



a sense of regard

essays on poetry and race

EDITED BY LAURA McCULLOUGH

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Essays on Poetry and Race

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contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

LAURA MCCULLOUGH

I. Racialization & Reimagination: Whitman & the New Americans 7

1. America Singing: An Address to the Newly Arrived Peoples 9

GARRETT HONGO

2. Song 20

SARA MARIE ORTIZ

3. Finding Family with Native American Women Poets 25

RAVI SHANKAR

4. Walt and I: What's American about American Poetry? 33

KEN CHEN

5. Inaugural Poems and American Hope 43

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN

6. Refusal of the Mask in Claudia Rankine's Post-9/11 Poetics 50

JOANNA PENN COOPER

7. I Am Not a Man 57

CAMILLE T. DUNGY

II. The Unsayable & the Subversive 61

8. Shut Up and Be Black 63

MATTHEW LIPPMAN

9. Unsexing *I Am Joaquín* through Chicana Feminist Poetic Revisions 72

LEIGH JOHNSON

10. New Female Poets Writing Jewishly 79

LUCY BIEDERMAN

11. Looking for Parnassus in America 88
TIM LIU
12. The Radical Nature of Helene Johnson's *This Waiting for Love* 91
HADARA BAR-NADAV
13. Writing between Worlds 97
TIMOTHY LEYRSON
14. Letting Science Tell the Story 107
PAULA HAYES
15. Identity Indictment 115
TRAVIS HEDGE COKE
- III. Imperialism & Experiments: Comedy, Confession, Collage, Conscience 121*
16. Carrying Continents in Our Eyes: Arab American Poetry after 9/11 123
PHILIP METRES
17. A Mystifying Silence: Big and Black 137
MAJOR JACKSON
18. Writing White 155
MARTHA COLLINS
19. Writing like a White Guy 162
JASWINDER BOLINA
20. Whiteness Visible 173
TESS TAYLOR
21. The Gentle Art of Making Enemies 183
AILISH HOPPER
22. No Laughing Matter: Race, Poetry, and Humor 199
TONY HOAGLAND
23. The Unfinished Politics of Nathaniel Mackey's *Splay Anthem* 210
PATRICK S. LAWRENCE
- IV. Self as Center: Sonics, Code Switching, Culture, Clarity 221*
24. Code Switching, Multilanguaging, and Language Alterity 223
MIHAELA MOSCALIUC
25. New Living the Old in a New Way: The Jazz Idiom as Post-Soul
Continuum 233
ADEBE DERANGO-ADEM
26. Arthur Sze's Tesselated Poems 243
GERALD MAA

27. Ed Roberson and the Magic Hour 252
RANDALL HORTON
28. Asian Americans: The Front and Back of the Bus 257
DAVID MURA
29. One Migh Could Heah They Voice: Conjuring African American Dialect
Poems 270
CHARLES H. LYNCH
30. What's American about American Poetry 278
KAZIM ALI
31. What It Means to Be an American Poet 290
RAFAEL CAMPO
- Contributors 295
Index 301

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Garrett Hongo's "America Singing: An Address to the Newly Arrived Peoples" first appeared in *Parnassus* and was reprinted in *Fourteen Hills*.

Ken Chen's "Walt and I: What's American about American Poetry?" first appeared at *Poetry Society of America*.

Jason Schneiderman's "Inaugural Poems and American Hope" is adapted from an essay that first appeared in *American Poetry Review*.

Camille T. Dungy's "I Am Not a Man" is adapted from an essay that first appeared in *Painted Bride Quarterly*.

Major Jackson's "A Mystifying Silence" appeared in *American Poetry Review*.

Martha Collins's "Writing White" appeared in *American Poetry Review*.

Jaswinder Bolina's "Writing like a White Guy" appeared at *Poetry Foundation*.

Kazim Ali's "What's American about American Poetry" first appeared at *Poetry Society of America*.

Rafael Campo's "What It Means to Be an American Poet" first appeared at *Poetry Society of America*.

Tony Hoagland's "No Laughing Matter: Race, Poetry, and Humor" appeared in *American Poetry Review*.

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introduction

LAURA MCCULLOUGH

A poet once said to me that what she wanted from a good poem was that it move her *from one sense of regard to another*. In these essays about poetry and race, while some are more heavily about one or the other and some bring in complicating factors and concerns, it seems to me that they are all about *regard*, and that the denotations and connotations of that word—to observe, give attention to, think about, have feelings for, hold in esteem, be moved by—speak to the multiplicities of this project. Certainly I was looking to embrace mystery as opposed to mystification. I was also looking to be inclusive of both working poets and scholars, of writers with differing aesthetics as well as differing racial and ethnic identities and ideas about race and ethnicity, while according consideration to other identity markers with normative or marginalizing potential, such as gender, sexuality, religion, age, and bodily status.

This anthology is an effort to collect the voices of living poets and scholars in thoughtful and considered exfoliation of the current confluence of poetry and race, the difficulties, the nuances, the unexamined, the feared, the questions, and the quarrels across aesthetic camps and biases, and with a broad scope regarding the idea of race itself. While not all of the aspects of intersectionality are germane here, the idea that constructed categories of the human condition intersect, bleed and feed into each other, shift in dominance, and are differently privileged (even within groups) is at the core, and this project is in itself an intersectional and hybrid document in that it attempts to bring together contrasting views by people within and across many categories without judging the primacy of their categories. Rather, this project seeks to honor the complexities, especially when borders seem to be permeable, porous, crossed and recrossed, of each contributor's lived experience alongside the intellectual exfoliations of other contributors. Somewhere in the nexus of what we live

and what we think, this project took hold, the idea being to query, to quarrel, and to consider.

Edward W. Said, cultural critic and literary theorist noted for his work in postcolonial thought, wrote:

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connections between things. (1994, 406)

Said's sensitivity to Otherness, the multiplicity of its origins and shifting mutabilities as imperialism as a concept changes and can be applied in different ways, indeed the way it might even be applied to the arts, is useful in finding a way to enter the essays that make up this anthology. He wrote that

hybrid counter-energies, at work in many fields, individuals, and moments provide a community or collective made up of numerous anti-systemics [that offers] hints and practices for collective human existence (and neither doctrines nor complete theories) that is not based on coercion or domination . . . [leading to] mixed genres, unexpected combinations of tradition and novelty, political experiences based on communities of effort and interpretation . . . rather than classes or corporations of possession, appropriation, and power. (406)

The essays collected here illustrate Said's words in that they are often hybrid in form, and certainly hybrid in representing individual thinking, often trying to refract something out of the personal, historical, and aesthetic condition, oppression, or legacies of the writer. In confluence, this anthology is a hybrid of lyric and scholarly approaches to rendering the query, the quarrel, and the consideration in efforts toward making what these writers discovered become a *knowing* and in their curation and arrangement a larger body of *knowing* that could be entered into and engaged by many kinds of readers.

The act of writing these essays, by poets, poet-scholars, and scholars, necessitated a close examination process, but they are not meant to be definitive. In fact, Said is again helpful in preparing to read them. He wrote that “it is more rewarding—and more difficult—to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about ‘us’” (407). His intent here is a contrapuntal strategy for reading literature by holding more than one idea in the mind, very much as intersectionality might suggest, so that we read with multiple perspectives being, again, queried, quarreled with, and considered. Said’s original concern was regarding the colonized and the colonizer, but this is a foundational concept upon which to consider the multiple aspects of identity that will be explored in these essays, as well as their limitations, the possibility that they can be used as another kind of oppressive and alienating factor, and, too, the ways in which, taken together, they help to shape a view of the human condition that may not be fully apprehended through any one lens.

Authenticity and respect are two of the foundational components of this project. This does not mean that difficult subject matter is avoided, but it does mean that I challenged contributors to examine their own biases and to quarrel, first, with themselves, digging deeply into what they have experienced and know. Poets were asked to write essays the way they would write poems, to know something afterward that they themselves didn’t know going in. Scholars were asked to write not only for academics but for a broader audience of readers and writers of poetry.

The contents range from lyric essays by poets who mine their own experience to serious analysis of poets who perhaps have not yet received the critical attention that they warrant. Other essays take on matters of debate and political concerns, while others focus more on aesthetics or try to locate race in a web of complexities, and this enriches a larger, but controlled and composed, dialogue about the moment in time and poetics we are in with respect to both poetry and race.

Given that both of these lenses, poetry and race, are mutable and hard to define, the collusion of the two creates a kind of *terra nullius*—a term that is Latin for “land belonging to no one” and has come to mean, in international law, land that is not specifically governed by any one nation, though it may sometimes be “occupied.” And given the often incendiary nature of debates about poetics and race, the Balkanization of aesthetic camps as well as identity-based groups, this project was not about “occupation” so much as about trying

to create a neutral territory wherein writers of varying class, race, ethnicity, sometimes origin outside of the United States, but certainly often ancestral lineage of many cultures and countries, and from different aesthetic training or schools of critical thought, could give voice to thoughtful and mindful and sometimes soulful concerns.

This anthology seeks to move into this unowned territory with a sense, not of the dignity of the parts, but of a respect for the hybrid and intersecting nature of the project. Many of the writers take risks here as they attempt a new kind of engagement with the core concerns of the project and the many questions it sparks: How does one tease out race? Deal with real and perceived issues of trauma? Exfoliate the overlapping borders of multiple identities (of race and also of aesthetics)? Explore and embrace hyphenation (of artistic, biological, cultural, political identities)?

This is not meant to be exhaustive, but a new engagement that embraces multiple perspectives and, hybrid in itself, will be a powerful and provocative artifact that allows the nuances of those artistic, biological, cultural, political identities and experiences, the roots of both thinking and creating within the contributors to come into relief. These are complicated concerns taken on with great delicacy, vulnerability, and considerable intellectual power, but neither singly nor in the aggregate do they become definitive. Rather, they raise questions. This is a primer, a safe starting place for discussions that are rarely had and, when they are, have often led to breakdown in communication. The truth is that it is both hard to *be* the Other and hard to *hear* the Other, and confronting this paradox leads to another one: *we are all the Other*, an idea Said's work suggests is a key not only to the future of literary theory but to the future of humanity.

With that in mind, I did not set out to gather a manifesto, but to allow for an Introduction to Otherness, in the layered and fraught zones of poetry and race, and to ask questions. Does poetry need to reflect to us something of ourselves? What about when it doesn't? Does it engender empathy? Is empathy the same as compassion? Do we see ourselves in the eyes of the Other, and can we establish the value of Otherness by the Other, and examine our relationship to the very concept of the Other? Does a poet need to represent an identity group, and what happens when the poet confounds expectations about that group or, even more interestingly, *of* that group? These questions and more are not so much answered as they are articulated across these essays and in the organization of them into four units.

The anthology is divided into four sections. The first, “Racialization & Reimagination: Whitman & the New Americans,” includes essays that address either directly or slantwise issues about Americanism. Race, racialization, poetic as well as political legacies are unpacked, and this opening section speaks to and manifests both hybridity and intersectionality. These contributors raise questions. They consider. They risk. They even confess. All of them include a sense of wonder and, whether directly or indirectly, evoke perhaps the most important legacy of the American poetic icon Walt Whitman.

In the essays in the second section, “The Unsayable & the Subversive,” the poets and scholars write about the experience of *unsilencing* or about writers or concerns that seem to cross borders, those categories that intersectionality tries to illumine while recognizing the critical nature of the intersections themselves. What happens in the interstices? Why is one category more valued than another, and indeed what occurs when someone does something outside an applied category? What are the risks? What are, possibly, the rewards of crossing or confounding borders?

The third section circles around or in some cases directly interrogates the racial category of *whiteness*. What it means, what it excludes, what the borders are, the legacies, the privileges, the limitations and oppressions of and by. So, too, does it enter the peculiarly American tension between black and white histories and aesthetics. “Imperialism & Experiments: Comedy, Confession, Collage, Conscience” includes essays that all pry open doors that seem closed, and the hinges are creaky indeed.

The final section, “Self as Center: Sonics, Code Switching, Culture, Clarity,” most directly confronts language in the intersection of poetry and race, and the ways in which language is both a part of identity categories and the tool with which we render poetics. The essays in this section are very concerned with architectures of sound and culture, of race and the literary community, of poetry and being a poet in a racialized world.

The groupings in the anthology are meant to generate topics for discussion, to raise questions, to decenter and destabilize, to provoke, and maybe *to move*. By its nature, civil discourse requires participants willing to speak in good faith, but it also requires participant listeners who can hear positions that they may disagree with, to, as Said exhorts, read contrapuntally. To know what it means to be human requires not only perceiving the Other but confronting the nature of our own Otherness as revealed through “them.” Who is, intersectionality suggests, *us* and *them* when so many categories of being intersect, cross, and connect?

The contributors to *A Sense of Regard: Essays on Poetry and Race* invite us to listen in as they try to speak what they know, discover what they didn't, and in the process often find something out about themselves. They invite us to be moved from one sense of regard to another. What that might be will depend on each of us. They invite us to be provoked and to linger in that state, to see what it reveals to us, to talk to others about it, to ask questions of each other. To query, quarrel, and consider. The larger story lies in the interstices.

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I. RACIALIZATION & REIMAGINATION

Whitman & the New Americans

The essays in this opening section illustrate the contrapuntal in that they embrace hybridity, of thought, of race, of aesthetics in the forms within and the perspectives out of which they are written, and, to, in confluence with each other. Garrett Hongo's "America Singing: An Address to the Newly Arrived Peoples" evokes Walt Whitman and imagines a new polyphony out of the American optimism. Following and complicating the Hongo essay, Sara Marie Ortiz in "Song" explores difficulties and mutabilities in First People's poetics and bravely queries herself within those discussions. In "Finding Family with Native American Women Poets," race and gender collide as Ravi Shankar explores the intersections of what seem to be separate worlds, beginning with the question "You a red or a brown?" Ken Chen's performance piece/essay "Walt and I: What's American about American Poetry?" begins and ends with the speaker "hanging out" with Whitman and "dreams" its way through an exploration of multiple identity issues. Jason Schneiderman in "Inaugural Poems and American Hope" examines a number of ceremonial poems written for and/or performed at American presidential inaugurations and considers their

implications about race. In “Refusal of the Mask in Claudia Rankine’s Post-9/11 Poetics,” Joanna Penn Cooper “unmasks” stylistic and racial confluences in the Jamaican American poet. This section closes with the ways gender, race, and poetry sidle next to each other in Camille T. Dungy’s introspective “I Am Not a Man.”

I ~ america singing

An Address to the Newly Arrived Peoples

GARRETT HONGO

Maybe you've seen the sign
On old Sepulveda. *Tai Song*,
Cantonese Cuisine, on your way
to or from the L.A. airport.

Greg Pape

I've never been in Peking, or in the Summer Palace,
nor stood on the Great Stone Boat to watch
the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the picnickers
running away in the grass.

But I love to hear it sung.

Li-Young Lee

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear.

Walt Whitman

I am fascinated and thrilled that there has been such a surge of new immigration from across the Pacific these past few years. That, as a country, we are again in the process of being renewed and reformed by the new Americans from Asia and elsewhere. These newly arrived peoples, I know, come not so much from Japan and Okinawa and Guangdong, as did the ancestors of us third- and fourth-generation Asian Americans, but rather they are now coming, in increasing numbers, from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, Southeast Asia, Tonga, Fiji, Samoa, the Caribbean, Central America, and the Philippines. Their presence has charged our society with energy and change.

When I visit California now and walk about in the resurgent downtowns of San Jose and Santa Ana, I pass Vietnamese markets, Korean grocery stores, and restaurants for every kind of Pacific/Asian cuisine. When I was teaching at the University of Houston in 1988, I did most of my shopping in a huge supermarket run by Chinese for almost every Asian ethnicity. There was a Korean section, a section for Japanese foods (napa cabbage, daikon, kamaboko fish cakes, and Kal-pis in the coolers), and racks and racks of Chinese condiments like chili oil and oyster and plum sauces. I saw what I've always loved seeing—bins full of bean threads, bags of sesame seeds in various grades, cellophaned flats of dried seaweed, cans of black beans and bamboo shoots, fifty-pound bags of rice. The smells were gorgeous. The market was in its own little complex of shops, a big parking lot ringed with little storefronts for a travel agency, an optometrist, a records and tapes store, a bookstore, a coffee and dim sum shop, a casual restaurant, and a movie theater that showed chop-sockie Saturday matinees, mildly lurid cheongsam romances on weekend nights, and serials all week long.

I was taken there by one of my master's students, Edmund Chang, a graduate of Tufts in Boston, who was born in Taiwan, had grown up in Malta and Libya, went to high school in New Jersey, and had just become an American citizen the year before. He wanted to show me where to buy rice. We went with my small sons, themselves half Asian, who loved the sweet rice candies but wrinkled their noses at the carded yellow circles of sliced, seal-wrapped octopus hanging on hooks near the check stand. And me, I loved the goddamn place. I loved the feeling of the throng of new peoples swirling around me. I loved the feeling that I was in a vortex of cultures, a new republic of exchange—the thrilled New Americans around me. I heard a new chorus. It was America singing.

Before leaving Houston in 1989, I decided to get my car detailed. I didn't know if I was going to sell it or drive it to the West Coast where I was to take a new job. I took it to a detail shop I'd noticed while driving by one day. The guy there was a young hotshot, a sassy white dude who could do everything—I knew it and he knew I knew it. I liked him. He had Benzes, Beamers, even a Maserati in his shop. There was a Volvo being vacuumed and shined up when I drove in. He gave me a guarantee and a good price. This was the place to get the job done right, I thought.

We made the deal and I handed him my keys. He leaned out of the little waiting room and yelled over to one of his employees inside the garage, who

was busy shammying down a slick black Riviera. “Juan-o!” he said, an inside joke between the two of them. Juan was a handsome Native American-looking guy with thick black hair who was to drive me home in the shop car. He and I climbed into a Jeep Cherokee, freshly shined and, inside, its plastic wiped down with Armor All. We rode together in silence for a while. Then, when I’d stood about as much of it as I could, I struck up a conversation.

“Where are you from?” I asked. His hair was jet black, his skin rich and brown like stained Hawaiian koa wood. He held himself stiffly and shifted gears with precision. He had the posture and build of a Navajo, I thought.

“El Salvador,” he said, and turned his face to show me his grin.

“Oh,” I said, surprised. In an instant I felt annoyed with myself for being nosy. But I was curious, too. “Are you here to save your life?” I said.

He told me, “Yes, mine and my mother’s, my wife’s, my children’s. We all come.” There was a silence again as we moved through traffic into the little university village near where I lived. I wanted to give him something.

“Do you know the phrase,” I said, “*el pueblo unido, jamás será vencido?*” I learned it from my Chilean friends who had fled the murders after the coup of General Pinochet. It means “The people, united, will never be defeated” and was a slogan used to rally the various splinter groups of the Latin American left into a unified coalition. Hundreds of thousands chanted this as they marched in demonstrations through the streets of Santiago in support of the democracy of Salvador Allende, the doctor and socialist who was the elected president of Chile and who was deposed and murdered by his own military and, it is frequently said, with some assistance from our CIA.

This Salvadoran man next to me turned and grinned again. “Yes, sir. I know this saying. It is full of heart. We in El Salvador say it too, though we die for it.”

What unsettled me was his modesty, his resolve. Riding through Houston in that car, we were both humbled by the histories we carried and invoked.

Some folks—a lot of white Americans who fear people like us, who fear the oncoming change as weak, inner-reef swimmers fear the largest swells at sea beyond the reef—look to our renewed cities with anger and pessimism, consider them now terra incognita, lands where monsters dwell and where they are no longer safe or welcome. Many of the people I talk with in so-called educated circles feel that the inner cities, the ghettos, are a demilitarized zone, an unknown, an X or Mysterious Island where others belong but not them, not the real Americans.

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