly be outside of either.

These limitations aside, *How to Play a Poem* makes a compelling case for thinking about poetry through a Bakhtinian lens. The range of poems Bialostosky interprets is impressive, and implicitly argues for the value of his approach, especially for students with limited experience with poetry. As Bialostosky notes, Bakhtin is not often considered useful to theorists of poetry and poetics, and for this reason alone, the book is a valuable contribution to discussions about how to teach and understand poetry, particularly to undergraduate students.

Poems, Poems, Everywhere

For the educator looking for new ways to approach poetry in the classroom, *Poetry and Pedagogy Across the Lifespan* may be the most useful of the titles reviewed here. This edited collection seeks to portray "poetry as a locus of pedagogical power in almost any context" (xv), and it succeeds in this aim. The breadth of contributions is impressive, with chapters exploring how poetry can be used in classes about chemistry, accounting, criminology, foreign language acquisition, teacher training, and coping with combat trauma, among other topics. As a result of the collaboration between editors Angela Sorby, who teaches at Marquette University in Wisconsin, and Sandra Lee Kleppe, who teaches at Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, the collection brings together contributions from educators teaching primarily in the United States and Norway in a variety of situations, from primary schools to universities. Together, these essays effectively "re-imagine the practice of poetry as a flexible, multi-modal medium that can reach students (and others) across the lifespan" (xvi).

The collection is divided into two sections: "Poetry Across the Disciplines and Modalities" and "Poetry Pedagogies and Theories in the Classroom." Particularly in the first section, chapters create productive tensions that highlight the wide variety of pedagogical goals that the study of poetry can facilitate. For instance, "Poetry and Accounting: 'What Is It You Plan to Do with Your One Wild and Precious Life?'" by Richard Tobin explores how the author instrumentalized poetry to help accounting students develop their professional skills, noting that the communication skills developed through the study of poetry "provide accounting students with a distinct competitive advantage in the workforce" (4). Meanwhile, "Teaching Poetry Through Dance" by Vivian Delchamps implicitly argues against such instrumentalization, presenting poetry and dance as a pair that can help students to resist the removal of agency in schooling—the increasing sedentariness of learning in secondary and post-secondary education that is part of producing a docile and manageable workforce.

The chapters that resonate with readers will of course depend on where and what they teach. As someone who has frequently taught at institutions

where students felt pressured to study "practical" things at the expense of taking humanities classes, I was particularly interested in "The Chemistry of Poetry: Transfer Across Disciplines." In this chapter, poetry professor Angela Sorby and chemistry professor Tracy Thompson describe their attempt to co-teach a course across disciplines and institutions with the goal of facilitating "far transfer"—the ability to apply "ideas or skills . . . in other contexts" than the one in which they were learned (30). Sorby and Thompson describe the process of teaching students critical reading practices and the scientific method as pursuits that can be productively compared and that can teach some of the same kinds of critical thinking about data and the material world. Ultimately, Sorby and Thompson argue, this comparison was successful not so much because of course content or measurable outcomes, but because, "when instructors from disparate disciplines work together, the demonstrated value of human connections is a lesson with the potential to transfer beyond the academy in ways that matter—even though (or because) we can't trace the effects" (31). Theirs is an intriguing experiment in bridging the much-hyped and artificial humanities/STEM divide that could be adapted to suit many different institutional settings.

Jim Cocola's "Multimodal Encounter: Two Case Studies in the Recovery of the Black Signifier" is a standout chapter that traces the posthumous white-washing of the work of canonical Black poets including Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Etheridge Knight, and Amiri Baraka. Cocola argues that "[t]hese half-dozen poets are among the most canonical in the African American tradition, and yet their emphases on blackness have been diminished through posthumous refashioning aiming to reframe their work for more general consumption." He shows that "such disappearances prove far more common than casual readers might suspect, and [that] the collective retrieval of these disappeared signifiers constitutes a dynamic kind of recovery work in the classroom" (140). Attending particularly to the deracination of Hughes's "Harlem" and Angelou's "Ailey, Baldwin, Floyd, Killens, and Mayfield" as they were anthologized, retitled, reprinted and recirculated after their authors' deaths, Cocola makes the case for "multimodal encounters," where "students [are] exposed to different mediations of a poem—in periodicals, in collections, in anthologies, in print, in audio and video recordings, as used with and without permission by others in diffuse cultural and political contexts" as a means to help students develop "a much fuller and more interdisciplinary sense of literary history: a history that, in this particular context, is far blacker and queerer than the most readily available texts would lead us to believe" (156). Cocola's offering contributes significantly to both literary history and to pedagogical discussions, and shows how literary study is linked to larger questions of historical memory and power.

Cocola's essay pairs well with Brian Yothers's "Teaching Unlikely Poets: Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Frances E. W. Harper," which likewise shows how thinking specifically about the changing fortunes of poetry within popular and academic cultures can help to give students a more complex view of how literary history and political and cultural histories are intertwined. Yothers notes that his students, a mix of MA graduate students, undergraduate English and English Language Arts majors, and other Liberal Arts majors, tend to have some familiarity with these authors as novelists from other classes they've taken, and that "they are often surprised and pleased to find that they are re-introduced to these figures as poets" (304). Teaching the lesser-known poetry of these figures, Yothers shows, helps to give students "a robust sense of the value placed on poetry in the nineteenth-century United States" (303) along with an understanding of how these writers used different poetic genres to understand key political and social issues of their time.

In their introduction, Sorby and Kleppe explain "[t]he essays in this volume are meant to spur active application and adaptation by educators" since "[e]very pedagogical situation is different" (xxiii). Though my review has focused primarily on essays that highlight imbrications of poetry and history, the wide range of approaches to poetry in the collection will make it useful to any educator thinking about how to present poems and poetry in many different classroom settings.

Turning Poems into Portals

Taken together, these four books show that, while poetry does not have any necessary ends or universal uses for educators, classes that don't think about poems might be missing out on a vital source of student engagement and intellectual growth. As Sorby and Kleppe argue, "Poetry asks students to think differently and maybe a little harder—and in return, it gives them access not just to the work of creative writers but also to their own capacities as creative readers" (xxiv). Each title reinforces the argument made so clearly in *Don't Read Poetry*: that poetry is capacious, but attending to the specificity of different poetic genres, like spoken word poetry or dramatic monologues or elegies, as the other three titles do, can turn poems into portals for students to enter larger conversations about the world they live in and the worlds and historical consequences they have inherited.

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