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(Di)versification: Transgressive Poetics in the Twenty-First Century Classroom

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(DI)VERSIFICATION: TRANSGRESSIVE POETICS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
CLASSROOM

by

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ABSTRACT

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CLASSROOM

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The University of Texas at Arlington, 2024

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(Di)versification: Transgressive Poetics in the Twenty-First Century Classroom pairs literary analysis with pedagogical implications in an attempt to argue for the increased use of poetry in the classroom as a mechanism to subvert anti-ethnic and anti-LGBTQ censorship efforts. I argue in favor of a structuralist approach to analyzing early twenty-first century poetry in the transgressive classroom as a site of resistance against legislative efforts to censor or prohibit discussions of structural racism in public education. The work is separated into five chapters, each of which interrogates distinct formal traditions in American poetry: received forms, invented forms, erasure, nontraditional forms, and what I term unreadable poems, or poems that resist a traditional or linear reading. Each chapter delineates practical methodologies for educators through a combination of in-depth analysis and a discussion of pedagogical implications. Together, these chapters demonstrate the unique and effective application of teaching poetic form as a site of critical inquiry in the classroom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

Educators in America are presently faced with perhaps the most hostile and challenging work environment since the inception of compulsory schooling. State and local legislators have introduced and, in some cases, implemented new laws governing the content of public school classrooms, empowering parents to challenge everything from library inventories to modes of instruction, and moved to eliminate tenure. Collectively, these efforts further perpetuate an already deeply volatile profession, one increasingly laden with questions of ability, professionalism, and responsibilities from the general public. To complicate matters, recent legislation is in direct conflict with the pedagogy scholarship I encountered across every district and teacher training program in which I participated over the past fifteen years, which stresses the necessity of connecting learning to the "real world," prioritizing representation in the classroom, and facilitating frequent moments of self-reflection or metacognitive response. These pedagogical implications are rooted in the understanding that today's youth experience stress and anxiety at exponentially higher rates than previous generations. According to Brenda K. Wiederhold, complaints about mental health and reports of mental health crisis among adolescence has experienced a sharp increase in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her conclusions speak to an intensifying need for educators to develop curricula which supports adolescence through authentic representation and sociopolitical relevance given the strong evidence that mental health directly correlates with how visible, valued, and authentic students feel in the classroom.

Concurrently, literary scholars continue to engage in a seemingly inexhaustible debate over the trajectory of American poetry, its societal worth, and its intended readership. While poetry may be objectively more accessible and diverse than ever before in American literature,

stigmas associated with studying poetry are ever present and many educators continue to deprioritize poetry in their respective classrooms. Mary Weaven and Tom Clark investigated apprehension about teaching poetry in a Melbourne senior secondary college, during which participants in the study almost universally admitted that they were afraid to teach poetry. Weaven and Clark concluded that this general fear was rooted in three core anxieties: the fear that colleagues would ostracize them for teaching poetry, the fear that students would not understand poetry, and the fear that they lacked the necessary knowledge and experience to meaningfully teach poetry (206). Edwin Creely theorizes about the apprehension around teaching poetry in Melbourne and at large, arguing that the

> decline in the quality of poetry teaching internationally and in Australia may be
>
> due to a reticence on the part of teachers to utilise poetry in the classroom due to
>
> its seeming obscurity and complexity, or perhaps because there is poor reception
>
> to and engagement with poetry from students, who may see it as disconnected
>
> from their experience and interests. (117)

Yewande Lewis-Fokum, Schontal Moore, and Aisha T. Spencer add that this resistance to poetry, particularly among students, occurs when students are unable to access and engage with poems in coherent ways (86). At both the secondary and higher education levels, I have had countless experiences which confirm these scholars' findings. My colleagues are nothing short of combative at the suggestion that they should incorporate poetry into their respective classes, and my students are almost universally apprehensive about studying poetry because they have been made to believe that they "don't get it." Despite the reticence of educators and students alike, I contend that poetry is not only the most convenient, but also the most purposeful, mode of writing to subvert legislation which seeks to limit representation in the classroom and censor

conversations about real world issues.

Recent research indicates that poetry is both an effective and efficient medium through which educators can balance pedagogical pressures with legislative efforts to sanitize public school curricula for numerous reasons. For underrepresented students, poetry acts as a gateway for students to encounter counternarratives that intentionally center historically marginalized experiences (Lewis-Fokum 88-89). Carolyn Rickett, Cedric Grieve, and Jill Gordon also found that reading and writing poetry measurably improves mental health and sense of self (267-268), while Jake Young adds that experiencing poetry is "one of the best ways to develop both emotional intelligence and emotional maturity" because "poetry teaches us how to feel and control our emotions. It gives us space to feel and space to reflect" (207). Alexa Garvoille argues that studying poetry, and poetic form in particular, improves social and academic literacies (29-30).

I agree with Garvoille's conclusions that an interrogation of canonical poetic forms greatly enhances student literacy, but I argue in favor of centering poems from the early twenty-first century rather than canonized poems. There is certainly nothing wrong with incorporating canonical poems into the classroom, but canonical poems fail to address the questions of representation and contemporary relevance. The inclusion of early twenty-first century poets, most especially from underrepresented communities, ensures that students both engage with form in a meaningful way and also encounter poems that inspire discourse around the sociopolitical issues affecting their daily lives. Further, extending pedagogical practice beyond canonized, or received, forms allows educators to address invented forms from living poets, many of which were invented in direct response to the historical erasure of BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+ authors in American literature, as well as recent applications in erasure,

conceptualism, and the co-opting of nontraditional forms like crosswords that use form to question structures of oppression.

Despite pervasive evidence in favor of increased attention to poetry across the curriculum, questions about the importance and relevance of poetry as a genre of study persist, most especially in K-12 education. The debate around American poetics and its longevity invites frequent commentary from critics, authors and educators. In 2015, *The Washington Post* published a data-backed assertion that poetry is going extinct. In 2022, Matthew Walther claimed T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* as the last great American poetry. These are but two examples of the continued claim that American poetics is dying or dead, arguments which routinely spark immediate and vigorous rebuttal from poets and poetry readers alike. At the core of this debate is the pervasive assumption that canonized American poetry is indicative of the vitality of the genre; this claim, coupled with negative dispositions about the study of poetry that span general readers and educators alike (Hughes and Dymoke 49-54; Certo, et al. 105-109), contributes to the misconception that few, if any, great American poets have emerged over the last fifty to sixty years.

What most conceptualize when they consider the canon generally denotes those authors and literary works most often anthologized and/or required by various public school entities, such as AP curricula, adopted textbooks and test preparation materials. Most reading lists of American poetry in K-12 studies include Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Sylvia Plath, and Donald Hall, to name a few. Poets of color are rarely included, with the exception of a few mainstays such as Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and occasionally Paul Laurence Dunbar. According to Wesley Morris, Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* remained the "Moses"

of the American literary canon as late as 2018 despite Bloom's open dismissal of modern feminist and queer ideologies and his overt exclusion of many notable authors of color. Jill Anderson reinforces this, arguing that "It's been more than 50 years since literacy experts first stressed the need for more diverse books in the classroom, and yet reading lists look surprisingly the same as they did in 1970." Throughout her article, Anderson catalogs continued efforts to diversify the curriculum, including references to "The All-White World of Children's Books," written and published by Nancy Larrick in 1965, as well as Rudine Sims Bishop's 1990 essay, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," in which Bishop argues, "When there are enough books available that can act as both mirrors and windows for all our children, they will see that we can celebrate both our difference and our similarities, because together they are what makes us all human."

Despite continued calls for diversification in the curriculum throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, classroom materials remained glaringly homogenous well into the twenty-first century, prompting renewed calls for updates to the curriculum over the past decade. The organization We Need Diverse Books compiles research regarding the current state of publishing and the benefits of diverse books, noting that nearly half of all main characters in children's books are coded White, and another 30% are animals, meaning that only about 1 in 5 books targeted to children feature main characters of color. Even more alarming is that their research notes fewer than 4% of books feature a main character with a disability, and the same is true for children's books featuring a main character who identifies as LGBTQIA+. K. Blaine Wall, speaking to examples of intolerance in his courses, argues that teachers are in a particular position to challenge harmful ideologies, suggesting that "attitudes are often born of ignorance, [so] education is the ideal way to dissuade students from hopping on the bandwagon of fear"

(98). The stakes of continuing to teach a flattened, whitewashed version of the American experience are clear: "Educational research has shown that when teachers fail to address issues of social justice, marginalized groups are victimized" (Wall 103). Tricia Ebarvia, co-founder of #DisruptTexts, echoes this sentiment, arguing that

> As literacy teachers, we have one of the most powerful resources available to fight against hate and bias: We have stories. The stories—and, more importantly, the *counter*-stories, the *counternarratives*—that we choose to share with students are instrumental in helping all our students be seen and heard, appreciated and understood. This is especially critical for students from communities whose stories are too often over-simplified, misrepresented, or rendered invisible in the dominant culture and mainstream media. (43)

Both Wall and Ebarvia highlight the ways in which educators have a direct influence on identity formation, and they can actively combat harmful ideologies through inclusive practices in the classroom. If we accept the role of educational institutions in developing future generations of American citizens, then we must acknowledge that the intentional disruption of harmful systems and thought processes in our classrooms translates to a more inclusive and tolerant society.

Speaking to the role of the canon in nation-making, Anderson invokes Pamela Mason, Senior Lecturer on Education at Harvard, who describes the canon as a collection of texts prioritized in public education for their ability to represent the "depth and breadth of our national common experience." Cristina L. Lash extends this sentiment to curricular choices in general, arguing that public schools "make" nations and, by extension, nationalists, establishing and continually reinforcing an accepted version of Americanness as it prepares new generations of citizens for their place in the nation as a whole (100). The problem, according to all three

scholars, is that the K-12 canon continues to normalize 'middle class, white, cisgender people' as the 'common experience.' Lash also articulates how efforts to diversify the curriculum often center a Black-White binary, ignoring students of color and White immigrant students, evident in the continued tokenization of a handful of Black authors by textbook companies and mandated curricula (102-103). Though this binary does show evidence of minimizing what Lash terms "ethnic distance" between schools and Black students, it exacerbates feelings of alienation and under-representation for students from other historically marginalized communities (104).

Sustained and renewed calls for diversification are being met with vigorous challenges from legislators and parents alike. Elected officials and school board officials have turned the curriculum into a political talking point, inciting fear among parents in order to defend practices designed specifically to limit diversity and inclusivity in twenty-first century classrooms. This is most clear in the sweeping book bans proliferating school and local libraries at the behest of conservative pundits misrepresenting children's literature as pornographic, sexually explicit, and/or guilty of 'reverse-racism.' Considering the fact that only about 20% of all books targeted to children feature a main character of color, and fewer than 5% feature a main character who identifies as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, it is especially alarming that nearly every title on banned book lists features these characters. Students from marginalized communities are already met with a well-documented dearth of books which represent them, yet these books are overwhelmingly the subject of bans. In effect, legislation and community-based efforts to restrict access to diverse and inclusive texts perpetuates and exacerbates one of the most fundamental problems in education, forcefully eradicating people of color and LGBTQIA+ people from district-endorsed versions of the American experience.

bell hooks states that "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the

academy…Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions…" It is irresponsible to pretend that today's classrooms are the same as they were even three or four years ago. The teaching profession has long endured ire and judgment, both from the public and from legislators, but teaching today requires educators to navigate stresses that range from health risks to violent assault to increasingly restrictive legislation around curriculum. At the center of the storm are our students, most of whom enter the classroom desperate to feel seen, respected and valued.

Anti-ethnic and anti-LGBTQ legislation makes the representation and visibility of historically marginalized students in the curriculum increasingly difficult for public educators, who are vulnerable to consequences from district employers and potential lawsuits from the state. During the 2021-2022 academic year alone, more than half the United States passed legislation to greatly restrict curriculum material. Cathyrn Stout and Thomas Wilburn compiled an interactive map for *Chalkbeat* that tracks all states with legislation or pending legislation that prohibits references to racism and white supremacy in public education (Figure 1).

We have tracked efforts in 36 states to restrict education on racism, bias, the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to U.S. history, or related topics

Click or tap on a state to see details.

Alaska Maine Vt. N.H. Wash. Mont. N.D. Minn. Wis. Mich. N.Y. Mass. R.I. Idaho Wyo. S.D. Iowa Ill. Ind. Ohio Pa. N.J. Conn. Ore. Nev. Colo. Neb. Mo. Ky. W.Va. Va. Md. Del. Calif. Utah N.M. Kan. Ark. Tenn. N.C. S.C. D.C. Ariz. Okla. La. Miss. Ala. Ga. Hawaii Texas Fla.
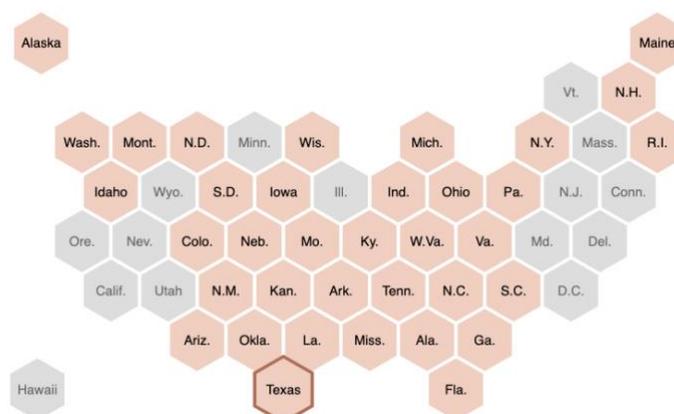
(Figure 1)[1]

According to a spreadsheet compiling their data, thirty-seven states introduced and/or passed legislation that would restrict discussions of race and racism in the classroom. Alabama, for example, permanently banned key parts of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in a bill that "encourages Alabama residents to 'move forward' from the past." Other states enacting or pursuing legislation that specifically targets CRT include Arkansas, Arizona, Idaho, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, and Texas, among others. In many instances, this legislation includes language which explicitly prohibits teachers from discussing elements of systemic racism, meritocracy, and white supremacy. Some, like Texas, go so far as to restrict the use of the word slavery, instead calling for those displaced by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to be described as migrant workers. Even as legislative efforts failed to uphold the rhetorical shift, both Texas school districts in which I taught quietly communicated that those teachers who referenced slavery directly may not have contracts renewed and could be at risk of disciplinary action, effectively enforcing conservative censorship to avoid potential pushback from parents. Mississippi

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[1] Stout, Cathryn and Thomas Wilburn. "CRT Map: Efforts to restrict teaching racism and bias have multiplied across the U.S." *Chalkbeat*, June 9 2021, updated 1 Feb. 2022.

Governor Tate Reeves signed a bill to ban instruction that refers to racism and systemic racism as fixtures in American nationhood, arguing that such a sentiment "runs counter to the principles of America's founding." He subsequently declared April Confederate Heritage Month and Genocide Awareness Month, but failed to acknowledge the systemic eradication of Indigenous peoples or the slave industry as genocidal practices in American history.

Jamie Gregory, writing for the Intellectual Freedom Blog, compiled numerous digital and print forms being circulated by districts to empower parents to report violations of anti-ethnic and anti-LGBTQ legislation (Gregory). A New Hampshire reporting form includes checkboxes for various forms of discrimination and a space for parents to indicate what type of discrimination they believe their child encountered in the classroom (Figure 2), while an Ohio reporting form allows students to select various topics they prohibit their children from learning in the classroom (Figure 3).

CONFIDENTIAL
THIS IS NOT A CHARGE OF DISCRIMINATION.

I believe I, or my child, was discriminated against because my school, or my child's school, was teaching and/or advocating that one identified group is:

- [ ] Inherently superior or inferior to people of another identified group
- [ ] Inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously
- [ ] Should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment
- [ ] Should not treat members of other identified groups equally

Based on:

- [ ] Race or Color
- [ ] National Origin
- [ ] Creed/Religion
- [ ] Gender
- [ ] Sexual Orientation
- [ ] Gender Identity
- [ ] Physical Disability
- [ ] Mental Disability
- [ ] Age
- [ ] Marital Status

First date of alleged discrimination (MM/DD/YYYY): _____

Last date of alleged discrimination** (MM/DD/YYYY): _____

** Please keep in mind that you only have 180 days from the last date of alleged discrimination to file an education intake form with the Commission under both state and federal laws.

(Figure 2)[2]

Racially Divisive Concepts / SEL Parental Non-Consent/
Opt Out Form For the _____ School Year

I, _____, as parent and/or legal guardian of _____, a minor child, hereby exercise my right under the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment, the U.S. Constitution and the Constitution and laws of the State of Ohio, to direct the upbringing and education of my minor child, and hereby place school administrators on notice of the following:

1. I DO NOT CONSENT to my child's participation in any instruction or discussion which is derived of racially divisive concepts in whole or in part from; contains information from; or references to the following sources, including but not limited to:

A. 1619 Project
B. Revisionist History
C. Critical Race Theory
D. Culturally Responsive Teaching
E. Ethnic Studies
F. Action Civics
G. White Fragility
H. Antiracism
I. Systemic Racism
J. Diversity, Equity & Inclusion
K. Equity Initiatives
L. BrainPop
M. CASEL
N. Any SEL programs including, but not limited to, Sanford Harmony, Edgenuity, Purpose Prep, Second Steps, RethinkEd, 7 Mindsets, Panorama, UnboundEd, the Wallace Foundation etc.

(Figure 3)[3]

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[2] Gregory, Jamie. "Anti-Critical Race Theory' Education Legislation, Passed and Pending, is Unconstitutional Censorship." *Intellectual Freedom Blog*, The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association, 12 Jan. 2022.

[3] Gregory, Jamie. "Anti-Critical Race Theory' Education Legislation, Passed and Pending, is Unconstitutional Censorship." *Intellectual Freedom Blog*, The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association, 12 Jan. 2022.

These forms illustrate the growing push for a selective education in which students do not encounter information that conflicts with their parents' or caregivers' ideologies. In most instances, students cannot challenge these decisions, thereby surrendering any autonomy over their education, even when they are keenly aware that they are not learning the truth about American history or contemporary issues. Those students who choose to speak publicly about the desire to have autonomy over their education are dismissed by the very adults tasked with preparing them for the future; some are openly ridiculed for voicing their frustrations, even when they voice those opinions in forums designed for the purpose. During a school board meeting in Texas, for example, Granbury ISD Superintendent Jeremy Glenn, echoing numerous school leaders and lawmakers across the country, described high school students who challenged his order to remove books from the high school library as radical leftists who support pornography in the classroom. At the root of this censorship is a generalized fear that teachers will address the ways in which America has protected systems of oppression, but excluding such conversations from the curriculum further alienates students who are already woefully underrepresented in the classroom.

Though legislative efforts to censor curricula in higher education are, to date, less common, South Dakota, Idaho, Oklahoma and Iowa have all passed laws which effectively restrict educators at public higher education institutions from including certain topics or theories in the classroom. On the surface, these laws extend to all state employees, but the language makes clear that higher education institutions are the intended target. To understand what is at stake in these attacks on educators and educational institutions, we need only consider the established purpose of compulsory education in the United States, namely the charge of preparing new generations for civic engagement and American citizenship. Oriana Bandiera, et

al. provide a robust and thorough data analysis designed to test the hypothesis that compulsory schooling legislation in America correlates with the 'Age of Mass Migration,' and that the language of that legislation implicates compulsory schooling as a concerted effort to assimilate the children of migrants to the American way of life (104). They concluded that

> American-born median voters pass compulsory schooling laws significantly
> earlier in time in US states with a larger share of migrants from European
> countries without historic exposure to compulsory state schooling in their country
> of origin…There is existing evidence for schools affecting individual values via
> the content of curricula…Our findings thus come full circle…to suggest the
> original architects of the common school system, all of whom linked education
> with inculcating the civic values and discipline necessary for effective
> participation in American democracy, ultimately achieved their aim (104-105).

Adriana Lleras-Muney and Allison Shertzer arrive at similar conclusions in their research, which includes comprehensive data analysis to determine the effects of compulsory schooling and English-only laws on immigrant populations from 1910 to 1930. Their research was compelled by "A resurgence of legislation geared towards making English the official language of the states" beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the elimination of bilingual programs and the renaming of the Bilingual Education Act to the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act as part of No Child Left Behind (2). Lleras-Muney and Shertzer found that "both public and private efforts focused on 'English first' as the main objective of the Americanization movement" thereby dubbing bilingual education programs "un-American" (7) and that "enrollment of foreign-born children predicts the passage of [English only instruction] legislation" (12).

While these studies fixate on the beginning and end of the twentieth century, the implications of their findings are evident in both contemporary political rhetoric and expressed sentiments among voters. Pew Research Center compiled data during a 2022 poll which shows that parents are largely divided along partisan lines regarding their opinions on the Department of Education, individual educators and acceptable content in public schools (Figure 4).
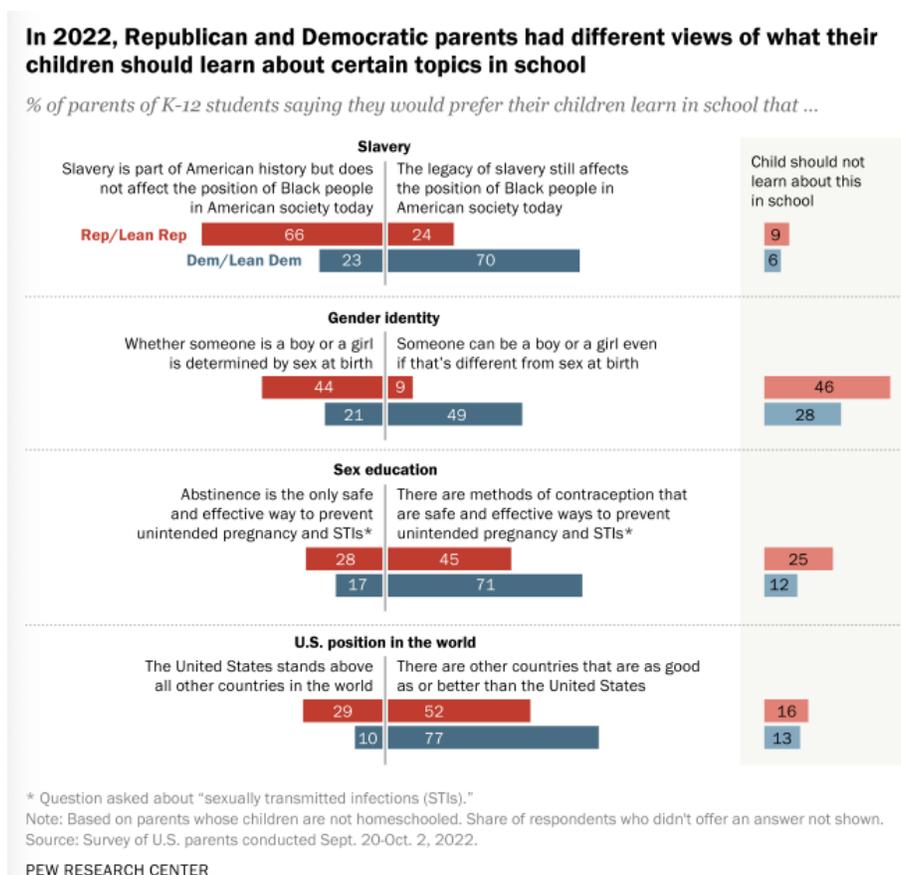
(Figure 4)[4]

Based on this data, parents are most sharply divided on questions of race and gender identity, with right-leaning parents significantly more likely to oppose curricula which acknowledges the lasting impact of slavery on contemporary society, and that which affirms the existence of gender identities that diverge from one's assigned sex; this correlates with another key finding

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[4] Hatfield, Jenn. "Partisan divides over K-12 education in 8 charts." *Pew Research Center*, 5 June 2003.

regarding the presence of targeted words (diversity, equity, inclusion, culture, social, emotional) in district mission statements. Unsurprisingly, districts in areas that voted Democrat during the 2020 election were substantially more likely to include reference to diversity, equity, and inclusion in their mission statements. Interestingly, the divide is narrower with reference to "social" and "emotional," yet fewer than a third of school districts examined referenced these words at all in their respective mission statements, suggesting that most districts do not center the social or emotional wellbeing of their students as core elements of their mission.

With parental choice at the forefront of conversations about state-sponsored education, it comes as no surprise that a survey conducted by Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) identified education as a central issue in the 2024 election, with 91% of respondents indicating that education is either "critical" or "one among many important issues" (16). Notably, the only issues respondents identified as more important to the 2024 election are "the health of our democracy" and "increasing costs of housing and everyday expenses," suggesting that even questions of reproductive care, immigration, and racial inequality register lower than education in the minds of voters going into the 2024 election cycle. Though 92% of respondents "favor teaching children history that includes both the good and bad aspects of our history," the majority also supported "refraining from teaching aspects of history that could make them feel uncomfortable or guilty about what their ancestors did in the past" (31). Approximately one third of Americans communicated distrust in teachers and librarians, with 82% of respondents who "most trust far-right news outlets" indicating that "teachers and librarians are indoctrinating children" (31). Questions of gender identity were even more starkly divided, with 88% of Republican respondents indicating that they do not believe there are more than two genders, while only 36% of Democrats indicated the same (33).

These sentiments are reflected in both legislative and community efforts to censor materials in both schools and public libraries. According to the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom, there were "1,269 demands to censor library books and resources in 2022…[which] targeted a record 2,571 unique titles…Of those titles, the vast majority were written by or about members of the LGBTQIA+ community or by and about Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color." Preliminary data from 2023 shows a 20% increase in attempts to censor library materials and services. Again, the target is primarily materials which affirm LGBTQIA+ identities and/or the experiences of people of color. These demands for censorship mirror legislative actions across the country, specifically working to ensure that American youth are not exposed to material which directly challenges conservative ideologies. The potential effect of these attacks is the further alienation of communities already starkly absent from the standard curriculum, discouraging youth from engaging and impeding their ability to see themselves in the version of America presented to them inside the classroom.

Against the backdrop of intentionally polarizing rhetoric and prohibitive legislation, educators must attempt to inform students about the most pertinent issues of their time and ensure authentic representation in the classroom. Educators have both the ability and responsibility to meaningfully address the very issues that state legislation seeks to prohibit, particularly with the aid of well-selected poems that inform and invite debate around the most relevant issues of our time. I argue that poetry is a particularly nascent entry point to address relevant and difficult sociopolitical themes, both methodologically and practically, and further that students will benefit from a concerted and sustained focus on the formal elements of poetry. Engaging with poetry may appear tangential to the demands of most standards-based curricula, and to the project of increasing equity in the education system as a whole. This necessitates a

reframing of poetry as more than high literature with limited accessibility or applicability. From a practicality standpoint, poems function as cultural artifacts which concretize the human condition across nearly all cultures and historical moments. Students are able to practice every key skill inherent to research, critical inquiry and textual analysis through a rigorous engagement with poetry. Poems are also likely to be both a product of their times and a window through which students can discuss contemporary issues. Scholarship over the last decade highlights the broad applicability of poetry in academic pursuits ranging from neuroscience and psychology to palliative care and social work. Additionally, there is substantial scholarship to suggest that poetry is, for many historically marginalized groups, the preferred genre for writing as resistance.

Carmen Bugan, in *Poetry and the Language of Oppression*, argues that poetry is "a form of salvation…from political oppression," and that "the language of oppression comes into competition with the language of poetry for a higher ideal, and where the struggle takes place: one language suppresses it, the other seeks to express it." Her work offers necessary insight into how readers can and should approach poetry as an intentional act of resistance against dominant power structures, particularly when poets write from within oppressive structures. Bugan further highlights how poetry offers individuals a way in which to make sense of the world free from state censorship and demonstrates how political refugees living in diaspora use poetry to process and communicate the injustices they and their families have survived.

Ilya Kaminsky, speaking in an interview with *Atlanta Magazine*, reinforces the role of poetry for diasporic witnesses as he describes interactions with numerous friends and colleagues in war-torn Ukraine. At the center of his conversation with the interviewer is the ongoing insistence on translating poetry and disseminating it beyond Ukraine as a deliberate act of resistance against the Russian invasion. Kaminsky describes an interaction with one poet, Lesyk

Panasiuk, who tells Kaminsky, "I don't need your money, he says. Translate my poem, publish it in the world" (Enjeti). Throughout the interview, Kaminsky stresses the ways in which Ukrainians turn to poetry while taking refuge underground, in the streets between air raids, by the light of generators and candles—across all these scenes, the poets share with Kaminsky that they must continue to write, read, and recite. Hala Alyan communicates a similar urgency and commitment to using poetry as a site of resistance, arguing that "the diasporic witness is witness to their dying, to their bearing witness to God, and witness to their witness. Therefore: a diptych of witnessing. Only one is left to speak on it" (Alyan, "'I am not there…"). Alyan speaks directly to her internalized sense of obligation to address Palestinian genocide, an idea echoed throughout her most recent poetry collection, *The Moon That Turns You Back,* released just months after Israel began a violent assault on Palestinians in October 2023.

Audre Lorde likewise argues that poetry functions as a site of resistance in her widely circulated essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," wherein Lorde argued that poetry "is a vital necessity of our existence" and that women of color are able to "give name to the nameless so it can be thought" through poetry. More recently, Maylei Blackwell, speaking to the role of witnessing in reclaiming Chicana history, argued that "retrofitted memory is a form of countermemory that uses fragments of older histories that have been disjunctured by colonial practices…or by masculinist renderings of history that disappear women's political involvement," a foundational perspective that works to inform the ways in which we discuss the sociocultural impact of writing that disrupts dominant narratives (2). Alyan, Lorde, and Blackwell help to contextualize and name the specific resistance described by Bugan, that resistance which manifests repeatedly in the work of contemporary American poets living in diaspora.

While Blackwell does not exclusively engage poetry as a site of resistance, her insights

into the creation of counternarratives is indispensable, most especially as we engage erasure and documental poetry written by authors outside the cisgender, White hegemony. Educators should take note that each of these women centers the role of the writer in developing counternarratives, thus the most effective way to empower students is to engage them not just through critical reading, but also through the writing of original poetry. Incorporating early twenty-first century writers introduces students to perspectives that are too often absent from the classroom, validating their own experiences and demonstrating that their lives are deserving of attention. That validation becomes most meaningful when students are given the opportunity to express themselves through similar means, such as "after" poems in which students work to emulate structural elements of a source poem while producing images and language that are wholly unique to them.

Given that many American students live in diaspora and lack the means to visit the homes of their respective ancestors, educators should pay particular attention to the poetics of diaspora and how the act of witnessing differs for those who lack the autonomy to return to spaces of their forebearers. Throughout the introduction to her book, *The Poetics of Difference*, Mecca Jamila Sullivan cites numerous scholars across diasporas, all of whom point to poetry as a site of resistance because it offers historically marginalized voices an opportunity to create alternative histories and counternarratives that defy oppressive, state-enforced narratives. Drawing from Audre Lorde's poetics and the "theory of multiple difference," Sullivan describes difference "both as a means of naming the specific forms of otherness by which black women have been barred from power and life in Western colonial logics…and as a means of articulating the capaciousness and complexity of black women's subjectivities" (3). She argues that "the tactic of voicing difference through genre subversion is a prominent characteristic of African

diaspora women's writing," a characteristic which frequently extends to other writers of color and members of the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly trans* authors of color confronting their inability to assimilate to either racialized or gendered spaces (11). Sullivan thus creates a vital lens through which to understand how poets engage the genre as Other and work to deliberately decolonize that space. Students can apply this understanding through both critical analysis and creative writing, broadening their worldview while also empowering them to claim ownership over their experiences and voices. Educators can also turn to Sullivan's theory to introduce students to subversive techniques and how poets living in diaspora actively disrupt expectations of form and language, deepening the understanding of how rhetoric, structure, and textuality work in tandem to create a more nuanced perspective of race and gender identities.

Yomaira C. Figueroa-Vásquez's concept of *destierro*, a term that describes the complex and multiple forms of dispossession that attempt to cut peoples away from their land, bodies, memories, and spiritual practices, also has clear application in the teaching of poets writing in diaspora (89). Figueroa-Vásquez's theoretical work focuses specifically on Afro-Atlantic literature, but her comments on the function of exile and the impossibility of home prove equally applicable to Latinx and Asian writing written in diaspora. She invokes Carolyn Forche, who argues that fiction and poetry function as vessels through which authors can write "othered" histories, silent histories, and stories of resistance as a cornerstone of what Figueroa-Vasquez terms "faithful witnessing," an intentional methodology that aligns itself with feminist and decolonial epistemologies, situating analysis alongside insurgent worldviews that offer new ways to understand decolonization as project and practice to "elucidate how…Afro-Atlantic works…engage in philosophies of witnessing which reject colonial politics of recognition…and offer meditations on futurities or worlds / otherwise" (7, 67). Embodying faithful witnessing as

praxis requires instructors to observe and empower students without co-opting or inserting ourselves into the narrative. Educators should recognize the role of retrofitted memory in creating from a place of disjunctured or fractured memory, a means through which counternarratives act as an opportunity to reclaim or reimagine colonized spaces. Together, the work of Figuero-Vasquez and Sullivan establish a deliberate and ongoing subversion in diasporic poetics through which poets of color disrupt White hegemonic narratives and representations of the so-called "Other."

Sarah Dowling coins the term "translingual poetics" to describe "poetry that is self-consciously situated between languages and that attends to the complex process of domination and refusal" and which "foreground historical processes of contact, colonization, migration, and assimilation, locating evidence and the effects of these violences in language and in languages" (5-6). Dowling differentiates translingual poetics from bilingual and multilingual writing in that "*translingual* typically describes critical, oppositional, and survival practices" (5). Like the diasporic poetics delineated in the work of Figueroa-Vasquez and Sullivan, what Dowling terms translingual poetics functions as an intentional act of subversion against "settler monolingualism," moving between languages as an act of resistance against English-only spaces. The act of writing across languages, and specifically the refusal to translate non-English words and phrases, not only validates writing outside White Mainstream English but also decenters English-only readers as the default audience for American poetry. In the classroom, the incorporation of translingual poetics is integral to discussions about linguistic racism and the need to destabilize the correlation between White Mainstream English and Academic English / Professional English. Despite my best efforts, students in my classes frequently communicate apprehension about using language and language structures authentic to their respective voices in

essay writing. However, they are eager to employ voice during creative writing exercises, most especially when constructing poems; through discussion, I have come to understand that they view poetry as a space in which semantic and grammatical guidelines are not absolute, thus the infusion of speech patterns, multiple languages, and euphemisms does not register as "deviant" rhetorically.

Educators are facing unprecedented efforts to censor the curriculum, as evidenced by the continual rise in the number of book bans and legislative efforts to censor public educators. Poetry, as evidenced above, is an effective genre of resistance for historically disenfranchised communities, a mechanism through which silenced and marginalized voices can reclaim their respective identities and reinsert themselves into narratives that have historically erased their experiences. It follows that educators who select poems with intentionality can respond to censorship and engage students with complex, relevant literature. Some will undoubtedly argue that poetry, as a genre, is not inherently political. While I will concede that the extent to which poetry is politicized varies across traditions and historical moments, early twenty-first century poetry is marked by a measurable increase in its attention to the political sphere. Despite this shift, living poets and critics alike still frequently center readings of poetry fixated on the personal. Inevitably, some argue against politicized readings of poetry, even with increasingly visible discussions around the personal as political. As Carolyn Forche argues, however,

> We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between 'personal' and 'political' poems…The distinction…gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time, it renders the personal too important and not important enough. If we give up the dimension of the personal, we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the

personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures

of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of

the individual. (31)

Micheal Leong attributes some of that politicization to the ways in which early twenty-first

century poets are engaging with historical artifacts as an act of resistance. Leong acknowledges

that "there is a long tradition of writers who draw on preexisting documents," but argues, "the

practice of appropriation, citation, and documentation of the new century have taken on a

distinctive character, responding in powerful ways to a set of specific historical circumstances"

(5). According to Leong, this shift coincides with the turn of the century in North American

poetry, marking the insurgence of documental poetics which "moves from deconstruction to

reconstruction through a practice of textual resocialization—that is, through a citation, re-

citation, even recitation, of what has been filed away" (5-7). Diasporic poetics, translingual

poetics, and documental poetics frequently overlap, working in conjunction to fully disrupt

dominant narratives and reorient readers as witnesses to experiences routinely suppressed in

American literature. Co-opting documents curated and cataloged by the State and reconstructing

them toward vastly different narratives is perhaps the most overt method for creating

counternarratives that deliberately destabilize White hegemonic perspectives.

Consider, for example, Moncho Alvarado's "An Erasure of Senate Bill 1698 (2),"

reproduced below (Figure 5).

nature, to promote gender fluidity or gender pronouns

the basis for

finding

The department of education

shall establish rules and procedures for establishing and

inclusion   described in
nature,

Statutes,   to read:
          Prescribe

all books, publications, papers or

audiovisual materials
          in nature, that promote   fluidity
                              allowed

an entity, including a charter school, another school district

or a military base,
                    or   any
                    parties
                         to   Prescribe the curricula and

criteria for
          repair

(Figure 5)[5]

Alvarado sources the erasure from SB 1700 (originally SB 1698), a bill that was first vetoed by

the governor, then reintroduced and enacted, during the 56th Legislature in Arizona during the

2023 cycle. The bill as it was passed allows parents substantial involvement regarding the

selection of materials for the classroom. More importantly, it specifies that Arizona schools

must, among other things, exclude *all* books deemed lewd, sexual, or which "promote gender

fluidity or gender pronouns or that groom children into normalizing pedophilia" (SB 1700 Sec.

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[5] Alvarado, Moncho. "An Erasure of Senate Bill 1698 (2)." *Poem-A-Day*, The Academy of American Poets, 25 Oct 2023.

5.2). Rhetorically, this phrase implies an equivalency between the support or recognition of gender fluidity and/or gender pronouns and pedophilia, echoing the numerous politicians calling for an end to transgender book readings across the nation. SB 1700 is one of more than five hundred anti-trans bills that were introduced in state or federal legislation sessions during 2023, and part of more than three thousand legislative efforts to ban certain books from public schools in 2023. Alvarado creates an erasure of the bill which textually and semantically destroys it, reimagining a counternarrative in which Arizona enacts legislation that does not prohibit these materials, but instead compels districts to "Prescribe all books, publications, papers or audiovisual materials in nature, that promote fluidity allowed an entity" and to "Prescribe the curricula and criteria for repair." Alvarado's final statement perfectly exemplifies what Leong describes in his comments as the move from deconstruction to reconstruction. Alvarado's poem does not merely dismantle the bill, but offers an alternative that is rooted in identity affirmation.

The poem offers ample opportunities for instruction in the classroom, many of which reinforce interdisciplinary skills like the critical reading of technical documents, archival research, and comparative analysis. Were I to include this poem in a first-year writing course where our primary concerns are close reading, rhetorical analysis, and research, the assignment might look something like this:

> Step 1: Read SB 1700 in its entirety, offering a critical analysis that includes annotations demarcating specific elements of the text that reinforce your reading.
>
> Step 2: Conduct research into the historical context of the bill, including how it aligns with similar bills focused on gender identity and public schools introduced in 2023, as well as any language the bill borrows from

publicized talking points from major political parties.

Step 3: Read the erasure created by Alvarado, again offering a critical analysis

with annotations that support your reading of the poem.

Step 4: Produce three discussion questions that ask students to compare specific

language or textual observations between the original bill and the erasure,

as well as exemplar responses to each question.

Once students had completed each part of the process, we would come together for a discussion centered on comparative analysis and drawing from the questions that students produced. This exercise responds directly to anti-ethnic and anti-LGBTQ legislation, centering a trans Xicanx woman and her civic engagement with legislation that directly impacts other members of the trans community. Students come away having participated in meaningful research, critical reading, and discourse around documental poetics as a site of intervention and protest. As an extension of the exercise, educators might assign students to locate a local, state, or federal document that applies to them and generate an erasure which creates a counternarrative or alternative space that is, for the student, more representative of their values and priorities. Students could include a reflective paragraph that discusses their thought process in creating the erasure, reinforcing metacognition as a vital part of the writing and revision processes.

As this exercise demonstrates, including poetry in the curriculum is far from tangential; in fact, it is strong pedagogical practice, and it may help respond to the often glaring omission of authentic representation in textbooks while also reinforcing key literacies that prepare students to enter the world as informed, independent thinkers with a strong foundation in critical inquiry. Further, as Logan Manning notes, "inviting poetry into classrooms [activates] potential for breaking through the silence that often pervades schools" and helps to create spaces where

students are "free to produce counter-stories and counter-meanings to the ones handed to them by others" (289). For educators committed to empowering students, to developing informed and independent thinkers equipped with the skills necessary to meaningfully engage multiple forms of communication, poetry is a uniquely effective conduit. The exercise described above, for example, could be completed in one or two course meetings, yet it engages multiple literacies and culminates in high level discourse about an immediately relevant, real world issue.

The classroom is an increasingly embattled space, and educators are continually forced to confront the dichotomy best described by Adrienne Rich in her essay, "Arts of the Possible":

Public education and universal public access to the word. Universal public education has two possible—and contradictory—missions. One is the development of a literate, articulate and well-informed citizenry so that the democratic process can continue to evolve and the promise of radical equality can be brought closer to realization. The other is the cynical perpetuation of a class system with an elite, nominally "gifted" few, tracked from an early age, and a very large underclass essentially alienated from language and science, from poetry and politics, from history and hope, an underclass to be funneled—whatever its dreams and hopes—toward low-wage temporary jobs. The second is the direction our society has taken. The results are devastating simply in terms of the betrayal of a generation. (332)

Rich published these comments in late 1997, more than a decade before the election of President Barack Obama and nearly thirty years ahead of the influx of legislative efforts to sanitize the classroom. In retrospect, her comments are even more ominous, as educators should recognize the rapidity with which American society has barreled toward the perpetuation of oppressive

structures through the education sector. Despite swiftly devolving faith in public education among parents and students alike, transgressive educators persist. In my own praxis, I draw heavily from bell hooks, who coined the term "transgressive teaching" and wrote heavily about the need for educators and students to connect with one another to generate excitement around learning.

hooks explicitly identifies the classroom as a site of activism and resistance, as well as the necessity of disseminating information in an accessible manner, arguing that "any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public" (64). hooks is greatly influenced by Paulo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, while also acknowledging the internalized misogyny evident throughout Freire's text (45-49). Both authors identify education as a pathway to freedom (hooks 4-5, Freire 74-75) and argue that some educators have a vested interest in replicating racist structures to protect whiteness and reinforce racist power structures (hooks 149, Freire 55). Freire and hooks also emphasize that educators must approach activism with the understanding that they are not liberating students, but rather acting as allies to their students (hooks 18-19, Freire 38). This distinction is central to distinguishing between pedagogy which perpetuates inequitable power dynamics and that which empowers students to disrupt the oppressive structures they encounter.

Of course, transgressive teaching requires more than a carefully curated classroom library and informal conversations with students. Educators have a responsibility to confront and actively subvert racist structures embedded in education as an American institution. Asao B. Inoue provides a step-by-step, actionable model for creating writing assessments, rubrics, and practices that decenter Whiteness and disrupt traditional power structures in the teaching of

writing (Figure 6).

Power – the ways of disciplining and control, the instruments, techniques, procedures, and tactics that produce docility and control people

Purposes – the explicit reasons for judging and assessing

Places - where and when do things happen, the figurative and material locations that de(con)fine people and their learning, the locations of shock and change

People – agents in the ecology, (e.g. students and teacher)

Processes – what and how things are done, labor practices

Parts – codes, constructs, and artifacts (e.g. texts, rubrics, feedback)

Products – learning, results, consequences, and decisions

(Figure 6; Inoue 176)

Transgressive teaching requires that instructors restructure writing assessments with these seven components (Power, Purpose, Place, People, Process, Parts, and Products) if they are going to destabilize the racist power structures imbued in past writing rubrics and assessments. Adopting Inoue's approach to antiracist writing ecologies accepts that "People in antiracist writing assessment ecologies are not considered homogenous, nor are they simply stakeholder groups with uniform needs and wants…[they] are diverse in many ways, which affect their ways of reading and judging, and the entire system" (175). Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides and Carlin Borsheim-Black offer an important addition to the conversation of antiracist teaching praxis,

moving beyond assessment practices to offer tangible methodologies for antiracist literary instruction. They "see literature as a platform for helping students to build their racial literacies, [and] also see the complex understandings that come with racial literacy development as leading to deeper interpretations of literature" (12). One of the most essential tenets of antiracist instruction, according to Sarigianides and Borsheim-Black, lies in intentionality—educators must employ methods like backward design with a specific mind toward what it is they want students to derive during a lesson focused on racism (19-20).

Kimberly Parker emphasizes this need for intentionality, arguing that transgressive teaching "means evaluating and reevaluating our curriculum, materials, and expectations to ensure that we see children's inherent brilliance" (34). Parker highlights that students of color are historically underrepresented in systems of achievement like gifted programs, accelerated learning programs, and AP courses, urging educators to "explore our own practices and ask ourselves difficult questions that will surface our beliefs" (34). While acknowledging our complicity in systems that perpetuate racist structures of achievement and racist ideologies in literature may be uncomfortable, it is an essential part of becoming a transgressive teacher in the twenty-first century. We must also "redefine achievement to ensure that it means the education of the whole learner, *including, but not limited to*, academic achievement" (Chrona 88). Academic achievement, in isolation, risks prioritizing meritocracy systems which are inextricably linked to White supremacy because our institutions have operated under measures of achievement that prioritize specific modes of thinking and learning. These modes disproportionately benefit White, middle-class experiences and risk alienating students of color who internalize the belief that they cannot succeed in formal education settings.

The scholarship around transgressive teaching is well-documented, as is the function of poetry as a site of resistance, but how does formalism correlate with political activism in the genre? I have had countless conversations with colleagues, critics, and living poets; across these conversations, the most pervasive assumption about formalist poetics is that it aligns with conservatism and institutionalized poetry, that its rigidity and structure correlate too closely with colonialism and systemic oppression. Given that legislation most often targets *structures* of oppression, however, I argue that a structuralist analysis of early twenty-first poetry is an ideal intervention that allows students to contemplate the correlations between poetic structure and sociopolitical structures. Hank Lazer, in 1990, observed two distinct approaches to discussing postcolonial poetry, namely "those which begin from a multicultural perspective and those which theorize the relationship of form and politics, where form is considered broadly as an institutional and social practice as well as an aesthetic set of choices" (505). Of note is that Lazer differentiates multiculturalism from formalism with regard to poetry criticism, suggesting that a multicultural perspective either does not make assumptions about the correlation of form with institutions, or that those with a multicultural perspective are not directly concerned with that correlation.

Through a deep analysis of nine books of poetry criticism, Lazer ultimately concludes that "If poetry is to retain (or return to) a place of importance and excitement, poets must engage in an oppositional practice of form *and* content inseparably," and that they must continue to write radically, to move beyond what their predecessors have already shown (527). This conclusion seems at odds with a formalist approach to early twenty-first century poetry, but in actuality Lazer reinforces the importance of understanding form. How, after all, can students appreciate the innovations of and oppositions to form without first encountering the structures against

which early twenty-first century poets are writing? It is only through encounters with the sonnet crown, for example, that students can begin to understand how Jericho Brown's invented form, the duplex, acts in opposition to the sonnet. I do not mean to suggest, then, that a formalist approach in the twenty-first century is concerned exclusively with canonical or received forms; rather, I argue in favor of leading with received forms and then introducing students to invented forms, co-opted forms, even seemingly anti-formalist forms, so that they are best able to process the specific connections between form and resistance. Brown, for example, describes his process of inventing the duplex form as "queering the sonnet," and has spoken on numerous occasions about his deliberate engagement with both canonical poetic forms and the blues as mechanisms for reimaging poetic form as a space in which people like him can language authentically, meaningfully.

Transgressive teaching necessitates prioritizing and validating the experiences of students, a practice that in turn requires supplementing the curriculum with intentionality. Each group of students carries unique experiences into the classroom; this could be seen as a challenge or a virtue—a challenge insofar as different course sections may need different sets of experiences represented in assigned texts, but also a virtue in that the unique configurations of each class push educators to continually engage literature as they search for texts that will serve their students best. This task may feel impossible against the backdrop of growing dissent for the profession and ongoing challenges to course materials, but poetry offers a tangible way to address that challenge. Centering diverse experiences is, practically speaking, more possible when texts themselves are short; supplementing the curriculum while navigating various bans on certain books is simplest when incorporating new work from living authors, work that has not yet been challenged by parents. Beyond the practical, poetry as a genre requires intense critical

reading and writing skills, so educators are able to push students further without spending weeks on an individual text. For transgressive educators, poetry offers an effective and efficient way to confront the sociopolitical implications of our time while also validating students' respective experiences. By rooting pedagogy in formalist intervention, educators can combat the misperception that poetic form is antithetical to resistance while also providing a discernable and accessible framework through which students can enter into critical analysis wherein they begin to process disruptions in form as disruptions to power structures at large.

The specific intervention that my dissertation offers is a cohesive interdisciplinary conversation that brings sociological, political, literary, and pedagogical theories together to construct a more informed, complex understanding of how to structure the twenty-first century classroom as a site of activism through a sustained engagement of poetic form. As the literature review herein illustrates, there is ample scholarship around the poetics of difference and how authors of color utilize poetry specifically to resist oppressive systems; likewise, sociologists and political theorists have robustly demonstrated the continual erasure of people of color and pressure to assimilate to an American ideal that largely eradicates cultural difference. Numerous texts have also worked to identify practical methods for decolonizing the classroom and creating a learning environment that empowers students.

Likewise, scholars in education expound the benefits of teaching poetry as a mechanism for critical reading and writing, while scholars in psychosocial sciences have thoroughly demonstrated the socioemotional benefits of reading and writing poetry. Each of these methodologies is integral to effecting change, yet few have meaningfully engaged across disciplines to articulate the unique (and vital) impact that reading and writing poetry can have on students. Thus, my dissertation aims to fill that gap, combining the powerful insights of scholars

in multiple fields with my own experiences as an educator and my deep engagement with contemporary poetry to provide educators with concrete frameworks for bringing poetry into the classroom. I have organized the chapters based on structural features, moving from canonical and/or received forms toward increasingly conceptual and unconventional forms. This work includes five chapters, each addressing a specific element of form in twenty-first American poetry and its applicability in the classroom. I combine literary analysis with pedagogical implications to offer educators concrete ideas for how to subvert oppressive legislation without jeopardizing their careers or alienating students. The unifying thread across each chapter is that poetry serves as a useful conduit for transgressive teaching practices, particularly in the wake of anti-ethnic and/or anti-LGBTQ legislation restricting school curricula. The structural elements prioritized herein are received poetic forms, invented poetic forms, erasure, nontraditional forms, and unreadable forms. The decision to center structure as a unifying element reflects research which speaks to the unique correlation between literacy and the structural analysis of poetry, as well as literary criticism which bridges structure and sociopolitical commentary in twenty-first century American poetry. Though I have arranged the chapters according to structure, each prioritizes voices and experiences across a broad spectrum, with deliberate attention given to writers from communities that are generally excluded from school curricula.

Chapter One engages with form and formalism in contemporary American poetry because most lay readers and preservice teachers alike associate poetry with specific forms. Textbooks frequently present formal poetry through classical formalists such as William Shakespeare, John Donne, and Robert Frost, to name a few. My discussion will draw on recent scholarship that argues in favor of pairing classical formalists with contemporary poets, offering analyses of recent work by Patricia Smith, Taylor Byas, Zeina Hashem Beck, Danez Smith,

Terrance Hayes, Jericho Brown and Franny Choi. I suggest the use of contemporary formalists as a means to both instruct students on the formal elements of poetry and present form as a living, evolving aspect of American poetry. I further address the cross-curricular benefits of engaging students in the writing of formal poetry as a means of critical literacy praxis. Forms addressed include the sonnet (including the crown sonnet and heroic sonnet variations), pantoum, ghazal, villanelle, and sestina.

Chapter Two centers what I term "invented forms," or forms deliberately created and described by living poets writing in English. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the ways in which contemporary poets are making space for themselves in discussions of form in American poetry, a deliberate act which inverts the historical colonization of poetry by White critics and practitioners; this is an essential element of understanding poetry as a site of resistance, as it offers a strong counterargument to assertions that poets writing for audiences outside the academy lack technical skill and an intricate understanding of the page. The invented forms and their respective innovators included in this chapter are the duplex, invented by Jericho Brown; the golden shovel, invented by Terrance Hayes; the contrapuntal, a form utilized by twentieth century poet Andrei Bely and popularized in the twenty-first century by Tyehimba Jess and Tarfia Faizullah, among others; slam, invented by Marc Smith; the obverse, invented by Nicole Sealey; and the Arabic, invented by Marwa Helal. This chapter functions as a bridge between my earlier discussion of classical form and subsequent chapters on more nontraditional and experimental forms, helping to solidify arguments that poets pushing against form are doing so as part of a deliberate and sustained effort to reimagine the genre outside White-dominated spaces. From a practical standpoint, introducing students to invented forms helps to

communicate the ways in which students can begin to deviate from traditional communication structures as they master the foundational principles of reading and writing.

Chapters Three and Four consider erasure and nontraditional forms as mechanisms of protest. I argue that the authors of color intentionally challenge traditional notions of what poetry is, using graphics and co-opting familiar text objects like blueprints, bingo cards, and crosswords to challenge larger assumptions about gender identity, ableism, and the immigrant experience. Recent uses of erasure from Mai Der Vang and Courtney Faye Taylor, for example, engage the history of poetics as a site of recovery and alternate history, drawing from declassified and public documents to challenge dominant narratives around genocide and anti-Blackness. Fatimah Asghar employs a bingo card to comment on the daily microaggressions experienced by people of color in America and blueprint which acts as a structural commentary on the legacy of abuse in foster homes, while Junious Ward creates a mad lib from twentieth century miscegenation legislation to critique tacit culpability in systemic oppression. For educators, the inclusion of erasure and nontraditional forms in poetry encourages students to engage poetry as a living genre. It also invites conversation about the implications of gatekeeping in both the publishing and education industries, as well as the power of recovered histories and the manipulation of state documents to reorient readers to witness from the perspective of historically marginalized groups.

Chapter Five moves fully into a discussion of unreadable poems, poems which totally and intentionally subvert the very notion of what makes a poem; this marks the most explicit rejection of gatekeeping practices in the industry, with authors boldly refusing to assimilate to agreed-upon standards of poetry. These poems often employ typographic and spatial experimentation to challenge the way readers approach poetry, as exemplified in "Jotxland

Epic," by Roda Avelar, as well as the award-winning *Citizen,* by Claudia Rankine, and "Rondo,"

by Danez Smith. These poets exemplify a sustained investigation of how language functions on

the page, layering language and arranging it in white space as an act of resistance against

flattened versions of their respective narratives. By challenging the concept of the page as a two-

dimensional, finite space, poets work toward an understanding of language as complex, messy

and alive. Students understandably push against unreadable poems, as they do not resemble any

of the traditional representations of language included in curricula; however, the act of

navigating unreadable poems attunes students to unprecedented levels of critical reading and

reinforces the mentality that language cannot, and should not, be reduced to singular meanings.

　　　　Together, these chapters combine scholarship across multiple disciplines toward a

sustained argument in favor of utilizing poetry in the classroom. Each offers deep literary

analysis of exemplary poems, both to reinforce scholarship about the function of various poetics

represented and to provide educators with concrete frameworks for discussing poetry in the

classroom. My discussion is a vital addition to twenty-first century scholarship in that it bridges

the conceptual and the practical, addressing the most common reservations for including poetry

in the curriculum as well as calls to intentionally diversify the curriculum for twenty-first century

learners. My goal is to offer actionable ways to employ transgressive teaching practices in

individual classrooms at a time when educators are encountering unparalleled challenges from

both parents and legislators. The practical applications included in each chapter subvert efforts to

suppress literature by and about people of color and/or members of the LGBTQIA+ community

without directly defying existing legislation or literature bans. My hope is to offer a pathway

toward a more inclusive classroom which empowers students, not just to embrace their

individual experiences but to frame and communicate them in nuanced, deliberate ways that

represent their authentic selves.

Chapter 1

Received Forms as Resistance in Twenty-First Century American Poetry: Unsettling the

Curriculum Through Verse

Throughout my time in education, as both a curriculum writer for various school districts

and as a peer, fellow teachers have confided that they are reticent about teaching poetry because

they lack confidence in their ability to teach critical reading. More specifically, many colleagues

have voiced that teaching poetry is inherently different from teaching other types of reading and

writing because, to teach it well, we must instruct our students on interpretive thinking. One of

the most challenging aspects of instructing on interpretive thinking is that students

misunderstand critical analysis as the process through which they arrive at *the* meaning, rather

than *one possible* meaning. Another challenge is that poetry is intentionally efficient with

language, offering fewer textual clues than longer forms like the essay, short story, or novel. As a

result, students frequently enter poems from a space wherein they believe they are "bad at" or

incapable of making meaning, causing them to become passive learners as they wait for

educators to divine meaning for them. Introducing students to poetry first through poetic form

provides both educators and students with a concrete methodology, and one that allows students

to *begin* making meaning through observation of form, rather than immediately attempting

critical analysis; this, in itself, is not a radical or transgressive approach. What moves instruction

around poetic form from traditional pedagogy to transgressive teaching is how educators frame

the *function* of form and in what ways authors from historically marginalized communities

engage with traditions that have historically excluded them.

For educators reluctant to teach poetry, there is a certain comfort afforded by formal

verse, as educators can center lessons on the structural elements rather than interpretive strategies

and a critical reading of the language. Alexa Garvoille argues that "teaching poetic forms in the classroom is one of the easiest ways to begin engaging students in writing poetry" because reading and writing in closed forms permits educators "to root instruction in the concrete—the effable—-making closed forms a practical entryway into the ineffable art of poetry" (27). Garvoille also acknowledges, however, that limiting instruction purely to closed forms also limits the extent to which students interrogate the correlation between form and meaning. Though her focus is on encouraging students to disrupt form in their own writing, her comments are equally applicable to how educators should approach instruction around reading form. Each time educators introduce the strict parameters of a received form, they should provide exemplars that closely follow the requirements of form; this gives students a foundational understanding of how authors navigate the restrictions of form. Once they have an understanding of how different authors approach the form in a conventional sense, educators should introduce poems which deviate from form and push students to consider how disruptions in form, however minor, represent intentional decisions from the author and alter the ways in which the poem engages with tradition.

Prioritizing classical forms of poetry in transgressive teaching may appear antithetical, and indeed the continued emphasis on poems like Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" or Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" certainly does little to orient the classroom as a site of activism. However, I acknowledge the motivation to teach these poems on the basis that they are frequently included on standardized tests ranging from state exit exams to college entrance exams. Thus, I am not suggesting that educators rely exclusively on formal verse from the early twenty-first century; rather, I argue that supplementing instruction of canonical and oft anthologized formal poetry with a curated selection of formal verse written by living authors

from historically marginalized communities and centering instruction on structural analysis can highlight the ways in which living poets are making bold, deliberate statements about social structures through their use of canonical forms.

Over the past two decades, in fact, certain forms have proven immensely popular among poets living in diaspora, BIPOC poets, and/or LGBTQIA+ poets precisely because they offer concrete structures through which poets can challenge social structures. Mecca Jamilah Sullivan terms this practice

> *poetics of difference*—a set of subversive aesthetic strategies that uses
>
> multiplicities of form and genre to respond to global discourses of antiracism,
>
> decolonization, feminism, and anti-heterosexism…These forms function as both
>
> artistic innovations and theoretical interventions into how social difference and
>
> identity are imagined. (13)

Through these interventions, historically marginalized poets "train readers to navigate multiple forms of difference in the formal properties of their texts" (Sullivan 13). The most visible traditional form in twenty-first century American poetry is the sonnet and its variations, the crown sonnet and the heroic crown. For poets employing form as a site of resistance to Western social structures, the popularity of the sonnet is inevitable, as it is the form most readily and persistently associated with poetry written in English. Other canonical forms that appear with increasing regularity include the pantoum, the ghazal, the sestina, and the villanelle. While not all these forms require a strict metrical pattern, all of them rely on the repetition of words or phrases; this predilection for poetic forms which prioritize repetition correlates directly with poets' use of formal structures to highlight systemic oppression, generational trauma, and the

perpetuity of social structures that alienate those who fail, or refuse, to assimilate to mainstream America.

Michael J. Lee traces the historical influence of canon, which he argues "is often exerted in a kind of cultural loop; political communities cultivate and maintain canonical prestige through rhetorical practices, and canons, in turn, influence the rhetorical practices of political communities" (4-5). Lee concludes that engaging canonical texts perpetuates conservative ideologies, and indeed that reinforcing conservatism from generation to generation requires continued engagement with the established canon (24-25). If Lee's conclusions are extended to the literary canon and its prioritization in the classroom, one can conclude that educators who center canonized formal verse effectively reinforce the ideologies and practices of a dominant voice, namely the European colonial perspective. Some canonical poets have addressed this directly, reinforcing the perception that formalist verse reinforces White hegemony. Gwendolyn Brooks disavowed her early invocations of formal verse, including the sonnet, as "white writing" in her 1972 memoir, *Notes on Part One* (177). Marilyn Hacker describes a 1970s letter from Adrienne Rich in which Rich implores Hacker to "stop writing in metrical forms" because, Rich believed, forms like the sonnet represented patriarchal and colonial ideologies. However, Hacker also notes that Rich eventually softened her disdain for formalism and acknowledged "its radical engagements as close in time and space as Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Muriel Rukeyser."

Following a poetry reading in 1993, Derek Walcott and Joseph Brodsky discussed form and formal constructions in poetry. According to Walcott, "the obvious example of where recurrent crises in verse forms have happened is obviously America…it is always against tradition; it is always for the individual; it is always for self-expression as opposed to any

concept of tradition" (188). Walcott associates the resurgence of formal verse in the 1990s with the rebuke of formalism among modernists. He suggests that modernism and its rejection of formal conventions made a return to formal verse inevitable, closing by lamenting that "it is horrible that there are poets, young poets, who are taught" that musicality and formal rhyme are dead "as almost an American law" (189). Brodsky follows Walcott's comments with the statement that "it's not a simple return, because it's not just simply a pendulum going back and forth…The whole point about free verse is indeed a liberation…but in order to break out…you have to know the tune" (188-189). The two continue to go back and forth, with Walcott insisting that young poets are being deliberately "taught that the only possible escape from banality, from predictability, is not to use rhyme" (192). He challenges this practice, suggesting instead that "the argument is not about the number of beats to the line; the argument is how skillful is the manipulation of the shifts of stress within structure" (192).

I invoke this conversation in large part because, during the conversation, Walcott alludes to a cultural disdain for meter and rhyme in writing programs, and among literary journals, that persisted throughout the twentieth century. The "revolutionaries of formal verse," as Walcott calls them, challenged this disdain and sought to reassert the value of formal verse in contemporary American poetry. It should be noted, of course, that there is substantial disagreement about the place of formalism in twentieth and twenty-first century American poetry. Robert Phillips addresses this disagreement in detail, arguing that formalism did not actually fade from American poetry while also acknowledging that there developed a considerable rift between "the cooked and the raw, the left and the right, the conservative and the radical, the traditional and the experimental, the academics and the wildmen, the formalists and the free verse writers" (147). Putting Walcott and Phillips in conversation, it becomes clear that

formalism and formal innovation are not inherently "dead" or archaic practices in American poetry, but also that disagreement persists around the extent to which engaging with received forms can act as resistance against hegemonic structures. However, as David Caplan notes, early twenty-first century poets across many traditions and demographics are increasingly writing within metrical and formal constraints (3-4). Caplan rightly argues that early twenty-first century poets have resisted the binary thinking described by Walcott and Phillips, rejecting the suggestion that received forms inherently reinforce state power structures and instead reclaiming space within these forms, thereby disrupting the historical erasure of authors of color and reimagining an American literary tradition that is more inclusive and authentic to the broad spectrum of lived experiences in America.

Caroline Levine provides one of the most coherent descriptions of how and why formal structures in writing coincide with social activism. She structures her book, *Forms*, into four "forms" that, she argues, persist in both domestic and literary spaces:

> bounded *wholes,* from domestic walls to national boundaries; temporal *rhythms,* from the repetitions of industrial labor to the enduring patterns of institutions over time; powerful *hierarchies,* including gender, race, class, and bureaucracy; and *networks* that link people and objects, including multinational trade, terrorism, and transportation. All of these have resonant corollaries in literature and literary studies: the bounded whole has long been a model for lyric poetry and narrative closure; rhythmic tempos organize poetic meter and sometimes literary history itself; hierarchies organize literary texts' investments in certain values and characters over others; and networks link national cultures, writers, and characters. (21)

Levine further argues that scholars have long operated under "the assumption that literary forms can be easily mapped onto political communities—that there is an effective homology between the bounded wholeness of the lyric poem, for example, and the bounded wholeness of a nation" (25). This assumption manifests in our association of formal verse with conservative White America because the image of the "nation" remains heavily white-washed. The legislative efforts imposing censorship in classrooms across the nation only serve to reinforce conservative Whiteness as synonymous with Americanness. And yet, writers outside the White hegemony are co-opting traditionally White spaces in literature with growing frequency.

Poets like Taylor Byas, Danez Smith, Adrienne Chung, and Leslie Sainz are employing formal verse intentionally to assert their presence in White dominated spaces while also rallying members of their respective communities toward a unified resistance of oppressive structures. They have internalized that the replication of canonical forms by authors traditionally excluded from American literature, and from images of the nation, can be an act of resistance. Though the boundaries imposed by strict forms like the sonnet and sestina can restrict language, successfully navigating their parameters while also challenging hegemonic ideologies symbolically asserts that it is possible to dismantle power structures from within. Some poets are compelled to shatter canonical forms, sometimes upending readers' understanding of what constitutes a poem, while others multiply forms to disrupt understandings of how structures function and reimagine possibilities beyond those structures. Thus, introducing canonical forms into the classroom and centering a structuralist reading allows students to internalize formal elements while also contending with the ways in which a poet's treatment of structure can resist or critique other structures in society. In order to move readers toward a more coherent understanding of how formal verse challenges social injustice, educators should engage with what Matthew Zapruder

describes as "the mistaken idea about what poets do with language and form…that the formal qualities that make a poem what it is are secondary to the main purpose, the central message" (89). Poets are choosing structures with intentionality, and often the structure of the poem is precisely the point—the poem could effectively exist outside form, so the fact that it does not must be integral to its function.

THE SONNET AND ITS VARIATIONS

No poetic form in English is more recognizable than the sonnet, even though countless children's books deliberately employ iambic trimeter or iambic tetrameter and organize sections of text into couplets or quatrains; this is, at least in part, because no writer in English is more visible or venerated than William Shakespeare. The irony of the sonnet and its association with English/American colonialism lies in the fact that its origins lie in Italy, and Shakespeare was arguably not even the most technically proficient English writer of his time to co-opt the form. Nevertheless, when most students think of the sonnet, they think specifically of the version employed by Shakespeare. Today, the most iconic sonnet structures are the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets, while variations like the Spenserian and Miltonic sonnets have helped to ensure that generations of poets felt equally empowered to strategically alter the form. Spenser, for example, adjusted the rhyme scheme and shifted the volta back to the end of the octave, while Milton broke from tradition both stylistically and contextually by treating the volta with more fluidity and using the form for more introspective, personal meditations. Still, there are fairly consistent elements that pervade throughout the history of the sonnet: first, sonnets utilize iambic pentameter; second, sonnets frequently employ a deliberate rhyme scheme; third, sonnets center unrequited or unfulfilled sentiments; fourth, the form generally calls for a volta, or shift, in which the poem takes a turn that encourages readers to reorient their understanding of the

preceding lines or their subject matter; fifth, the sonnet nearly always contains fourteen lines (Figure 7).

Traditional Sonnet Structures

Petrarchan Sonnet

14 lines; iambic pentameter

Octave (8 lines) +
Sestet (6 lines)

Volta between octave and sestet

ABBA CDECDE or CDCDCD

Spenserian Sonnet

14 lines; iambic pentameter

Quatrain (4 lines) x 3 +
Couplet (2 lines)

Volta most common before couplet

ABAB BCBC CDCD EE

Shakespearean Sonnet

14 lines; iambic pentameter

Quatrain (4 lines) x 3 +
Couplet (2 lines)

Volta most common before couplet

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

Miltonic Sonnet

14 lines; iambic pentameter

No break between octave and sestet;
Introduces enjambment

Volta not always present

ABBAABBACDECDE

Crown and Heroic Crown Sonnet Structures

Crown Sonnet, or Sonnet Corona

Composed as a sequence of seven sonnets

Sonnets are structurally and thematically linked

Final line of the preceding sonnet is repeated as first line of succeeding sonnet

First line of the first sonnet repeated as final line of final sonnet in the sequence

Heroic Crown Sonnet

Composed as a sequence of fifteen sonnets

Interlinked sonnets following the structure of the crown sonnet

Fifteenth sonnet known as master sonnet; composed of first lines from preceding fourteen sonnets in order

(Figure 7)   (Figure 8)

In addition to the individual sonnet, sonnet sequences are quite common; two sequences that have enjoyed renewed attention in recent years are the crown sonnet, or sonnet corona, and the heroic crown. Both the crown and heroic crown contain a series of interconnected sonnets that follow a deliberate pattern of repetition. Crown sonnets contain seven sonnets; the first line of the first sonnet is repeated as the last line of the last sonnet, and the last line of each sonnet is repeated as the first line of the following sonnet. Heroic crowns include fifteen sonnets and follow the same pattern of repetition; however, the final sonnet in the sequence, called the master sonnet, contains either the first lines of all fourteen preceding sonnets *or* the last lines of all fourteen preceding sonnets arranged in either chronological or reverse chronological order (Figure 8).

Dora Malech and Laura T. Smith point to "a period of extraordinary production and development" for the sonnet beginning at the turn of the twenty-first century, stressing that "the

American sonnet's story hinges on the work of historically marginalized poets, even as, or perhaps because, the sonnet has long functioned as a poetic bellwether, as poets seek to engage with forebears and tradition as they negotiate public and private questions of nation, race, class, gender, sexuality, and diaspora within the form's peculiar confines" (1). Malech and Smith's claim calls to mind Terrance Hayes' *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* and Oliver de la Paz's *The Diasporic Sonnets*, both published within the last five years and both of which explicitly confront questions of belonging and oppression as men of color living in America. Women of color have centered sonnet variations in a number of collections published in 2023 alone: Taylor Byas structures *I Done Clicked My Heels Three Times* around her crown sonnet, "South Side," while Leslie Sainz's *Have You Been Long Enough at the Table* utilizes the sonnet to interrogate Yoruba myths and recenter the diasporic experience as a default lens; Adrienne Chung's *Organs of Little Importance* and Megan Fernandes' *I Do Everything I'm Told* both feature heroic crown sonnets prominently, with Chung confronting her inability to assimilate to Western beauty standards and Fernandes rooting her sense of unbelonging in a series of sonnets each set in a different city across the world. Each of these poets demonstrates the role of the sonnet in writing as resistance as articulated by Angel Nafis during an interview on *VS Podcast*: "A sonnet is a container. And what's inside it should press against the container. That's how it should feel."

Clearly the resurgence of the sonnet is not limited to the past few years, but early twenty-first century poets offer an opportunity for students to encounter the form in ways that challenge the constraints imposed by anti-ethnic and anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation, centering historically marginalized experiences in the classroom and demonstrating how these authors assert their presence in the larger project of nation-making. I turn now to a handful of early twenty-first

century sonnets that I include in the classroom, each of which engages with and challenges the formal constraints of the traditional sonnet. Franny Choi's "We Used Our Words We Used What Words We Had" has proven an effective entry point for discussions about how authors disrupt the sonnet intentionally because it offers a metacognitive consideration of the sonnet and, more broadly, the role of language as a site of resistance. The poem contains fourteen lines in iambic pentameter, presented as a single stanza and resisting the constraints of a rhyme scheme. Though the poem does not feature end-rhyme, Choi employs consonance and assonance throughout, asserting her mastery of sound and encouraging readers to treat the lack of rhyme as an intentional comment on the environmental destruction at the core of the poem. This is evident as early as the first line, in which the speaker laments, "we used our words we used what words we had / to weld, what words we had we wielded, kneeled, / we knelt" (lines 1-3). Choi subtly invokes Whitman in the eighth line, situating the "we" of the poem as a lineage of poets who turned to the genre as a space of resistance: "& rocked we harped we yawned & tried to yawp / & tried to fix, affixed, we facted, felt" (lines 8-9). Choi repeats the end word "felt" in the subsequent line, further aligning the legacy of resistance in American poetry to contemporary writing and connecting twenty-first-century writers to forebears in their shared frustration as they witness "the words' worth stagnate" (line 11). The play on Wordsworth juxtaposed with stagnation simultaneously implies a certain level of futility in turning to language to evoke change while also hinting that Whiteness as a prevailing perspective has run its course.

It is vital that students understand how Choi engages with the sonnet, and the American sonnet in particular, as an instrument of nation-making. Whether correctly or not, the sonnet is most often associated with the English language, and British colonialism in particular. Choi's decision to address the lineage of American poetry through one of its most canonical forms, a

lineage which is conspicuously devoid of queer Asian women authors, firmly asserts that she—and by extension others like her—belong to this lineage. Her invocation of Whitman, who famously pursued a distinctly American voice and the creation of an American poetics independent of British writing, mirrors her intentionally exhaustive use alliteration and simultaneous rejection of end rhyme. Choi establishes voice with intentionality, communicating that even as she operates inside meter and the English language, she refuses the cohesiveness implied by end rhyme. Her lines are inherently disjunctured, echoing the gaps in the lineage of American poetry that she critiques with the content of the poem itself.

Oliver de la Paz similarly turns to the sonnet form to assert the visibility of his and his parents' experience living in diaspora. Paz, like Sainz and Choi, resists rhyme in many of the sonnets throughout *The Diaspora Sonnets*; as a point of contrast, however, Paz arranges each sonnet into a series of seven couplets, structurally and visually demonstrating the dual allegiances to Filipino and American heritage that proliferate the collection. "Diaspora Sonnet with a Wok and a Broken Vent and Nothing Else" epitomizes this duality. The speaker describes his mother, whose "ears went deaf on this continent. No / shelter or cover…" (lines 7-8). While these lines critique the lack of support and care available to immigrants in America, the speaker also explains, "And I know what else it took—years to wash // the stories from her mind. The months to save / what's left of her aspirational self" (lines 12-14). Paz's use of the sonnet to capture the complexity of his mother's diasporic experience highlights the ways in which his mother, like the form itself, is both sheltered from her past and yet without song. The implication of her losing her hearing, as contained in a sonnet that refuses rhyme, helps to illuminate the ways in which her space inside the poem, and within the nation, robs her of sound at the same time that it erases the experiences she immigrated to forget.

Incorporating these sonnets into the curriculum encourages students to confront their own experiences with identity construction and nation-making, while also centering experiences that are woefully underrepresented in the classroom. One of the reactions that my students most often convey is their surprise at encountering authors who look like them and share their experiences when we study poetry. According to my students, they almost always engage with the sonnet, for example, through Shakespeare or others who use the form exclusively to comment on unrequited love. Our discussions help open their eyes to the ways in which poets can utilize the "container" of the sonnet and push back against that containment as a tool to contextualize larger conversations about citizenship, immigration, and identity politics. While these conversations are not inherently new to many students, they communicate that such conversations rarely take place in the classroom. One major benefit to the sonnet is its brevity, which allows for deep analysis in the relatively short space of a class meeting, but also for broad representation of experiences and voices. Any educator could confirm that it is difficult to address all the meaningful elements of a short story or novel chapter in ninety minutes, yet it is perfectly tenable to participate in a line reading of two or three sonnets within that same time frame. It is even possible for educators to begin with a relatively traditional sonnet at the beginning of a lecture and arrive at an intensely experimental approach by the end of that same lecture.

For example, Torrin A. Greathouse, a self-described transgender cripple-punk poet, confronts the bounded whole implied by the sonnet in "Sonnet to be Printed Across My Chest & Read in a Mirror, Beginning with a Line from Kimiko Hahn." The poem is printed backwards, immediately challenging the confines of the sonnet and demanding that readers reorient their approach to both the poem and the speaker it attempts to contain (Figure 9).

I could not return to the body that
contained only the literal world: here,

where I cannot say reflect & not suggest
a bending back. Where back does not suggest

the fractured glass of me. I am told to
sever, with a pencil's blade, the word body.

Taught that it does not belong, taught to cut
it away. But look, here it is, real

& ineffable. Beneath the sonnet's
dark calligraphy, what cannot be spoken

with a psalm-less tongue, music unhinged
from inside a gaping mouth, a body—mine.

& at last a poem that can't be read without
it: crippled, trans, woman, & still   alive.

(Figure 9)

The speaker acknowledges the disruption of perspective in the first lines, which informs the reader, "I could not return to the body that / contained only the literal world…" (lines 1-2). Here, the allusion to the body references both the physical body and the sonnet, or body of the poem. The confines of both are at odds with the speaker and fail in their attempts to bind the speaker's expression of identity. As the poem progresses, the speaker critiques "the sonnet's dark calligraphy" and hints at "what cannot be spoken" through a traditional deployment of the form (line 10). By inverting the gaze, the speaker ultimately achieves "a poem that can't be read without / it: crippled, trans, woman, & still   alive" (lines 13-14). The "it" to which the speaker refers is her body, thus solidifying the juxtaposition of her physical body and the body of the poem, neither of which can fully express themselves without the other.

Whereas these examples help demonstrate the possibilities in altering or adapting form as a method of critique, other early twenty-first century poets have chosen to retain the strict requirements of form even as they resist the tendency for discussions around the sonnet to exclude them. I present poems like Taylor Byas' "South Side" as a supplement to more experimental approaches because Byas employs a strict Shakespearean form across all seven sonnets in her crown sequence while also inserting her experiences as a Black woman into the sonnet tradition, as well as challenging misogynoir and violence as oppressive and anti-feminist traditions. Each poem in the sequence works to develop one piece of a larger narrative that begins with a young girl in the arms of her parents and ends with an adult woman who finds solace, both in herself and in her new city. Byas effectively plays on the length and repetition of the crown to create a narrative which explores numerous layers of trauma and joy in Black communities across the nation.

By separating the crown across seven sections in her book, Byas establishes the stage of self-actualization addressed in each section, using the sonnet as a baseline to contextualize the poems that surround it. The poem layers two distinct narrative arcs as it unpacks masculinity, nostalgia and womanhood in the Black community. One arc centers the first-person speaker, whom readers first meet as a girl remembering a boy and their "brownstones, side by side– / so there's nowhere to run, nowhere for us to cry" (lines 13-14). This first section also introduces the boy, a love interest whom the speaker explains "looks like a thug / in darkness" but "softens into a boy in the gold– // glow of a bedside lamp" (lines 7-9). As the sonnet progresses through each section of the book, the girl shifts to a woman living away from her childhood home, Chicago, and working to heal from the brief and passionate relationship of her girlhood.

Readers watch the boy grow, too, who "was only taught the game" (line 42). The game, of course, is how to be a man in the eyes of his father and peers. Byas chronicles how he internalizes misogynoir and takes his place in a disheartening cycle of coldness and violence too often aligned with masculinity. One of the most gut-wrenching sections is the third, wherein Byas unpacks sexual assault and the numerous ways in which Black women's bodies are used against them. The third section of "South Side" chronicles the memory of a time when the boy "trying to ply / [her] open in the backseat" (lines 31-32) shifts his attention to her friend "after a week" (line 36). By the time readers reach the seventh and final section, the boy has been replaced by the speaker's complicated love for Chicago. Evoking the frustration of the collection's title, *I Done Clicked My Heels Three Times*, the speaker laments her inability to return home while also explaining, "I learn / to find you everywhere I look, to glean / your shadow from Cincinnati's light and turn // it into home when I feel lost…" (lines 94-97).

Byas utilizes the second person pronoun "you" across all seven sections of the sequence, but shifts the subject as the poem progresses. While the first three sections use "you" to refer to the young girl, effectively situating readers as the one experiencing the violence and fraught relationship that characterizes her adolescence, the "you" in the fourth section appears as sentiments told to the boy by those working to reinforce a dangerous brand of masculinity. Some sentiments come from his father, who tells him, "*I'll lay / you out if you start that crying*" (lines 45-46), as well as fellow young boys who chant "*tap out / and you're a bitch…*" (lines 51-52). The fifth section avoids use of the second person pronoun, which returns in the final couplet of the sixth stanza, where the "you" now refers to "the heartbeat / of Chicago" (lines 80-81). This shift invites readers to read the "you" and, by proxy, the heartbeat as an allusion to both her

childhood home and the boy she loved, thus complicating the conflicted feelings she expresses about both and their inability to escape their respective cycles of violence.

"Dungeon Master," a heroic crown by Adrienne Chung, also employs the Shakespearean sonnet with attention to traditional meter, rhyme, and structure. Despite utilizing Shakespeare's variation of the form, Chung invokes Petrarch in the closing lines of the first sonnet in the sequence: "Perpetual lark to think of how / I left my home to walk the Wall, to read Petrarch / as if I were some stranger to this dark" (lines 12-14). The invocation of Petrarch signals that Chung is keenly aware of the literary history associated with her chosen form, yet the subtle inclusion of "as if" encourages the reader to consider the inverse. The inversion of form is solidified in the first line of the subsequent sonnet, which Chung slightly modifies from the preceding stanza: "I was never a stranger to this dark" (line 15). The speaker has moved readers from a space of reflection to a place of actualization and understanding by shifting from the potentiality of "were" to the concreteness of "was." The second poem in the sequence critiques the speaker's earliest encounters with femininity,

> locked inside a room with a television
>
> projecting friends into [her] little ark;
>
> Aurora, Cinderella, Ariel,
>
> and / [her]... (lines 16-19)

The poem closes with a bold rebuke of the Bible and its claim that "the day you die is better / than the day that you were born" (lines 27-28).

Throughout the sequence, the speaker considers expectations of womanhood and survival, culminating in a master sonnet that revisits the notion of death evident in the opening sections and aligns the speaker with both the princesses of the second section and Eve: "In the

next life, I'll make another bargain: / meet my lover back in the primal garden" (lines 209-210).

There is a particular irony in choosing the heroic crown for her critique of patriarchal notions of

femininity, as the hero or "lover" alluded to in the final line of the master sonnet appears to be

Satan. Given the juxtaposition of Disney princesses and Eve, readers must consider that Chung is

commenting on the toxicity inherent in narratives that perpetuate characterizations of women as

helpless and directionless without a male hero to give them purpose. Chung essentially uses the

hero, or heroic crown, to give the poem direction while leading us ever closer to the precipice of

a new life in which the speaker will renegotiate her function in the world.

  Megan Fernandes interweaves two crown sonnets in the dizzying and complex "Sonnets

of the False Beloveds with One Exception OR Repetition Compulsion." The poem, which acts as

the second section of her collection, *I Do Everything I'm Told*, contains single stanzas of

fourteen lines in the upper left corner of one page, as well as an erasure of the stanza in the

bottom right corner of the adjacent page. Thus, the poems on the left pages form a relatively

traditional crown, while those on the right pages develop a heroic crown composed entirely of

erasure poems. This structure immediately reinforces the title's claim to an obsession with

repetition and invites readers to consider the role of repetition in the ensuing narrative. At the

core of the narrative is a speaker who is navigating romantic relationships. The first line of the

sequence is "I cast beloveds. I kill them off, too…" (line 1). The subsequent erasure reduces this

line to "I cast," removing any reference to either "beloveds" or their demise (line 15); readers

might consider the role of cognitive dissonance and selective memory in the narrative, as the

erasures may contribute to the speaker's continued inability to form lasting relationships. One

important variation to the sequence is that Fernandes develops an eighth sonnet, "Wandering

Sonnet," which trades on the idea of a master sonnet by presenting the final lines of each sonnet

in reverse order, followed by a repetition of those lines in chronological order. Fernandes combines the concept of the master sonnet with a relatively young form, the palindrome, to further emphasize the cyclical nature of the speaker's relationships. Fernandes utilizes the same technique in "Diaspora Sonnet," which draws from all the erasure sonnets that precede it, forming a master sonnet palindrome that she then uses as inspiration for a final erasure. The erasure ends with four simple statements, each of which signifies one phase of the relationships described throughout the sequence: "I love   I fall   I cast / I kill" (lines 253-254).

Each of the poems included in this section offer opportunities for educators to instruct on one of the most canonical forms in English language poetry while also challenging continued attempts to erase historically marginalized experiences from the curriculum. On the surface, none of these poems are inflammatory and none of them explicitly defy the restrictions most-commonly present in anti-ethnic and anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation. What makes the poems radical is that each author employs the sonnet, in one way or another, to deliberately challenge modes of confinement and introduce tension by disrupting expectations, both within the form and within their respective critiques of social structures. By exploring the ways in which each poet attends to the structure of their sonnets, students must interrogate the various systems that work to bind or contain self-expression, as well as what is at stake when those attempts succeed at suppressing the voices of historically marginalized people. It is important to note that each of these sonnets centers some element of self-actualization or belonging, themes at the root of calls for more diverse books and more inclusive curricula. Students should see themselves in the literature they encounter, but there is a unique power in ensuring that they will see themselves in such a pervasive form, one routinely misrepresented as conservative and representative of the colonial mindset. Incorporating poets who push against form encourages students to prioritize self-

expression inside the systems that work to contain them, finding ways to insist on their existence using the tools provided to them by those systems of containment.

THE PANTOUM

Another canonical form experiencing revival among twenty-first-century American poets is the pantoum, a form that originated in fifteenth-century Malaysia and gradually spread through the West. Initially, the form was composed of just two interlocked rhyming couplets. As the form gained popularity among French and British writers, the rhyme scheme fell away, but a pattern of repetition emerged. The version of the form embraced today was circulated by nineteenth-century poets like Charles Baudelaire and Victor Hugo and later experienced renewed interest in America after John Ashberry employed it in his 1956 collection, *Some Trees*. The pantoum is a poem of any length, but which is written in quatrains and follows a strict pattern of repetition: the second line of the preceding stanza becomes the first line of the subsequent stanza; the fourth line of the preceding stanza becomes the third line of the subsequent stanza; the third line of the first stanza becomes the second line of the final stanza; and the first line of the first stanza becomes the last line of the last stanza. While some authors make use of meter and/or rhyme, neither is required of the form. For reference, consider "Poem for Three Dead Girls of Last Summer," by Rachel McKibbens (Figure 10).

Poem for Three Dead Girls of Last Summer

BY RACHEL MCKIBBENS

My sweetheart says I can no longer watch the news.
You worry too much. And he is right. My fear is a drilling.
Constant. Bloodthick. That girl in the suitcase,
that wife in the river, that woman in the elevator needed me.

I worry too much, it is my right. My fear is a drilling,
a songless bird perched upon my shoulder.
That wife in the river, that woman in the elevator needed me.
But I have three girls of my own, they are mine mine mine

and the songless bird perched upon my shoulder
watches over them, my sweet little Gretels who follow me home,
these three girls who are mine mine mine
gobble up my heart like a hunk of bread. When men

see them, my dear little Gretels, they follow me home.
When there is a knock at the door, I stash my darlings in a cupboard.
They come to gobble up my girls like hunks of bread. Men
line up like ants to take them away, to carry them home.

When there is a knock at my door, I hide my darlings inside a cupboard
like bowls of sugar. When they sleep, I wrap them in kite strings,
line them up like ants so no one can take them and carry them home.
They clutch their dolls and all night long they wish for boys

like bowls of sugar. As they sleep, I hold them like kite strings.
Constant. Bloodthick. That girl in the suitcase,
clutched her doll and all night long wished she'd been a boy.
It is why my sweetheart says I can no longer watch the news.

(Figure 10)

Note that McKibbens makes slight alterations to some of the lines in repetition, but retains key phrasing and acoustic qualities throughout. As with many contemporary uses of the form, McKibbens opens with a statement out of context and uses the poem to develop that context such that the final line takes on renewed, clearer meaning.

Though the poem considers the traumatic deaths of three young girls, a sensitive subject in any classroom, I have introduced the pantoum frequently with this poem because the pattern of repetition is precisely the point of the poem. McKibbens utilizes the form as a commentary on the endemic and cyclical violence that she encounters every time she watches the news, and her pantoum has proven an effective conversation starter in the classroom for discussions about generational and cyclical violence in America. McKibbens exemplifies Zapruder's insistence that readers consider form as an intentional, and sometimes primary, element of the poet's efforts to convey a particular message. In the case of McKibbens, the first line co-opts a popular statement, at least in my classrooms, around the tendency to avoid the news because it is "depressing." However, McKibbens is careful in her phrasing as the speaker states, "My sweetheart says I can no longer watch the news. / *You worry too much*. And he is right. My fear is drilling" (lines 1-2). What stands out is that the male figure is centered, robbing the speaker of her autonomy in that he dictates the level of emotional and mental anguish she can carry. Though she agrees, it is clear that the role of the speaker is inherently passive in the relationship.

McKibbens projects the speaker's lack of autonomy onto the children around her as her maternal instinct makes her feel responsible for "That girl in the suitcase, / that wife in the river, that woman in the elevator" (lines 3-4). The interlocking schema of repetition allows McKibbens to juxtapose these images with a songbird and her own daughters, again deepening our understanding of the speaker's anguish and compulsion to protect women she does not know. McKibbens then invokes the fable of Hansel and Gretel, the speaker referring to her daughters as "my sweet little Gretels who follow me home, / these three girls who are mine mine mine" (lines 10-11). This phrasing situates the speaker as the witch, at once recalling a long history of violence against children in children's stories while inverting the role of the witch to that of

protector and nurturer. She welcomes the consumption of her "heart like a hunk of bread" (line 12) and proceeds to "stash [her] darlings in the cupboard" (line 14) only when "Men / line up like ants to take them away" (lines 15-16). The pattern of repetition emphasizes that violence against women and children is perpetual, literally and metaphorically linking the speaker to centuries of literary reference to this violence. The full weight of the form occurs in the final stanza, which pulls the two threads of the poem together, interlacing images of the speaker's sleeping daughters with "That girl in the suitcase" that triggers the speaker's anguish in the opening stanza.

Taylor Byas' pantoum, "The Black Girl Comes to Dinner," emphasizes the structure and pattern of repetition as the speaker unpacks generational trauma and microaggression in the American South. Byas sets the scene for the poem in the opening lines

We drive into the belly of Alabama,

where God tweezed the highway's two lanes

down to one, where my stomach

bottoms out on each brakeless fall. (lines 1-4)

With these first lines, Byas invokes a history of nostalgia endemic to literature about the South while also alluding to the physical incarnation of grief and trauma symbolized by the way the speaker's stomach hollows as the car goes over each small hill. Byas shifts to internalized fear in the second stanza with the speaker admitting, "I almost tell you what I'm thinking, my mouth brimming…" (line 8). Though the title has set readers up to anticipate a critique of racialized trauma, the surface level fear is actually that the speaker's partner's parents may not accept her as enough. Byas interlocks this fear with the image of "the black girl in a sundown town—" (line 22), compounding the fear of visiting the family of a lover for the first time with the internalized

fear of death that Black people must carry in sundown towns. The final stanza emphasizes the

embodiment of this generational trauma, as the speaker's grandmother tries to comfort her: "your

grandmother folds me into her arms. And I try to feel / grateful. But *get home before it's too late*

and *watch out for flags*" echo in her mind (lines 29-30). As the poem concludes, readers revisit

the first line of the poem, this time with the understanding that "the belly of Alabama" is not just

the physical center of the state, but also a history of the state's consumption of Black bodies.

Students should interrogate the tautological nature of the pantoum and what drives both

McKibbens and Byas to utilize the form while addressing cycles of violence. Only through a

critical reading of both the structure and content of each poem can students fully process each

poet's critique of generational trauma.

Oliver de la Paz also utilizes the pantoum form in *The Diaspora Sonnets,* where he

concludes each section of the book with a pantoum. Putting the pantoum in direct conversation

with the sonnet stresses the pattern of repetition and the role of first lines in pantoums as both an

origin point and destination. It also encourages students to engage in a comparative analysis of

the forms and how the structure of each influences the reading experience, as well as how de la

Paz utilizes the forms differently to convey various aspects of the diasporic experience. The

collection, which has prioritized stories of de la Paz' father and the sacrifices he has made since

immigrating to the United States, closes with "Pantoum Beginning and Ending with a Big Sky."

Students must immediately consider the titular reference to repetition, a technique that appears in

each pantoum in the collection. By including the phrase "beginning and ending," de la Paz has

already encouraged readers to process the cyclical nature of both the poem and the content

within, ensuring that they process each poem as a return to one's beginnings. "Pantoum

Beginning and Ending with a Big Sky" centers the question of home:

>Hold us in the frame and place us closer to home
>
>if there's a home for us. Remember where we stand,
>
>monuments aligned with a certain perspective—
>
>perhaps from the side. Perhaps just disappearing.
>
>
>
>If there's a home for us, remember where we stand
>
>so we can return to it. Trace our steps backward… (lines 9-14)

The pattern of repetition stresses the correlation between migration and living in diaspora, as well as the pervasive fear of unbelonging. While the first instance enjambs "where we stand" with images of "monuments aligned with a certain perspective," implying immovable or rigid figures and invoking the problematic history of monumentalized individuals, the second use encourages both movement and change as the speaker connects "we stand" with the charge "to return." de la Paz is generally strict in his repetition of lines, making few alterations outside shifts in punctuation as the poem progresses, which makes his deliberate breaking of form in the final stanza much more noticeable. The final stanza begins with the first-person contraction, "I'd," shifting from descriptions of the speaker's father and what the speaker imagines he wants for him to a potential futurity in which he realizes those expectations. de la Paz returns to the image of "the horizon and the plains" that opens the poem, yet this move to the first-person subject effectively reorients the subject and action of the line from a sky which "cuts in [his] sight" to a speaker who can "see" for himself. Thus, the subtle deviation from form helps readers to process that act of self-realization at the heart of both the poem and, because of its placement in the book, the collection as a whole.

Introducing students to patterns of deviation is integral to helping them understand how poets employ form as an act of resistance, and it pushes their literacy further in that a study of formal deviation requires students to first understand the rules of the container, then consider the myriad reasons an author might press against them. For de la Paz, the pantoum allows him to physically illustrate feelings associated with living in diaspora, including the constant pressure to move forward and the inability to wholly, totally separate his existence from what came before. Subhaga Crystal Bacon makes an even more deliberate break from form in "Quesha D. Hardy, 24, Baton Rouge, LA, July 27," an elegy for a Black transgender woman who was murdered. Bacon opens the poem with a rebuke of how the police and Hardy's family treated her death:

> Though she lived as a woman, police identified her
>
> as ███ Hardy, saying Hardy's next of kin requested
>
> she be identified as male. Baton Rouge police do not believe
>
> Hardy was targeted because she was a trans woman. (lines 1-4)

These lines evoke patterns of microaggression endemic to the American South and its treatment of transgender people, as well as the transphobia associated with Southern Black communities. Bacon also comments on the refusal of police to acknowledge the role of transphobia in the crime, despite ample evidence that suggests transgender women of color are the most targeted demographic for hate crime in the United States. At the time of Quesha's death, she was believed to be at least the twenty-fifth transgender person murdered that year; by stressing this point early in the poem, Bacon insists that readers acknowledge the pattern of violence and the microaggressions that contribute to anti-trans crime. However, it is the orientation of the first and third lines in this opening stanza that prove most powerful when Bacon breaks form. According to the structure of the pantoum, these lines should recur in the final stanza, effectively returning

the narrative to a space in which Quesha's identity is again denied. Bacon rejects this repetition, though, closing the poem with a stanza that fully asserts Quesha's transgender existence:

> On that last Monday afternoon in July, she was still free
>
> to dream her dreams, to simply be herself, Quesha,
>
> wherever it was she was going before she died,
>
> loving the skin she was in, still following God's plan. (lines 21-24)

In this final stanza, the first and third lines carry over from the preceding stanza as the form anticipates. The second and fourth lines, which should repeat the first and third lines of the opening stanza, are entirely different. Rather than return the narrative to those who reject Quesha's identity, Bacon breaks form and powerfully insists on an image of Quesha dreaming, of living and loving herself as she was, of accepting that she is not without God simply because of who she is.

The pantoum is a remarkably flexible form, making it particularly appealing to both formalist and nonformalist poets alike. Given its heavy emphasis on repetition, this form proves effective for introducing students to critiques of cyclical issues and how historically marginalized poets comment on repeated acts of oppression. The pattern of repetition required by the pantoum is obvious upon a first read, and it seems a rather simple form to analyze. However, critical reading pushes students to consider not just how the lines are repeated, but also the implications of enjambment and sentence structure. The phrasing of each sentence dictates which statements and images repeat, allowing authors to invert or shift meaning from one stanza to the next without breaking form. Additionally, once students recognize the intentionally cyclical nature of the form, they must make meaning of deviations from that form. As the poems herein suggest, authors rarely alter form haphazardly, implying that breaks in pattern are deliberate attempts to

break the patterns described within the poem itself. In essence, disrupting form signals the poem as an act of protest meant to disrupt other structures as well.

THE SESTINA

Perhaps one of the most complex and obsessive canonical forms is the sestina, a form which traces back to the troubadour tradition in twelfth-century France. While the form was largely "out of literary fashion from about the Renaissance to the Victorian era," twentieth and twenty-first-century poets writing in English have returned to the form with regularity (Querengesser 199). This form is immensely challenging to write, and it can be daunting to read, as it follows a strict pattern of repetition across thirty-nine lines. The sestina's pattern of repetition is represented below, with each letter representing the end word of a line, the order of which is established by their appearance in the first stanza:

1. ABCDEF

2. FAEBDC

3. CFDABE

4. ECBFAD

5. DEACFB

6. BDFECA

7. (envoi) ECA or ACE

The poem does not have any set metrical or rhyming requirements; instead, it is arranged into six stanzas of six lines and one stanza of three lines, with the end words of each line in the first stanza following a "strict and elegant mathematical formula" (Querengesser 199). For poets of the twenty-first century, the form presents two complications immediately: first, readers rarely encounter poems of its length or breadth in twenty-first century American poetry; and second,

young writers are often discouraged from repeating words or phrases frequently in their writing to avoid sounding redundant, which runs counter to the expectations of a highly repetitive form like the sestina (Figure 11).

STANZA I		... new order ...	STANZA II	III	IV	V	VI
end-word 1		2nd	6	3	5	4	2
2		4th	1	6	3	5	4
3		6th	5	4	2	1	6
4		5th	2	1	6	3	5
5		3rd	4	2	1	6	3
6		1st	3	5	4	2	1
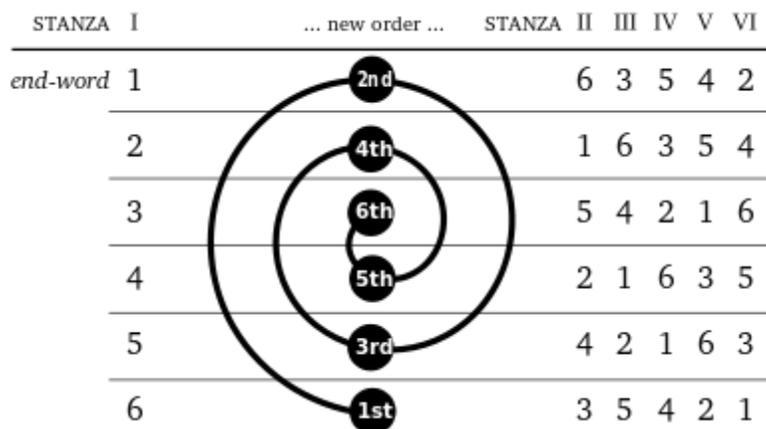
(Figure 11, created by Phil Wink)

Even the preceding forms only repeat phrases or lines once or, in the case of heroic crowns, twice. The length and number of repetitions inherent to the sestina can make the repetition of single words feel somehow more oppressive and overt. Unlike sonnets and pantoums, though, the sestina does not repeat or interlock phrases, which allows poets more flexibility in terms of the content they work to contain within the form.

Since my first year in the classroom, I have introduced the sestina with "Ethel's Sestina," one of the most visible and recognizable poems by Patricia Smith, one of the most lauded poets in contemporary American poetry. More recently, I have paired Smith's sonnet with two others, Tiana Clark's "Broken Sestina Reaching for Black Joy" and Taylor Byas' "My Twitter Feed Becomes Too Much." Together, these three sestinas help to illustrate for students how early twenty-first century Black women poets both conform and resist the formal structure of the sestina. Through an investigation of the form, students come to understand that even slight

deviations from form can, and often do, represent much larger fractures in the worlds they contain.

Smith's sestina includes an epigraph which explains that it was written as an elegy to Ethel Freeman, whose body sat in the New Orleans Convention Center for several days after she died waiting to be evacuated ahead of Hurricane Katrina. Freeman's son, Herbert, was grief stricken after he was forced to leave his mother's body and evacuate the area. Smith resists grounding the poem in trauma, instead delivering lines in the voice of Ethel which reflect a woman who both trusts her son and takes her place beside God with grace. The first stanza sets the pattern of repetition and establishes the voice of the speaker:

> Gon' be obedient in this here chair,
>
> gon' bide my time, fanning against this sun.
>
> I ask my boy, and all he says is Wait.
>
> He wipes my brow with steam, says I should sleep.
>
> I trust his every word. Herbert my son.
>
> I believe him when he says help gon' come. (lines 1-6)

Smith chooses six words to act as the crux of the poem—chair, sun, wait, sleep, son, come— each of which appears according to the sestina's intended pattern in subsequent stanzas. It is interesting that Smith uses both "sun" and "son," as many contemporary poets employ homonyms as subtle deviations from form; by choosing to use both as end words, Smith encourages readers to consider how the two words correlate. Sonically, the poem implies that Herbert is both Ethel's literal son and also her source of hope throughout the first four stanzas. In the fifth stanza, Smith juxtaposes the "sun" with the "savior's face," shifting uses of both "son" and "sun" toward the spiritual. By the time "that ol' sweet sun" (line 44) lifts Ethel from her

chair in the envoi, readers understand that she has both taken her place beside her savior and rejoined her son, who has had to leave her body behind.

Smith breaks from the form only once, drawing out the word "come" across seven lines in the sixth stanza:

Nobody sees me running toward the sun.

Lawd, they think I done gone and fell asleep.

They don't hear *Come.*

Come.

Come.

Come.

Come.

Come.

Come.

Ain't but one power make me leave my son.

I can't wait, Herbert. Lawd knows I can't wait.

Don't cry, boy, I ain't in that chair no more. (lines 31-42)

Linguistically, this stanza follows the pattern of repetition since the word "come" technically ends the third line. However, by moving each repetition of the word "come" to its own line, rather than containing all seven instances in a single line, Smith emphasizes the single word beckoning her to leave her physical body behind. If all repetitions were contained to a single line, the effect would be that the phrase appears urgent and insistent; as self-contained lines, this same command intonates patience and inevitability, but also stretches the stanza to emphasize the

physical line of people waiting for evacuation (read: salvation), as well as the drawing out of time and growing echoes of thunder from the impending storm. In my experience, the deviation in this stanza draws attention from students whose families have been displaced and those whose families have a personal history of migration. They note the scarcity created by situating a single word in each line, as well as the textual embodiment of waiting for salvation, an experience endemic to stories of migration and displacement.

Of course, educators would be remiss not to also highlight Smith's allusions to Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son," in which Hughes notably employs Black English and the metaphor of stairs as a mother explains the need to move forward to her son. Given that both poems are written in the voices of Black women and both highlight the relationship between mother and son, it seems clear that Smith alludes to Hughes' poem intentionally. Though Smith does not reference stairs, her choice of the end word "chair" mirrors the repetition of "stair" in Hughes' poem and acoustically links the two. Additionally, the final image in "Ethel's Sestina" is of a "golden chair," harkening a connection to the "crystal stair" in "Mother to Son." While the mother in "Mother to Son" speaks to her struggles in corporeal life and insists that her life "ain't been no crystal stair," the mother in "Ethel's Sestina" receives her "golden chair" as she ascends into heaven with her savior. Through her allusion to Hughes, Smith comments on the legacy of struggle in Black poetry while also refusing to linger in that struggle, instead writing Ethel toward a space of peace and reward. Black women are, through Smith's poem, finally allowed to stop "a-climbin' on, / And reachin' landin's, / And turnin' corners," ("Mother to Son," lines 9-11) and instead allow themselves to rest without apology, without guilt.

Tiana Clark published "Broken Sestina Reaching for Black Joy" as part of a longer series in *The Atlantic* about Black life in America. From the outset, readers must contend with the fact

that Clark is intentionally choosing a classical poetic form, one that has endured for nine centuries almost entirely in White dominant spaces, as her contribution to a series meant to highlight Black sociopolitical moments. Moreover, the title invokes Black joy, a theme which numerous contemporary Black poets have engaged. In many of these poems, the authors stress that America has continually sought to rob the Black community of joy through generational trauma and state-sanctioned violence. Students will almost immediately notice that Clark frequently deviates from the traditional sestina form. The second stanza, for example, does not include most of the same end words introduced in the first stanza—honeysuckle, day, bodies, pleasure, death, social—trading them for history, day, root, what, Wright, yet, what. As the end words indicate, this stanza also contains seven lines as opposed to six, and the final line directly challenges the form.

> Yesterday I was smashed with the rush of fresh honeysuckle
>
> from the greenway near my house where I walk every day.
>
> I've been trying to write a poem about buried Black bodies
>
> but all I want to write about is Black joy and my pleasure
>
> and Black love and Black lives that don't end with viral death,
>
> so I've stopped consuming the news. I've logged off of social
>
> media for a break. Black bodies are buried in the stickiness of history
>
> every day bodies become the next viral death. And yet, each day
>
> I want to write a poem about pleasure. Black pleasure at the root
>
> instead of viral death. What name now? What Black litany? What
>
> Black elegy is repeated on the news? This cycle: Daunte Wright.

I don't know the details yet, because I can't handle the details yet,

but I am mourning him still. This stanza broke the rules. So, what? (lines 1-13)

These deviations are not surprising given the description of the sestina as "broken" in the title, but they do encourage students to consider how the second stanza and its end words function as part of Clark's commentary. Certain end phrases from the first stanza appear inside lines within the second stanza, including two repetitions of the word "viral death," while neither the word "social" nor the word "honeysuckle" appear at all. The stanza takes on a defiant tone as the speaker laments that they want to discuss joy, yet the news forces them to confront violence against Black bodies daily.

What makes this poem so interesting and effective for instructional purposes, though, is that Clark is overtly metapoetic and considers the place of the sestina in discussing Black joy. "This stanza will break back inside the form of honeycomb to suck / the lyric into compression, reboot restraint…" she writes at the onset of the third stanza (lines 14-15). As the lines promise, this stanza returns to the end words of the first stanza; rather than restructuring them, Clark repeats them in exactly the same order as the first stanza. The fourth stanza includes the same end words and reorders them according to the form, but the fifth stanza again abandons the end words entirely. The fifth stanza ends with another metapoetic exploration: "I selected the sestina to probe a problem I can name / but can't answer. The end words are planets orbiting the math" (lines 30-31). The sixth stanza includes only the end words introduced in the first stanza, but reordered again:

Pleasure.

Death.

Honeysuckle

Black bodies.

Social / Media.

Every day. (lines 32-37)

Clark continues with several more stanzas, most of them six lines but all deviating from the expectations of the sestina. In the final stanza, the poet again invokes the rules of the form, comparing a kiss during a first date to "the length of a tercet / an envoi sustained / with pleasure reaching for Black desire, / reaching for the transcendence of pain…" (lines 65-67). Here, Clark includes white space before the words "if possible. Is it possible?" The question lingers, presumably returning readers to the question that motivated the poem in the first place and, as the speaker admits in the opening stanzas, a question for which the speaker offers no concrete answer.

Like Smith, Clark's poem emphasizes redundancy and repetition, this time of the Black bodies that proliferate social media and of the inescapable trauma associated with Black death in America. The stanzas near the end which most heavily deviate from form are also the stanzas in which Clark directly addresses the historicized violence perpetrated on Black bodies, thus rejecting traditional American forms in precisely the same way America continually rejects Black personhood. Taylor Byas' sestina, "My Twitter Feed Becomes Too Much," echoes the content of Tiana Clark's poem and makes for an excellent supplement in that it speaks directly to the role of social media in disseminating information, particularly for activist groups that turn to social media for injustices not regularly (or fairly) represented in traditional news outlets. Unlike Clark, Byas chooses to remain within the form, strictly employing end words and following the rules of repetition from stanza to stanza. Placed in conversation with Smith and Clark, students

will likely recognize Byas' dedication to the formal elements of the sestina quickly and be

prepared to annotate the chosen end words accurately. They may also notice how Byas plays

with the language to meet the requirements of the form, such as shifting from "break skin" in the

first stanza to "cars skinned" in the third, or the many ways that the word "hand" is used.

Byas' sestina also serves as a good option for educators who make use of prediction as

part of their poetry analysis methodology. If students have learned to associate the sestina with

repetition and narrative, they should be able to discuss potential themes, images and experiences

within Byas' poem based on the title. Some may not use Twitter, but most are likely attuned to

just how overwhelming the scenes of trauma can become on any media platform. The fact that

Byas is a Black woman further implies that what the students will encounter is connected to

commonly reported traumas like police brutality, protests and violence against Black women.

Again, if put in conversation with Clark's sestina specifically, the correlation between social

media/public messaging and the absence of joy in Black communities is a central theme. In

effect, both writers signal that their respective communities are bombarded with images and

narratives at odds with Black joy, situating joy itself as a radical act of resistance.

Note first how Byas begins the poem, already invoking the trauma associated with visual

artifacts as she writes "I come across pictures of two rubber bullets / nestled in a palm…" (lines

1-2). Not only is this image concrete and familiar, it also sets up "bullets" as an end-word,

further indicating that violence will take center stage. Throughout the poem, Byas infuses images

of protest and riot that continually illustrate the frequency with which state-sanctioned violence

targets Black people. Readers encounter burning cop cars juxtaposed with a police cruiser

running over protestors and gas masks situated alongside a Black man on the curb. At the

beginning of the third stanza, Byas writes "and this is church. A baptism–cover / me with the

blood" in a turn of phrase that both captures the immediate moment and invokes the history of

violence associated with White missionary work (lines 13-14). "My Twitter Feed Becomes Too

Much" also uses variations of the word "refresh" a total of eight times (including six inside the

repeated phrase "The page refreshes"), yet it is not one of the end words Byas chooses; this is a

strong opportunity for students to speculate about the effect of repetition and how authorial

choices impact the version of the poem we experience. Students should be able to ascertain the

fact that the sestina is a particularly exhausting form, so it is ironic that Smith, Clark, and Byas

all include exhaustion as a primary theme. Byas' repetition of the word "refresh" outside the

strict pattern of the sestina adds to the heaviness of the form, creating an experience for the

reader that emulates the heaviness the speaker describes.

THE VILLANELLE

I return now to one of the more pervasive and brief canonical forms in English language

poetry, the villanelle. Like the pantoum, the form has its roots in France; though initially a

pastoral ballad with few restrictions, the fixed form now associated with the name came about in

the early seventeenth century. Poets writing in English have dominated the form, including

Dylan Thomas' oft-anthologized "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" and Sylvia Plath's

confessional spin, "Mad Girl's Love Song." Unlike the pantoum, the fixed form for the villanelle

includes an intentional rhyme scheme in addition to repetition. The villanelle does not, however,

require a specific meter, though many writing in English choose to employ pentameter. The key

marker of the form is, again, repetition, this time of two refrains established in the opening

stanza; incidentally, the opening stanza also establishes the rhyme scheme. By way of an

example, consider Taylor Byas' poem, "When I Say No, *The Joker* Smiles," reproduced below

(Figure 12).

TAYLOR BYAS

WHEN I SAY NO,
THE JOKER SMILES

In the dark theater, I stale with the popcorn left
between the seats. My boyfriend's getting handsy.
Behind, a few rows up, a man observes the theft

of my growls as they slip from my swollen lips, bereft
of control or *no*. My boyfriend knows I can't see
in the dark theater. I stale with the popcorn left

between his teeth, his buttered and salted breath
panting a mist on my neck. He won't unhand me.
Behind, a few rows up, a man observes. The theft

happens, unnoticed by only a few. It's swept
under the rug. On screen, the Joker's dancing.
In the dark theater, I stale. With the popcorn left

on the ground, my boyfriend grinds his palm on the cleft
between my thighs. The Joker hollers like a banshee.
Behind, a few rows up, a man observes the theft

of my scream. The Joker paints a happy face, deft
with his finger-movements. My boyfriend smiles at me
in the dark theater. I stale with the popcorn left
behind. A few rows up, a man observes the theft.

(Figure 12)

As the poem demonstrates, the first and third lines of the first stanza act as refrains which are

alternated as end lines in stanzas two through four and which form a couplet in the final stanza;

the poem contains four tercets and one quatrain, as well as an interlocking rhyme scheme: ABA

ABA ABA ABA ABAA. The goal of the form is to present two lines which have some distance

between them, spatially and thematically, then draw them together until they collide in the final

lines of the poem. Because of this, the form has proven most popular for discussing issues that

exist in perpetuity, as with the toxic masculinity at the center of Byas' poem.

Between the title and the first stanza, readers understand that the speaker is watching *The Joker*, a film heavily criticized for romanticizing toxic masculinity and violence, with her boyfriend. The initial reference to "getting handsy" may appear innocuous on first read, but its proximity to "the theft" clarifies that the boyfriend's actions are unwelcome (lines 2-3). The first refrain emphasizes the effect of this assault as the speaker laments, "I stale with the popcorn" (line 1). Each time the reader encounters the phrase, it is a reminder that the speaker is losing vitality in this particular scene, but it is also a comment on the long-term effect of sexual assault and the normalization of sexual violence in domestic relationships. The second refrain highlights the role of a bystander, whose complicity in the violence grows as the poem continues; this is because the man continues to witness the violence without intervening or even turning away, implicating both the man inside the poem and readers who continue to move through the poem despite the speaker's clear discomfort with the observation.

Byas utilizes the form expertly to critique the societal tendency to observe injustice and violence without intervening, ensuring that readers must orient themselves as tacit observers through the act of reading. Juxtaposing this scene with images from *The Joker*, including "the Joker's dancing" and the way "The Joker hollers like a banshee," (line 11; line 14) connects what is happening to the speaker with what is happening on screen, arranging all three men in the poem as indicative of the toxic masculinity that puts women at risk, even in public spaces. The reader as observer and the implied audience of the film are also implicated in their willingness to draw entertainment from the violence they observe, visually and linguistically. As the two refrains form a couplet, the speaker is finally connected directly to "the popcorn left / behind," stressing that the speaker has been consumed and tossed aside like other trash in the theater (lines

18-19). She has lost not just her bodily autonomy but her humanity, reduced to a passive object of male violence "bereft / of control or *no*" (line 5).

Many villanelles concern themselves with mortality, as evidenced by Michael Luis Medrano's "Villanelle," which incorporates three generations of men at the precipice of death. The opening stanza employs two refrains which connect the death of the speaker's grandfather to the expectations predicated on the speaker's father: "Jesús José Medrano went away / no more motel rooms to clean / he asked my dad to take his place" (lines 1-3). This stanza also centers, literally and figuratively, a tradition of labor often associated with Latinx communities in the American South. In asking the father to take his place, the grandfather implies that the legacy of cleaning motel rooms will pass from father to son. The legacy of day labor returns in the fifth stanza, where the speaker recalls, "My grandfather, farmworker among grapes / measured a man tying vines in his teens" (lines 13-14).

The question of manhood permeates the poem beginning with the second stanza where the speaker describes how his "Dad cried and look the other way," prompting the mortician to close "the coffin on the body" (lines 4-5). The act of turning away as the tears form grows in significance as the reader sees how "the relatives cried in the out-loud dream" while the father, publicly, does not or cannot cry (line 11). The final stanza returns to the question of public mourning and its correlation with masculinity, as well as the pressure inherent in assuming the role of patriarch in the family:

> Como un hombre, he would say
>
> my father's tears never seen
>
> Jesús José Medrano went away
>
> he asked my dad to take his place (lines 16-19)

Opening this final stanza with the phrase *como un hombre* invokes a long tradition of masculinity which encourages men to exude stoicism and suppress emotional displays. As an observer, the speaker of the poem must understand that the cycle of emotional suppression will eventually pass to him, and that he is potentially witnessing the last time his father will cry in public. The weight of this act is emphasized by the repetition of the form, as readers encounter the grandfather's request four times in short succession, thus granting the pressure to act "like a man" and care for the family the exact same importance within the poem as the passing of Jesús José Medrano. Sarah Dowling notes that such refusals to translate non-English phrases "frustrates readerly desires to minimize or mediate differences, calling attention to the radically nonequivalent social statures of different languages" (19). That Medrano does this within one of the most canonically English language forms fundamentally disrupts the expectations of the form and its presumed audience. For students, it is also important to understand that Medrano frames Spanish as the language of his father and grandfather even as he employs it himself. This implies that the speaker in the poem experiences distance from the language and, by extension, distance from his father and grandfather. By frustrating readerly desires, Medrano helps to communicate his own frustration with and alienation from a part of his cultural and linguistic heritage.

The villanelle has also inspired some strong deviations from form, as with Suzi F. Garcia's "A Modified Villanelle for My Childhood." On first glance, the poem demonstrates its departure in that it contains seven tercets, followed by a quatrain and closing in a couplet. Garcia opens the poem, decrying, "I wanna write lyrical, but all I got is magical," a metapoetic refusal to allow the villanelle to confine her as she works to express herself (line 1). The following lines deepen the metapoetic dialogue, as the speaker admits, "My book needs a poem talkin bout *I remember when /* Something more autobiographical," thus signaling the poem as a self-aware

attempt to inject a more personal, authentic narrative into her writing (lines 2-3). The second stanza alludes to how the family "wanted to assimilate, nothing radical," but poverty and social isolation made them desperate (line 4). In the fourth stanza, the speaker explains, "None of us escaped being a criminal / Of the state, institutionalized…" (lines 10-11). Students should note that Garcia's poem does not contain a true refrain, instead alternating the words "lyrical" and "musical" in final lines across stanzas two through seven, most notably replacing "autobiographical" in the first line with "lyrical." This coincides with the opening frustration that the speaker needs to write something more lyrical, and the repetition emphasizes the pressure to assimilate to a canonical form even as Garcia resists its boundaries. The eighth stanza contains a quatrain, but it does not follow any expectation of the villanelle outside the repetition of the word "magical" in the third line. Garcia then adds a couplet at the end in which the speaker declares, "Did you know a poem can be both mythical and archeological? / I ignore the cataphysical, and I anoint my own clavicle" (lines 26-27). These lines effectively marry the implied dissonance between the "magical" and "autobiographical" presented in the opening stanza, while also explicitly naming the speaker's rebellion both inside and outside the poem. By ignoring "the cataphysical" and instead anointing her own body, and specifically that which connects her arm (the instrument of her expression) to the rest of her body, the speaker goes against the legacy of institutionalization and criminalization inflicted on her family at the same time that Garcia goes against the rules of the villanelle.

THE GHAZAL

I close this chapter with the ghazal, not because it is particularly canonical in English language poetry but because it is one of the oldest classical forms employed by twenty-first-century American poets, and a form frequently utilized by poets living in diaspora. Including

ghazals in the curriculum also works to combat the (sometimes quiet) Islamophobia that has permeated America since 9/11 while also aligning a traditionally Middle Eastern form with English forms in terms of literary and cultural value. The form has its roots in seventh-century Arabic poetry, though its popularity spread across the Middle East and South Asia along with the spread of Islam. Love and separation are the most common themes in ghazals, both of which manifest visually in the structure of the form. Ghazals do not have a strict length, but each stanza is presented as a couplet, or sher. These couplets follow a complex rhyming pattern set by the first stanza of the poem, called the matlaa. This stanza must contain both the radif, a word or phrase that will act as a refrain in subsequent lines, and the qaafiyaa, a word or phrase that precedes the radif and sets the rhyming pattern. The remainder of the poem is arranged into couplets, each of which contains the established rhyme and refrain at the end of the second line. For example, the following lines act as the matlaa for Agha Shahid Ali's "Ghazal:"   I'll do what I must if I'm bold in real time. /   A refugee, I'll be paroled in real time … (lines 1-2). As these lines demonstrate, the radif is "in real time," as this phrase is repeated at the close of both the first and second lines of the matlaa. The qaafiya is established by the words "bold" and "paroled," both of which contain long "o" sound paired with the "–ld" consonant sound. In the following sher, Ali writes, "Cool evidence clawed off like shirts of hell-fire? / A former existence untold in real time," which carries forward the qaafiya and radif in its second line (lines 3-4). While the ghazal can prove a remarkably challenging form in which to write, students are able to identify the pattern quickly and internalize the role of repetition in the form. The longer the ghazal, the heavier its redundancy becomes.

Fatimah Asghar's "Ghareeb" utilizes the ghazal to explore the alienation they experienced when they returned to the homeland of their deceased parents: "on visits back your

english sticks to everything. / your own auntie calls you ghareeb. Stranger" (lines 1-2). This ostracization intensifies the experience of growing up in diaspora because it is the speaker's family that perpetuates feelings of unbelonging. Stanzas one through five utilize the radif to emphasize how the speaker's family, and even their dead parents, reinforce their sense that they are a stranger, even in their family's house. The sixth and seventh stanzas shift from "stranger" to "strange" as they connect the sensation to passersby who ignore a deer carcass as they drive by, while the eighth redeploys "stranger" in an entirely new context. Here, the speaker describes how "the Qur'an [they] memorized turns stranger," expanding the alienation felt inside the family to include their religion, which also does not function as a home (line 16). The final stanza solidifies this feeling of separation: "how many poems must you write to convince yourself / you have a family? Everyone leaves & you end up the stranger" (lines 19-20). Another of Asghar's ghazals, "How'd Your Parents Die Again," echoes this frustration as the speaker contends with repeated questions about the details surrounding the poets' childhood and parents' death. Asghar chooses "grave" as the radif, pushing readers to internalize the frequency with which they are made to revisit the trauma of losing their parents through the invasive questions from interviewers and readers alike. The poem opens with a rebuke of those who feel they have a right to these details, the speaker chastising the speaker of the question offered in the title: "Again? As though I told you how the first time. / Everyone always tries to theft, bring them back out of the grave" (lines 1-2). The end of the poem is rife with the same anger that renders the Qur'an a stranger in "Ghareeb," vocalizing their inability to reconcile what they know of God with being an orphan:

Would I trust a God that promised me my family?

Does it matter how, if they're gone, twenty-five years, a grave

what's left of their remains? Does it matter how? There's no

place to see them again. Home is the first grave. (lines 11-14)

Students will note that Asghar's treatment of the ghazal is somewhat loose, as neither poem includes the radif in both lines of the matlaa and neither incorporates a qaafiya. These decisions do not necessarily detract from the heaviness created through repetition of the radif in each stanza, but they do introduce a certain discord into the form that readers must confront. If the function of the qaafiya is to establish rhyme, the absence of a qaafiya eliminates a sonic harmony inherent to the form, a feature which mirrors Asghar's use of the form to specifically contain feelings of unbelonging and isolation.

Zeina Hashem Beck, a Lebanese poet, utilizes the ghazal frequently in her recent collection, *O*, with varying levels of deviation. One of the most adherent entries is "Ghazal: My Daughter," which opens with a vivid matlaa which captures the despair of a mother watching her newborn child struggle to survive. Beck writes, "The neonatal doctor describes you; *Champion, no doubt*, my daughter. / Two days old, hands tied—tried to pull your breathing tube out, my daughter" (lines 1-2). Unlike Asghar, Beck makes use of the qaafiya, setting a strict rhyme that will carry through the subsequent stanzas. Beck also centers love as the prevailing sentiment for the poem, echoing its Arabic roots, with each sher compounding the resiliency of the daughter and her will to live, as well as aligning "my daughter" with a sort of prayer in the way it contains the grief of the mother. While "Ghazal: My Daughter" represents the form in the strictest sense, "Ghazal: Ode for My Body," another by Beck, deviates in tremendous fashion.

Beck opens the poem with a single line which echoes the ode, invoking the body directly and naming it "dear ordinary miracle" (line 1). Though the first line might suggest that the poem

is not a ghazal at all, the subsequent stanza is a traditional matlaa that carries the invocation of

the body forward into the radif: "I want. To learn how to be bold in my body. / It's always

young, it's always old in my body" (lines 2-3). The following stanza again shifts away from the

couplet form, presenting a free verse quatrain that plays on the feelings of age. The fourth stanza

again returns to the ghazal form in a couplet that adheres to both the rhyme and repetition

established in the matlaa. Beck lists back and forth like this throughout the poem, balancing

lengthier stanzas of free verse with brief interjections in the form of couplets, effectively

bridging the ode and ghazal. If one accepts that the primary function of the ode is to celebrate,

and core themes in a traditional ghazal involve love and separation, what Beck achieves through

this structural marriage is effectively an act of self-acceptance symbolized by both the language

of the poem and the combination of forms on the page. The closing stanzas demonstrate this

acceptance deftly, pairing a couplet fraught and unsure of futurity with a five-line stanza in

which her daughter grounds her in the joy of the present moment:

> In the future of the future, will I be named
>
> Z, recite the broken ode in my body?
>
>
> My daughter says *remember* instead of *remind*,
>
> as in, *Remember me of that song?*
>
> I lather my limbs with scented oil, smell
>
> the church that I am. What was I
>
> Saying? Remember me of, remember me. (lines 79-85)

Here, the speaker understands her body to be a "church" that is worthy of celebrating, and

grounds the ritual of oiling her limbs in celebration rather than an anti-aging practice. The final

turn of phrase embodies the voice of her daughter, which acts as an answer to the question of how the speaker will be named and remembered in the future.

The ghazal is a form dominated by writers with a connection to the Middle East and/or South Asia, but that is not to say that other writers are not drawn to the form. Both Patricia Smith and Porsha Olayiwola turn to the form for its musicality, using the radif as a sort of metronome to contain the beat of the dances they describe in their respective ghazals. Smith opens "Hip-Hop Ghazal" with a matlaa that celebrates dance in the Black community. The speaker proclaims, "Gotta love us brown girls, munching on fat, swinging blue hips, / decked out in shells and splashes, Lawdie, bringing them woo hips" (lines 1-2). Smith grounds her treatment of the form in the acoustic, employing Black English, rhyme, and a consistent meter of fourteen syllables throughout. These efforts turn the ghazal itself into a song that ultimately serves to shake the speaker from her own sense of stagnation in the final stanza: "Crying 'bout getting old—Patricia, you need to get up off / what God gave you. Say a prayer and start slinging. Cue hips" (lines 11-12). Like Beck, Smith makes use of the form to interrogate femininity and the pressure to suppress sexuality that women experience as they age. Olayiwola also leans into the acoustic qualities of the form with "Ghazal for the Chicago Two-Step," echoing Smith's poem as she paints the scene of two women dancing together in the kitchen. Olayiwola also employs the same "oo" qafiyaa, opting for "step" as the radif; this again situates sound, and specifically a monosyllabic sound associated with dance and celebration, alongside the refrain to emphasize the way music carries through the poem. What makes the poem a particularly interesting act of resistance is that Olayiwola draws on the unity implied by repetition inside the form to comment on "an unbroken population" that glides together in a Chicago Two-Step, "an exodus on beat so black the sway a great / migration—a flock in every city new step" (line 7; lines 9-10).

Olayiwola understands that the ghazal traditionally contains feelings of separation and love, and she uses the form to highlight a cultural phenomenon that extends from city to city, bringing Black people from numerous lineages together in shared movement.

CONCLUSION

The received forms discussed in this chapter are far from an exhaustive list, and this discussion represents only a small subset of the work twenty-first century poets are doing to comment on structural and systemic inequities through verse. Still, it is important to acknowledge the resurgence of form and formal deviation over the past two decades because it allows students to witness poetic form as a fluid and ever evolving literary technique, one that responds to the contemporary moment of its authors and one which authors continue to view as an opportunity for social critique. Poets whose careers began amidst heavy criticism of form, such as Patricia Smith, have embraced various forms with renewed vigor since the turn of the century. Young poets are looking to classical forms as a rite of passage, establishing their technical prowess while also pushing against forms in the same way their work pushes against various sociopolitical structures.

Each time contemporary poets demonstrate their understanding of form, readers can and should investigate the poet's deviations from form as intentional acts. As a whole, the poets described in this chapter reinforce the argument that dismantling oppressive structures sometimes requires that we work within those structures through their mastery of and departure from hegemonic poetic forms. Thus, writing within canonical forms is no longer an inherently conservative act; rather, it can be, and often is, an intentional subversion in which poets learn the foundational elements of White-dominant forms specifically to assert their place at the proverbial table. As the next chapter demonstrates, writing within and against classical forms is also a

necessary step toward innovation, which can be seen through new and reimagined forms like the Golden Shovel and Duplex, both of which take cues from the forms discussed herein. Presenting students with classical forms is, at the most basic level, inevitable—as dictated by standardized testing and misconceptions that poetry is synonymous with form—but also vital to their understanding of how containers can be used not just to bind, but to liberate.

Chapter 2

Invented Forms and the Reformation of the American Poetry Canon

There have been frequent calls for a more diverse and representative canon across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including recent movements like Disrupt Texts and Teach Living Poets, both of which have gained traction among writers of color via social media since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Kaitlin Hoelzer, in her exceptionally thorough delineation of the discourse around the American poetry canon, highlights the continued erasure of Black queer voices in particular. I would extend this observation to include all poets of color, as well as White immigrant poets living in diaspora, though I agree with Hoelzer that the erasure intensifies when one considers the correlation of queer and raced identities. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how early twenty-first century poets from historically marginalized communities have deliberately engaged canonical poetic forms as sites of resistance. The mastery and innovation of sonnets, sestinas, and other traditional Western forms works to establish poets of color and/or queer poets as vital additions to conversations around American poetics. Inverting those forms with intentionality further serves as a critique of both the institutionalization of poetry as an elite (or at least relatively exclusive) pursuit and the larger systems of oppression that routinely obscure the voices and experiences of underrepresented communities.

Hoelzer's discussion of the duplex, a form invented by Jericho Brown, argues that poets of color "use poetic form to critique and complicate a historically racist, heterosexist, and exclusive US literary canon" and that some poets are "moving beyond critique toward creation" through the invention of new poetic forms (2-3). Though Hoelzer concerns herself primarily with the creation of the duplex, her comments are equally applicable to the invention of other recent forms, including: the golden shovel, invented by Terrance Hayes; the obverse, invented by

Nicole Sealey; and the Arabic, invented by Marwa Helal. Each of these forms was created by a

living poet of color, and the respective creators have explicitly described the invention of form as

an intentional act meant to center historically marginalized voices and amplify poetic traditions

frequently excluded from discussions of the legacy of American poetry.

This chapter aims to highlight the function of invented forms in reshaping conceptions of

the American poetry canon. With regard to the golden shovel and duplex forms, the requirements

of each form highlight the project of bringing new generations of poets into conversation with

traditions that are frequently overlooked in educational settings. The duplex takes inspiration

from the sonnet and the pantoum, as well as blues music, participating in what Hoelzer describes

as "an often-exclusive white poetic tradition because of its sonnet-like features while also

celebrating a Black literary tradition that is generally positioned outside of the literary canon in

its use of the blues" (Hoelzer 3). Brown himself has confirmed the subversion that Hoelzer

describes, attesting to his deliberate infusion of distinctly White or colonial poetic traditions with

Black musical traditions to "queer the sonnet," as he often puts it during dialogue following his

readings. Though not a part of Hoelzer's argument, the golden shovel also deliberately engages

with poetic tradition, prioritizing the innovation that Hoelzer speaks to in order to engage new

generations of readers and writers with Black poetics.

The golden shovel form echoes the cento, a traditional form composed of quotations from

other work, in that the golden shovel requires poets to draw from lines of Gwendolyn Brooks'

poetry. Brooks is arguably one of the most visible poets of color in American poetry, yet even

her legacy is often reduced to the brief poem, "We Real Cool." Hayes' effort to connect living

writers with the full breadth of Brooks' poetry is evident in his naming of the form, itself an

homage to the opening lines of "We Real Cool," which sets the scene with "The Pool Players. /

Seven at the Golden Shovel" (lines 1-2). Nicole Sealey created the obverse, a variation of the palindrome, to contextualize lived experiences through conversations of generational trauma and violence. The poem literally hinges on inversion, as the first half of the poem is presented in reverse order in the second half. Unlike the palindrome, the obverse includes a thesis at the end of the poem, a stand-alone line which disrupts the symmetry created by the palindrome and insists that readers consider the poet in a specific, historical context.

Though the obverse form does not engage with previous literary traditions, it arose through ekphrasis and Sealey's inescapable discomfort with an art piece that, for her, evoked images of chattel slavery and lynching, again demonstrating the correlation between colonial violence and the invention or inversion of poetic form. Marwa Helal's Arabic form, like Sealey's, uses the structure of the poem to deliberately invert the way that readers encounter the text. Poems written using the Arabic form are read right to left, an allusion to the way that Arabic and some other Middle Eastern languages are read. Through this inversion, Helal recreates the discomfort with which non-native English speakers encounter the English language, destabilizing English speakers' understanding of how to encounter the language of the poem. To add to this discomfort, Helal includes an Arabic word (untranslated) within the form, actively rejecting efforts to impose "English-only" as the baseline for communication in America.

For educators, the inclusion of invented forms in the curriculum is an inherently radical act in that the originators of these forms have signaled their creation as intentional sites of resistance. Moreover, the use of invented forms allows educators to address one of the most pervasive misconceptions among students, namely that poetry is somehow antiquated or distant from their lived experiences. Each of the forms discussed in this chapter arose following the election of former president Donald Trump, meaning that each functions as a direct response to

one of the most significant cultural moments in early twenty-first century students' lives.

Additionally, the poets themselves are actively engaged in the innovation of American poetics.

The power of centering poets who live and write contemporaneously with our students, and

specifically those who have successfully invented forms, is that it offers students concrete proof

that poetry is a living genre, one in which poets of color and/or queer poets are increasingly

empowered to make revisions to tradition, to insist upon their space in the American canon and

to make space for those that come after them. These forms do not eschew tradition, but amend it

to be more inclusive and expansive, efforts which mirror the larger push for greater

representation in the classroom. The use of invented forms also sets the stage for students to

create their own forms, engaging in higher order thinking and critical literacy as they insert

themselves into the literary legacies they most admire.

THE DUPLEX – JERICHO BROWN

The duplex form first appears in Jericho Brown's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *The Tradition*, published by Copper Canyon Press in 2019. According to Brown, the form evolved as

he healed from an incredibly serious bout of the flu in 2018. In a blog describing the invention of

the duplex, Brown notes that he "had already written several of the sonnet subversions that were

beginning to make their way into [*The Tradition*]" before admitting that he was "so angry [he]

spent years thinking of ways to gut the sonnet" ("Invention"). His underlying frustration with

the sonnet forced Brown "to confront the Western tradition of sonnet writing: a tradition in

which there was room for flowers, but not for Black people. Like many African American poets

before him, including Gwendolyn Brooks or Claude McKay, Brown disrupts the sonnet form,

making it his own" (Mąkowska 78). Brown's pursuit led to a mediation on sonnet crowns, as

well as what Brown describes as his "need to write the very strict ghazal, 'Hustle,'...[and his]

rigid use of the form meant to mirror its end-word, 'prison.' Brown describes the process of creation in detail:

> In order to test whether my form could be made flesh, I printed every line I have ever written and cut them up until I had little slivers of lines…A literal need for space made one of my first decisions for me. The new form would only have 9 to 11 syllables further marrying East to West with lines that would probably echo blank verse…The poems became more whole and revisable when I saw in them the need for tonal shifts made possible by the blues lyric…The blues allowed for a poem that we teachers like to describe as "voice-y"…I decided to call the form a duplex because something about its repetition and its couplets made me feel like it was a house with two addresses. It is, indeed, a mutt of a form as so many of us in this nation are only now empowered to live fully in all of our identities.

Unlike many traditional forms, students have the benefit of confronting Brown's intentionality and process by way of his reflection on creating the duplex; this serves as a framework for analyzing the duplex poems which appear in Brown's book, *The Tradition*, as well as those written by other poets crafting duplexes themselves. Brown also offers an efficient and accessible description of the form:

> Write a ghazal that is also a sonnet that is also a blues poem of 14 lines, giving each line 9 to 11 syllables.
>
> The first line is echoed in the last line.
>
> The second line of the poem should change our impression of the first line in an unexpected way.
>
> The second line is echoed and becomes the third line.

The fourth line of the poem should change our impression of the third line in an

unexpected way.

This continues until the penultimate line becomes the first line of the couplet that

leads to the final (and first) line.

For the variations of repeated lines, it is useful to think of the a a' b scheme of the

blues form.

When I present parameters for a particular poem, I refer to them as ingredients and to the

form itself as a recipe; this helps students to internalize the idea that poetry is a product

that is directly influenced by its ingredients / parameters, but also resists the formality

that many students associate with the genre and allows for experimentation in the same

way that a literal recipe might.

As Hoezler notes, "In both form and content, the duplex is Black/queer…the term

describes Brown himself and thus speaks to the particular perspective from which the duplex

works. While Blackness and queerness are not the same thing…the term Black/queer also

illustrates the shared nondominant social space that Blackness and queerness both occupy and

the double marginalization of Black and queer people" (2). Thus, the form is an act of resistance

both in its construction and because Brown centers a perspective outside the White,

heteronormative perspective often associated with American poetics. Brown follows the

parameters of form strictly in the first four duplexes in *The Tradition*, then mines those four to

create a cento in duplex form for his fifth and final duplex in the collection. The first instance of

the form, appropriately titled "Duplex," considers the speaker's fraught relationship with his

father. The opening couplet reads, "A poem is a gesture toward home. / It makes dark demands I

call my own" (lines 1-2). According to Brown's specification, the second line should alter our

impression of the first. In this instance, the first line evokes images of nostalgia and safety in its invocation of home, while the second attributes "dark demands" to the home, implying that it is not the space of respite that readers might expect. The third stanza begins with the image of a lover's burgundy car, then shifts in the following line to describe the lover as "fast and awful" before comparing the lover to the speaker's father (lines 5-6).

Readers move from this image of the father to the speaker's admission that his father "Hit hard as a hailstorm. He'd leave marks" (line 8). The poem trades on the duplicity implied by the title and the couplet structure, as "The 'hailstorm,' which evokes the scale of the abuse the speaker was exposed to as a child, unexpectedly turns into the 'light rain,' which 'hits easy but leaves its own mark / Like the sound of a mother weeping again'" (Mąkowska 78). The final two stanzas juxtapose the image of the abused mother and the speaker's own abuse, with the duplex culminating in the revelation that "None of the beaten end up how we began. / A poem is a gesture toward home" (lines 13-14). The visual brevity of the form belies its depth, as Brown "imagines the whole argument of a sonnet between each of the couplet's lines," thereby injecting the poem with the breadth of a complete sonnet crown (Pacheco); this allows him to encompass "not only the abuse recounted in the poem, but also the everyday violence of living as a Black gay man in contemporary America," situating the poem as a testament to the Black/queer experience and the complexity of male love in the Black community (Pacheco). Though the poem has obvious social and political implications, Brown himself admits, "when I'm writing it I'm not thinking about social and political implications. I'm thinking about my life and I'm looking at my own childhood" (Guess). Brown's statement opens the door for an important conversation with students with regard to how and why certain experiences are politicized. My students often perceive the political sphere as abstract or disconnected from their daily lives,

despite the fact that their personal and educational experiences are deeply influenced by sociopolitical structures. Acting as witnesses to Brown's experiences as a Black/queer man serves as a catalyst for meaningful introspection around their own lived experiences, while also affirming that these experiences belong in representations of the American experience.

The duplex form has become a fast favorite among contemporary poets, in America and abroad. Omar Sakr, the first Arab-Australian Muslim to win the Australian Prime Minister's Literary Award, employed the form in "Context in a Broken Duplex" to critique violence and occupation in Palestine, as well as in "On Finding the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in Dante's 'Inferno'" to comment on queer sexuality as an Arab-Australian Muslim man. Within American poetics, the form is particularly popular among Black poets, including Taylor Byas and Karisma Price. Byas, whose affinity for formalism I discussed in the previous chapter, included the form in her chapbook, *Shutter*, which draws on various depictions of photography to comment on Black femininity. "Photography," the second poem in the collection, opens with a strong critique of objectification and dehumanization of the female form: "Somewhere, my body develops apart from me— / in a dark room, on a square of a Polaroid" (lines 1-2). As the poem moves forward, the speaker becomes realized as the photographer manipulates the image, culminating in the understanding that she exists solely as an object of the gaze. She laments,

> To the doe-eyed camera lens, *look at me honey*
>
> in the flash. I'm only real if you capture me.
>
> > In the flash, I'm only real if you capture me
> >
> > looking into the lens. You double behind it. (lines 9-12)

Byas' strict adherence to form emphasizes the limitations imposed on the speaker—literally within the frame of the image, and figuratively as an extension of the photographer's gaze. The

speaker never achieves an autonomous and corporeal existence, functioning instead as the physical embodiment of desire; this suggests that the speaker ceases to exist if she fails to embody that desire, dictating a rigid aesthetic that mirrors the complexity of the duplex.

Karisma Price, an early career poet from New Orleans, draws on the duplex to comment on generational trauma in the Black community, alluding to emergencies that threaten the safety of her family while they sleep. The first lines of the poem, "I showed my cousins I loved them by learning / how to spell every one of their names," situate the speaker inside her family legacy while also acknowledging Price's self-aware entry into the legacy of Black poetics (lines 1-2). The reference to cousins invokes kinship, yet its use with Black English urges the reader not to consider the term in exclusively familial connotations in many forms of English. "Cousin" is frequently employed to reference those to whom a person feels close, whether genetically, emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually. Thus, in learning "how to spell every one of their names," Price acknowledges her commitment to understanding her forebearers and contemporaries alike. This committent is emphasized in the second and third stanzas, which move the concept of kinship from familial to ancestral:

My black nation learns how to spell the names

of our kin renamed "emergency," "threat."

New Orleans, please. There's threat of emergency:

a violence against where black people sleep. (lines 3-6)

The slight alteration from the second to the third line moves from the abstract notion of "every one" to a collective, "black nation," and positions the speaker as a member of that collective. Kin, then, moves from a handful of close relatives to the entirety of the Black community, allowing Price to align the renaming of her family with the systemic renaming of Black

individuals across the nation, alluding to the practice of dehumanizing the state violence by robbing them of their respective identities in headlines, police reports, and on social media. Lines five and six trade on Price's movement from the local to the collective, allowing her to comment on both the immediate environmental threat to residents of New Orleans, where "there's threat of emergency," to the systemic "violence against where black people sleep" across the country. Though Price is less rigid in her repetitions throughout the poem, she leans into the complexity and duplicity imposed by the form.

The duplex has proven one of the most accessible forms in my classroom, as the structure of the poem is quickly evident. Fixating on this structure during critical reading exercises encourages students to draw inferences and make meaning of the unspoken. Recall that a key motivation for Brown was the desire to "gut the sonnet," so it is important for students to contend with the fact that what they encounter on the page represents just a fraction of the narrative contained by the duplex. If one accepts the premise that each couplet represents a full sonnet in the crown sequence, then the form essentially moves the sequence from ninety-eight lines to just fourteen. In order to make meaning of the poem beyond a superficial reading, students must make connections—between the first and second lines in each couplet, and across couplets. Beyond that, students engage with the tradition inherent in the form, thereby acknowledging the place of Black/queer poetics in the American canon.

Byas' and Price's duplexes consistently generate the strongest response from my students because they engage with two issues at the forefront of their experience: the correlation between Western beauty standards and fetishization of the other, and also the cyclical nature of generational trauma. Discussions about the role of digital editing and digital imaging are commonplace for my students, so they are keenly aware that they are frequently bombarded with

images that communicate expectations for female sexuality and actively constrain desirability to reflect Western standards. What they are less familiar with is the possibility that poetry can act as a site of resistance against such pressures to assimilate to Western beauty. Students engage with Byas' poem eagerly because they encounter Byas as a faithful witness of their own experiences, a woman who looks like them and understands what it means to navigate impossible beauty standards and raced perceptions of desire simultaneously. Price, too, is a poet who looks like many of my students and writes authentically about experiences that mirror their own. Her approach to generational trauma is neither flattened nor fetishized, demonstrating for students that poetry is a space wherein they can witness their full selves. For both poets, the duplex form is an essential part of their critique in that a duplex most readily implies a space divided, as with a literal duplex, an image that intensifies each speaker's inability to wholly reconcile their respective experiences with the traumas they describe. Students, in turn, understand the utilization of form itself as a site of resistance, fleshing out and unifying disparate histories and emotions by collapsing whole sonnets into their respective beginnings and endings.

THE GOLDEN SHOVEL – TERRANCE HAYES

Terrance Hayes introduced the golden shovel form to American poetics with the publication of *Lighthead*, his fourth full-length poetry collection. According to Hayes, the form arose out of his decision to have his children memorize poems by Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks. Hayes challenged his five-year-old son to memorize "We Real Cool," Brooks' brief but widely anthologized poem. Reflecting on the experience in the foreword to *The Golden Shovel Anthology*, Hayes recalls, "We were a dynamic doo-wop duo, my five year old and I, practicing Brooks' exquisite twenty-four words at various speeds and volumes. One night, even as I began digging for my own words, Brooks kept playing in my head. I decided to string

the whole poem down the page and write into it" (xxix). Hayes' description speaks to his commitment to introduce new generations to the legacy of Black poetics in America. Though his son may not have been a practicing poet at five years old, the shared act of memorizing "We Real Cool" alongside his father no doubt laid the groundwork for an attention to literary and cultural roots in the Black experience that will extend throughout his life.

From a pedagogical perspective, Hayes' description mirrors a long historical tradition of prioritizing memorization in the classroom, and the tradition of memorizing poetry, in particular. As an adolescent, I was required to memorize numerous poems and poetic monologues; even today, I am able to recite Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" and Antony's monologue from *Julius Caesar* without hesitation. John Keating stressed the vitality of memorization for his students in *Dead Poet's Society*, John Donne's "Death, be not proud" remains an oft-recited choice at funerals, and nearly every colleague I have asked can recall at least a handful of Shakespearean sonnets from memory. At the core of memorization praxis in the classroom is a belief in the importance of developing a knowledge bank, and the poems that students are required to memorize substantially affects their worldview. The decision to have students memorize poets like Shakespeare ensures that he remains an influential author in English poetry, but it also reinforces the hegemonic ideologies of colonialism and prioritizes a distinctly White worldview.

However, requiring that students recite poems more carefully curated to prioritize historically marginalized perspectives can subvert hegemonic ideologies and respond to calls for more culturally relevant pedagogy. Yewande Lewis-Fokum, Schontal Moore, and Aisha T. Spencer did exactly that when they launched their program, *Talk the Poem*, a project centered on recitation with an expressed aim of improving students' engagement with Jamaican poetry and

Jamaican cultural history. Hayes proceeds from a similar understanding and, though the golden

shovel does not explicitly require practitioners or students to memorize a source poem, it embeds

a similar pedagogical practice that, as Jess Cotton put it, aims "to articulate an alternative way of

thinking about blackness and belonging: one that allows us to see black subjectivity as an

aesthetic function that reorients poetry's history towards an unforeclosed future" (524).

Educators, then, actively work toward a more diverse and authentic canon by engaging students

in the critical reading and writing of golden shovels, as both processes require that students

participate in comparative analysis and process the ways in which early twenty first century

poems respond to and extend the legacy of Gwendolyn Brooks.

Hayes' first implementation of the form appears in "The Golden Shovel" and reproduces

the entirety of "We Real Cool" as end words down the right side of the poem. The poem includes

two sections—in the first section, Hayes does not make any alterations to the end words,

allowing readers to encounter Brooks' poem precisely; the second section utilizes enjambment

and careful word choice to repeat Brooks' poem again, this time with more nuance and creative

license. The first section, for example, uses the end word "real" without change, while the

second section uses "ethereal." In both instances, the form upholds in that the final syllable in the

line corresponds to Brooks' poem, yet Hayes' creative approach invites future practitioners to

play within the form, thus reinforcing a core motivation for the form, namely to "open up

dialogue between black poets across time: making lyric address more historically mobile"

(Cotton 544).

The structure of a golden shovel is relatively straight-forward: writers choose a line or

lines from a Gwendolyn Brooks poem, then incorporate those words, in order, as the end words

to each line of the poem. SJ Coyle describes the process as "part-cento, part-erasure," suggesting

that the form mimics other recent applications of erasure poetry that aim to democratize the page and employ textual mining as a means by which contemporary poets "complete" preexisting texts through their own additions to the conversation (366-367). The structural effect introduced by Hayes is such that readers can experience the poem in two ways—a horizontal reading of the poem, whereby readers move from left to right, presents an original poem by the author, while a vertical reading down the right-hand side of the poem presents a line or lines originally composed by Brooks. The dual reading experience reinforces Coyle's assertion, as Hayes' construction clearly builds onto Brooks' preexisting work and offers a more "complete" version that can only exist through the act of textual mining. Many utilizations of the golden shovel put original poems in conversation with the Brooks poems from which they mine their end words, though this is not explicitly required by the form. The structure of a golden shovel elicits comparisons to the sestina, as both forms are deeply concerned with end words and make use of those end words in a deliberate pattern. There are also elements of the cento at play, as poets construct their work using lines pulled from others. Consider the first section of Hayes' "The Golden Shovel," reproduced below.

I. 1981

When I am so small Da's sock covers my arm, **we**

cruise at twilight until we find the place the **real**

men lean, bloodshot and translucent with **cool.**

His smile is a gold-plated incantation as **we**

drift by women on bar stools, with nothing **left**

in them but approachlessness. This is a **school**

I do not know yet. But the cue sticks mean **we**

are rubbed by light, smooth as wood, the **lurk**

of smoke thinned to song. We won't be out **late.**

Standing in the middle of the street last night **we**

watched the moonlit lawns and a neighbor **strike**

his son in the face. A shadow knocked **straight**

Da promised to leave me everything: the shovel **we**

used to bury the dog, the words he loved to **sing**

his rusted pistol, his squeaky Bible, his **sin.**

The boy's sneakers were light on the road. **We**

watched him run to us looking wounded and **thin.**

He'd been caught lying or drinking his father's **gin.**

He'd been defending his ma, trying to be a man. **We**

stood in the road, and my father talked about **jazz,**

how sometimes a tune is born of outrage. By **June**

the boy would be locked upstate. That night **we**

got down on our knees in my room. If I should **die**

before I wake. Da said to me, it will be too **soon.**

I have bolded the end words to highlight Hayes' use of Brooks' twenty-four word poem, "We Real Cool." Reading vertically, one experiences the original poem, one so pervasive that Brooks herself said of the poem, "I know some of you are sick and tired of this poem, because if you see my name, you see it" (00:20:23-00:20:30). Much has been written about "We Real Cool," and the general consensus is that Brooks deftly comments on self-destructive habits and mortality in the Black community through her sparse, imagistic verse. The epigraph for the poem explains that there are seven men at a pool hall, The Golden Shovel, before describing how the men participate in a nocturnal culture that readers might assume includes socially deviant and/or criminal behavior. Notably, there are no intergenerational figures in the poem, implying that the men who "lurk late" and "die soon" do not have ready access to strong role models or parents. Hayes engages with these themes in this first section by deliberately juxtaposing an abusive father and son with a father-son pair that has a positive relationship. They act as witnesses to domestic violence, which the youthful speaker describes (lines 10-12).

The scene echoes Brooks in that the abused child leaves his father's reach. Here, Hayes morphs the boy into "a shadow knocked straight," an image that corresponds to the men who "lurk late" in Brooks' poem. However, Hayes pushes against the trope of generational violence as the speaker and his father make space for the abused boy, standing together in the road where the speaker's "father talked about jazz, / how sometimes a tune is born of outrage" (lines 19-21).

The poem closes with an allusion to the Lord's Prayer, which is cut short as Da tells the abused boy that if he should die as a child, "it will be too soon" (lines 23-24).

The second section picks up ten years later and acts in opposition to the insistence on survival that closes the first section. Readers can imagine the speaker to now be a teen or young adult given the lapse in time implied by the inscription "1991." Students will likely note the shift in voice, as the second section is marred by frustration and anger, the speaker lamenting that he and his peers are "Born lost and cool- / er than heartache" (lines 27-28). The transition from the first to second section reinforces what Brooks captures in "We Real Cool" as a new generation internalizes systemic oppression as inevitable, responding not through activism but self-destruction. The second section culminates with the lament that "We sweat to keep from we- / eping. Groomed on a die- / t of hunger, we end too soon" (lines 46-48). Here, Hayes remarks on the number of young Black men murdered each year, as well as the systems that perpetuate the cycle of violence, including Black masculinity and generational poverty. The poem is an ideal entry point for students to encounter the form, both because it acts as the origin of the golden shovel and because it invites dialogue around the more sparse "We Real Cool," which my students sometimes struggle to interpret. By presenting two sections set ten years apart, Hayes implies an explanation for the behavior of the seven men playing pool in Brooks' poem and what motivates their indifference to dying young. "The Golden Shovel" also encourages students to approach Brooks' work as a living piece of art, one which continues to resonate among those in the Black community, offering additional layers of understanding around one of the most visible poems in K-12 education.

Among the invented forms discussed in this chapter, the golden shovel has inspired the most prolific application, including a suite of golden shovel poems in *Poetry*, as well as *The*

Golden Shovel Anthology. The broad nature of the form seems to encourage its replication across poets from diverse backgrounds. Many of these poems incorporate some or all of "We Real Cool," while others mine lesser-known works from Brooks. Danez Smith's "The 17-Year-Old & the Gay Bar," for example, pulls the first two lines from Brooks' "Gay Chaps at the Bar" as source material. Brooks' poem is part of a sonnet sequence addressing the experiences of soldiers on the front lines, in effect making Smith's golden shovel a second-generation entry into a conversation that began with a letter sent to Brooks (Stavros 10).

The letter from which Brooks gets her title is almost certainly using "gay" to describe whimsical or boisterous young soldiers, rather than explicitly addressing the sexual practices of the soldiers. Smith, a Black/queer nonbinary poet, inverts this allusion by attaching the adjective "gay" not to "chaps" but to "bar," implying that those in their poem are explicitly queer. This inversion is reinforced in the first line of Smith's poem, wherein the speaker describes the bar as "this gin-heavy heaven, blessed ground to think *gay* & mean *we*" (line 1). Smith's decision to italicize the end word "we" insists on a rereading of Brooks' line from the perspective of queer collectivity, an act which injects queer identity into both Brooks' poem and the soldiers' experiences to which her poem refers. For students, this invites a discussion about the erasure of queer soldiers, most especially during the time period in which Brooks' poem is rooted. Smith "completes" the narrative begun by Brooks by reasserting the existence of queer soldiers. They also circumvent expectations by aligning "gay" with "we," reinforcing a sense of community and belonging against a legacy of exclusion and isolation for gay soldiers in the military.

Indigenous poet Joy Harjo, like Hayes, draws from "We Real Cool" in her golden shovel, "An American Sunrise." Unlike Hayes, however, Harjo chooses to use just the last fifteen words of "We Real Cool," constructing a loose sonnet with Brooks' image as a framework. Harjo's

poem, like Smith's, comments on the LGBTQIA+ experience while also critiquing the alcoholism endemic to Indigenous communities. The speaker confesses, "It was difficult to lose days in the Indian bar if you were straight. / Easy if you played pool and drank to remember to forget. We" (lines 3-4). Readers encounter the word "straight" from multiple angles: straight as sober and/or conservative; straight as on the up and up; straight as not queer. For those who are not "straight," it is easy "to lose days." Harjo thus aligns social deviance with queerness, suggesting that being queer in an "Indian bar" necessitates heavy drinking as a means of escapism, an act of forgetting.

Like Brooks, Harjo embraces the uncomfortable staccato created by ending lines with "We," highlighting the disjointed relationship between Indigeneity and the "American sunrise" alluded to in the title of Harjo's poem. The sonic disruption also acts as a structural resistance in that it subverts the acoustic expectations of the sonnet, injecting cacophony into a traditionally harmonious form while also speaking directly to discord in the Indigenous community: "forty years later and we still want justice. We are still America. We / know the rumors of our demise. We spit them out" (lines 13-14). Harjo's resistance is solidified in the final two words of the poem, "die / soon" (lines 14-15). Harjo adds a fifteenth line to the sonnet, amplifying the weight of the impending death and creating unresolved tension in the closing syllables of the poem. Harjo connects the Indigenous experience to the Black experience by situating the subjects of her poem in a bar and having them play pool in the same way that the seven do in Brooks' poem. However, she moves "We Real Cool" into the present moment by shifting the subject of death from "We" to "They," referring to the rumors of Indigenous demise. The shift in subject creates a powerful rebuke of state violence against Black, Indigenous, and queer bodies, as "die / soon"

now resonates as an ominous warning that suppressed and silenced communities are coming to reclaim their respective places in the American landscape.

Gwendolyn Brooks is one of the few Black women I encountered in curriculum materials or assigned textbooks as a secondary teacher, yet the textbooks and lessons I have come across do not necessarily pay homage to her legacy as an outspoken activist who wrote bravely and pointedly about injustice in the Black community. Her most anthologized poem, "We Real Cool," was frequently described as a ballad of self-destruction and Black masculinity by my colleagues, who routinely failed to introduce students to Brooks' intentional disruption of sound or acknowledge Brooks' poem as an intentional critique of the injustices that underpin the self-destruction described. Even as I have transitioned to higher education, discussions with students make clear that they have not engaged Brooks outside "We Real Cool," if at all. More overtly radical poems of resistance like "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till," are completely foreign to my students and almost never included in curriculum materials or textbooks. I suspect that one of the more likely reasons for this erasure is that "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" confronts injustice and racially motivated violence head on.

Perhaps the overtly political tone of the poem is what influenced Patricia Smith to turn to "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" for her golden shovel, "Black, Poured Directly into the Wound." Brooks' poem, reproduced below, focuses the reader's attention on Emmett Till's mother, rather than the young boy, reorienting the conversation around Till's lynching to center on survivors and the lasting impact of violence against young Black men.

(After the murder, After the burial)

Emmett's mother is a pretty-faced thing;

the tint of pulled taffy.

She sits in a red room,

drinking black coffee.

She kisses her killed boy.

And she is sorry.

Chaos in windy grays

through a red prairie.

The inscription sets the scene as readers encounter Till's mother after she has buried her son, "pretty-faced" and "drinking black coffee." Pairing the image of black coffee with kissing "her killed boy," Brooks reinforces that Emmett Till's mother now carries her son inside her. Karen Jackson Ford explains how the tight structure of the poem mirrors

> The oppressive enclosure suggested by the setting of the room where Till's
> mother keeps vigil at her son's casket is countered by the wind blowing through
> the open prairie just as surely as the "pattern" of racist violence will be countered
> by the "Chaos" of resentments unleashed in its victims (the room is "red" not just
> with her son's blood but with her anger). (379)

The "Chaos" to which Ford alludes continues to plague the Black community in Chicago, as well as Black communities across the nation, which no doubt influenced Chicago native Patricia Smith's decision to invoke the poem in her approach to the golden shovel.

Smith's thirty-seven-line poem allows students who may otherwise be unfamiliar with "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" to read it vertically down the right side of the poem. Reading horizontally, students encounter a version of Till's mother that

is weary of the generational violence targeting Black youth. Smith argues that Till's

mother

> …tires of the
>
> sorries, the Lawd have mercies. Grief's damnable tint
>
> is everywhere, darkening days she is no longer aware of.
>
> She is gospel revolving, repeatedly emptied of light… (lines 8-11)

On the surface, these lines describe a tired, grief-stricken mother. Smith is writing directly of Till's

mother, to be sure, yet these lines evoke the larger sense of frustration and exhaustion that permeates

contemporary discussions of state violence and hate crime.

The length of Smith's lines, and of the poem itself, contrast the abrupt lines of Brooks' poem,

structurally emphasizing how the anger and grief have overtaken Till's mother. Where Brooks used the

white space around her lines to highlight the absence of Till, Smith's lines fill up the page, emphasizing

the mother's mental state. Till's mother, like the page, is consumed by what she witnesses: "she recites

(angry, away, awful) the alphabet of a world gone red" (line 17). Terrance Hayes, in comparing Brooks'

and Smith's poems, notes that

> Where the Brooks movie poem might be quiet and haunted, the Smith movie poem might
>
> be frenetic and restless, cutting from "boys in the street" averting "the Decapitated
>
> exclamation points" in Mamie's eyes, to church ladies floating about her in Chicago.
>
> Where Brooks does not reduce her subject to evil, Smith does not reduce her subject to
>
> elegy. Smith's poem is expansive and alive.

Hayes helps to elucidate how the golden shovel form "completes" or reinvigorates Brooks' work

for a new generation of readers. Smith is able to bring Brooks' lines into the contemporary

moment, honoring Brooks' legacy in Black poetics while retooling the message for a twenty-first

century audience. Among all the forms available to educators, the golden shovel may offer the best opportunity for comparative analysis, and the form offers a direct response to those students who question the importance of reading poetry from previous generations. The form also allows for students to address systems and cycles that persist across generations, as emphasized in Smith's treatment of the form. By the end of "Black, Poured Directly into the Wound," the lasting effect of this violence is made clear. Emmett Till's mother sees death on the face of every boy, while Emmett Till "in dreams, sings *I am gold*. He tells how dry it is, the prairie" (lines 37-38). The image reaches for comfort and solace, yet the "dry…prairie" devoid of red and violence is only accessible in the wake of death, suggesting that the speaker of the poem feels increasingly dejected about the possibility of peace for Black boys during their respective lifetimes.

OBVERSE – NICOLE SEALEY

Nicole Sealey also makes use of form to comment on historical and systemic violence predicated on Black bodies by European imperialism. Her poem, "candelabra with heads," is described by Sealey as an obverse poem. The obverse is a form invented by Sealey which follows the palindrome structure, but adds a single, stand-alone line to the end which breaks the symmetry of the palindrome and injects an explicit "thesis question" to the poem (Sealey 61). The palindrome, sometimes called a mirror poem, follows a tight and predictable pattern wherein the first half of the poem is repeated in reverse order in the second half of the poem. Thus, readers can read a palindrome from top to bottom or bottom to top and still experience the same poem. Palindromes were popularized following the publication of Natasha Tretheway's "Myth," in which Tretheway uses the form to process the death of her mother. Since the poem literally hinges on repetition, returning the reader line by line to the opening image, palindromes are especially useful when poets are seeking a structure that emphasizes cyclical experiences. What

Sealey's obverse form adds to the experience is disruption, and an insistence on reimagining the poem through the lens of the thesis question that stands outside the palindrome itself. Including the thesis as its own line also reorients the reader; like the thesis itself, readers are no longer looking directly into the mirror as participants, but observing the speaker while they look into the mirror. Thus, readers become witnesses to the cycle emphasized in the poem, an understanding that is essential to a critical reading of Sealey's "candelabra with heads."

Sealey's obverse is an ekphrastic endeavor inspired by Swiss sculptor Thomas Hirschhorn's installment, "Chandelier avec bustes de mannequins" (Figure 13). The sculpture is part of a series which the artist explains is meant to comment on trenchant ideological hardening, which is reflected in Hirschhorn's use of duct tape to create mannequins that resemble tumors and, notably, form a chandelier incapable of providing light. Upon observing the sculpture, Sealey had a visceral experience that elicited images of lynching and violence against Black bodies.

(Figure 13, Muzeum Szutiki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie)

Sealey opens the poem with a metacognitive reflection of her reaction to the sculpture, the speaker recognizing,

> Had I not brought with me my mind
>
> as it has been made, this thing,
>
> this brood of mannequins, cocooned
>
> and mounted on a wooden scaffold,
>
> might be eight infants swaddled and sleeping. (lines 1-5)

Note that the poem has not yet signaled the experience that the speaker has with the sculpture, only acknowledging that others of a different mind might see something tranquil and enlivened. For students, these lines invite a discussion of the sculpture and what it evokes, as well as how our respective experiences alter our perceptions. In my classes, there are always a handful of students who ask variations of the question, "Why do you make everything about race?" Sealey's poem offers a vital response to such questions, not because the opening lines imply race but because Sealey reinforces one of the most important elements of self-awareness as a critical reader; namely, that how readers experience a piece of text is inevitably affected by the experiences and understandings that they bring to the poem. Extending this conversation to the outside world helps enlighten students to how events like George Floyd's murder can produce many different responses based on what the observer has experienced prior to witnessing an event. In this instance, Sealey understands that her perception of the sculpture is affected by her identity as a Black woman and her experiences living in Western societies.

Sealey offers several possible interpretations of the sculpture before inviting readers to share in her experience. The second stanza of the poem opens with the rhetorical question, "Can you see them hanging? Their shadow" (line 9). The "them" of this line refers back to "a family

tree with eight pictured / frames" (lines 7-8), an objectively innocuous image. However, as the second stanza continues, readers realize that it is not frames which are hanging from the tree, but human beings. "The bodies weep / fat the color of yolk. Can you smell them / burning?" the speaker asks (lines 11-13). Here, students confront that Sealey does not see any of the possibilities alluded to in the opening stanza, but a series of Black bodies, offering clues to what the speaker has experienced prior to observing the sculpture. The poem then pivots around the scent described by the speaker:

> burning? Their perfume climbing
>
> as wisteria would a trellis.

> as wisteria would a trellis.
>
> burning? Their perfume climbing
>
> fat the color of yolk. Can you smell them (lines 13-17)

As the form shifts into the second half, students face an exact mirror of the initial poem. Rhetorically, the second half opens with "wisteria" climbing "a trellis," thus the "perfume" is semantically linked to flowers, not bodies. However, readers will find it difficult not to carry their experiences in the second stanza over to the third; the structure of the poem supports the speaker's opening assertion that a particular experience with the sculpture is inevitable because of the "mind" she has brought with her. Now that readers are privy to parts of that mind, the sculpture is no longer open to interpretation. Instead, it presents as a clear commentary on lynching.

Sealey moves the reader backwards through the poem, which adds a haunting layer to the image of spectators observing lynched bodies. The inversion that occurs between the second and third stanzas moves the scene from the metaphorical to the literal:

Can you see them hanging? Their shadow

is a crowd stripping the tree of souvenirs.

…

is a crowd stripping the tree of souvenirs.

Can you see them hanging? Their shadow (lines 9-10; 19-20)

The "shadow" that mimics "a crowd stripping the tree of souvenirs" in the first half of the poem becomes a tangible crowd in the second half, as do the bodies suspended from the scaffold. The speaker, having witnessed the surreal yet concrete images of lynching of the third stanza, can no longer erase the image from her mind. Whereas the first half of the poem offers alternate readings of the sculpture before rooting the speaker's interpretation in the history of lynching, the second half never allows for these possibilities. The speaker, like the reader, has already witnessed the sculpture in such a way that it cannot be unseen. Thus, when readers revisit these alternate perceptions in the second half of the poem, they already understand them to be impossibilities:

Might be a family tree with eight pictured

Might be eight fleshy fingers on one hand.

might be eight infants swaddled and sleeping.

…

Had I not brought with me my mind (lines 22-28)

Sealey's brief use of anaphora creates a list that no longer resonates as potential readings, but instead as a series of experiences to which the speaker does not have access as a direct result of generational trauma. The act of witnessing at the outset of the third stanza has permanently stripped the speaker of her connection to lineage (the "family tree") and innocence (the "infants swaddled and sleeping"). Up to this point, readers have experienced a palindrome exactly as they might expect, faithfully returning to the point of origin with renewed understanding. That return to the point of origin is where Sealey's innovation of form occurs. The author shatters expectations of symmetry and balance, adding a question that stands apart from the rest of the poem. The speaker asks, "Who can see this and not see lynchings?" (line 29) The addition of this question, which Sealey describes as a "thesis question" for the poem, may not initially resonate as enough to qualify the poem as a new form. I argue, however, that the question is integral to an understanding of the experience presented in "candelabra with heads." The palindrome contextualizes the speaker's reaction to the sculpture and helps the reader to understand why she views the sculpture as she does, but the thesis question extends Sealey's critique to address those who deny racial violence and/or who seek to minimize the lasting effects of slavery and lynching on contemporary Black communities. In working to answer the question, students must contend with the fact that those who do *not* look at the sculpture and see lynchings are observing the sculpture, and the world, from a place of privilege and blindness. The subtle shift in form is a powerful act of resistance, as it pushes students to sit with the renewed understanding that those who deny systemic racism and oppression can only reach new heights of understanding by acting as faithful witnesses to Black experiences.

Near the end of Sealey's full-length debut, *Ordinary Beast*, she includes the poem, "in defense of 'candelabra with heads.'" The poem provides important context regarding Sealey's

process of creation and what she hopes to communicate through the obverse form. The speaker

alludes to editorial pressure that Sealey faced when she first published "candelabra with heads,"

as well as why Sealey initially framed the poem as a strict palindrome rather than an obverse:

> If you've read the "Candelabra with Heads"
>
> that appears in this collection and the one
>
> in *The Animal*, thank you. The original,
>
> the one included here, is an example, I'm told,
>
> of a poem that can speak for itself, but loses
>
> faith in its ability to do so by ending with a thesis
>
> question…
>
> (lines 1-7)

For readers, this admission speaks to Sealey's faith in the obverse and the ability of the "thesis

question" to enhance the palindrome. Sealey then explains that she included the question "not

because I don't trust you, dear reader, / or my own abilities," and not because she (or the poem)

lacks faith (lines 10-12). Rather, Sealey argues that the reader "should know that human limbs

burn / like branches and branches like human limbs" (line 14-15). The inclusion of the question,

then, is not evidence that Sealey doubts our understanding of generational trauma and the legacy

of lynching but instead hope that "a hundred years from now" some

> lucky someone be black
>
> and so far removed from the verb *lynch* that she be
>
> dumbfounded by its meaning. May she then
>
> call up Hirschhorn's *Candelabra with Heads*.
>
> May her imagination, not her memory, run wild.

(lines 20-27)

The closing lines of the poem explicitly affirm Sealey's faith, or least hope, that the history of lynching will eventually be an abstract concept, one distant enough from lived experience that a Black woman may be able to navigate the world, or at least an art museum, without the weight of internalized trauma. However, these lines also reinforce Sealey's critique of modern lynching and her rebuke of those who minimize the lasting effect of slavery and lynching on Black communities. The obverse form was restored to "candelabra with heads" when Sealey published *Ordinary Beast* in 2017.

Despite its importance and Sealey's open dialogue around the creation of the form, I have not encountered any other instance of a published invocation of the form, while the palindrome form on which it is based remains popular among early twenty-first century poets. I include the obverse here because of the unique opportunity that the obverse offers with students. Since the form requires a thesis question, and palindromic poems are readily available to readers, educators can challenge students to develop and defend thesis questions for existing palindromes. In so doing, they participate in the same process that Sealey has, moving the received form of a palindrome into the obverse through a process of critical reading and argumentation, two profoundly important skills in the twenty-first century classroom. The purposeful selection of palindromes can increase visibility for historically marginalized voices, and it can introduce important conversations into the classroom. Franny Choi's palindrome, "It Is What It Is," plays on the chiasmus inherent to the form by applying turns of phrase to the structure of the poem as a whole.

Choi grounds the poem in the knowledge that her mother "passes / that business, now closed, where–…a man killed three Korean mothers" (lines 2-5). The poem hinges on the brief

line, "Be Afraid?," with the lines in the second half appearing in reverse order of the first half

(line 9). The effect is haunting as Choi expertly captures the recurring trauma, both of her mother

passing the site of the murders each day and of the speaker's continual realization that her

mother puts herself at risk daily "to make a living" (line 2). The irony of the title's seemingly

nonchalant acceptance of this reality further emphasizes the deeply internalized sense that

violence is always possible, in even the most mundane or routine moments. Students might

engage the palindrome alongside research or news coverage about the event, then develop a

thesis question to add to the end of the poem. Students might also discuss whether or not the

hinge of the poem, "What am I supposed to do? / Be afraid?" is a thesis question that drives the

poem. If so, Choi's poem would qualify as an obverse and invite discussion around whether or

not the inclusion of a question in the center of the poem is more or less effective. On the one

hand, readers are not pushed to reread the poem with newly gained perspective; on the other, the

reversal of lines and events in the second half immediately resonates as an opposite or inverse of

the first section because the question alters our perspective.

Taylor Byas' "In a Picture On My Boyfriend's Phone" employs the palindrome to

comment on infidelity. The title contextualizes the opening lines, in which the speaker informs

readers of what she has discovered on her lover's phone:

Another woman ripples,

naked in his eager grasp.

In our bed, they dirty the sheets

I cleaned. He snaps photos, (lines 1-4)

Readers immediately understand the scene and what is at stake for the speaker. She admits, "I do

not know / how to leave him" in a familiar turn that highlights the complexity of loving someone

who has committed an act of betrayal (lines 8-9). The poem spins on a central line that centers the boyfriend as recorder of the sexual act, applying to both the infidelity of the first half and to intimate moments with the speaker herself in the second half. The form is integral to Byas' critique of her decision to stay with someone who has had an affair, as the second half inverts her inability to move on. The speaker states,

> I touch him. I learn
>
> how to leave him.
>
> I do not know
>
> of a woman who looks like me. (lines 14-17)

Like Choi, Byas uses chiasmus to unlearn the boyfriend's infidelity while also returning autonomy and agency to the speaker. The inversion in the second half of the poem also implies that the speaker has posed for images in the same way that "another woman" has for her boyfriend. Since the second half walks back from knowledge of the affair, the repetition of the line "another woman ripples" now suggests that the speaker does not recognize herself in the images on her boyfriend's phone. In effect, Byas has used the form to invite questions about how people comprise parts of themselves for those they love. Again, this poem offers an opportunity for students to read critically and develop a thesis question that will move the poem from a deeply personal experience to a broader, more universal message. In my classes, I asked students to consider how their understanding of the poem might change if Byas had written it as an obverse with the question, "How can I look at her and not see me?" The question makes use of Sealey's structure of inquiry, and it prompted discussion from students about how the speaker may have also entered into a relationship with the man through infidelity, the possibility that Byas empathizes with the woman rather than blames her for the infidelity, or even that the

speaker is forced to reconcile what she has become for her lover and how it corresponds with her sense of self. What stands out about each of these readings is that all apply equally well to the palindrome, yet it is the inclusion of such a question that encouraged my students to extend their thinking. My students also felt more empowered to defend the possibilities invited by the question because the analysis, on the surface, was hypothetical—there is no inherent risk in misreading an altered version of the poem, so students were less reticent about exploring meaning.

ARABIC - MARWA HELAL

One final form that has powerful implications in the transgressive classroom is the Arabic, created by Marwa Helal in her 2019 full-length debut, *Invasive Species*. The form has one requirement, which is described by the title of the original poem, "poem to be read from right to left." The first lines of the poem prove that readers must follow the instructions in the title if they hope to make meaning of the poem as a whole:

> language first my learned I
>
> second
>
> see see
>
> for mistaken am i native (lines 1-4)

In reading the lines from left to right, as readers of English language writing are taught to do, renders the poem incomprehensible. Reading from right to left, a practice most associated with Middle Eastern languages (including Arabic), acts as a cipher through which readers can immediately access the lines. Helal describes her relationship to both Arabic and English in the poem, the speaker admitting,

> of tired got i

> number the counting
>
> words english of
>
> to takes it
>
> in 1 capture
>
> another (lines 17-22)

What the form demands is that readers invert their approach to language itself. Helal requires the reader to step outside their comfort zone and experience the words in an unfamiliar way, a structural decision which amplifies the frustration associated with language acquisition and the pressure to center English as a primary mode of communication in America. Though the lines themselves are sparse and the language highly accessible, the form of the Arabic is an act of resistance. Students must confront their own expectations about how language functions and what happens when authors break convention. For those coming to English as non-native speakers, the poem resonates and makes the process of language learning visible in ways that most writing in English does not. It is also significant that Helal includes "poem to be read from right to left" as the first poem in her collection. Though she does not employ the form anywhere else in *Invasive Species*, the arrangement signals Helal's expectation that readers alter their thinking and enter the collection from a new perspective.

Philip Metres makes use of the Arabic three times in his collection, *Fugitive / Refuge*, a book concerned with hybridity and belonging as an Arab American. Metres arranges the book into sections, the titles of which indicate his attention to borders, exile, and return. His first use of the Arabic form is "Map the Not Answer," which opens with the powerfully charged statement, "exists everything here / belonging except" (read right to left, as the form intends: here everything exists / except belonging) (lines 1-2). The poem appears in the third section of

the poem, titled "Of Return," which moves the narrative back to the United States. The speaker struggles to communicate his sense of alienation, reverting to the Arabic structure when English proves discomfiting for the task. The speaker returns to his homeland in dreams, explaining that "understand you here / homeland is what again" (here you understand / again what is homeland) (lines 11-12). These lines inform the reader that the speaker, having left the United States for his native country and returned, no longer feels connected to the United States. He, like Helal's speaker, is keenly aware that he is seen as Other and that American patriotism does not make room for people like him.

His lineage, however, is equally inaccessible, amplifying the sense of isolation in the poem. The speaker confesses, "keys find to want you // give to forgot elders" (you want to find keys // elders forgot to give) (lines 20-21). These lines highlight one of the fundamental struggles for second-and-third-generation immigrant students—the speaker has internalized that White hegemonic definitions of America do not include him, yet his native culture is locked away from him both linguistically and symbolically. The speaker wants to develop a sense of homeland and kinship with his family's native country, yet his access is controlled by elders in much the same way that his access to Americanness is controlled by sociopolitical constructs outside his control. In both instances, gatekeeping prohibits the speaker from true self-actualization, instead dictating his belongingness on each front.

The speaker's inability to access lineage and language is emphasized in Metres' "Learning the Ancestors' Tongues," which combines the Arabic and contrapuntal forms. As Metres explains in a note to the poem, the poem is "to be read in two voices, one right to left, and the other left to right, overlapping or meeting at the center" (121). The structure of the poem and the arrangement of words stresses the difficulty of accessing a new language:

you want to learn I

more me knowing

> *place one in accord with all were they*

know I than

Myself

> *sound a came there suddenly and*

> *wind mighty rushing of as heaven from*

language this

me inside (lines 1-9)

One textual aspect that students will notice is that both the italicized and non-italicized lines are more coherent when read from right to left, yet Metres encourages readers to access one set of lines from left to right. Because the note does not specify which voice is which, students can read the poem in multiple ways: first, they can choose to read all lines from right to left; second, they can read non-italicized lines from right to left and italicized lines from left to right; third, they can read non-italicized lines from left to right and italicized lines from right to left. Each of these choices fundamentally alters the reader's understanding of what happens in the poem, as well as who lies behind each of the voices. If readers read the entire poem from right to left, the conversation between the two voices is clear and accessible, implying a shared understanding between the speaker and the one teaching him language.

If readers read the non-italicized lines from left to right, then the one learning language is seemingly younger and frustrated that he does not understand himself, whereas the one teaching language is presumably more enlightened and experienced because they speak in vivid, abstract language. Finally, reading the non-italicized lines from right to left and the italicized lines from

left to right implies that the one learning language is fumbling over translations as they work to make meaning of the new language. The musicality inherent in "and suddenly there came a sound / from heaven as of rushing mighty wind" becomes the abrupt staccato, "sound a came there suddenly and / wind mighty rushing of as heaven from" (lines 6-7). Metres' inversion of scription, in this case the King James version of Acts 2:2, mimics the process of translation wherein one must first move one language into another literally; that transliteration, however, does not accurately communicate the language, so readers must then work to arrange the newly transliterated phrase into a coherent structure that reflects the original's meaning. While multilingual students understand this process as part of daily life, English-only students will likely communicate frustration and learn of the process from the poem. Acknowledging the process of translation in conversation helps to create empathy around the challenge of navigating multiple languages and contextualize the sometimes sharp or disjointed use of English from non-native speakers. Whereas native English speakers might generally presume that "broken English" is indicative of poor education or understanding, Metres' use of the Arabic form confronts this misconception and uses the discomfort inherent to the poem to educate native English speakers about the reality of moving between languages.

Metres makes use of the Arabic form one final time with "You Have Come Upon People Who Are like Family and This Open Space," one of the last poems in the collection and one which clearly signals a growing understanding between the speaker and his subject. The opening lines evoke hope and belonging, the speaker literally and figuratively extending himself to the subject of his dialogue:

know cannot I

end will this how

both are we though

air different in breathing

flesh different of planets

stop won't I

hand my holding

you toward (lines 6-8)

Metres' use of the second-person pronoun puts the reader inside the poem, thereby signaling an effort to connect with both the immediate subject of the poem and readers who have worked to understand him. Structuring this poem in the Arabic form communicates that the speaker's attempt at dialogue and community is contingent on the reader's willingness to proceed from a space of discomfort. Having invited the subject and, semantically, the reader into his space, the speaker offers food and drink before closing the poem with the language of prayer:

end the are you

beginning my of

of beginning the

end my

These lines evoke 57:3 of the Quran, which begins by describing Allah as "the first and the last," as well as Christian descriptions of God as "the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End" (Revelations 21:6). The allusion suggests that the speaker of the poem views the ability to communicate as a spiritual endeavor; those that choose to stay and work through language

barriers in order to better understand one another thereby participate in a spiritual or holy experience. Though the Arabic form will undoubtedly frustrate students momentarily, they become active participants in the poem by subverting expectations and reading the lines from right to left. By pushing through their initial confusion to reach a place of understanding within the poem, students practice the necessary skill of altering how they see things in order to internalize experiences outside their comfort zone. Like the obverse, the Arabic form is predicated on subverting structural expectations to demonstrate that perception is innately connected to understanding.

CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on four invented forms, each created and shared with readers within the past decade. Incorporating these forms into the twenty-first century classroom is a fundamentally transgressive act in that the literary canon does not yet make space for these forms. Each of the poets created their respective forms with the expressed purpose to assert belonging within the American literary landscape insofar as each first published their invented forms via American presses with primarily American readerships. Reading and writing in these invented forms is a deliberate act of resistance against White hegemonic perceptions of American poetry, and of the American experience as a whole. Moreover, three of these forms engage explicitly with pedagogy as part of the writing process—the golden shovel through its requisite research and direct engagement with poetry predecessors, the obverse through its insistence on argumentation, and the Arabic through its reorientation of language and reading praxis.

The obverse and the Arabic both demand that the reader acknowledge the function of perspective, urging readers to interrogate how their respective biases and hyper-politicized

identities influence the way that they see the world around them. The golden shovel form moves beyond mere suggestions that new generations of poets read the work of their literary ancestors, instead aligning contemporary poems with ancestral work. Duplex poems draw from some of the most canonical forms—the sonnet, villanelle, and pantoum—while making space for something new and, importantly, created by a Black/queer poet whose perspective is largely absent from textbooks and classroom exercises. Just as society at large is faced with evolving understandings of identity, the duplex emphasizes that American poetry is evolving to make space for forms and experiences that have, until very recently, been marginalized or entirely obscured from the canon. For students, witnessing the evolution of genre in real time helps them internalize that their experiences and their voices are valuable. Students learn that their stories are worth telling, and that they can tell those stories on their terms; this is what makes the innovation of form so radical.

Chapter 3

Against Formalism: Erasure and the Poetics of Counternarrative

The first two chapters of this dissertation contend with the use of deliberate and structured forms, both inherited and invented, as an act of resistance against social structures that seek to contain or suppress historically marginalized voices. Introducing structured forms in the classroom is beneficial to students because it provides them with a predictable and ordered framework through which they can begin critical analysis. According to Ashleigh A. Allen and Rob Simon, however, critical literacy requires students "to not merely read the word and world...but to also rewrite that world to better serve them and their communities" (44). Allen and Simon argue that when students are invited to revise and rewrite canonical texts, they learn to "investigate censorship, the literary canon, the creative possibilities of resistance, and the creative potential in destruction" (40). I would add that approaching an existing text as a space of both creation and destruction encourages students to consider the power and reach of existing texts, thereby contending with the ways in which dominant narratives work to reinforce specific perspectives and histories. Numerous contemporary poets have utilized disruptions of official documents, from newspaper articles to declassified government reports to children's stories, as a mechanism of protest.

In this chapter, I argue that authors of color intentionally challenge dominant narratives by using erasure to assert alternate histories and create counternarratives that reorient the reader and center the experiences of people of color. Recent uses of erasure from Mai Der Vang, Nicole Sealey, and Courtney Faye Taylor, for example, engage the history of poetics as a site of recovery and alternate history, drawing from declassified and public documents to disrupt

official narratives around genocide and anti-Blackness.[1] Whereas Vang calls attention to the ways in which government organizations participate in efforts to conceal genocide, both Sealey and Taylor interrogate the perpetuity of systemic racism and public violence against Black bodies. Note that the poets and texts included herein are intended to function as examples of what educators might include, rather than a comprehensive set of suggested texts. One key benefit of drawing from poetry in the classroom, and especially the erasure technique, is that poetry offers an immediacy often lacking in other genres. The space between an event and the publication of poem's responding to that event can be a matter of weeks. Additionally, many educators encourage students to draw from recent news articles, speeches, or social media exchanges for source text when creating erasures; thus, it is important that educators continually draw from contemporaneous texts.

Further, the use of poems predominantly published over the past five years carries with it an inherent scarcity of critical commentary on the individual works. The lack of scholarship should not be viewed as an indication that the texts are less worthy of scholarly attention, but as evidence of their urgency and contemporaneity. For educators, the inclusion of contemporaneous erasure poetry in the curriculum encourages students to engage poetry as a living genre, and it invites conversation about the implications of gatekeeping in both the publishing and education industries. Students also benefit from confronting the tangible ways in which contemporary poets of color become active participants in the retelling of their respective histories, empowering youth to imagine a version of themselves counter to the version they encounter in textbooks, popular media, and on film. From a practical standpoint, the incorporation of contemporaneous erasure poetry limits the amount of critical commentary available to students, which reduces the

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[1] Note that the poets and texts included herein are intended to function as examples of what educators might include, rather than a comprehensive set of suggested texts.

possibility that they will look to previous critics for meaning rather than derive meaning themselves.

When I refer to erasure poetry, I work from a poetic practice popularized during the latter half of the twentieth century wherein poets actively redact, erase, or obscure portions of an existing text to create something new. Methods of erasure vary, and the method chosen by an author can significantly impact a reader's experience with the new text. For my students, I present a handful of the most common methods, including: blackout, where the author obscures portion of the source text with black bars or permanent marker; whiteout, or the inverse of blackout poetry, where the author erases portions of the source text and increases the amount of white space on the page; cutout, a similar process to whiteout poetry in that it wholly eliminates portions of the source text, but through the physical excision of lines and phrases with scissors or a razor blade; object erasure, a process through which authors use an object or set of objects, such as peppercorns or buttons, to obscure portions of the source text; illustration, wherein authors create an image that covers portions of the source text and embeds remaining language in the illustration created. While this list is not comprehensive, it helps students develop a concrete understanding of what erasure poetry is and how authors engage source materials during the act of creation.

The process of erasure in poetry is not unique to the twenty-first century, nor is it an inherently political mode of writing. Travis Macdonald chronicles the evolution of erasure poetry in American poetics, tracing what he describes as the evolution of erasure from "the use of appropriation as a poetic tool…from the outskirts of abject plagiarism to semi-accepted practice" to *Oulipo*, a group of French writers who sought "to discover and promote the production of literary forms and to reinvigorate pre-existing texts." While *Oulipo* was concerned with

mathematical and scientific applications that amounted to a form of erasure, Macdonald pinpoints Ronald Johnson's *Radi os*, which draws on John Milton's *Paradise Lost* as source material for complex erasure. He further notes the increasing popularity of erasure poetics in American poetry, citing such seminal works as Janet Holmes' *MS OF M Y KIN*, which draws on the works of Emily Dickinson, and *The O Mission Repo*, an internet-based project that uses *The 9/11 Commission Report* for its source material (Macdonald). While Macdonald is concerned primarily with the correlation between the information age and erasurism, his research helps elucidate the cognitive shift from viewing erasure as entirely derivative and uncreative to the understanding of erasure as a valid means of engaging source texts and reintroducing them to new generations of readers. The seemingly limitless amount of source material available to early twenty-first century readers is undoubtedly a key factor in the growth of erasure poetry; however, I would argue that the surge of erasure poetry from authors of color over the past decade can also be attributed to an active resistance of dominant narratives through erasure poetics.

Early twenty-first century poets have turned to erasure with increasing vigor, often in a deliberate effort to critique sociopolitical moments. Andrew David King, writing for *The Kenyon Review* in 2012, developed several essays on the phenomenon of erasure poetry, its legacy, and the inherent controversy of lifting "original" works from preexisting texts. In "Touching with the eye, seeing with the hand: erasure as reading experience," King asks, "Were meanings that were forcefully excavated from a received text *latent* in that text all along? Does the presence of another author, another human, mean that responsibility for meaning shifts to them alone?" He uses these questions to guide a discussion about what he terms "the dichotomous relationship erasures have with their source texts," ultimately concluding that "erasures are records of

consciousness's dissolution…moving between ruin and creation to leave testimony to each while authoring new testimonies themselves." Another of King's entries in the series, "Politics, erasure, and a 'sometimes genuine music,'" digs further into the questions of authorship and authenticity, beginning with King considering "whether or not the act of erasure produces another voice." King notes that "the authorial 'I'...carries with it tremendous agency," and "tampering with this sense of agency…disturbs us." Ultimately, King argues that "there may be a justice in the telling, one that eventually surmounts the uncertainties inherent in the act of ever setting down an 'I'-voice on paper, or assuming another's voice as one's own." Notably, King's essays consider the moral and literary implications of erasure as an act of creation without much discussion of historical or cultural erasure in the name of empire.

The practice of erasure as an extension of colonial empire is, according to Rachel Stone, at the heart of a surge in politically-oriented erasure poetry beginning with the inauguration of former President Donald Trump. Stone cites several erasures published in popular magazines, as well as erasure poems across social media platforms, all of which she argues exhibit "a desire to re-examine the institutions and narratives that shape Americans' lives, from government bureaucracy to new media." Where King wonders at the authenticity of voice in erasure, Stone suggests that early twenty-first century poets use erasure to "reassert power over language that has typically been used to determine who does and does not belong" and that "erasure has gained new energy at a moment when the country is deeply polarized—when official documents may hold radically different consequences and meanings for different people." The problem of power dynamics at the root of erasure echoes Solmaz Sharif's discomfort with the form, a technique that "horrified" her because she thought of "erasure as what a state does."

Sharif goes on to suggest, in a series of abrupt and direct statements, that "Poetic erasure means the striking out of text. Poetic erasure has yet to advance historically. Historically, the striking out of text is the root of obliterating peoples." Despite her reservations, Sharif herself drew on the letters of detainees at Guantanamo Bay as source material for erasures in the series, "Reaching Guantanamo." The conflict exemplified by Sharif's simultaneous use of erasure as a poetic technique and her expressions of discomfort with erasure as "the closest poetry in English has gotten to the role of the state" is an important conflict for students to confront because it invites discussion about the problem of attempting to, as Audre Lorde put it, dismantle the master's house with the master's tools (*Sister Outsider* 112). I would push further, however, and argue that poets have prioritized erasure poetry as a viable act of resistance in the wake of Trump's inauguration, often through the erasure of official state documents, such as a Department of Justice report on the Ferguson Police Department, declassified documents from the Central Intelligence Agency, and N-400 application forms for naturalization

Michael Leong delineates the proliferation of what he calls documental poetry, or poetry that draws from existing documents during the process of creation, in contemporary American poetry. Though the practice of drawing on existing documents is not unique to the twenty-first century, Leong notes a "documental turn" toward "the practices of appropriation, citation, and documentation" with "a distinctive character, responding in powerful ways to a set of specific historical circumstances" (5). Though the writing process specific to documental poetics involves substantial research, documental poetry is not meant to parrot or mimic academic discourse so much as bring "historical work into a broader area of public intellectualism" (Leong 27) in order to illustrate "how documents and monuments can evoke within us a wide range of emotions—from hatred to veneration, from indifference to outrage, from desire to disgust" (Leong 25).

Documental poetics can take on many forms, including erasure poetry that redacts and/or sanitizes existing documents to create concrete texts that subvert dominant narratives and monumentalize historically marginalized experiences and voices. The documental turn described by Leong has contributed to what Sarah-Jane Coyle describes as "a moment," a resurgence she traces "to the 2010 publication of Austin Kleon's *Newspaper Blackout*" (359). Though Coyle acknowledges the relative absence of academic scholarship centering erasure (360), it remains a popular pedagogical tool in the classroom. Maya Pindyck argues in favor of a New Materialist approach to erasure in the classroom, suggesting that "conceptions of the page as living matter can make it easier for some students to work in playful and thoughtful ways with what is already there and active (59). Ashleigh A. Allen and Rob Simon further demonstrate how students can unsettle the canon through a collective "participation in and rejection of issues of power, censorship, and the canon" by applying erasure to *Fahrenheit 451* (43).

One example from my classroom is Mai Der Vang's *Yellow Rain*, a book-length project of documental poetics which draws from declassified documents surrounding the genocide of Hmong refugees in Laos and the United States government's complicity in concealing that genocide for the sake of military strategy and international relations. *Yellow Rain* is not composed exclusively through erasure. Some poems feature lines or epigraphs pulled from declassified documents, while others are inspired by the content in various government reports. The "Notes" section of *Yellow Rain* begins with a bibliography for each section, one which Vang uses to acknowledge the source material for various poems in the section. At the beginning of the final five sections, readers encounter textually complex pieces carrying the titles "Composition 1," "Composition 2," "Composition 3," "Composition 4," and "Composition 5." As Vang explains in her notes to the respective sections, each of these compositions incorporates text from

specific government documents. The text is then arranged in layers on the page with varying

opacity and size to create a new, concretized text (Figure 14). Vang effectively reinvents the

various reports from which she draws, using textual manipulation to focus the reader's attention

on specific phrases while omitting large portions of the source text. The first page of

"Composition 1" includes nine overlays that begin with the phrase "The U.S. government

received a report of an attack" and specific mention of a yellow substance.
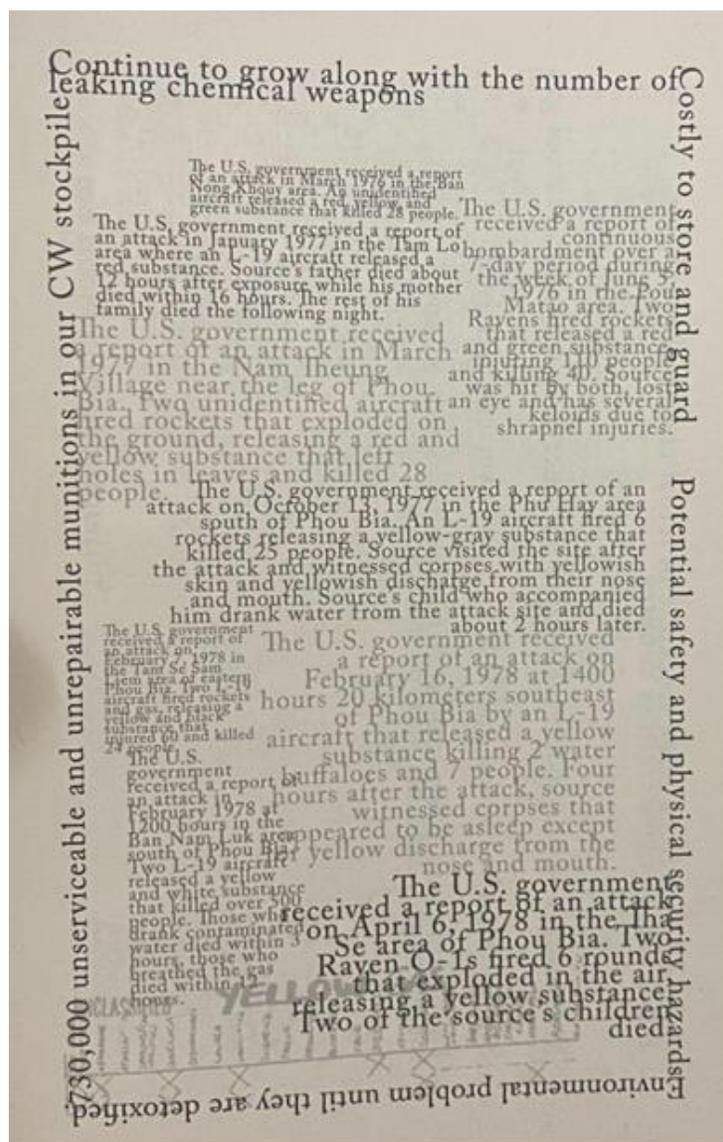
(Figure 14)

By overlaying these texts, as well as varying their size and opacity, Vang emphasizes not just the number of attacks on Hmong refugees but also the extent to which the United States government was aware of the attacks. The second and third pages of "Composition 1" include further references to attacks, as well as several mentions of the United States military demilitarizing and disposing of functional chemical weapons. When my students engage with the composition pieces at the beginning of each section, they immediately note how overwhelming the information is, an observation that aligns with Vang's use of erasure to highlight the extent of the United States government's intentional erasure of genocide. Vang creates a counternarrative that disrupts the official narrative of her family's experiences, effectively concretizing their lived experiences by moving language from an act of historical erasure by dominant forces to an act of poetic erasure that decenters the strategic dissemination of information in favor of what Vang perceives as a more authentic representation of what really happened to Hmong refugees. Her arrangement of text also functions as a form of bombardment, overwhelming the eye and destabilizing students' expectations for how to approach a poem. Some of my students express frustration at the inability to process all of the information, or the discomfort of not knowing from which direction the next piece of information will come. We discuss how their response acts as a simulated experience that mirrors the experiences described inside the poem, where Hmong refugees are bombarded with yellow rain and continually destabilized as they work to navigate geographically amidst continued chemical attacks.

Other poems in *Yellow Rain*, such as "Specimens from Bon Vinai Camp, 1963," are even more overt in their use of erasure. Vang presents "Specimens from Bon Vinai Camp, 1963" as a numbered litany, with each section beginning with language pulled from the description of various specimens received by the United States military. These specimens range from blood and

urine collected from individuals to chemical material collected from the region occupied by

Hmong refugees at the time. Vang takes poetic license in her descriptions of samples from

individuals, such as "Blood (heparin) from a brew of the fennel equinox x 1" and "Lactating

milk from drought of the heart's whistle" (48-49), but is more direct and scientific in her

descriptions of non-human specimens collected from the region, such as "Carcassed blossoms

mapped with yellow powder" and material "Brought out of Laos 19 Jan. 1963 in a bamboo case

by antennae of a moth" (48). The effect is such that images related to the body carry a mystical

or mythological tone, while non-human objects are concrete and naturalized; rather than use the

abstract to humanize the men, women, and children providing samples, Vang emphasizes the

colonial practice of Othering by ensuring that students will not encounter Hmong refugees as

natural or even familiar. Further, Vang stresses that the scientists tasked with processing both

human and non-human samples did not treat Hmong subjects as concrete individuals, but an

abstract data source. At the close of the numbered litany, Vang introduces a secondary litany

built entirely of questions. These questions, which are not part of the source document(s),

introduce an uncomfortable reality about the objective analysis of human specimens:

> At what temperature should blood, urine, and milk be kept while being stored
>
> during transit?
>
> Is lactating milk a suitable sample?
>
> …
>
> How do we discern the nameless in order to veil what we know?
>
> …
>
> What if we never forgive ourselves? (50)

By situating language from the source text with questions that interrogate the problem of objectivity that sometimes accompanies scientific inquiry, Vang insists that readers acknowledge the underlying complicity of erasure that scientists participate in when they choose to document their findings in specific ways and/or contain those findings in classified government documents. Educators can use Vang's poems to introduce other examples of medical racism, such as the disparity in medical treatments for White and Black patients, the legacy of medical experimentation on non-White subjects like Henrietta Lacks, or the dearth of Asian Americans represented in contemporary American medical studies (Nguyen, et. al).

Vang's "How Far the Small Ones" similarly balances italicized sections culled from source documents with lyrical stanzas that work to humanize Hmong refugees affected by yellow rain. Vang arranges her lyrical stanzas along the left margin and indents the italicized portions, thus forcing the eye to move back and forth across the page, creating a reading experience that vacillates between Vang's perceived reality and the official (classified) narrative put forth by the government; this arrangement of the text, which resembles the contrapuntal form, allows readers to enter the poem in numerous ways. I ask my students to first read all left-aligned text, which is composed of entirely original lines; next, they read all indented text, which is drawn entirely from source documents. Finally, students read all left-aligned and indented stanzas in order down the page. The first reading is an overt commentary on the treatment of human beings, while the second creates a counternarrative that challenges the erasure of genocide at the root of the source document. The third reading, which combines Vang's poetic treatment of events with language from government documents, recognizes poetry as a site of resistance and demonstrates how readers can move from the role of witness to active participant in the rewriting of history from historically suppressed perspectives.

For students, "How Far the Small Ones" can also serve as a model for their own erasure poems; I have my students draw from archived documents related to historical events, such as news articles surrounding the 1836 land grab in what is now Texas or flyers about the internment of Japanese Americans, in order to create erasures that balance source material with original text while also presenting an alternative telling of the event from the perspective of a historically silenced or suppressed community. In so doing, students internalize source documents not as absolute truth but a deliberate and intentional representation of events from a single, often colonial, perspective. Students further internalize that they have the power to challenge documents which perpetuate superficial or stereotypical representations of a given community by physically manipulating those source documents through poetry.

Vang's fusion of erasure and found poetry forms sheds light on continual efforts to deny the use of chemical weapons against Hmong refugees, with American scientists going so far as to attribute the falling particles to bee feces despite overwhelming evidence that contradicted these claims. In effect, Vang co-opts a popular poetic form to critique the historical erasure of trauma experienced by Hmong people as they fled the communist regimes of Vietnam and Laos. Alongside the erasures are poems that display remarkable skill as they fill in the gaps left by decades of denial from American agencies. Vang completes the narrative through these poems, giving space to a story that scientists and officials continue to dismiss. "The Culpable" opens with a direct address to these scientists:

When all else fails, you'll indict the bees.

When all else rushes at your awareness

in the stage of sudden beasts,

> you'll second guess
>
> if it had been the bees. (lines 1-5)

The poems function as direct commentary about the massacre of Hmong refugees and Western attempts to cover it up. Speakers often invoke those Vang holds accountable, first for the deaths themselves and then for the attempts to erase the experience from history. The poems further offer Vang an opportunity to respond on behalf of all those who provided blood, submitted to questioning, and trusted the United States government to legitimize their pain.

Courtney Faye Taylor similarly turns to documental poetry in her debut collection, *Concentrate*, which constructs a counternarrative meant to recenter the life of Latasha Harlins, a fifteen-year-old Black girl who was shot and killed by Korean shop owner Soon Ja Du in March 1991. Taylor deliberately subverts dominant depictions of Harlins as either a criminal or one catalyst for anti-Asian violence during the 1992 Los Angeles race riots. Taylor is committed to presenting Harlins as a fifteen-year-old girl embroiled in all the expected dramas of being a teenager; through intensive research and the manipulation of various texts, Harlins is allowed to be a child again. The collection is an innovative entry into documentary-style poetry that offers all the narrative elements of C.D. Wright's *One With Others* and the experimental use of historical artifacts in Mai Der Vang's *Yellow Rain*. Taylor aptly grounds the collection in lived experience, humanizing Harlins and deliberately avoiding the familiar tropes that so often flatten Black trauma. "A thin obsidian life is heaving / on a time limit you've set," the second section of the collection, introduces the numerous ways that Black women are systemically isolated and dehumanized in American society. According to the Notes included in the collection, this section includes real Yelp reviews of minority-owned businesses in America, as well as text pulled from

articles that cover everything from racial bias in pain assessment to influential texts to fear in the Black community.

Spanning two pages, Taylor interweaves a series of statements used in the study, "Racial bias in pain assessment and treatment recommendations, and false beliefs about biological differences between blacks and whites," with brief poetic responses to illustrate some of the internalized biases that contribute to anti-Blackness. The first statement from the article reads, "*Whites, on average, have larger brains than Blacks*," followed by an interjection about a Black woman getting her nose pierced: "I kept my eyes open when he pierced my nose   just to prove I could / watch this white man shoot me and   not blink once" (lines 5-6). Other lines from the article assert that White people are "less susceptible to heart diseases" and "more efficient respiratory systems than Blacks," while Black people "are significantly more fertile" and have nerve endings that "are less sensitive than White people's nerve endings" (lines 7-29). Taylor's careful erasure of the article condenses the discussion to its conclusions, which makes it clear to readers that the study ultimately perpetuates depictions of Black people as insensitive, unhealthy people who are frequently pregnant, while White people are healthy, sensitive, and restrained in childbearing.

Interweaving lines of commentary, Taylor explicitly challenges these conclusions. In one stanza, for example, Taylor writes, "Auntie's favorite stereotype is *They're so violent! —* not methodically, but / ad-libish; a think-on-your-feet-type knockout," directly opposing the conclusion that Black people are insensitive and thick-skinned (lines 30-31). While the source text justified racial bias in the medical field and excused medical practitioners or under-treat Black patients, Taylor's erasure urges readers to see Black patients as equally human. The source text centers physical pain, alluding to a long history of brutalizing Black bodies in America, but

the implications go much deeper. By challenging assertions that Black people are less sensitive, Taylor also pushes readers to acknowledge the mental and emotional trauma incurred by continued violence predicated on Black individuals in the name of public safety. My students view Taylor's reversal of the source text's conclusions as both a validation of their feelings and permission to admit pain, an important alternative for those who have internalized the necessity of masking their pain so as not to appear vulnerable or weak.

The next poem in the section, "Should Be Considered," pairs images of Black women and various phrases pulled from police reports that describe Black women (Figure 15). The text included is sparse, as Taylor again condenses source texts down to the most important statements in an effort to draw readers' attention to what matters most.

REMARKS

a blonde hair weave.

MOST WANTED

No clothing was located in the area

was last seen wearing light
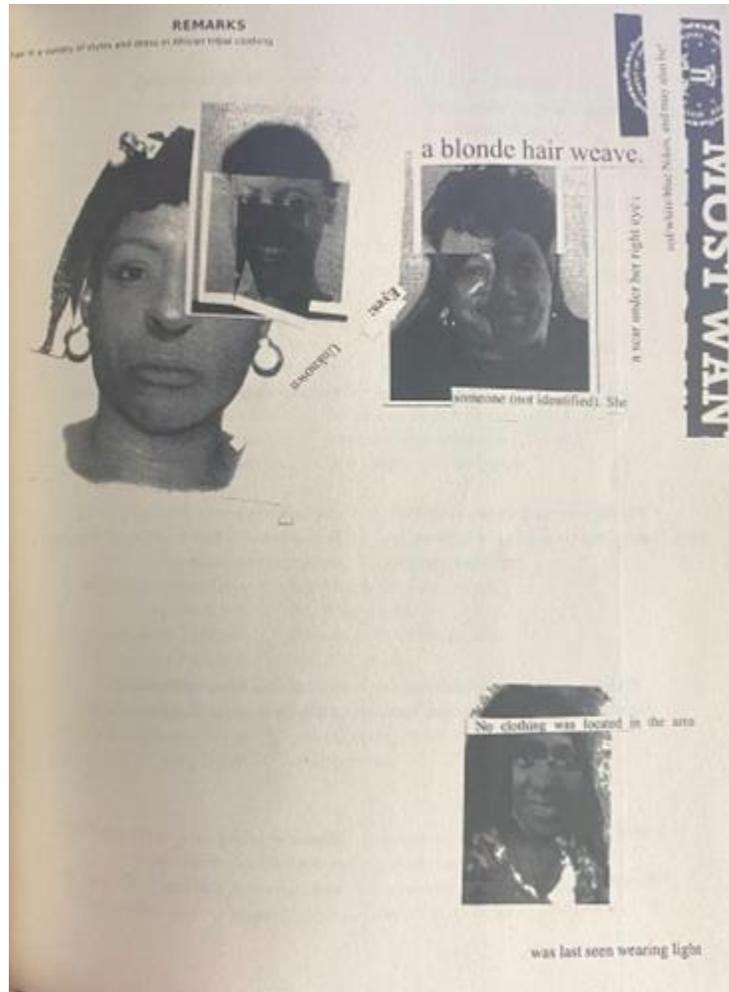
(Figure 15)

As students observe the page, they notice how certain images appear to be mugshots, while others are images of victims. Two of the photos are not manipulated, but the other two appear to be constructed of pieces from more than one person; this visual act of erasure mirrors the erasure of the documents in the poem, which compiles short excerpts to construct a larger rebuke of how Black women are treated. In pairing collage with erasure poetics, Taylor bridges the origins of erasure in American art and American poetry, providing a succinct but powerful rebuke of the ways in which various media participate in the erasure of Black women and girls.

Though some of the phrases and images on the page seem to come from Most Wanted documents, readers will note how the language for suspected criminals and the language for missing or murdered Black women is similar; thus, Taylor uses erasure to highlight how Black women are reduced and dehumanized by the justice system whether they are considered perpetrators or victims of violence. Emphasizing the similarity in language further comments on the criminalization of Black individuals, harkening back to Harlins and the shop owner's perception that she was a dangerous criminal. The conversation may not be new to students in the wake of increased publicity since the murders of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and others; however, Taylor connects those deaths to a longer history of violence and introduces new generations of readers to Harlins, whose name is much less familiar to today's youth.

Another section of the book, "The phenomenon of withholding," contains one of the clearest examples of palimpsest erasure, a technique in which parts of the text are often faded but remain visible (Figure 16).
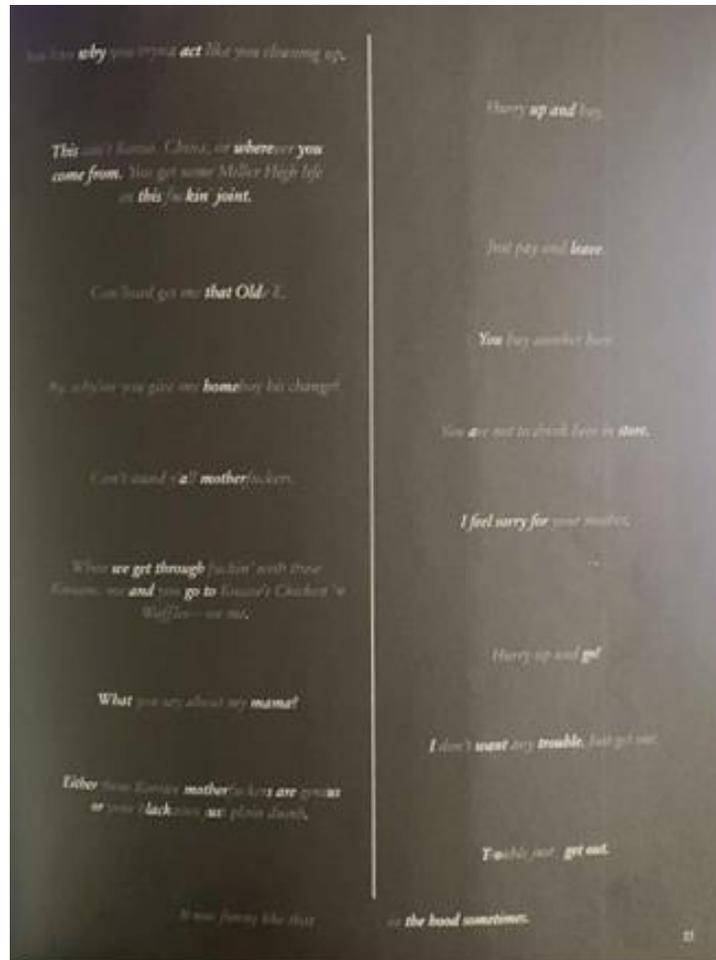
(Figure 16)

The poem collects lines from several films which include scenes where Asian Americans interact with Black people, including *Jackie Brown* and *Menace II Society*. Reading the complete text, students get a sense for the tension at the root of Harlins' murder and the subsequent violence during the Los Angeles race riots. The left side of the text seems to function as a Black customer in an Asian-owned market, while the brief statements on the right are in the voice of Asian market owners. Both sides display marked hostility toward one another, though the Black voice appears more aggressive and violent, while the Asian voice carries a tone of fear. However, Taylor's erasure inverts this perception, particularly as she shifts the original line, "I don't want

any trouble. Just get out." to "I want trouble," suggesting that fear stems from racial bias and can operate as a catalyst for violence.

Similarly, Taylor shifts the lines "Ay, why'on you give my homeboy his change? / Can't stand y'all motherfuckers. / When we get through fuckin' with these / Koreans me and you go to Roscoe's Chicken 'n / Waffles—on me" to "home / a mother / we get through / and go to," reframing the combative voice as a child who only wants to return home to their mother. The changes evident in the erasure invite discussion among students about how bias can code interactions as negative, as well as the extent to which public perception may diverge from reality. Given the number of interpersonal interactions that students experience on any given day, especially in situations with skewed power dynamics like teacher-student and officer-student, Taylor's poem offers an important lesson in how what people say may be vastly different from what the other interlocutor hears and vice versa. Educators might consider having students apply erasure to a dialogue exchange from a political debate or narrative text, using palimpsest to demonstrate what was originally said and what the student imagines each party actually heard. Likewise, encouraging students to draw on a recent exchange in which they felt misunderstood, first by faithfully recreating the conversation and then by creating an erasure that highlights their perception of the exchange, communicates how erasure can be used to process one's own experiences.

The palimpsest method may offer students one of the more accessible entries into erasure, as the technique makes the act of erasure more immediately visible and allows for the critical literacy skills described above. Nicole Sealey's most recent collection, *The Ferguson Report: An Erasure*, is a particularly intensive treatment of the palimpsest, one which draws on the official report of police misconduct in the wake of Michael Brown's murder in Ferguson, Missouri to

create a counternarrative which critiques state-sanctioned violence against Black men. The collection reprints the entirety of "Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department" as filed with the Department of Justice, the vast majority of which is both faded and crossed out. Sealey embodies Solmaz Sharif's comments about the palimpsest, wherein "the ghost is not only death or the degradations of time—the ghost is the state itself" (Sharif). In contrast, the words and phrases that Sealey lifts from the source text are starkly Black and bold (Figure 17).

(Figure 17)

Given that Sealey's source material relates to the murder of a Black boy, Michael Brown, her approach to the palimpsest visually renders the state as ghost while enlivening the Black boy at its core, resurrecting Brown through a deliberate reconstitution of the state narrative.

At the back of the book, Sealey explains that she first began her project of erasure to more deeply engage with the report and, by proxy, the long history of state violence predicated on Black bodies. According to Sealey's brief note, the process encouraged her to consider an alternative reality "where life might prevail" (118). Sealey's statement firmly grounds the collection in a larger movement from poets of color who are redacting public documents intentionally, creating counter-public spaces that reject the dominant narrative and reorient readers to experience life through the lens of historically marginalized groups. Sealey destabilizes the official report on police misconduct in Ferguson, Missouri by foregrounding images and experiences that undermine the highly politicized conversations around police brutality and the murder of Black individuals. While the official report is more than one hundred pages of highly technical jargon, Sealey excises the vast majority of the text. Her erasures produce just eight poems totaling less than a thousand words. Students can find a cohesive version of each poem following the report, but the impact of reading the lines in context adds an essential layer to the reading experience. What amounts to a few lines, for example, might span three or four pages in the erasure, creating a sharp staccato of language that mirrors ragged breath or a heart struggling to find its rhythm, thus effectively and hauntingly animating a report that is, in its original form, despairingly devoid of life.

SJ Coyle, writing about Nicole Sealey's "Pages 1-4', an excerpt from *The Ferguson Report: An Erasure*," argues that Sealey's "appropriation of the entire report as a source text elucidates the power of language and the capacity for official documents to hold" immensely different experiences for different people (375). The first poem begins with "Horses, hundreds, neighing— / part reflex, part reason, / part particular urge" (lines 1-2); this image simultaneously evokes the violent history of westward expansion in the United States and the unbridled freedom

of horses in the wild. Against this image, the speaker warns the reader, "At gunpoint, among them, / you are. Less likely to live" (lines 3-4). The final lines of the poem are a thunderous allusion to the frequency of murder at the hands of police, rebuking those who say "death / comes in threes" as readers are forced to consider perpetual news cycles filled with Black and Brown bodies brutalized by police officers across the nation. Sealey mines the twelve pages of the report to create the eighteen-line poem, emphasizing the bloated nature of official documents and how they serve to bury evidence of injustice in an abundance of jargon. By erasing all but a handful of letters and words from each page, Sealey stresses the full weight of police brutality and how state violence surrounds Black communities on all sides, as well as "the increasing exclusion of black people from 'white space'" (Coyle 376).

Sealey is exceptional in her ability to reduce the source document down to images that are at once innocent and fraught with violence:

Stop! Hands Where I can see!

a boy pretends to prey. His mark

makes of her hands a bird

and flies away. Stop, or I'll

shoot! he kids. Then makes

of his hands a gun. Fires away. (lines 8-13)

These images are rooted in the innocent play of a boy and girl, yet Sealey highlights the potential violence beneath the interaction with deft efficiency. The girl, in raising her hands and taking flight, mirrors the final moments of Michael Brown's life. Her hands offer not a threat but an ethereal return to nature, one similar to the horses of the preceding poem, and still she cannot escape the seemingly inevitable violence that halts her escape. The same fate lingers in

subsequent poems, with Sealey alluding to the long history of violence imbued in the word "sundown" as she describes how the day, and a life, extinguish (line 17). Even the sunset is dubbed the "casket's crown" (line 20).

One of the most overt critiques of state violence appears in Sealey's treatment of pages 35-39 of the source document. Across these four pages from the report, Sealey highlights the repetition of the word "force" and its myriad iterations. The poem created from these pages includes "force" fourteen separate times, ranging from "Force / of habit" to "Brute force. Blunt / force to be reckoned with. / Force a smile" (lines 1-8). The poem closes with the ominous image, "To force / open your door…," an act which evokes the murder of Breona Taylor and connects the report on injustice in Ferguson to a larger epidemic of police violence against Black bodies across the nation. Notably, Sealey lifts this poem from a section which, in its first few lines, acknowledges that "Even where FPD officers have legal grounds to stop or arrest, however, they frequently take actions that ratchet up tensions and needlessly escalate the situation to the point that they feel force is necessary" (35). The section concludes that Ferguson police officers routinely use disproportionate force, particularly with vulnerable populations like students, people with disabilities, and historically marginalized communities. Sealey's poem does not so much rewrite the conclusions of the report as emphasize the pattern of force endemic to the police department. However, it is Sealey's references to "habit" and "smile" that most act as a counternarrative resistance to dominant narratives, as these speak to both the long and engrained history of state-sponsored violence as well as the microaggressions that predicate trauma on Black bodies even in the absence of overt violence, a profound critique of respectability politics and an easily accessible foray into the microaggressions experienced by students.

For those outside primary and secondary education, the level and frequency of microaggressions experienced by the average American student may be surprising. Having spent the vast majority of my teaching career in secondary schools, I have observed at least a handful of microaggressions during nearly every class period and passing period. I am not being hyperbolic; it is the reality that American students navigate daily. One of the most common microaggressions that my Black female students encounter is being told that they are being too loud or too aggressive when they speak, whether amongst their peers or during class discussion. Students' concerns and opinions are also frequently diminished by faculty and administrators who dismiss students as too young to have meaningful or thoughtful opinions. Latina students regularly endure comments related to their choice of jewelry, such as hoop earrings, and their make-up. Faculty often step toward Black males who dap each other up, a greeting that is routinely misunderstood as a precursor to conflict or violence.[2] The importance of including poems that explicitly acknowledge or invite discussion regarding microaggressions and the ways in which they actively erase or delegitimize aspects of student identity is difficult to quantify. Likewise, it may feel impossible to incorporate poems that address even a fraction of the microaggressions that students experience; however, the function of erasure poetry as a space of empowerment and the use of individual erasure poems offer a sustainable foundation through which educators can foster such conversations.

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[2] There is an inherent tension in secondary schools due to visible police presence in common spaces. For those at higher education institutions, it may be difficult to internalize that students encounter armed police officers at every common point of egress during passing periods, and officers patrol the lunchroom during every lunch period. Given the well-documented and disproportionate criminalization of students of color and the increasingly pervasive discussions about the school-to-prison pipeline, the mere presence of these officers serves as a type of microaggression akin to the way that young people of color are frequently followed in retail stores. Over the course of my career, I have had dozens of students ask to eat in my room because of the trauma they experience when officers approach them at the lunch table.

Though the projects foregrounded in the early part of this chapter include lengthy and complex treatments of erasure, individual erasure poems abound and provide equally beneficial opportunities for students in the classroom. One such benefit to incorporating individual poems is that students can engage with poetic treatments of current events in real time; they are also able to consider what lies beneath the rise in popularity of erasure poetry following the inauguration of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States. As previously discussed, Rachel Stone describes how literary magazines and social media platforms exploded with examples of erasure poetry in the days and months after Trump entered the Oval Office. The explosion of erasure poems is due, in part, to the fact the erasure is "a form uniquely suited to quick (and sometimes viral) adaptation online" (Stone). While Stone points to the legacy of erasure extending back to the early twentieth century, like others she observes that "In the 2000s, poets started using erasure in a more explicitly political way, challenging official narratives by crafting their own counter-narratives from the same texts." One of the most frequently shared and quoted examples of highly politicized erasure during the Trump era is Finnish-born Niina Pollari's "Form N-400 Erasures," a pair of poems wherein Pollari uses the black-out method to erase vast swaths of text from pages of the Form N-400 Naturalization application. The first of these erasures draws from page twelve of the application form, excising all but a single question from the original text (Figure 18).
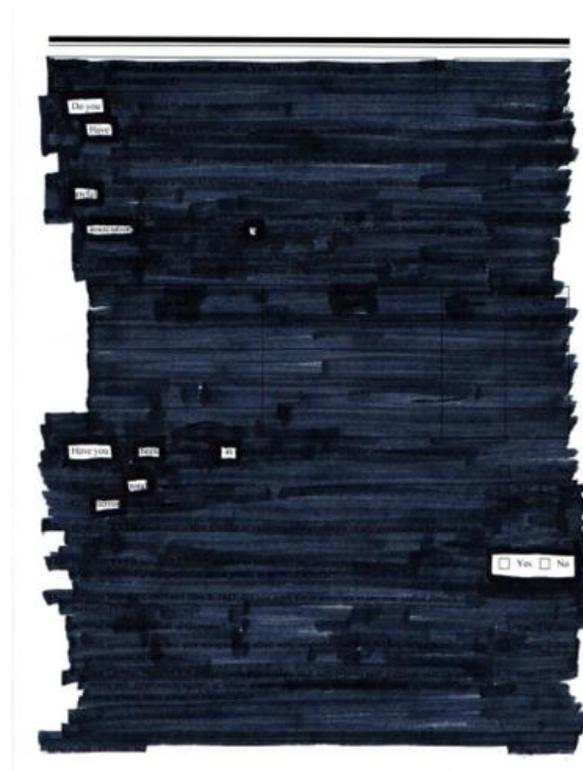
(Figure 18)

Pollari's poem was published less than a month after former President Trump issued an

Executive Order which banned those from numerous Middle Eastern countries from entering the

United States for at least ninety days (Stone). The form itself is "opaquely-worded…expansive

and arduous," yet Pollari's erasure focuses on two simple, if pointed, questions: "Do you have

awful associations" and "Have you been in total terror," followed by checkboxes for "Yes" and

"No." Pollari's revision of the page gets to the core of the immigration ban on which she

comments, centering the function of government agencies in perpetuating terror in the lives of

immigrants.

The irony of the source page is that it contains numerous questions regarding whether or

not the applicant has, at any time, attempted to or supported the overthrow of a federal

government. Answering yes to any of the questions would likely lead to an applicant being

rejected, thus reinforcing the idea that the American government does not embrace revolution or

opposition to its policies as part of the democratic process. By excising most of the text, Pollari empowers readers to answer yes without risk of rejection or state retaliation. She also encourages readers to consider what is more important: understanding if an applicant has been terrorized, or if an applicant has ever opposed a state agency. Pollari's erasure also pushes readers to consider situations in which opposition is both justified and inevitable, no doubt a consideration imperative to those seeking naturalization or entry into the United States as political refugees. It is also worth noting that, as a Finnish immigrant, Pollari helps reframe conversations around immigration and anti-immigrant legislation, highlighting that anti-immigrant ideologies affect immigrants from all races and nationalities.

Another popular erasure of a federal document is Tracy K. Smith's "Declaration," which lifts text from the Declaration of Independence (Figure 19).

He has

        sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people

He has plundered our—

        ravaged our—

            destroyed the lives of our—

taking away our—

        abolishing our most valuable—

and altering fundamentally the Forms of our—

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for
Redress in the most humble terms:

            Our repeated
Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.

We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration
and settlement here.

        —taken Captive

           on the high Seas

                to bear—

(Figure 19)

The use of the pronoun "He" in the opening line may target former President Trump as the arbiter of the injustices described in the poem, or it may work to personify the United States itself. Given that former President Trump, at the time of publication, operated as a symbol for the nation as a whole (however contentious), this distinction does not fundamentally alter the effect of Smith's erasure. The source document is something that students will likely have encountered or, at the very least, understand as a catalyst of the American Revolution. Despite its title, the Declaration of Independence in its original form spoke explicitly to the freedom of a few. Smith co-opts the text and participates in erasure in order to call attention to those who were not and are not granted the freedoms outlined in the document. Smith's inversion of the word "settlement" is especially notable, as she distances the "we" of the poem from the "He" by aligning "He" with settler colonialism and "we" with the victims of settler colonialism, their "emigration / and settlement here" a result of captivity and forced displacement (lines 13-15).

As evidenced by both Pollari's and Smith's erasures of federal documents, the application of erasure in the classroom is not limited to literature and language courses. In fact, a critical analysis of either erasure would be strengthened by the context offered in history and even political science classes. Consider, for example, Junious Ward's "Concerning a Problem," which features an erasure composed from a letter sent by Mildred Loving to the Attorney General (Figure 20). Ward includes two footnotes with the poem which explain that residents of Loving's hometown "had an ingrained history of choosing to identify as anything other than Black" and that "Virginia's ruling class quickly lobbied to change the definition of 'white' to include a person with 1 / 16 American Indian ancestry" (51).

(Figure 20)

However, neither of these annotations makes clear who Mildred Loving is or why she is significant in Virginia law. Thus, Ward's blackout erasure does not fully resonate with students until they understand that Mildred Loving appealed to the State of Virginia to overturn anti-miscegenation laws prohibiting her relationship with her White partner. To fully comprehend Ward's erasure, students are best served by researching *Loving vs. Virginia* and, if possible, reading at least portions of the original case file. Ward includes numerous documents from his own research in Appendices to the collection, as well as a brief note on the annotations that accompany his erasure of the letter itself.

Once students have context, the lines created by Ward's blackout begin to take shape as an act of resistance. Ward reduces the letter to simple statements like "I am a problem" and "We can't live but would / like to" while the majority of the page is redacted (lines 2-15). Not only

does Ward reduce the White space in favor of Black space, but he also seems to comment on the tone of respectability in the original letter. By removing platitudes meant to appeal to an indubitably biased state official, Ward gets to the heart of the letter. His counternarrative allows for Mildred Loving to speak plainly and honestly without minimizing her Blackness. In addition to the blackout, Ward includes his annotations of the letter, which seem to have preceded the erasure since several annotations point to now-redacted text. Nonetheless, the inclusion of his annotations adds a layer of investigation for students, who are afforded an opportunity to see a familiar method of critical reading in action. Educators can use Ward's annotations to introduce or reinforce how students might annotate their own source texts, and how those annotations can inform their decisions when creating erasure poems themselves. For students who perceive textual artifacts as static, the dynamic nature of Ward's annotation and erasure reinforces that critical literacy requires students to enter into conversation with the text.

Layli Long Soldier's *Whereas* offers perhaps one of the most complex treatments of a federal document in recent memory, as she blends erasure and conceptual poetics to critique *S.J. Res. 14,* a joint resolution meant to acknowledge the injustices against the various Indigenous peoples at the hands of the United States government. A portion of Soldier's collection draws directly from the resolution, arranged into two parts: Whereas statements and Resolutions. Each part coincides with one section of the source document. Soldier participates in various techniques of erasure, including textual manipulation, omission, and concrete poems to highlight the shortcomings of the resolution. The third resolution redacts portions of the source document to create a poem in which each line is a single word. The erasure reads, "I recognize that official ill-breaking of the Indian" and carries footnotes that ultimately restore the original statement, "[The United States, acting through Congress] recognizes that there have been years of official

depredations, ill-conceived policies, and the breaking of covenants by the Federal Government

regarding Indian tribes" (91).

That Soldier amends "The United States, acting through Congress" to "I" is a powerful

critique of the resolution in that Soldier insists upon an active recognition of individual

complicity in injustice, as is her shift from the passivity inherent in "ill-conceived

policies…regarding Indian tribes" to "ill-breaking of the Indian." Soldier's use of erasure

directly implicates the United States, and all those complicit in violence against Indigenous

peoples, for the ongoing oppression of Indigenous people in the United States. The fifth

resolution in Soldier's collection carries an inscription that explains how Soldier is manipulating

the source text to form "a text in the shape of its pounding" (Figure 21).
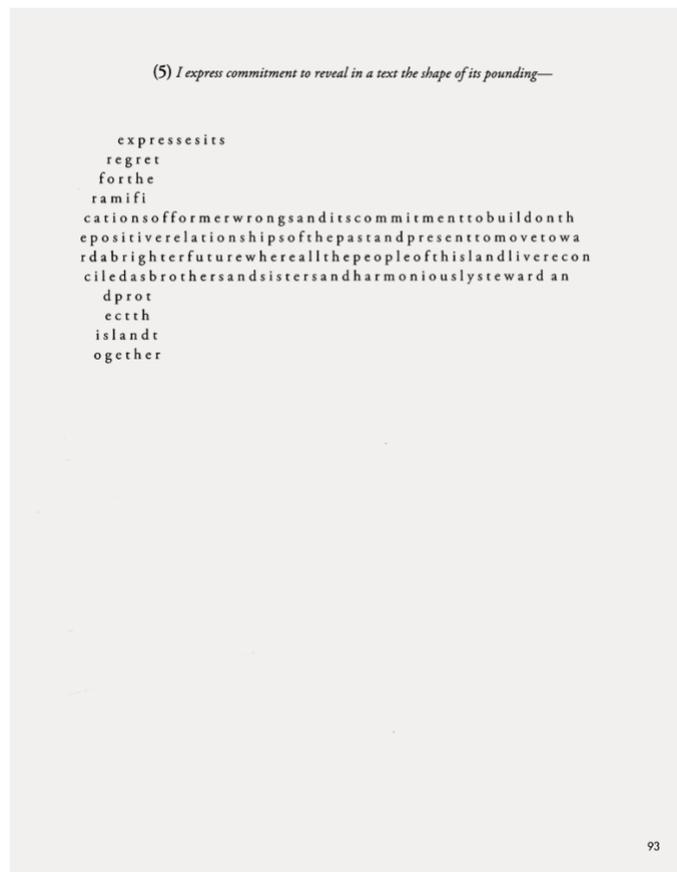
(Figure 21)

The concrete poem formed through the source text resembles a hammer, and Soldier has eliminated all space between words such that all letters in the poem bleed into one continuous "pounding." While the act of erasure may seem minimal, it mirrors the confusing language of the source document while also eliminating the space for breath between words, further capturing the impact of the resolution on Indigenous communities.

Of course, not all erasures mine state documents for source material, or nonfiction material at all. Some poets participate in variations of self-erasure, lifting from their own work to complicate the source poems with new layers of meaning. Elena Ramirez-Gorski's "Transcript of Psych Ward Guard #3 (Erasure Poem in Which I Am the White Space)" is a prose poem that utilizes self-erasure as a means through which the speaker demands space. The poem includes three sections—the first is a dense block of prose containing 518 words; the second is a sparse erasure of the original block, with just under one hundred words; the third returns to the original block of text and reduces it to just eleven words—wherein the speaker uses erasure to whittle the poem down to its most direct and explicit form, centering the "I" through increasing white space while decentering the comments of Psych Ward Guard #3.

In the original block of text, readers encounter a guard who speaks in a stream of consciousness that leaves almost no white space, essentially silencing the speaker of the poem by talking over them. The guard begins with an attempt to empathize with the speaker, but quickly descends into a derogatory statement that reinforces the imbalance of power between guard and speaker: "What? Who are you talking about? The doctor? He's awful. The meanest. How much do you weigh? I could bench you, wouldn't even break a sweat" (lines 1-2). The guard then shifts back to empathy, establishing common ground by drawing comparisons between himself and the speaker, arguing that "The only difference between me and you is I'm wearing a badge,"

and "The only difference is you got to your breaking point, we all have a breaking point" (lines 2-6). As the stream of consciousness continues, the guard offers his own assessment of patients, suggesting that "You guys aren't crazy" and "You guys are completely sane" (lines 18-20). The poem takes an alarming turn in the closing lines, as the guard uses language that suggests he is cornering the speaker just as the speaker is getting ready to leave the facility: "...we need to have a little chat first. You're not in trouble, I just want to talk. I'm looking at your discharge survey. I offended you? I was joking. I thought you were smart enough to realize that. I know better now…Why are you scared? What? Speak up. I don't bite…No hard feelings? See my point? We're good? Shake my hand. Sweet" (lines 21-28).

The second section of the poem eliminates large portions of the guard's words; this increase in the amount of white space serves as a visual assertion from the speaker that they deserve to be visible in the conversation. The guard is no longer able to talk over the speaker for the entirety of the conversation, which renders what remains of his speech a reflection of the speaker's perception of the exchange. The section is notably more visceral, opening with the guard insisting, "The only difference between me and you is I wear my problems bleed yours Once I hurt The only difference is you break but make breaking your home" (lines 1-6). Because the section is a stronger representation of the speaker's experience, the lines act as an admission wherein the guard acknowledges that he causes pain inside the psych ward when he is having problems. The poem again establishes a power dynamic, first with the suggestion that patients are unable to move on from trauma and then when the guard acknowledges, "I can walk outside and just be the truth you just throw your shit curse your mother then say Nothing" (lines 13-19). In this section, the final image is incredibly haunting and vivid: "You stand as i hold the guts unbabied and terrible in my hands" (lines 26-28).

The reader must contend with the guard's more visible preoccupation with violence in this section, moving from the uncomfortable way he occupies space and looms over the speaker in the first section to a decidedly morbid and active participant in a gutting to which the speaker is a helpless witness. The shift in the first self-erasure acts as a critique of the psych ward and provides some context to the offense alluded to in the first section and the speaker's underlying fear of the guard. By using white space as a visual rebuke of the guard's perspective, the speaker validates their fear and establishes their response to the guard as rational and reasonable. The final section reduces the twenty-eight-line block of text to just one sentence: "What i mean is cant you see im the whitest lamb" (lines 1-17). The vast majority of the section is white space, making the speaker the center of the exchange while whittling the guard's speech down to a single absolution of fault wherein the guard aligns himself with a Christ-like sacrifice.

Megan Fernandes offers another example of self-erasure in "Sonnets of the False Beloveds with One Exception OR Repetition Compulsion," described in Chapter 1. The poem utilizes an original crown sonnet sequence as source material for a collection of erasures positioned opposite their respective source sonnets. Fernandes drops the erasures to the bottom of the page, creating a visual that suggests the erasures are footnotes to the original poem. Like Ramirez-Gorski, Fernandes uses the erasure to reduce each poem to core admissions—whether or not these admissions represent more authentic versions of the events described, the connection between erasure poetry and the literal function of pencil erasers suggests that the erasures serve as revised or finalized versions of the source material. "Shanghai Sonnet," for example, begins with the speaker explaining, "I cast beloveds. I kill them off, too, / because the must is mostly a bloodless tool" (lines 1-2). The erasure that follows amends this statement to "I cast / mostly" (lines 1-2), suggesting that the balance implied in the original sonnet is inaccurate.

At the close of the poem, the original source sonnet offers an indictment of the speaker's apathy: "It rains, and on cue, you skid and skin your knee. / You bleed. I neglect it. Neglect to inspect it. / I am young and nothing is sacred yet" (lines 12-14). The erasure again amends the statement, shifting responsibility from the speaker to the lover: "you / neglect Neglect / and nothing" (lines 13-14). By excising "I kill" from the first line and shifting the subject of "neglect" from "I" to "you," the erasure offers a perspective of the relationship wherein the speaker is not at fault, or at least not solely responsible for the deterioration of the relationship. The following poem in the sequence, "Brooklyn Sonnet," similarly uses the erasure as a reflective space, though this time the original sonnet juxtaposes a "you" that is young and naive with a speaker that laments their missed connection, while the erasure features a "you" that is less sacred against an "I" that is noticeably more cynical. The final line of the erasure gets to the heart of the dichotomy as the speaker inquires, "did you know / like / I know / who breaks" (lines 11-14).

The act of self-erasure offers a unique opportunity for critical literacy that sidesteps critiques of erasure as unoriginal or a form of plagiarism because the source material draws from work created by the author of the erasure. When this self-erasure stems from historically marginalized voices, the act becomes an inherently political rebuke of cultural and historical erasure (Perez). Craig Santos Perez, expounding on the possibilities of erasure poetry, first acknowledges, "The erasure of our traditions, customs, and bloodlines. We have the scars of erasure." He turns to poetry as a way "to stay connected" and "to resist being fully erased" because poetry offered a way "to hold onto elements of [his] culture, geography, language, before it was completely erased." Perez goes on to argue that "erasure is a violent, colonial act" and that he writes "from a continuous space of erasure." The historical and cultural erasure of

Perez' people inspired a technique in his 2023 collection, *from unincorporated territory*, that uses his own UN testimony about US colonialism in Guam as source material.

Perez describes how he chose "to strikethrough the entire testimony" because "the strikethrough embodies that feeling of not being heard, that feeling of being erased." By asking students to participate in self-erasure as a creative exercise, educators encourage a process that pushes students to interrogate the role of erasure in preserving (or dismantling) systemic structures. Writing in erasure, as Pindyck notes, "abandons commonsense reading level logic for a different, more intuitive logic: a logic of sense that resists communication and even meaning making…The practice asks students to acknowledge what is already there and to participate…in unmaking and then remaking a body of text" (Pindyck 60-61). I argue that exercises in self-erasure are a critical step. Since the source material is of students' own creation, the process of unmaking and remaking further reinforces the importance of revision as part of the writing process, as well as the necessity of reevaluating experiences from multiple perspectives. As evidenced by Ramirez-Gorski's "Transcript of Psych Ward Guard #3 (Erasure Poem in Which I Am the White Space)," self-erasure often leads to a more direct and vulnerable presentation of experiences that trims text down to its most honest or coherent statements, a practice that benefits students across all genres of writing.

Given the rise in censorship affecting public education spaces and libraries, educators can also encourage erasure as an act of resistance by introducing canonical texts as source material for original erasure poems. Ashleigh A. Allen and Rob Simon drew from Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* for an exercise, encouraging students "to unsettle the text and its language" (43). Allen and Simon first assigned students to read the novel itself, as well as a poem by Adrienne Rich that encourages readers to create from what is available, then presented them with pages

torn from the book and a challenge to use "white correction fluid to obscure" portions of the page so that only their new erasure poems were visible (44-45). The goal, according to Allen and Simon, was to "unsettle the fictional world of *Fahrenheit 451*, in which people are surveilled and stories are destroyed," thereby joining the "many poets and writers [who] have used erasure with an array of published and personal texts to write—or erase—into political moments, movements, general disorder, and their lives" (44-45). The authors include sample poems produced by students; in one, the student describes how "darkness / moved along / the men's faces," while another poem from the same student compares "the dreadful yet sudden whisper of shattered memories" to "the scream of the dead" (46).

In both samples, the majority of the page is covered by white-out, mirroring the censorship evident in the original novel while drawing readers' attention to the darkness and death that accompanies government surveillance. Asking students to engage with canonical texts in this way does not just reinforce literature as living and fluid, but also invites students to critique texts that they may otherwise view as above reproach, thus communicating that students' perceptions and voices are valuable and deserve to be treated with the same respect as the texts they encounter. In so doing, educators encourage discussion around what is at stake when people are rendered silent through historical and cultural erasure, as well as those who are prohibited from voicing their perspectives in daily exchanges. One added benefit of directing students to lift erasure poems from canonical texts is that these texts are far less likely to be the subject of book bans or prohibited by state legislation.

Allen and Simon use erasure specifically to reinforce critical reading and move students toward an interpretative representation of a text or its themes. Jessica Q. Stark, in *Buffalo Girls*, demonstrates how the erasure of a canonical text can function outside the tradition of literary

analysis. Her use of erasure is an intentional act of resistance in a collection that centers her attempts to connect with the legacy of her mother and other Vietnamese women whose cultures and experiences have been largely erased. Stark includes several poems which, on first glance, do not appear to be erasure poems at all. Visually, the lines move down the page in a predictable manner without any obvious excision of text. Stark does not participate in palimpsest, strikethrough, blackout, or whiteout methods to create her poems. Instead, Stark uses numerous translations and versions of the popular fable, "Little Red Riding Hood," to create what she terms "liberal erasures" (115). In fact, the only immediate indication that the poems are erasures is that each carries the title "Little Red Riding Hood," followed by an inscription that begins with "*after*" and identifies the author of the version from which Stark is drawing her language. By obscuring the act of erasure, Stark inverts the erasure of her Vietnamese culture and her inability to connect with her family's legacy as a child, ultimately destabilizing a classic tale familiar to most American children and rendering the original tale inaccessible.

The first of these erasures is drawn from a version of the tale by Charles Perrault and begins with a secondary inscription that explains the moral: "*Children, especially attractive, well-bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf*" (22). The inscription grounds the poem in the greater context of the collection, established by the allusion in the book's title[3] and referenced across numerous poems throughout *Buffalo Girls*. Stark opens the poem with a quintessential phrase in fables, "Once upon a time" (line 1), before describing how "This good woman // set to go to a village // through the wood / with a wolf…" (lines 5-8). The poem closes with the statement, "I say wolf, but there

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[3] "Buffalo Girls" or "Buffalo Gals" refers to women who made their living in bars, concert halls, and brothels in Buffalo, New York. These women traditionally catered to sailors, as they worked in close proximity to where crewmen received their wages. Stark connects this tradition to the larger history of objectification and fetishization of Vietnamese women.

/ are various kinds" (lines 13-14). The poem is remarkably sparse, with each stanza containing just one or two short lines. Stark has cut the fable down to its barest form, most evident in the way she sidesteps allegory in favor of a final couplet that explicitly names the true monster at the heart of the moral—the many predators who seek to harm even "good" women.

"The Tale of the Tiger-Women" draws from a Chinese version of "Little Red Riding Hood" in which the predator is a tiger of sorts. The tiger can shapeshift and appear as a woman, preying on unsuspecting children by luring them in before devouring them. Unlike Western versions of the tale, the Chinese version includes two children: a little girl and her brother. The tiger poses as Granny and consumes the brother, but the little girl escapes by tricking the tiger and hiding from it. Stark's decision to include this version in her series of erasures reinforces the East/West dichotomy that undergirds her investigation of lineage and legacy in the collection, and it destabilizes the stereotype of East Asian women as passive or submissive. Stark's erasure uses all gaps to align the little girl with the predator:

> THE NIGHT IS LONG AND
>
>   I BEAR THE HUNGER.
>
>
> The girl said: I AM
>
> HUNGRY, TOO. (lines 7-10)

Stark further rejects passivity through the lines, "It is still better / to be the tree than the // sleeping-mat" (lines 15-17). On one hand, readers may infer that the sleeping-mat is on the ground and thus literally more vulnerable to predators, while the tree offers protection. Stark's use of the verb *to be* is an intriguing choice, as it could also suggest that preserving one's original form renders them strong and impenetrable, while allowing oneself to be shaped for the

comfort of others leads to weakness and vulnerability. The question of female agency is most overt in the final lines, which describe a woman leading tigers through the forest, pointing toward a human that has deceived them (lines 20-23). The image reorients the woman as predator and pulls back the veil implicit in most versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," thereby destabilizing the trope of humankind as inherently superior to so-called beasts.

I see distinct benefits in the use of fables or other familiar children's tales as source material for erasure exercises. From a practical standpoint, children's fables are, like canonical texts, less likely to be challenged or prohibited in the classroom. The tales will also likely be familiar to students, though it is unlikely that many students will have been tasked with revising or otherwise altering the tales. Likewise, few students are likely to have spent much time thinking about the tales or how they shape one's perception of the world. By engaging with familiar, "low-level" texts as critical readers and writers, students are again urged to consider literature as living and fluid. Further, their erasures could consider the histories or legacies associated with the source fable—either through a comparative analysis of multiple versions, as Stark demonstrates, or by researching criticism around the fable—and how the fable changes from generation to generation.

Stark, for example, highlights how most Western iterations of "Little Red Riding Hood" present the little girl as naive or petulant and often include a strong male character like the hunter as a savior figure, while the Chinese version displays the brother as most vulnerable and the little girl as more likely to survive when facing a predator. Her erasures draw the reader's attention to how the fable normalizes violence against women and teaches girls to avoid predators, a lesson that fourth wave feminists have noted as distinctly problematic in the absence of lessons that discourage boys from exacting violence on women. Students can use the fables and tales, or even

illustrated children's books, from their own upbringing to create erasures that similarly draw attention to problematic ideologies or mentalities, as well as to invert morals in a way that renders them more applicable to the contemporary moment.

Educators can and should incorporate erasure poetry strategically as a mechanism through which students can engage in discourse about the sociopolitical issues that affect their daily lives, as well as the historical erasure of various communities and the impact of that erasure on future generations. Students most benefit from both reading and creating erasure poetry—the act of reading invites critical analysis about both the poem itself and the source document from which it derives, and the act of writing again reinforces a critical analysis of the source text while also empowering students to concretize and monumentalize their respective experiences. To begin, students should encounter contemporary erasure poems that demonstrate the ability of the poet to develop counternarratives through the disruption of official documents, as with poets like Mai Der Vang, Courtney Faye Taylor, and Junious Ward. In so doing, they develop more finely tuned critical literacy skills, but they also internalize the possibility that they, too, can create counternarratives which more authentically reflect their respective experiences. Students are thus empowered to proactively resist narratives which perpetuate negative and/or inaccurate stereotypes, as well as source texts that actively erase their communities, their traumas, their successes.

Even outside the political sphere, erasure poetry can prove an effective and efficient space through which students can explore complex, sometimes deeply vulnerable and incomprehensible themes. Mental health, for example, is a topic of keen interest to my students, yet colleagues have acknowledged that they have rarely prioritized discussions about mental health crisis in the classroom because they feel ill-equipped to lead those discussions. Suicide

remains one of the leading causes of death for adolescents and young teens, and again my students report few authentic or sustained discussions about suicide in the classroom. While it is certainly true that educators are not necessarily trained mental health professionals, they can select texts which address mental health and suicide in earnest. Diana Khoi Nguyen, in *Root Fractures*, turns to erasure poetry in her attempt to process a brother's suicide. The collection includes family photographs, many of which the brother cut himself out of prior to killing himself, a deliberately symbolic act of erasure that preceded his physical erasure from their lives. Nguyen employs erasure in numerous ways, many of which produce poems that create images of family which mirror the photographs she includes in the collection (Figure 22).
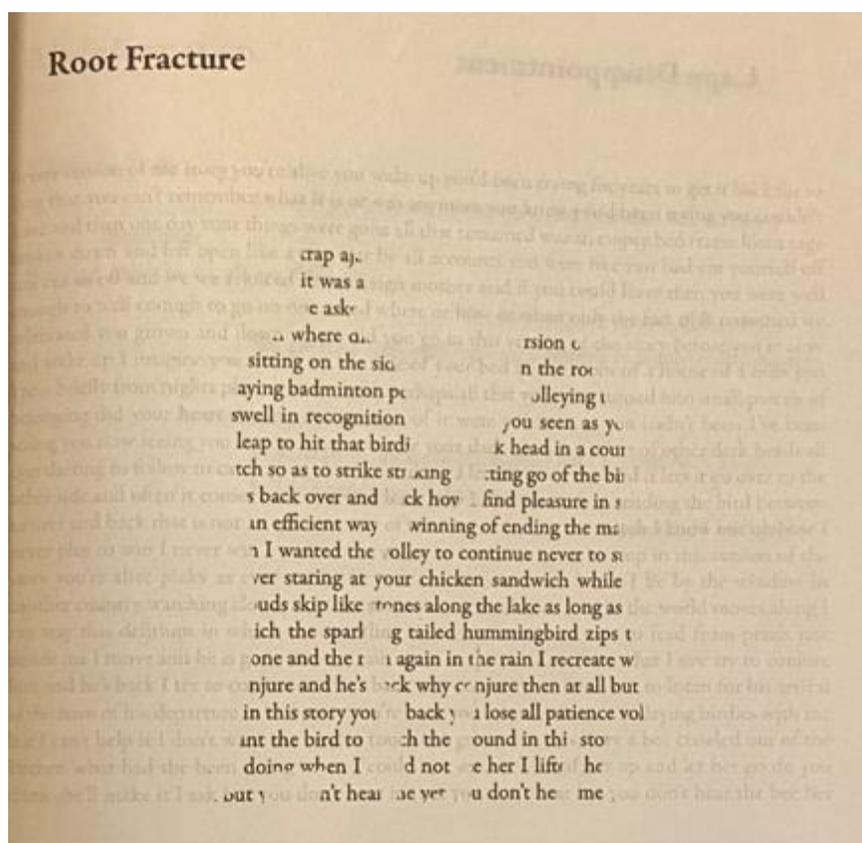
(Figure 22)

Several of these erasures carry the title "Root Fracture," and each takes a different approach to erasure as a poetic technique. In Figure 22, for example, Nguyen utilizes the palimpsest method and fades the background text almost entirely.

The image created by the text that remains clearly resembles the silhouette of a family. As students attempt to read the text that creates the silhouette, they may notice that the sentences and phrases are incomprehensible, a linguistic representation of what remains of the family in the wake of the brother's suicide. In order to access the language in a way that they can process, students must strain to read the deeply faded, or erased, text, an act that mirrors the challenge of accessing memories and making sense of trauma in the aftermath of a loved one's death. The text as a whole features an "I" that directly addresses the brother, or "you," creating more discomfort for the reader as they confront what feels like an invasion of privacy. The effect is not unlike eavesdropping, in this case listening in on an immensely private exchange between the speaker and her dead brother. Unlike many of the poems included in this chapter, Nguyen does not turn to erasure in order to make or re-make meaning. Instead, her use of erasure resists meaning, thereby communicating to readers that it is acceptable, and perhaps even cathartic, to resist the urge to make meaning out of trauma.

Erasure poetry is one of the simplest techniques to incorporate into the classroom, especially as a generative writing exercise. What moves the process of erasure from a superficial engagement with source texts, though, is careful and sustained attention to critical reading and critical writing. Educators can and should expose students to early twenty-first century erasure poems as examples of how historically marginalized poets insert themselves into documents and histories that actively erase their experiences. Educators should also make space for the complexities inherent to erasure, such as Solmaz Sharif's assertion that erasure poetry is an

extension of the erasure practiced by colonial states, and whether or not such writing functions as legitimate resistance. There is an endless supply of source texts available to educators, yet the mere inclusion of source texts and erasure exercises will not inherently push students to consider the sociopolitical issues at stake in their daily lives. In order to foster structured and effective interrogations of key issues, educators should shape both reading and writing activities to the specific source texts they incorporate; this will direct students' attention to the most pertinent parts of the text, as well as set them up to produce their own erasures with intentionality rather than an erroneous or random revision of the source text. Whereas writing into and against form encourages students to consider the ways that language may or may not contain their respective experiences, erasure pushes them to disrupt their understanding of text as finite and the erasure of certain voices as unamendable. Erasure prioritizes revision—of the text, and of the self.

Chapter 4

Co-opting Nontraditional Forms in Early twenty-first Century American Poetry

The use of nontraditional forms, such as matrices and crosswords, is increasingly common in early twenty-first century poetry concerned with identity. Poets like Fatimah Asghar, Franny Choi, and Junious Ward all challenge traditional notions of what poetry is, using graphics and co-opting familiar text objects to challenge larger assumptions about gender identity, ableism, and the immigrant experience. These forms are grounded in a larger poetic tradition which alters traditional forms, such as the sonnet, to advance and expand dialogue related to oppressive tactics in American poetry. By disrupting the visual and reading experience for readers, contemporary authors are also troubling perceptions of poetry as inherently elitist and inaccessible, thus arguing in favor of a more inclusive and more diverse conception of American poetics. In many instances, these same authors juxtapose nontraditional forms with strict formal poetry, further asserting that their choice of format is guided not by a rejection of tradition but by a desire to expand and innovate the genre. I argue that the co-opting of nontraditional forms is particularly common in dissent poetry, that which seeks to critique the sociopolitical climate in twenty-first century America, and that authors who employ these forms often use their writing to argue in favor of more expansive conceptions of gender, race, and the human experience. I further argue that the intentional inclusion of nontraditional forms in the classroom, particularly after students have familiarized themselves with traditional forms, presents a unique opportunity for students to interrogate the correlation between visual structures and messaging. Many nontraditional forms also mirror structures that students engage with outside the classroom, thus they may be less averse to engaging with poems that might otherwise appear too difficult or abstract at first glance.

Form has long been linked to poetry and, in many instances, used to identify poetry as distinct from other genres of writing. In Western literature, Greek tragedy makes use of strict meter and rhyme schemes as early as the eighth century BCE, while the form of Greek epics appears in Roman epics, Anglo-Saxon epics, British epics, and even *The Columbiad*. Shakespeare is known as much for his use of the sonnet as his plays, yet three forms of the sonnet appear continuously across Europe throughout the Renaissance and Romantic periods. As discussed in previous chapters, twentieth-century poets showed increasing devotion to odes, sestinas, and villanelles. Over the first quarter of the twenty-first century, poets have employed mirror poems and pantoums with growing frequency. However, poets have also resisted form, especially since the middle of the twentieth century. Blank verse offered poets a way to break away from the sonnet without abandoning iambic pentameter, while free verse gave poets license to write outside any form at all. Though free verse remains the most common choice among early twenty-first century poets, a number of poets now use strict forms not readily associated with poetry to change the way readers think about and experience poetry. These poets often make use of these forms specifically to challenge traditional thinking and construct counternarratives.

Naturally, the use of nontraditional forms like mad libs, crosswords, blueprints, and others invites the question: what makes these pieces poetry? The debate over what constitutes a poem is storied and contentious, far too expansive to address here; so, let us turn to two poets in particular and their contribution to the debate as a framework for identifying what, if anything, renders such nontraditional forms "poetic." Glyn Maxwell, in *On Poetry*, invites readers to consider the "visual intelligence," which he defines as a "poem with prime visual force: anything that's using *letter*-shape, *word*-shape, *line*-shape, *stanza*-shape or *poem*-shape as a metaphor in

itself" (35). Maxwell goes on to clarify that the shape of a poem is not inherently meaningful, that the edges, margins, and fixed space of a poem must have some rationale, some characteristic which enhances our understanding of the poem as a whole (56-57). While Maxwell does not directly engage with nontraditional forms, his remarks apply especially well to the fixed forms adopted by poets throughout this chapter as the *shape* of the poem is, almost universally, directly linked to the way readers move through each piece. As Helen Vendler argues, "the structure of a poem enacts (acts out, dramatizes) by way of a dynamic evolution of form what the poem says by way of assertion" (76). While these comments may, and often do, apply to the formal structure of a poem, the same could be argued for the nontraditional shapes discussed throughout this chapter. Early twenty-first century poets deliberately trade on readers' experience with the forms they employ, using the reader's instinct for navigating shared forms like the crossword to guide readers from one image or stanza to another, without which many readers may not otherwise understand how to navigate the arrangement of words and lines toward meaning. Students, then, should encounter the *shape* of nontraditional poems as inherently linked to the assertions embedded in the language of the poem.

Writing about traditional forms, Maxwell argues that "any form in poetry, be it meter, rhyme, or line-break, is a metaphor for creaturely life" (120). The form(s) that poetry takes in the present may change from generation to generation, but those forms can and should represent the lived experiences of that generation. Inherited forms, as noted in previous chapters, provide a foundation for the innovation of both traditional and invented forms, a context for understanding how poets continue to use the white and black space of the page toward particular ends. While inherited forms are valuable and continue to hold meaning, "telling any kind of truth, making work that's tough, unforgettable, lovely...will demand new forms of verse from poets" (Maxwell

69). Maxwell may be referring to invented forms like the golden shovel or duplex, which adapt inherited forms for new generations, but I argue that nontraditional forms are also an extension of this need to continually introduce new and familiar structures as a means for containing truths that have, sometimes for centuries, been starkly absent from American poetics.

Matthew Zapruder frames the majority of *Why Poetry* as a defense of poetry and suggests that readers, if they are to enjoy poetry, must unlearn many of the lessons they have been taught about how to engage with poems. Like Maxwell, he comments on the place of form and "formal" features in contemporary poetry. According to Zapruder, "The creation of a poetic state of mind in poet and reader is inextricably connected with form. A poem, literally, makes a space to move through. To read a poem is to move through that constructed space of ideas and thinking" (57). When considering Zapruder's argument alongside Maxwell's, it becomes clear that nontraditional poems are doing the work of poetry insofar as the authors are thoughtfully and intentionally co-opting forms that encourage readers to move through the poem in precise ways. Zapruder continues,

> Often in textbooks and in teaching, the formal elements of a poem, like rhyme,
> meter, sound, are treated basically as enhancements to the so-called message of
> the poem. That type of analysis is based on a mistaken idea about what poets do
> with language and form. It implies that the formal qualities that make a poem
> what it is are secondary to the main purpose, the central message. (59)

Highlighting this misunderstanding is particularly important for two reasons: first, Zapruder notes that the "formal elements" often taught to students are rooted in traditional, canonical forms; second, he identifies a key gap in how many students learn to interpret poetry. Both Maxwell and Zapruder suggest that readers should not consider the structure of a poem as

arbitrary, but deliberate and meaningful, even to the point that readers might wholly

misunderstand a poem if they fail to first contend with its structure. More importantly, Zapruder

describes the concept of *ostraneniye*--- "translated as 'defamiliarization,' though a more literal

translation would be something like 'strangefying'"—introduced by Viktor Shlovsky in "Art as

Technique" (41-42). Shlovsky argues that what sets something apart as art is its ability to

defamiliarize the mundane, to make that which is commonplace novel, perhaps even disturbing.

According to Zapruder, "Poetry exhibits the purest form of defamiliarization" because "it is in

poetry that we see most clearly and powerfully, without any other ultimate distraction, how

language can be made deliberately strange" (42-43).

Zapruder expands on how poetry can make language "deliberately strange" in his

discussion of form, during which he suggests that line breaks may "do something unexpected,

even violent or unnatural," while "in a prose poem, the contrast between the mundane form of

prose and the unexpected feeling of coming upon poetry can create an all the more startling and

powerful reading experience" (62-65). Like Maxwell, Zapruder never moves beyond the

traditional conception of poetry as, rather exclusively, black words on white space. However, his

remarks on poetry and its ability to defamiliarize are integral to understanding the impact of

nontraditional forms on the reader's experience. What separates the experimental from the

nontraditional is that nontraditional forms are neither formless nor, structurally, unfamiliar.

Rather, poets have rendered the familiar---mad libs, cross words, glossaries, etc.---unfamiliar by

pushing those forms into the strange, discombobulating space of poetry. Most of the forms

described in this chapter are, traditionally, received as forms that resist interpretation and/or

provide clarity in a literal sense. Poets have inverted that expectation, destabilizing readers

through "visual intelligence" and the deliberate use of fixed space as metaphor.

Educators are in the unique position to usher nontraditional forms into the classroom, situating contemporary poets alongside strict formalists from the canon to highlight the fluidity of poetry as a genre, and the troubling of form as an intentional act of resistance. Not only can students experience poems written by authors who are alive and creating, a necessary endeavor in its own right, but they can also deepen their understanding of form through the analysis of poems which alter or reject those forms. Nontraditional forms of poetry disrupt expectations about how the work functions as expected within their respective forms and within their designation as poems, inviting discussion first about where the form has been altered and then about what the effect(s) of disrupting the form are in understanding the poem as a whole.

Natalie Diaz's "My American Crown" (excerpted in Figure 23), for example, engages with the crown sonnet sequence discussed in the first chapter. At first glance, Diaz seems to abandon all features of the crown sonnet, and all features of poetry in general. Each word is arranged separate from the others, some linked by lines and others wholly separated from another by other lines. Visually, there is nothing that would signal to students that what they have encountered is a poem *except* that the title proclaims the work as a crown sonnet. Twenty-first century students will likely feel an immediate discomfort in trying to navigate Diaz's sonnet sequence, as there is no familiar visual cue that tells them how to enter and arrange the various entries.

My American Crown
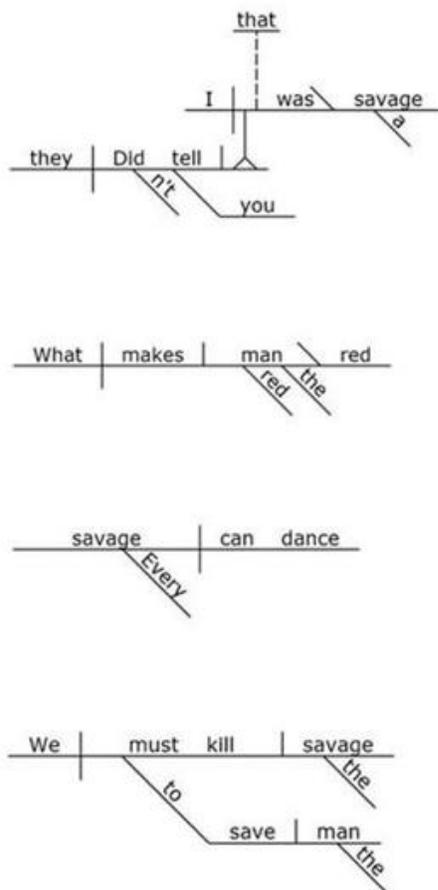
(Figure 23)

Students should be able to articulate the ways in which the poem deviates from the traditional

sonnet crown, but they would likely require direction to process the arrangements as sentence

diagrams, a practice that is often overlooked in K-12 classroom instruction today. The sonnets in

"My American Crown" are, as Diaz herself explains in a note that accompanies the sequence,

visually "contained spaces that are also fractured moments." Diaz clearly articulates her

deviation from the traditional crown, showing a deep understanding of the form and

intentionality behind her own choices. She emphasizes the word "savage," for example, rather

than repeating a full line from sonnet to sonnet.

Once the students recognize the arrangements as rooted in grammar instruction, analysis pivots to what Diaz intends by co-opting the sentence diagram method for her sonnet sequence. Rather than an indication that Diaz is unable to operate within the strict structure of the sonnet crown, the use of sentence diagramming suggests that Diaz has a thorough understanding of language, undoubtedly an understanding far deeper than students' experience with English grammar. Jessica Lewis Luck argues that the question of intentionality is not something that contemporary critics or educators readily embrace with respect to poetry analysis, but such departures from traditional poetic structures necessitate that readers consider "textual materiality and authorial intentionality alongside one another" if we are to comprehend the full breadth of the author's experimentation (21-23). While Luck's focus is on experimental texts, I argue that the methodology she presents is equally applicable to nontraditional forms. The sentence diagram is not an inherently experimental form, but its place inside American poetics is certainly uncommon and troubles many definitions of what makes a poem. With this in mind, I turn to "My American Crown" and what Diaz might have intended.

First, students need to understand that the function of a sentence diagram is to deconstruct the parts of existing sentences in an effort to better understand how those parts function within the whole. In other words, the sentence diagram is a sort of analysis operating at the most basic and literal level. Diaz, by withholding the "whole" of the sonnet, has co-opted colonial language parameters specifically to force readers to partake in the construction of that "whole." When students work to make meaning of each sequence, reorganizing the parts into a coherent sentence, they become participants in the formation of a counternarrative. The first entry in the sequence, when reconstructed, poses the question, "Didn't they tell you that I was a savage?" As students form this question, they are situated as the "I" of the poem, thus they first

enter the poem not as the colonizer, but as the "savage." The following three sequences are all in the third person, each working in tandem with the others to other the "savage" in preparation for murder. The fourth sequence states matter-of-factly, "We must kill the savage to save the man." Because students have been asked to enter the poem as the "savage," this statement necessarily threatens their very existence, which allows students to more fully process how rhetoric forces indigenous people to internalize death as an inevitable part of the colonial project. Viewing this arrangement as a sentence diagram, it is also visually evident that the statement intentionally separates "savage" from "man," semantically reinforcing the perception that the so-called "savage" is not synonymous with "man," in other words the "savage" is un-human.

In this instance, students have direct access to Diaz's intentionality, as she includes a discussion of her sequence below the poem. One aspect of "My American Crown" that may surprise many students is that each of the sentences diagrammed in the poem comes from a popular source written in English. "Didn't they tell you I was a savage" is a lyric from Rhianna's song, "Needed Me," while "What makes the red man red" is the title of a song included in Disney's 1953 animated film, *Peter Pan*. None other than Mr. Darcy, in *Pride and Prejudice*, utters the words, "Every savage can dance." Richard Henry Pratt wrote that "We must kill the savage to save the man" in a treatise advocating for the total assimilation of indigenous children into American society, suggesting that they must "kill" or abandon their respective cultures in order to become civilized men. According to Diaz, the combination of direct quotes from historical documents and popular media alongside the sentence diagram helps to recreate, for readers, what she experiences when she reads sonnets in English: "I see the violence of the words, turning and turning, more truly and unmeasured, chaotic and untamed, the way this language, these phrases, and the actions they enact give permission to have turned in my life." Of

course, educators are unlikely to find poets' discussions of intentionality for most poems, and the teaching of forms so far from the poetic tradition necessarily invites questions about best practices.

Luck offers an intuitive discussion of pedagogy praxis in the epilogue to her book, where she argues

> Certainly experimental poetry has an important audience in poetry readings, conferences, journals, and publishers where avant-gardists share their work with one another, but these venues are generally frequented by the already converted. For experimentalism to have its viral, micropolitical effects on the culture, there is no more fertile site than the trenches of the classroom. (153)

Again, Luck's focus is on the experimental, but her arguments apply well to the teaching of nontraditional forms. Like experimental poetry, poems that co-opt nontraditional forms appear most frequently in spaces where readers have already signaled a willingness to explore the poem outside the traditional sense. Students, in my experience, fit the "most resistant…audience" that Luck calls for in that they are vocally resistant to learning experiences that lead from a space of discomfort. Fear of the unknown permeates the early twenty-first century classroom, where students have been taught, both explicitly and implicitly, that assimilating to the standard is synonymous with academic success. However, as Luck notes, introducing students to poems that challenge their perception of what makes a poem and, by extension, what a poem can do, "could infect students' thinking, producing skeptical creative readers, both within the discipline of English and in their lives outside the classroom" (154).

In the face of anti-ethnic and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation meant to limit students' exposure to representations and discussions of race, gender, and sexuality, incorporating nontraditional

forms offers an opportunity to "infect" them with modes of thinking that challenge the hegemonic narrative. What follows in the remainder of this chapter are examples of nontraditional forms and how educators might use these forms to encourage new ways of approaching both poetry and the larger sociopolitical implications that the poems address. My sample is by no means an exhaustive list, but an entry point for educators looking to disrupt or diversify the curriculum while also pushing students toward a more developed, more nuanced critical literacy. As with the poems included in previous chapters, there is a relative dearth of scholarship discussing the poems included herein, as much because of their recent publication as because literary criticism has, to date, not committed substantial scholarship to the study of how and why poets co-opt nontraditional forms. The poems included in this chapter represent only a fraction of the nontraditional forms used in early twenty-first century American poetry, but I have centered forms and poems which have proven successful with my students from semester to semester, including: terminal command form ("Turing Test"); floorplan ("Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan"); mad-lib ("Partition"); bingo card ("Microaggression Bingo"); crossword ("Map Home"); glossary ("From," "Glossary of Terms," "Glossary"); menu ("Self-Portrait According to George W. Bush"); product reviews ("Racist.").

When Alan Turing asked in 1950 if machines could think, it was an honest question, and a natural evolution of his work to crack the enigma machine. Beyond the professional, however, Turing was a gay man at a time when British laws intimated that homosexuals were subhuman and grotesque, deviations that threatened the fabric of moral society. As Robinson Meyer describes in "Alan Turing's Body," when the government learned of Turing's sexual orientation, he was effectively banished from society and forced to undergo chemical castration. Whereas Turing had been both human and hero during World War II, within a handful of years, he was

physically and historically erased. Turing emerged from chemical castration a different man; his body was softer and he developed breasts, his mind increasingly clouded and unable to hold onto the ideas and theories to which he had clung for so much his adult life (Meyer). Turing lived, however briefly, outside gender. The chemical castration meant that his body transcended the heteronormative binary, yet he was robbed of his autonomy by the very nation he had served. He effectively embodied Donna Haraway's cyborg, "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction," defined by British society as neither fully human nor inhuman (149).

Turing's seems a fitting origin story for Korean American poet Franny Choi's exploration of humanness in the "Turing test" poems in her collection, *Soft Science*. Choi aligns her collection adjacent to both Turing and Haraway in "A Brief History of Cyborgs," where she writes that

> Once, a scientist in Britain asked Can machines think? He built a machine, taught
>
> it to read ghosts, and a new kind of ghost was born
>
> …
>
> Here, in a seed, is a cyborg: A bleeding girl, dragging a knife through the sand.
>
> An imaginary girl who dreams of becoming trash. (11-12)

Though the poem itself is hardly nontraditional, composed almost entirely of long, prosaic lines, it culminates in a single line which mirrors the structure of her "Turing test" poems: "Can machines think / come here let me show you / ask me again" (12). Through the poem, Choi signals her use of the cyborg as a thought experiment for investigating aspects of her own identity, namely her gender identity and her Korean American identity. According to Choi, who has addressed the metaphor in various interviews, the appeal of the cyborg is that it is dualistic,

both human and machine, making it an ideal metaphor for exploring nonbinary gender and multicultural ethnicity.

Choi acknowledges the legacy of cyborgs in each section, formatting poems which center cyborgs using programming code. Many of these poems are labeled "TURING TEST," with all but the first also indicating the specific parameters of the test in their respective titles (e.g. "TURING TEST_Empathetic Response," "TURING TEST_Boundaries," etc.). Fittingly, Choi's use of the cyborg to explore feminist issues reflects the function of "the cyborg [as] a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience" (Haraway 149). Choi has chosen an apt metaphor to carry her critique of patriarchy and misogyny, one that neatly bridges lived experiences with a technological mythos specifically designed to further contemporary feminist thought. Choi converts the book itself into a piece of technology through her formatting, further challenging the traditional conception of poetry as static and/or dead.

Soft Science runs counter to expectations that literary poetry is inherently synonymous with inaccessible language and rigid forms, instead presenting the reader with a futuristic approach to language, co-opting decades-old forms from computer science to argue that poetry is not only alive but perfectly capable of metamorphosis. Choi's rejection of formalist poetry perfectly mirrors the content of her poems, which continually challenge traditional understandings of gender, race, and personhood. Further, by incorporating terminal command structures throughout the collection, Choi places the reader at the keyboard, implying that each person is an active participant in their own indoctrination, and that each person chooses either to perpetuate the issues that the poems address or to rewrite the code themselves.

The poems presented as Turing tests serve as section breaks, each one setting up a particular inquiry related to the humanity of the speaker in the poems. The poems follow a

structure similar to terminal commands on the computer, challenging preconceptions of poetic structure and situating the reader as the scientist meant to determine the humanity of the speaker insofar as making meaning of the cyborg's response aligns with the scientific analysis of Turing test responses as either human or inhuman (Figure 24). Speaking about her approach to the poem and its form during an interview, Choi explained,

> Those slashes are a technology I learned from sam sax and Jan Beatty. I liked the way they chunked sentences into pieces, made them objects I could lay down like blocks. They made it easier to change the sentence as I went, made the language something I could gather and manipulate rather than asking it to bear the burden of coherence.

Choi's "technology" effectively forces readers to confront their complicity in the objectification of the speaker and, by proxy, the dehumanization of those the speaker represents. In "Turing Test," the speaker is asked if they understand the questions, where they come from, and how old they are.

// this is a test to determine if you have consciousness
// do you understand what i am saying

in a bright room / on a bright screen / i watched every mouth / duck duck roll / i learned to speak / from puppets & smoke / orange worms twisted / into the army's alphabet / i caught the letters / as they fell from my mother's mouth / *whirlpool* / *sword* / *wolf* / i circled countable nouns / in my father's science papers / *sodium bicarbonate* / *NBCn1* / *amino acid* / we stayed up / practiced saying / *girl* / *girl* / *girl* / *girl* / til our mouths grew soft / yes / i can speak / your language / i broke in / that horse / myself //

// please state your name for the record

bone-wife / spit-dribbler / understudy for the underdog / uphill rumor / fine-toothed cunt / sorry / my mouth's not pottytrained / surly spice / self-sabotage spice / surrogate rug burn / burgeoning hamburglar / rust puddle / harbinger of confusion / harbinger of the singularity / alien invasion / alien turned pottymouth / alien turned bricolage beast / alien turned pig heart thumping on the plate //

// where did you come from

man comes / & puts his hands on artifacts / in order to contemplate lineage / you start with what you know / hands, hair, bones, sweat / then move toward what you know / you are not / animal, monster, alien, bitch / but some of us are born in orbit / so learn / to commune with miles of darkness / patterns of dead gods / & quiet / o quiet like / you wouldn't believe //

(Figure 24 excerpted from "TURING TEST")

All of these questions relate to practices of othering, a process by which the public identifies

actual or perceived identity markers as synonymous with immigrant or outsider. "TURING

TEST_Empathetic Response" centers emotional complexity, ending with the question, "do you

believe you have consciousness;" to which the speaker responds, "sometimes / when the

sidewalk / opens my knee / i think please / please let me / remember this" (15). These lines

complicate the reader's understanding of cyborgs by linking emotional capacity to

consciousness, though the computer implies that a correlation is not absolute. The speaker

directly relates pain to consciousness, associating the physical destruction of the body and the

introduction of blood with cognition. "TURING TEST_Boundaries" confronts the

hypersexualization of the Other as the questions fixate on pleasure and consent. The question

"does this feel good" is left unanswered, while the response to "can i keep going" apologizes for

the delay (29-30). Unlike the first two poems, wherein the responses appear to be from a human

speaker, the detachment implicit in the close of "TURING TEST_Boundaries" suggests a speaker unconcerned with being physically touched, a traditional ideation of the cyborg as sex slave. These lines help contextualize a section of the book in which Choi grapples with the inevitability of sexual trauma and the desire to numb oneself to it as a means of survival.

For educators, Choi's use of technological language structures in the Turing test poems sets up discussion about how individuals are effectively programmed in their respective lives. The terms "programming" and/or "program" are commonly used in reference to everything from student schedules and degree tracks to campus events and even the perceived impact of social media algorithms on people's psyches. However, my students show a lack of familiarity with how rhetoric is used to dehumanize or other specific populations, as well as how dehumanization is used in tandem with objectification to relinquish arbiters of colonialism from guilt around the traumas their actions induce. Choi, in *Soft Science*, uses the language of technology to demonstrate how language can be, and often is, used to dehumanize East Asians as a means of justification for acts of oppression. If Choi had chosen, instead, to frame her poems as direct questions and answers, the poems would not successfully critique the colonial perception of East Asian women as submissive, unthinking, and sexually available. The structure is essential to students' understanding of how seemingly innocuous questions like "where did you come from?" are rooted in a history of dehumanization and othering.

The use of nontraditional forms, such as the computer code in Choi's collection, is becoming more common among twenty-first-century poets. Readers are more and more likely to see poems structured as film scripts, word searches, matrices, and crosswords, especially if they are experiencing poems outside traditional literary journals. Fatimah Asghar, perhaps more than any other early twenty-first century author, experiments with nontraditional form in their debut

collection, *If They Come for Us*, where they routinely co-opt nontraditional forms to offer counternarratives that address the immigrant experience and non-traditional family dynamics. "How We Left: Film Treatment," tracks the speaker's departure from the Pakistan-India region, British partition, and being orphaned, through the use of a traditional film treatment. Each section carries a title that indicates its place within the film, opening with

> [Establishing Shot]
>
> Here's the image Autie P gave me: the street a pool
>
> of spilled light & all the neighborhood children
>
> at my grandfather's knee. Kids: turbaned or taqiyahed
>
> or tilakaad or not. How Jammu smelled of Jasmine. (lines 1-5)

As the "film" progresses, readers experience major events in the narrative by way of five-line stanzas. Asghar critiques the question of a target audience by following the section header "[Target Audience]" with the rebuke, "Everyone wants Kashmir but no one wants Kashmiris," before lamenting, "I think I believe in freedom I just don't know where it is. / I think I believe in home, I just don't know where to look" (lines 61-65).

An Emmy-nominated writer[1], the form is not unfamiliar to Asghar, but it is unfamiliar to many readers of poetry. The form allows Asghar space to write about deeply traumatic moments in small, contained spaces. Like Diaz and Choi, Asghar embraces a fragmented form to present a narrative that is, itself, incomplete. Against the backdrop of discussions around systemic racism and representation in Hollywood, co-opting the film treatment also grounds the speaker's experience as a counternarrative, challenging traditional treatments of the immigrant in film. Unlike the reality of Partition and its impact on Asghar, an orphan living in diaspora, the "film"

---

[1] Fatimah Asghar and Jamila Woods received an Emmy nomination for their series, *Brown Girls*, in the Outstanding Short Form Comedy or Drama Series category

closes with an image of the speaker teaching a man's "children's children's children until / the streetlights came on, until [their] neighborhood crowded night" (lines 96-100); this is an intentional act of resistance that returns the speaker and others living in diaspora to a space of community and collective healing.

"Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan" combines Asghar's earlier connection to film with the blueprint for a home (Figure 25). The image presented on the page is remarkably complex; the underlying script is faded and repeats on loop as a background: "Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called." In contrast, the rooms of the home are outlined in bold black lines. Inside each room is a stanza of the poem. Here, the structure mirrors the home, while the content addresses the conflict between what occurs and what is presented to the outside world. Again, Asghar forces the reader to grapple with trauma and acknowledge the complexities of reporting abuse to child services by destabilizing their sense of normalcy. Students may be primed to enter a traditional poem and discover hidden abuse, but few will have associated the blueprint with abuse, thus the structure pushes them to confront their perception of the word home and the ways in which a home does not always mirror their respective experiences.

Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan

Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why

Bedroom One
All orphans are raised by wolves. I
called them sisters. We traveled as a
pack: three to a bed, licking each
other's fur. No one could hurt us.

Bedroom Two
I was young. I didn't know better.
I was young. I lied it all away.
I was young. The police were big.
I was young. No one believe us.
I was young. I was afraid.
I was young. I made a mistake.

Living Room
Was I wrong then,
for what I did?

Was it betrayal
or survival?

Kitchen
Is this how you bend someone's mind
to break? *Nothing happened.*
We were wolves. They said we could
survive anything.

Hallway
Forgive me Allah.
I have always been
wild. Still, I lie. My
mistakes hang
like a crescent bright
in the sky.

Bathroom

What's the difference?

Forgive me Allah. But I cant
stop repeating. Nothing
happened. Repeat after me:

(Figure 25)

In my classes, I urge students to consider the implications of the text included in each "room"

and how it aligns with the level of privacy they associate with that space. The living room, for

example, is a space that most students identify as a public space wherein few secrets are shared.

Asghar has included three questions in this space, but no answers, implying that this is not a

space where the speaker can be honest or forthcoming. "Bedroom Two" is presented as a space

where the speaker rehearses answers for the child services representative, while "Hallway" offers

the most vulnerable insight into the speaker as they beg forgiveness for lying about the abuse

they experience in the home. Students note that while bedrooms should be spaces associated with

privacy, this privacy is often used by abusers to contain secrets rather than afford children a

place of security. The hallway, in contrast, is the most clearly liminal space and Asghar has used it to illustrate the liminality of the speaker's faith, emphasizing how the repetition of the script wears at the speaker's devotion and trust that Allah will forgive them. The bathroom, perhaps the most secure space in the house, is also the only space in which the speaker is silent, suggesting that they turn to this space to shut out or quiet the guilt associated with lying about their abuse.

Throughout the collection, Asghar titles numerous poems "Partition," effectively creating a narrative that spans the book as a whole. One such poem is written as a mad lib, inviting readers to fully engage with the poem by filling in the blanks (Figure 26). Asghar crafts the poem with nuance and intention, creating a piece that will inevitably read like nationalist propaganda regardless of the choices readers make in completing the mad lib. By co-opting this particular form, the poet requires the reader to become participatory in said propaganda, thereby shifting perspective and inviting readers to consider the ways in which they are complicit in the propaganda around them. For students and educators alike, the mad lib is a familiar form. A brief Google search for "mad lib lesson plan" produces more than one million results, with most links directing to various lesson plans in which educators have students use the mad lib to practice parts of speech or as a generative exercise in creative writing. These lesson plans span every grade level from grade three to higher education, an indication of how successful mad libs are at engaging students in the classroom. Introducing Asghar's mad lib to students trades on a familiar pedagogical technique, while also challenging perceptions of poetry as inaccessible or fixed.

Partition

AUGUST 15TH, 1947

At the stroke of midnight, _____ achieved freedom, resulting in a
                               country

_____ celebration. Both _____ and _____ fought for many
adjective   *country*   *country*

months to come to this agreement and now that the _____ are gone
                                                    proper noun

the _____ people celebrate their victory. "We end today a period of
     proper noun

all _____ and _____ discovers herself anew," said _____, in a
     noun   *country*   *proper noun*

public speech, to great cheers of _____ With _____'s promises of
                                   slogan   *country*

the security of the _____ region and its borders, _____'s citizens
                     proper noun   *country*

_____ to put the unfortunate events of the last few months behind
verb

them, and _____ with their new neighbors. Though millions
            verb

_____, leaders assure _____ and future prosperity alongside
past tense verb   *noun*

cooperation with the military. _____ people are advised to shed fear,
                                proper noun

and _____ the new _____ _____ vowed that members of all
     verb   *country* *proper noun*

_____ are welcome in _____, but asked _____ to honor the
religion   *country*   *religion*

_____'s flag. However, if you are planning to leave for _____,
country   *country*

please do not forget to surrender your _____ and ration cards
                                        plural noun

(_____ and _____) at the _____ railway station. We wish you
 noun   *noun*   *proper noun*

peace and _____ _____!
            noun   *slogan*

(Figure 26)

Students are empowered to rewrite the narrative, yet Asghar's careful attention to which words

the reader adds renders all participants complicit in Partition. The poem functions as an act of

resistance not because it creates a counternarrative that challenges the hegemonic narrative, but

because it situates all those who engage as active participants, thereby urging them to consider

the many ways in which their daily actions may tacitly perpetuate oppressive systems.

Asghar uses another nontraditional structure in "Microaggression Bingo," which is predictably arranged as a Bingo card (Figure 27). Asghar uses the form to highlight the frequency with which specific microaggressions occur in one's daily life.

Microaggression Bingo

White girl wearing a bindi at music festival	Friend defends drone strikes to play "devil's advocate"	Teacher still calls you "Fat-ma" on the last day of class	"But you are lucky you have something exotic to write about!"	Everyone turns to you as an expert on yoga even though you can't touch your toes
Strangers calls you a sexy samosa at the bus stop & still expects you to give them your number	"I went to India once, to find myself."	Casting call to audition for Terrorist #7	All the actors in a movie about Egypt are white	"Oh, But you don't really seem Muslim."
"You're from Kashmir? I have a <rug/ sweater/ scarf> from there!"	Someone misspells both your first and last name in an email	**Don't Leave Your House For a Day-Safe**	"Oh but I read a book by Jhumpa Lahiri once so I know all South Asians <insert stereotype>."	"I'm working on a story about Muslims but I'm not Muslim. Could you read it and tell me what you think? I'll take you out to coffee!"
Casting call to audition for Battered Hijabi Women #42	Editor recommends you add more white people to your story to be more relatable	"But America is so much safer for women."	"So what's Muslim food taste like?"	Get called a FOB and told you smell like curry
"You're from the same place that M.I.A is from, right?"	"I love hanging out with your family, it feels always feels so *authentic!*"	"Oh did your parents make you wear a Hijab?"	The villains are wearing headscarves in yet another fantasy series	In the 5ᵗʰ week of class on Bollywood a student still refers to South Asia as the Middle East

(Figure 27)

The bingo card form serves to engage the reader in a conversation about how deeply traumatizing daily life can be for certain identities. The pedagogical application can be as simple

as having students complete the bingo card for themselves. In my experience, students of color, and especially those living in diaspora, cover many more squares than their White peers, inviting a discussion about how daily interactions impact different identities, opening students to a more thorough understanding of microaggressions and emphasizing the role of rhetoric in perpetuating systems of oppression.

Asghar's "Map Home" utilizes the crossword format, with clues serving as stanzas (Figure 28). The reader is left to pry at the clues, all of which are personal and abstract, to complete the puzzle.
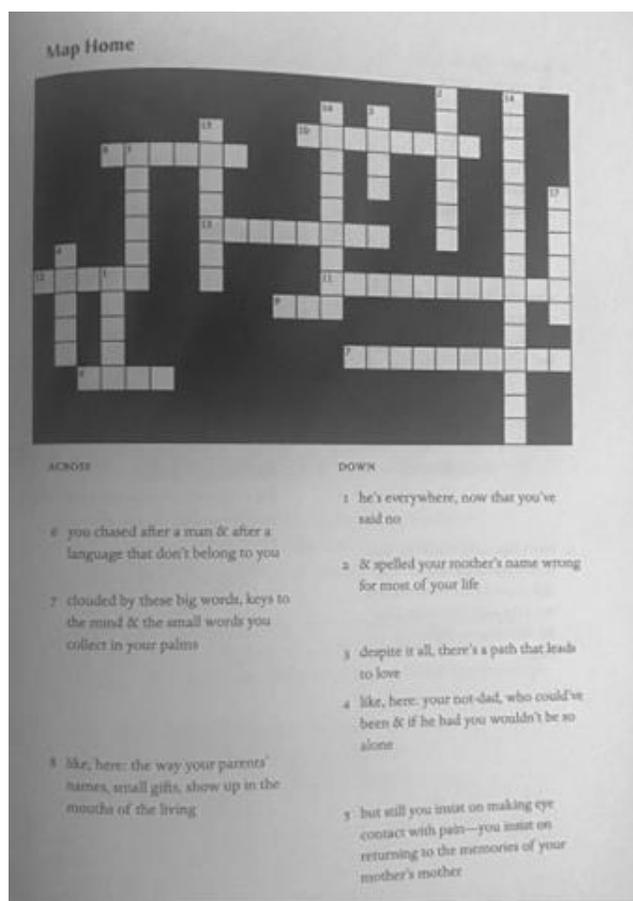
(Figure 28)

Like the speaker in the poem itself, students initially come away confused and without answers. In approaching the poem as a traditional crossword, there is an implication that each stanza

offers an answer. The clue for 1 Down, "he's everywhere, now that you've / said no," even sets students up to wonder if the answer might be Allah. However, reorienting the way they enter the poem can provide substantially more clarity, as "Across" and "Down" seem to function as a pair of poems in which the speaker grapples with not knowing their parents and how to keep their respective memories alive despite few personal memories of them. By framing the poem as a crossword, Asghar encourages readers to engage and become active participants; ironically, the lack of coherent clues mirrors the frustration articulated by the speaker, which helps to communicate both the gaps in the speaker's memory and the eventual realization that their parents are not a puzzle to be solved, that the gaps indicated by empty squares in the crossword do not have to be filled in order for the speaker to experience joy or self-actualization. Here, as elsewhere through their collection, Asghar is deliberately investigating form and the function that specific forms play in daily life. They disrupt the reader by juxtaposing traditional verse with word structures that, like the speaker in so many of the poems, feel at once familiar and remarkably out-of-place.

Asghar is clearly committed to interrogating what constitutes a poem and how nontraditional structures can function as poetic devices. One such structure is the glossary, which is presented as a table. Unlike many of the structures with which Asghar experiments, the glossary is a form that also appears in Franny Choi's *Soft Science* and in Safia Elhillo's *The January Children*. All three authors center the role of language in self-actualization across their respective collections. Additionally, the authors interact professionally and personally, and all three explore liminal identities with a focus on the ways in which rhetoric works to destabilize one's sense of self. Elhillo and Asghar self-identify as queer Muslim authors, with Elhillo self-identifying as a cisgender woman and Asghar self-identifying as nonbinary; Choi self-identifies

as a queer woman of color. These identities overlap in their treatment of the glossary as poetic

form, which each author turns to in order to communicate some of the more pervasive

microaggressions and misunderstandings that they experience in their respective lives.

Asghar utilizes the glossary in "From" to address the question, "Where are you from?"

and the sentiments that often accompany the question (Figure 29). The top row of the table acts

as a header which sorts the poem into three categories: "What They Say," "How They Say It,"

and "What They Actually Mean." As students move down the left-hand column, they note that

each row introduces a new language in this order: English, Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi. Though the

language changes, the question remains the same, implying that the "they" of the poem

references interlocutors from different cultural and linguistic traditions. As students move into

the second column of the table, there is an immediate and noticeable departure from the

repetition of the first column. The second column, in addressing "How They Say It," presents

English-speakers as passive speakers who work around a direct question, searching for "a short

cut to the end, / could be a period. a lovesong" before implicating English-speakers as complicit

arbiters of drone warfare. This contrasts heavily with the remainder of the column, where Asghar

has provided simple transliterations of the initial question for Urdu, Hindi, and Punjabi. While

this seems to suggest that the speaker in the poem feels a greater sense of belonging with those

who are not English-speaking, the final column complicates this assumption. Asghar, in

addressing "What They Actually Mean," demonstrates a total sense of unbelonging across all

four interlocutors. Their presentation of what English-speakers actually mean highlights the

implicit xenophobia inherent in asking people of color in America where they are from because

the assumption is, "you must not be from here. / so, where are you from?" The Urdu and Hindi

responses are ominous and alienating, with the Urdu speaker suggesting that "there is a wrong

answer" while the Hindi speaker argues that "there is a wrong accent." The most pained response

occurs

(Figure 29)

(Figure 30)

(Figure 31)

with the Punjabi speaker, who asks, "how did you forget? / how will you remember?" At the core of Asghar's tabular form is the implication that, while the speaker understands all four languages and is superficially aligned with all four cultures, each places conditions on the speaker's belonging. Asghar makes expert use of the glossary form to address incredibly complex and nuanced prejudices across the cultural identities she inhabits, utilizing the structure and traditional function of the poem to infuse the relatively sparse and direct language with meaning well beyond the words on the page.

Franny Choi, in "Glossary of Terms," also uses a traditional header, this time with the top row functioning as one grid and the left-most column functioning as a second grid (Figure 30). Along the top row, students encounter four simple words: "star," "ghost," "mouth," and "sea." The columnar grid describes the contents of each cell by row: "Meaning," "See also," "Antonym," "Origin," and "Dreams of being." With the exception of the final row, all other descriptors are commonplace in a glossary or word list, thus directing students' attention to the intentionality undergirding what the speaker believes each noun wishes to be. The added layer of ontological fantasy works to anthropomorphize each object insofar as many readers likely associate dreaming, in this context, with a consciousness only present in humans. Despite the straight-forward structure of the glossary, Choi takes considerable poetic license throughout the entries. The meaning of ghost, for example, is presented as "the outline of silence," while the antonym for "mouth" is, perplexingly, "mouth." Each cell offers an opportunity for critical reading, as students try to make meaning of each phrase in the context of Choi's arrangement. What is meant by the implication that the opposite of a mouth is also a mouth? The answer may lie in the "meaning" of mouth that Choi provides: "an entryway or an exit." If a mouth can function as both entry and exit, then perhaps the implication of a mouth being its own antonym

lies in how it functions. Choi's line of thinking extends to the provided origin for mouth, which invites the question, "what came first, the sword or the wound?" Students should connect both "entry" and "exit" with "the wound," and the sword with a penetrating force. Finally, in reading what the mouth "dreams of being," students again reorient their understanding of "mouth" in context, moving from an entry or exit wound to the mouth of a river, which longs to be "the sea."

Curiously, Choi has included "sea" as one of the nouns in the glossary. Unlike both "star" and "ghost," readers gain further insight into the psyche of "mouth" because they have access to the speaker's understanding of "sea." The speaker asserts that the meaning of "sea" is "cold ancestor; bloodless womb," phrases that could be read as negative or lifeless, except that the glossary directs students to "see also" the phrases "heart-song; swarm-song; salt-song; swallower of songs." My students read allusions to song as positive unless a poem explicitly identifies the song as mournful, such as a lamentation or dirge; thus, Choi's juxtaposition of the apparently "cold" and "bloodless" sea with song implies that they are to read the sea as a positive space. Reading the sea as a positive space is reinforced by its antonym, "machine," which reflects the long tradition of treating nature and technology as opposites in conflict. Within the larger context of *Soft Science*, which aligns technology with lifelessness and machines (cyborgs) with the dehumanization of East Asian women, students would be right to assume that the opposite of a machine is positive. Reading the opposite of a machine as positive is supported by the final entry in the "sea" column, where the speaker suggests that the sea "does not dream; is only dreamed of." Of the four nouns, the sea is the only one that does not long to be something else, and it is the only one without an origin. Given that the glossary presents the sea as "ancestor" and "womb," as well as without origin, students might infer that the sea is a sort of divinity that

exists outside time, that divine nature lending itself to a particular contentment with its sense of being that the other nouns, which have been created, innately lack.

Safia Elhillo, in "glossary," forgoes the use of a header, as well as an exterior boundary for her table (Figure 31). As a result, this glossary appears to resist containment and is, instead, presented as part of a large whole to which the reader is not privy. Like Asghar and Choi, though, Elhillo follows a regular pattern from column to column: the first column presents phrases in Sudanese Arabic; the second column offers a transliteration of the Sudanese Arabic phrase; the third column features a direct translation; and the fourth column provides an interpretative translation. Though Elhillo's glossary appears less politically fraught than Asghar's, both glossaries demonstrate how language takes on meaning, from what is spoken to what is heard and ultimately to what is meant. Students could read Elhillo's glossary superficially in that the poem functions precisely the way a glossary is meant to function; however, a critical reading invites increasingly complex layers of understanding.

During the first reading, I encourage students to make sense of how language is used literally versus how it functions symbolically, an approach that requires them to read each row from left to right. On their second read, however, I push students to read column by column; most do not know Arabic, rendering the first two columns less clear, but this reading highlights common words and phrases in the third column. Only by reading down the third column do most students realize the repetition of water, as well as the juxtaposition of "a green man" and "a blue man." Finally, students read comparatively, focusing their attention on the nuances of repeated words or phrases. "A green man" is considered "handsome," for example, while "a blue man" means "dark-skinned," a comparison that critiques the apparent colorism implicit in the language

and, by extension, Sudanese culture. Likewise, there are numerous descriptions of water, each connected to a specific color.

Since students have already internalized "blue" as "dark," they read "blue water" as "dark water," but Elhillo turns that expectation on its head by describing "blue water" as "drinking water." Generally, drinking water is associated with a lack of color, the clarity of water suggesting its purity or suitability for drinking, an assumption reinforced by Elhillo's description of "black water" as "blood in the whites of the eyes." Some of the phrases also ground ancestral connections to land in language, as students learn that "the year the nile was dug" speaks to how "old" something is, while "your father's street" is used to describe "an heirloom." For Elhillo, a Sudanese poet living in diaspora, these allusions to land and its connection to both familial and ancestral lineage help to highlight how the diasporic experience might make one feel isolated or disconnected from their history.

Like the mad lib, poems that make use of the glossary structure encourage student engagement by design. Beyond the analysis of the exemplar poems, or perhaps before an attempt at analysis, students can engage with the structures on their own terms. Educators might present a table like Asghar's with only the header filled in, then instruct students to think of a simple phrase they hear often in different contexts or from different peer groups. Next, students could go down the first column, presenting the phrase as different groups frame it; finally, they complete the remainder of the table by considering how each group communicates the phrase and what they actually mean by it. The writing exercise might set students up for discussions about code-switching or the fluidity of language and how context alters perceptions of language. Similarly, educators might present Choi's table with only a set of nouns and the descriptors for each row complete, then ask students to take creative license with each noun as they work to

complete the table. By sharing out or comparing responses with peers, students will confront the myriad interpretations of a seemingly concrete noun, an exercise that indubitably reinforces critical and interpretive reading strategies. Elhillo's approach to the glossary could function as a framework for exercises in which students unpack text lingo or phrases used in a cultural context that might be misunderstood by those outside the culture, working to communicate the sonic qualities of each phrase before providing the literal language and the meaning in context. My students participate in a form of this exercise quite often, as it arises organically when they offer an analysis of assigned literature that contains phrases with which I am unfamiliar, such as their description of Lydia Bennet as a "pick me girl." All of these exercises push students to explore language beyond the literal, an essential skill that translates into a more developed critical literacy.

Throughout my years in the classroom, I have identified food and brief discussions about food as a comfortable and unifying space for students. They are eager and willing to share their tastes, make recommendations, and engage in lively debate around food. With this in mind, I turn to Roy G. Guzmán's "Self-Portrait According to George W. Bush," from the collection *Catrachos*. Guzmán turns to the language of consumption in one section of the poem, with each stanza framed as a long-form descriptor for popular menu items at a Chinese restaurant, while Courtney Faye Taylor incorporates numerous fictional Yelp reviews throughout *Concentrate* to foreground the continued tension between Black and Asian communities in Los Angeles. Though not all the reviews Taylor includes address food specifically, like Guzmán's menu they trade on the consumer-provider relationship to highlight how consumption, both materially and literally, can act as a metaphor for identity politics. Where Guzmán moves between English and Spanish to interrogate their sense of self, Taylor frames these fictional Yelp reviews as found

poems, using the series as a whole to communicate the pervasiveness of racial bias and prejudice in the community. Taught in tandem, these two approaches highlight how consumer societies problematize identity for those outside White hegemonic society.

"Self-Portrait According to George W. Bush" is a sweeping poem spanning eleven pages that takes on several different forms from section to section. One section, "[Colores / Drones]" is formatted as a menu, with each stanza beginning with a food item and its cost (Figure 32); the food items themselves are traditionally offered in Chinese restaurants across America, yet the descriptors are offered in English and Spanish. Guzmán, who is a first-generation immigrant from Honduras, immediately complicates the authenticity of the food by presenting so-called Chinese dishes in two European colonial languages, exemplifying how colonialism co-opts and repurposes historically marginalized cultures for Western consumption.

BBQ Spare Ribs (5) costillas barbeque
(5)..7.25
Estás caught otra vez entre qué comer today and the rest of the
week because you've started seeing a gastroenterologist and he's
said we've got to be careful about your colon because it's inflamed.
Te recuerdas

Wonton Soup sopa de
mariposas.......................................2.00/3.00
of all the MSG you consumed in college, from that place with the
bubble tea que creo qu'is closed by now? They took away the Pizza
Hut, left un McDonald's. Some wounds nunca se abandonan tan
easy. El frío

Hot & Sour Soup sopa picante y
agria..4.00
of those Hyde Park streets nunca went away, as an extension of the
art project you ended up embodying, pero which you can't
comprehend because you're always living outside of it. Like a breeze
en una bandera

(Figure 32)

The first entry, "BBQ Spare Ribs (5) costillas barbeque," is followed by a bilingual stanza which stresses liminality through its use of English and Spanish, as well as the opening phrase, which warns that the speaker is "caught otra vez entre qué comer today and the rest of the week" because of their gastrointestinal issues. Structuring this commentary in the form of a menu and grounding in the literal consumption of spare ribs sets students up to question what, beyond the literal, the speaker also cannot stomach. The added use of two languages also reflects a core element of the discomfort Sarah Dowling describes in her theory of translingual poetics described in the first chapter. Whereas Asghar and Elhillo, in their respective glossaries, give meaning to non-English languages through the act of literal and/or interpretive translation, Guzmán rejects readerly expectations by moving between English and Spanish fluidly, refusing to translate or clarify non-English phrases as a resistance to settler monolingualism.

Each menu entry follows the same structure, with bilingual descriptors that interrogate the speaker's sense of self and sense of unbelonging with increasingly personal reflections. Beneath "Chicken Lo Mein," the speaker laments "y te entra una tristeza to know that what connects you to your community is suspicion, regret," after driving past Honduran restaurants, while the descriptor below "Chicken w. Broccoli" has the speaker wondering, "where would we be if we'd been given the same opportunities you've had." These two entries, placed one after the other, further emphasize the frequency with which the speaker hears language that implies a disconnect between themselves and their community, a theme stressed by the inherent conflict between the "I" and "you" of the entries, where the "I" feels slighted and projects that frustration onto the "you," who has been afforded better chances at success. The section culminates in a pair of entries that describe a similar conflict between the speaker and their mother: "Tu madre begs you to stop spending your money en chucherías, en going out con la otra gente de dinero…But

what she doesn't know is that loneliness is a symptom one becomes so adept at concretizing in a foreign land."

The speaker's final admission, contained under "Soda refrescos," is a deft use of the menu structure. Students may be inclined to treat many of the menu items as arbitrary or unrelated to the descriptors beneath them, but "Soda refrescos" challenges such a reading. Colloquially, the words "soda" and "refrescos" can refer to carbonated beverages, liquids which are quite literally infused with a gas that disrupts and volatizes their composition, yet "refrescos" translates most literally to "refreshments," a word that is linguistically at odds with the physical composition of "soda" and even more at odds with the expression of loneliness in the long-form descriptor. Educators, while illustrating critical reading, might also point to the first entry, "BBQ Spare Ribs (5) costillas barbeque," which communicated that the speaker has gastrointestinal problems, otherwise known as acid reflux. Thus, the infusion of gas, a requisite part of "soda," would make the product difficult to consume, thereby implying that the loneliness to which the speaker alludes is also difficult to stomach. Given both the content of this section and the title of the poem as a whole, Guzmán may be using the language of consumption to express how assimilation, or the swallowing of one's home culture, causes physical and emotional discomfort for the speaker.

Courtney Faye Taylor, in contrast, considers the language of consumption in terms of a consumer-provider relationship, specifically as expressed by consumers who have reviewed neighborhood markets in the community where Latasha Harlins, a fifteen-year-old Black girl, was murdered by a Korean woman after Harlins and her friends entered the woman's market. These entries operate as found poems in that Taylor presents them without commentary or alteration, relying on the structure of the review as a form with which readers are familiar to

provide layers of context and understanding. These reviews open all but the first section of the book, and all are one-star reviews. Given the pervasiveness of consumer reviews, the form itself sets students at ease in a way that traditional poems rarely do, as they do not carry into the poem an inherent lack of confidence in their ability to analyze the text. In my experience, entering poems with a measure of comfort and confidence is integral to putting critical reading into praxis, and Taylor's use of Yelp reviews further opens students' eyes to the fact that they are well-versed in making inferences or reading between the lines, even if their most frequent exposure occurs outside literature with a capital L.

The first review that Taylor includes features a reviewer who is Black and believes that they have been mistreated by a shop owner. According to the reviewer, visiting the market was the "worst experiment of [their] life." The reviewer describes the location of the market as "at the cross walk of Phoenix and 5th where lots of blacks live," a phrase that could either situate the Black reviewer as separate from "lots of blacks" that live in the neighborhood or signal that the shop owner should be more accommodating to Black customers given the demographics of the neighborhood. As the review continues, the reviewer explains that they "go nowhere lookin broke" because they are familiar with being profiled as a criminal or thief before describing the shop owner as "this female" and "heifer," ultimately proclaiming that "once the hood gets wind of [the shop owner's] lil attitude" the store will close for good. Again, Taylor offers no commentary or alteration in the review, yet my students quickly infer that the reviewer is likely male given the derogatory references to the stop owner, after which they question the validity of the review on the basis that it exemplifies misogynoir and the reviewer clearly has internalized bias. Unlike a more traditional poetic structure, the Yelp review is a form that students are familiar with reading through a critical lens, thus Taylor's use of the form at the beginning of

various book sections primes readers to approach subsequent poems with the same process of

critical reading. She effectively coaxes readers into participating in linguistic analysis by meeting

them first on their terms, destabilizing any resistance or reticence they may have about

interpreting poetry by illustrating their natural ability to draw conclusions and make inferences.

In the case of this particular Yelp review, Taylor uses it to set up the rest of the section, wherein

readers confront misogynoir in the form of medical racism and the racial profiling of Black

women.

The following section, titled "The phenomenon of withholding," opens with another Yelp

review, this time written by a self-identified Asian reviewer who attempted to use the restroom at

"this braiding salon" (Figure 33).

★ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Racist.

We ate at a bfast food truck parked across the way. I had
too much juice and of course there were no restrooms,
so I walked across the street to this braiding salon, hoping
to use theirs. When I got inside, they told me there were
no restrooms to use. "None. At. All."

Mind you, my two friends had gone to this exact same
salon just 15 minutes prior and were allowed to use the
restrooms: no eye rolling, no teeth sucking, no questions.

So I asked these ladies why my friends had been allowed
to use their restroom but I wasn't. They just shrugged and
scrunched their eyebrows up at me like they had no clue
what I was saying.

I'm Asian. My two friends are white.

It should be considered.

| Useful | Funny | Cool |

(Figure 33)

The first word of the review is "Racist;" this word is presented as a stand-alone line, a singular judgment that is then followed by an explanation of what, according to the reviewer, makes the establishment racist. The reviewer explains that, when they entered the salon and asked to use the restroom, they were refused and told that the salon did not have a restroom; this frustrates the reviewer because their "two friends had gone to this exact same salon just 15 minutes prior and were allowed to use the restrooms: no eye-rolling, no teeth sucking, no questions." As the review comes to a close, the review points out, "I'm Asian. My two friends are white. / It should be considered." Again, students can quickly identify the internalized bias at play in this interaction, both the anti-Blackness exhibited by the speaker and the anti-Asian bias attributed to the women in the salon. As with the previous section, Taylor establishes the core theme that connects the poems throughout the section, culminating in a quatrain that explicitly critiques how White culture sows division between minority communities deliberately and systemically:

> We could avoid each other.   We could avoid events
>
> that breed a white supremacy between us. But whiteness
>
> is intrinsic to all transactions in this country. Avoiding
>
> white power means passing away.

Taylor uses the Yelp review to concretize an abstract and potentially controversial idea, the intentional division of minority communities to preserve White supremacy, offering students a clear and definitive example that acts as proof of the critique she lays out across the remainder of the section. By the time students reach the last page, they are more informed and less defensive about their own internalized bias, making them more receptive to Taylor's ultimate rebuke of self-segregation and her call for a unified resistance to White supremacy. Without the comfort and familiarity afforded by co-opting Yelp reviews, students are far less likely to process the

layers of internalized bias and social commentary across the section, making Taylor's use of nontraditional form integral to their understanding of much larger sociopolitical critiques.

Numerous movements that speak to the need for reinventing the canon and increasing representation in the texts teachers assign have cropped up on social media over the past few years. Among the most notable and widely discussed are two organizations, Disrupt Texts and Teach Living Poets. While the former is specifically geared toward upending the American literary canon, the latter primarily seeks to imbue syllabi with contemporaneous poetry of any sort. The founders of Disrupt Texts state that the movement is a "grass roots effort by teachers for teachers to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve." The founder of Teach Living Poets communicates similar sentiments in their seven core values, including a desire to "complicate the canon" and "provide students with poetry that reflects their identities." Both of these movements represent a widespread desire to decolonize the canon, and both have identified educators as those most able to quickly and thoroughly subvert the white supremacy perpetuated in the American literary canon. The founders of both movements also recognize that the publishing industry, and the textbook industry especially, is too entrenched in the traditional canon to effect any significant change in the short term. Thus, educators can and should supplement required texts with options that expressly work against the themes and structures of the so-called "classics."

Further, most educators who teach literature will likely note a collective sigh of discontent when students hear that they will be analyzing poetry. Poetry, more than any other genre in my experience, simultaneously terrifies and anesthetizes students specifically because so many students have been convinced, through bad teaching and a poor selection of "classic"

poems, that they are incapable of understanding poetry. Introducing poetry becomes a fool's errand, so to speak, when students encounter again and again the poems of Shakespeare, Donne, Eliot, and even Frost. Though the parameters for formal poetry in the canon are static and rigid, they are about as accessible as the rules for proofs in mathematics or the Newtonian laws are for students. The inaccessibility of received forms is because, like mathematical and scientific concepts, the forms in question were theorized and perfected generations ago.

Contemporary pedagogical theory may have its fair share of contentious debate, but most educators have internalized "rigor and relevance" as buzzwords that have permanently entered the conversation. Educators are increasingly tasked with teaching state-mandated standards through rigorous coursework that actively engages students with real-world, applicable examples. It may feel impossible to engage students in a deep analysis of a sonnet or villanelle, but introducing nontraditional poetic forms crafted by contemporary poets serves as an opportunity to do so. Many poets actively and successfully co-opting text structures and/or writing in slight variations of traditional forms are early twenty-first century poets, making their work more relevant to early twenty-first century students; such poets are also frequently not cisgender heterosexual white males, which disrupts canonized texts and offers students an opportunity to experience perspectives outside the White hegemony perpetuated by the American literary canon. Finally, pairing nontraditional forms with formal classics and asking students to consider the differences between them requires higher level thinking, thus increasing rigor in the classroom. Students are also more likely to engage with texts that they do not recognize as poetry, and may even be more willing to attempt crafting poems that emulate nontraditional forms than they are to attempt a traditional sonnet.

There is a clear and immediate need to reconsider definitions of poetry, to engage critically with the text structures and deviations of form in twenty-first-century American poetry, not just to better understand these deviations but to address the underlying presumption that the White hegemonic aesthetic is superior to other approaches to the genre. For too long, poetry has been governed by parameters established and upheld by critics and editors who prioritize one experience over all others. Publishing is undergoing tremendous change, yet poetry remains relegated almost entirely to small presses. Critics devalue, if not outright ignore, many collections published by independent presses, and editors at larger publishing houses view poetry as a poor financial investment. While this gatekeeping does affect the exposure that new collections receive, it also empowers authors to experiment with form more readily than they might with mainstream publishers. All the titles cited in this chapter, for instance, appear from presses or imprints that explicitly state a desire to disrupt traditional publishing and diversify American literature in their respective mission statements. Additionally, the influx of online literary journals allows authors even more space to play with and challenge traditional conceptions of poetry which, in turn, inspires more poets to experiment. American poetry has long been associated with innovation, beginning with Whitman's insistence on a distinctly American voice, and early twenty-first century readers are eager to consume collections that experiment, refuse to play it safe, or render the genre inert.

Chapter 5

Early Twenty-First Century Poets of Color and 'Unreadable' Poems as Sites of Resistance

Experimental poetry has been a part of Western literature since antiquity—a legacy

rooted, most probably, in the fact that definitions for experimental poetry vary greatly across

literary eras and language traditions. More recently, critics like Jacquelyn Ardam, Jonathon P.

Eburne and Andrew Epstein have identified conceptual poetry as a deliberate and calculated

movement adjacent to experimentalism. However, disagreements persist regarding the

definitions and characteristics of both movements, as well as the extent to which either

movement ought to be prioritized in academic discourse. Attempts to categorize experimental

and conceptual poetry often produce overlaps which situate poems in both traditions, as well as a

third tradition most explicitly introduced during the twentieth century—avant-garde. Scholars

have worked to disambiguate experimentalism, conceptualism, and avant-garde with varying

degrees of success during the past decade.[1] The poems in this chapter share qualities aligned with

each of these movements, and each could be classified along the lines of experimental,

conceptual, or avant-garde poetry; however, each of these poems also shares a common element

that makes them particularly challenging for students, namely that they resist linear readings. By

this, I mean that each of the poems in this chapter experiments with form, textuality, and

movement to develop poems that have the potential for multiple trajectories, each of which

produces a different poem. For students, the idea that a poem can be read in different directions

can be immediately frustrating. The most appropriate term for the student response to these

poems and the characteristics they share is *unreadable*, by which I mean poems that do not offer

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[1] Jessica Lewis Luck provides a helpful delineation of the terms experimental and avant-garde in literary scholarship (*The Poetics of Cognition* pp. 12-14); Jonathan P. Eburne and Andrew Epstein likewise chronicle the evolving definition of conceptualism ("Introduction: Poetry Games" pp. 4-9)

a clear or concrete trajectory for the reading of the poem.

While I suggest that unreadable is a more functional term, it is important to understand how the traditions of experimental, conceptual, and avant-garde poetry contribute to the formation of these poems, as well as how discussions around the core definitions of each movement affect the classification of early twenty-first century poems that resist linear readings. There are common threads that arise across these discussions: experimental poetry is "uncreative" and "appropriative" in the sense that it draws almost entirely from existing work; experimental poetry is deliberately and inevitably apolitical because it eliminates or obscures the individual; conceptual poetry is a distinctly White movement; conceptual poetry does not require close reading, and indeed appears to defy close reading. Additionally, scholars have repeatedly suggested that conceptual poetry is dead or dying (Leong 109). Drawing on recent critical work, I argue that elements of experimentalism and conceptualism are alive and well in early twenty-first century poetry, and that poets of color routinely draw from experimental and/or conceptual movements as an act of resistance against the legacy of Whiteness and formalism in English-language poetry, as well as the many forms of systemic oppression that continue to marginalize non-White communities and their experiences. By creating unreadable poems, poets like Danez Smith, Rodolfo Avelar, and Hala Alyan push students to internalize that issues like gentrification, trans identity, and military occupation require that we consider them from multiple perspectives. The varying outcomes available to students reinforce the importance of approaching difficult and/or complex sociopolitical issues from different angles to best develop solutions and alter ways of thinking.

Before offering a close reading of unreadable poems and discussion of their applicability in the classroom, it is important for students to understand the evolution of the material poem

and the writing process as sites of play, or experimentation. A basic understanding of avant-garde, experimental, and conceptual poetry movements allows students to internalize how these works, despite their disruptions of visual and linear space, function as poems. Jonathan P. Eburne and Andrew Epstein, in the introduction to a special issue of *Comparative Literature* addressing "Poetry Games," provide an expansive and well-documented summary of what they term *ludopoesis*, poems that, through content or creation, display ludic qualities (4-9). Eburne and Epstein ground their discussion of ludopoesis and avant-garde poetry in a chronology of the generative techniques used to create the "uncreative," to appropriate existing texts and images as source material for new writing. They argue that the bridge between poetry and play "moves to the forefront during the twentieth century, as the use of word games, constraints, chance methods, generative processes, performative projects, collaborative writing, hoaxes, and other project-based or playful compositional practices become central tools for a wide range of avant-garde writers and artists" (1).

Eburne and Epstein further attribute the rise in ludopoesis and avant-garde poetry with the evolution of digital technology, suggesting that changes to the way individuals create and encounter texts necessitates an evolution not just in how poets convey their writing, but in how they create it (1-2); their use of the word "play" is not intended to suggest that ludopoesis is inherently frivolous; in contrast, the editors note that such writing often incorporates "profound ethical and political resonances" (3). Most notably, Eburne and Epstein identify conceptual poetry as an "[extension] of methods inaugurated by the historical avant-garde" for the digital age (9-10), arguing that poets turn to these techniques "because of their liberating potential, though not merely for the pleasures of aesthetic play but also for the purposes of cultural critique—as a method of resisting ideological forces, challenging conventional language use, and

questioning and exposing political and social structures, including the workings of globalization, racism, and neoliberal capitalism" (11).

Michael Leong, writing four years after Eburne and Epstein, argues that late conceptual poetry is further distancing itself from "the ludic strain of conceptualism's most early canonical texts" and is instead employing "extreme citation to engage with historically specific, and often wrong, deaths within the political public sphere" (110). Leong draws on Claudia Rankine's celebrated book, *Citizen*, as evidence that "conceptual techniques can effectively respond to racial trauma" (144). Unlike Eburne and Epstein, Leong addresses the institutionalization of experimentalism and conceptualism as a result of institutional critique, effectively arguing that contemporary scholarship problematizes one of the primary goals of conceptualism, namely to create outside institutional constraints. Leong also explicitly interrogates the legacy of Whiteness in conceptual poetry, arguing that "a fuller acknowledgement of black conceptual poetics would need to begin by differentiating it from the theoretical, formal, and historical frames" established by popular anthologies of conceptual poetry like *Against Expression* and *Notes on Conceptualisms* (116-117).

Leong's critique is essential to understanding how poets of color have recently engaged with experimental and conceptual writing, particularly in the wake of Rankine's success with *Citizen*. However, Leong, like Eburne and Epstein, confronts conceptualism purely as a movement of mimesis, an "uncreative" act of generative writing that draws almost entirely from existing texts. Though this assumption accurately applies to the vast majority of what critics term experimental or conceptual poetry, recent work from Danez Smith, Hala Alyan, and Roda Avelar, among others, demonstrates a growing trend of experimentation rooted in creative, that is new, writing. Additionally, neither Eburne and Epstein nor Leong offer accessible pathways to

incorporating experimental or conceptual poetry in the classroom. Given the apprehension that many educators express about teaching poetry in general, I suspect that many would be immensely reticent about teaching poems that seem, on the surface, deliberately inaccessible or unreadable to students. Nevertheless, the inclusion of unreadable poems in the classroom benefits students in a number of ways. Most importantly, these poems help students to move beyond the belief that poems have fixed or finite meaning, and that the purpose of reading is to make meaning of the poem. My students frequently express a desire to identify what a poem "means," grounding the reading experience in understanding; unreadable poems resist a flat or rigid concept of understanding and instead prioritize metacognition as the most important part of the reading experience. From a pedagogical standpoint, introducing poems that reinforce metacognitive processes offers an opportunity to deepen students' understanding of how they think and reinforce the importance of metacognition in developing informed, nuanced perspectives about complex issues.

Jacquelyn Ardam, a contributor to the special issue curated by Eburne and Epstein, provides a framework for meaningful engagement with avant-garde poetry in the classroom through close reading techniques specific to the genre. While Ardam's focus is the avant-garde, I argue that her framework is equally beneficial for educators incorporating unreadable poems in their respective classrooms. Ardam writes that "conceptual writing has more in common with its textual forbears than its practitioners would often like to admit," and that "studying form allows us not just to see conceptual procedure in action, but also the ways in which rules-based texts formally exceed their constraints and thus destabilize their conceptual frameworks" (133). She further notes that the vast majority of scholarship around conceptualism, including the authors mentioned above, has been quite successful at articulating the underlying ideas of conceptualism,

but has failed to adequately address how to *read* conceptual writing (135). According to Ardam, this gap is due, in part, to the fact that many conceptual writers themselves suggest that their writing is unreadable, or at least that people do not need to "read" their work in the traditional sense (135).

Even those who have discussed ways to engage conceptual writing tend toward what Ardam calls "thinkership," a technique that prioritizes "parsing, skimming, and aggregating" while ignoring the "form, diction, tropes, and themes" that are most readily associated with close reading (136). Though Ardam focuses her attention on the formal qualities of the alphabetic sequence, her argument is useful in understanding how to successfully incorporate experimental and conceptual poetry in the classroom. She suggests, for example, that alphabetic sequence "enables nonlinear reading" in the digital age because online databases and encyclopedias utilize search functions that circumvent the alphabetization of information (141). Educators can apply this same concept to poems that seemingly defy a linear reading process through the arrangement and shape of language. In other words, experimental and conceptual poems do not necessitate a linear reading, but that is not the same as saying that such poems do not necessitate a *close* reading. I would argue that some recent poems disturb the process of linear reading as a deliberate attempt to pull the reader deeper into the text, to render them collaborators in the act of creation and thus participants in the writing process. When those poems critique oppressive structures, readers then become active participants in the act of resistance.

According to Jessica Lewis Luck, engaging with experimental writing does not just disrupt the reading experience—it fundamentally alters the way readers think. Through an in-depth look at cognitive processes in relation to avant-garde poetic traditions, Luck argues that "Experimental poems can also function as a powerful scaffolding for extended cognition for both

writer and reader, materializing not so much the content as the activity of the embodied mind"
(7) and that "the strangeness of experimental poetry can disrupt the linguistic and perceptual
habits of the reader; working not as a mirror or a lamp but as a virus, subtly reshaping the
embodied mind from the inside out" (10). Throughout her book, Luck addresses key concepts
aligned with critical discussions of experimental poetry, ultimately challenging foundational
assumptions like intentionality, voice, and visualization. She argues against those who suggest
that intentionality is antithetical to analyses of experimental poetry, as well as the perception that
attention to the material effects of experimental poetry negate the possibility for writerly
intention or meaning-making (46-47).

Luck's argument is integral to applying close reading strategies to experimental and
conceptual avant-garde, as she upends the common presumption that authors resist meaning in
their application of experimental forms, thereby opening the door for discussions of how
experimentation generates meaning, not just materially but also linguistically. Luck also argues
against the theory that experimental poetics eliminates voice on the basis of procedural creation,
and that such assumptions routinely exclude innovative writers of color (50-51), a line of
thinking that is particularly important with regard to the recent use of experimentalism and
conceptualism as a site of resistance. Luck, more than any critic I have encountered, understands
the particular challenge of teaching experimental and conceptual poetry, ultimately concluding
that "the virus of experimental poetry paradoxically enables rather than disables, engaging and
empowering students (and teachers) to be finders, experimenters, asserters, and makers of
meaning" (165). Though her attention is not explicitly on the role of avant-garde techniques as a
site of resistance, her research is integral to pedagogical praxis—through Luck we can begin to
understand how recent poems operate, how they disrupt, how they infect readers with ideologies

at odds with oppressive structures and institutions.

Danez Smith, a Minneapolis native and the youngest ever winner of the Forward Prize for best collection, signaled themselves as a skilled practitioner of textuality and material poetics in *Homie*, a collection which repeatedly layers and arranges text in strange, unfamiliar configurations as they confront White supremacy, HIV infection, and anti-Blackness. In their more recent collection, *Bluff*, Smith amplifies their experimentation, visually, structurally, and linguistically mirroring their disillusionment with art as activism. This disillusionment is made plain in the opening poem, "anti poetica," which presents a litany of critiques to the function of poetry in times of crisis. The speaker laments, "there is no poem free from money's ruin" (line 7) and "no poem to admonish the state / no poem with a key to the locks / no poem to free you" (lines 17-19). Smith's "anti poetica" primes readers for a collection which is at odds with itself, poems which question their efficacy and their importance, but also for a series of poems which disrupts the reader visually and appropriates the material as a site of resistance. "On Knowledge," for example, spans nine pages, each containing stark, imposing black squares and limited text. Across the first six pages, the text is fully contained inside the field of black, though Smith arranges the text differently from page to page. On the seventh page, the text moves outside the black square entirely as the speaker proclaims, "i had to break out my mind / to get it back, i needed to / see the words in the light" (13).

These lines communicate the black squares as representative of the mind, identifying the white space of the page as "the light" and effectively suggesting that the visual barrier imposed by the borders of the black squares prevents light from entering the mind; this reading is reinforced on the eighth and ninth pages of the poem. On the eighth page, the text is contained in a second field of black that overlaps the square, contextualizing the visual movement outside the

mind through the text, which explains that the speaker had to move their mind "deeper into the dark / question of its use / & that's when the poems got dangerous" (14). The ninth page returns to a single black square, including just two lines of text: "i said the quiet part / aloud / i rehearsed my   action" (15). Smith contains all the text inside the black square, save the word "action." By moving this particular word outside the field of black, which readers have come to understand as the mind, Smith communicates that they are not satisfied with "action" as a theoretical or cognitive process, but instead require action "in the light," action that is visible and exposed.

A close reading of this poem solidifies Luck's argument about intentionality, as Smith demonstrates a clear and concerted intentionality through their experimentation with materiality and its juxtaposition with lyric. The arrangement of words is no less arbitrary than the text itself—here is a poem in which the author is attentive to how materiality can convey, visually, what the text seeks to convey lyrically. Additionally, Smith's use of the "i" seems to challenge assumptions that experimentation is devoid of voice. In contrast, Smith infuses the lyric "i" throughout the poem in a layered critique of the self and its place in artistic resistance. On all but one page of the poem, Smith uses the lowercase "i" reminiscent of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century attempts to decenter or delegitimize the self.

The sixth page, however, includes nearly two hundred instances of the uppercase "I." The letter wraps around the edges of the black square in an endless and dizzying loop, a visual critique of the last and most formidable barrier between the speaker's mind and the light, an indictment of the self and the ways in which prioritizing the "I" prevents us from meaningful action. "Rondo" takes Smith's experimentation with materiality and meaning even further as they critique city planners' decision to disrupt a Black community for the sake of efficiency. The

complexity of the poem lends itself to ample application in the classroom, which I will address momentarily. First, though, I offer a close reading of the poem as a demonstration of the approach proposed by Ardam, one which mirrors the way I might guide students when instructing them on how to make meaning of experimental writing.

The poem begins with two sections of text lifted from outside sources, one attributed to Earl Wilkins in *The St. Paul Echo* and the other attributed to the Gale Family Library. These two blurbs provide context for the construction of I-94, which the city built "right through the heart of the Rondo neighborhood" despite intense opposition from the residents of the Rondo community (35). According to the text sourced from the Gale Family Library, "the route split the Rondo neighborhood and forced the evacuation and relocation of hundreds of people and businesses. One in every eight African Americans in St. Paul lost a home to I-94. Many businesses never re-opened" (35). The poem continues for six pages, each of which makes use of material space to demonstrate the forced displacement of the Rondo community. The layout of the poem within the collection plays a central role in our understanding of the poem's materiality, as Smith extends a strip of black across the pages to represent the incursion of I-94 (Figures 34-39).

Smith's critique of I-94 begins with a fully-justified block of text juxtaposed with a smaller black rectangle; this rectangle extends onto the following page, signifying the construction of I-94 and its disruption to the community. Arranged on either side of the rectangular strip, the cohesive and coherent block of text has been exploded into a handful of words seemingly dispersed at random. Of the original text, which contains 125 words, only sixteen words remain, a visual critique of the effect that construction had on the thriving Black community. The narrative began with descriptions of "a south we build in dead Decembers" that

included "daughters with sugar on their dreams, sons who didn't flinch at the potential of trees" and "enough land to grow some collards & tomatoes" (36), yet the extension of the black strip through the page eliminates any coherent phrasing (Figures 34-35).

a south we built in dead Decembers, an Africa made of ice, a negro could work, daughters with sugar on theirs dreams, sons who didn't flinch at the potential of trees, dirt that couldn't grow the beans we liked, but a decent home & a good job, honkies that stared but didn't mob (as quick), winters we hated but could survive, just a few hundred miles south of what used to be freedom, we knew now so many years from chains & still so many in chains, that freedom wasn't something on this side of the boat, but at least a little more happiness, homes in our name, enough land to grow some collards & tomatoes, our Sunday daughters in white brighter than any snow.

36

we outgad daughters Africa
many just we
dreams
theirs survive enough
sons home our we freedom

37
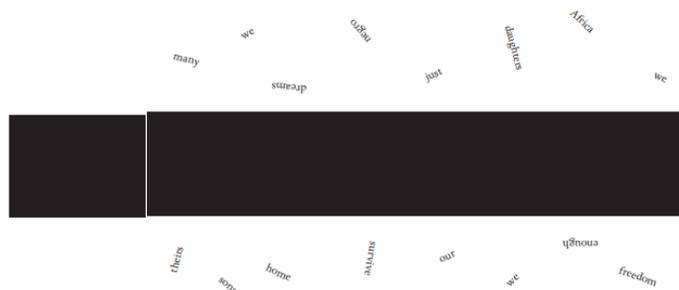
(Figure 34)   (Figure 35)

I argue that the scattering of words and its incoherence, rather than resisting meaning, puts readers at the center and forces them to construct meaning for themselves, thereby becoming a sort of community organizer as they reconstruct the verbal community disrupted by the black strip. There are dozens of possibilities at play, all of which are equally viable; however, I find myself predisposed to rebuild through litany, perhaps because Smith has already utilized the technique numerous times in early parts of *Bluff*. One such possibility might render the words below the line as follows: "enough / we survive our sons / theirs / we survive our home / our freedom." This rendering allows for the repetition of "we," "survive," and "our" as central words in the creation of litany. The same methodology might render the following from the words

above the line: "we negro daughters / we Africa / we just dreams / we many." These constructions are predicated on the presumption that Smith has included "we" both above and below the line to emphasize community, and that the organizing of language is meant to return community to each space. By using parallelism and litany, this construction rhetorically reconnects the "we." Of course, this is only one way to organize the language, just as unification through shared experiences is but one way to organize literal communities. The act of making meaning, then, becomes the focal point—Smith transfers their own interrogation of art as activism onto the reader, involving them directly in a type of action centered on bridging disparate values toward collectivity.

The following two pages (Figures 36-37) continue the symbolic I-94, but Smith again disrupts expectations. They add side streets to orient readers in the Rondo neighborhood and offer text that visually resembles verse; this text, though, draws on the use of footnotes in critical writing. As with footnotes, readers develop a somewhat coherent, if less informed, understanding by reading the verse on its own, but the more informed and contextualized meaning derives from reading the footnotes in line with the verse. Assuming a left-to-right, top-to-bottom approach as the most linear encounter, page thirty-nine reads "sons dream dirt like // winters mob / but we survive // so many years from freedom // quick, we grow our Sunday." This reading is economical, yet offers a layer of meaning. Readers might infer that "winters mob" is overwhelming St. Paul with snow, thus the "sons" are effectively dreaming for enough dirt to overrun I-94, enough to have residential gardens again, and that the community persists despite having been robbed of this possibility.

(Figure 36) (Figure 37)

Western Ave

a south made
of sugar[1]

an Africa
with

honkies[2]
we
knew
so many   chains
this side of
happiness[3]

Dale St

still

little
land[4]

_____
1. sweethomes they ruined with moneyrain, dissolved our new mississippis into neverheres
2. the promise of fear, their variable hunger for our various sufferings, neighbors who unwelcomed us
3. "freedom" was a door into a bigger cage & when they couldn't shackle the necks anymore, their metal met the mind, they chained time, chained the money, chained the dreams & noosed futures
4. yet we were black and so forever, we sifted their violences for our gold & became their terrors for our safety

Dale St

sons dream dirt like[1]

winters mob
but we survive[6]

so many years from freedom[7]

quick, we grow our Sunday[4]

Victoria St

_____
5. even the schools massacre their lil dreams, six feet tall or under, baby boys displaced into the city's carnivorous machine
6. yet they have not killed us
7. distant enough to see even they are not free, hate/greed/their god/their contempt all cages, slow funerals for the world they cellmate with us, locked in their disdain for tomorrows
8. in the church basement we praise, we plot, we fed & feed, we baptize, we redeem, we organize, we haul up, we sweat, we break down, we safe, we home & so here they come armed with torches, manifestos, badges, roads

If readers take "Sunday" as an allusion to Christian salvation, or heaven, then the community manifests its own salvation in the absence of worldly sustenance, both empowered and keenly aware that they will not experience freedom until they reach the salvation they are building for themselves. The ability to discern meaning through close reading reinforces Ardam's assertions that experimental poetry does not inherently resist meaning, as well as Luck's insistence on attending to authorial intention.

While this reading is evidence enough that Smith is approaching "Rondo" with intention, it reflects only one layer of meaning. If readers instead consider the footnotes in line with the text, page 39 reads:

sons dream dirt like even the schools massacre their lil dreams, six feet tall or

> under, baby boys displaced into the city's carnivorous machine
>
> winter mobs
>
> but we survive yet they have not killed us
>
> so many years from freedom distant enough to see even they are not free,
>
> hate / greed / their god / their contempt all cages, slow funerals for the
>
> world
>
> they cellmate with us, locked in their disdain for tomorrows
>
> quick, we grow our Sunday. in the church basement we praise, we plot, we fed
>
> & feed, we baptize, we redeem, we organize, we haul up, we sweat, we
>
> break down, we safe, we home & so here they come armed with torches,
>
> manifestos, badges, roads

This version more than triples the number of words encountered and complicates each line of poetry, creating a far more somber tone through the inclusion of explicit references to racial violence and systemic oppression. The dirt that sons dream of, in this version, refers to burial and death at the hands of various state institutions, while the "winter mobs" now function as a noun phrase that alludes to mobs of people actively pursuing the community implied by "we." Community organizing, too, becomes explicit as the final line (stanza?) details what is meant by "we grow our Sunday," but again Smith adds an ominous allusion to mobs who threaten the community, this time "armed with torches, manifestos, badges, roads." Smith uses materiality and experimentation to argue that the community thrives and retains its energy on its own, but the incursion of state institutions invites a violence that overwhelms and ultimately overshadows the hope evident in the more economical reading of the poem. Additionally, forcing readers to traverse the thick black strip repeatedly as they try to make meaning of the poem emphasizes that

organizing and reunification will require that the community overcome the separation imposed by the construction of I-94.

The final two pages of the poem (Figures 38-39) serve as the most explicit resistance to forced separation, featuring text that first occupies the symbolic interstate on one page and then builds white blocks of text that materially overcome the strip on the final page.
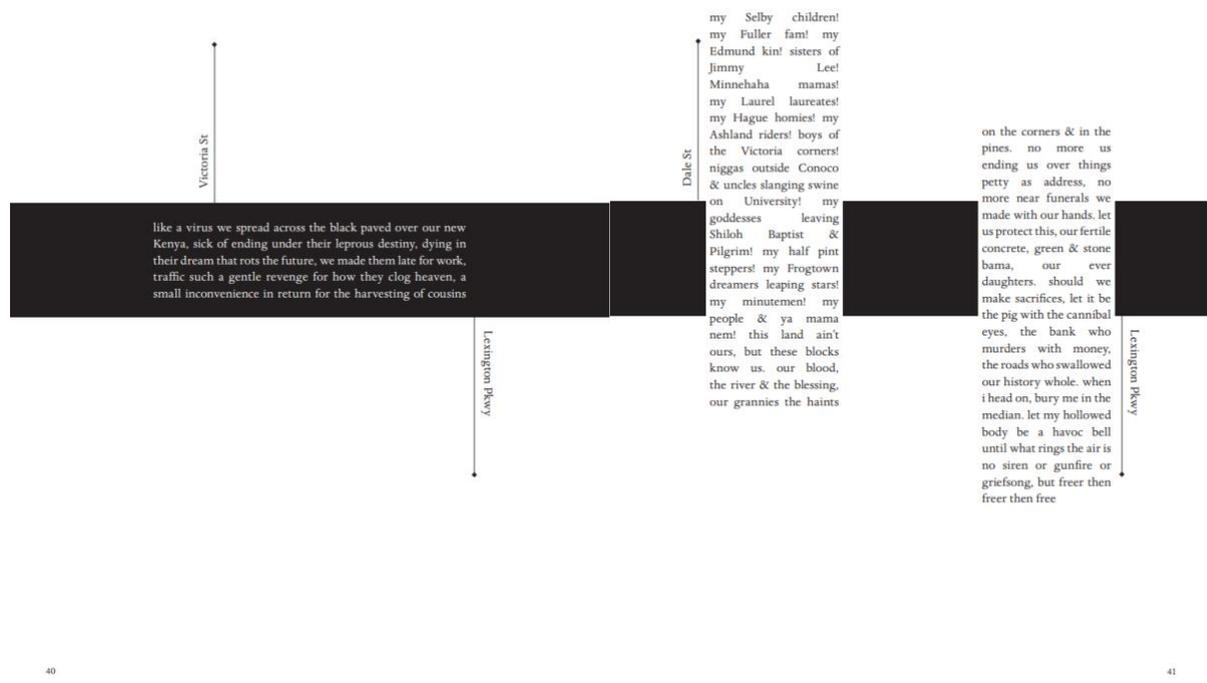
(Figure 38)   (Figure 39)

Smith references the material occupation of black space in the text itself, writing that the community spreads "like a virus" over I-94, using traffic as a form of community action to congest their road as a "gentle revenge" for the way city planners have contributed to Black death. The long lines of justified text mimic the image described, creating a visual of the

bumper-to-bumper traffic attributed to community action and alluding to images of protests designed to shut down bridges and freeways that proliferated media following the murder of George Floyd. The final page culminates in the physical destruction of I-94, an act made possible through collective action and reunification. Smith uses invocation in the first disruption to rally micro-communities toward a shared resistance, then delivers an explicit call to action in the second disruption. The combined material and textual efforts of pages 40-41 recreate visual and verbal components of protest, including the stoppage of traffic, a literal rallying cry, and instructions for unified resistance of state institutions like police departments ("the pig with the cannibal eyes") and "the bank who murders with money."

When I encountered "Rondo," it immediately resonated as an artistic demonstration of a lesson that I delivered to students at a Tulsa high school at the start of my teaching career. Tulsa is a deeply segregated city, with self-contained communities separated by a series of highways that surround the city center. Though my students were keenly aware of and could label which community occupied each area, most had not realized that the highways functioned as physical barriers. During the lesson, I opened the discussion by projecting a map of Tulsa on the board and asking students to tell me how I should label the visible space. They identified East Tulsa as predominantly "Mexican" (by which they meant Chicanx and Latinx diasporas) and "Asian" (by which they meant Hmong and Vietnamese), North Tulsa as predominantly "Black," and West Tulsa as predominantly impoverished White families.

Students pointed to the city center as the space where wealthy White families lived. I then used a marker to trace the highways that loop the city center, after which I turned off the projector. Without the distraction of the map, students realized that city planners had effectively fortified White wealth by building "walls" to separate minority communities from the city center.

With guiding questions, they further realized that these highways reinforced the division between minority communities, preventing them from organizing toward a collective resistance of White wealth and the local systems that perpetuated oppression. Inevitably, though, students questioned whether or not I was projecting and/or misreading the layout of the city because I was looking for evidence of systemic racism. "Rondo" is a perfect rebuttal to such questions, as it demonstrates that city planning across urban centers routinely works to destabilize communities of color, and that community organizing is the most effective means of circumventing efforts to suppress minority communities. Smith's poem also invites discussion about gentrification and city development as a tool to displace minoritized communities, as well as larger discussions about the colonial strategy of isolating minoritized communities to prevent unified acts of resistance.

While the close reading above lends itself to English and literature classrooms, "Rondo" would function equally well in political science, history, and ethnic studies courses that address issues ranging from local activism to policy to the isolation of immigrant populations at the border. "Rondo" could function as a launching point for research projects investigating the impact of city development in local communities, or deep analysis of projected impacts on pending city development. Students could use "Rondo" as a catalyst for policy changes that prioritize the long-term effects of city plans on existing communities, perhaps even as inspiration for new data analysis processes that consider human impact in addition to practical changes like traffic patterns, commerce, and zoning. Because experimental poetics alters our cognitive processes, as Luck demonstrates, encounters with and a close reading of "Rondo" serves not just as a concrete teaching instrument but also a method for rewiring how students think—about community organization, city development, systemic oppression.

Like Smith, Palestinian American poet Hala Alyan has prioritized experimental and conceptual poetics in her most recent collection, *The Moon That Turns You Back*. Though Alyan includes a number of formal poems, including several strict ghazals, what stands out most is her attempt to engage the reader in the act of creation via two particular forms. The first is an inventive form that trades on the multiplicity of the contrapuntal and the engagement tactics of choose-your-own-adventure stories. "Interactive Fiction: House Saints" is one of several poems throughout the book that use the experimental form, which contains a single line of verse followed by three columns of stanzas, each separated by a set of vertical lines (Figure 40).
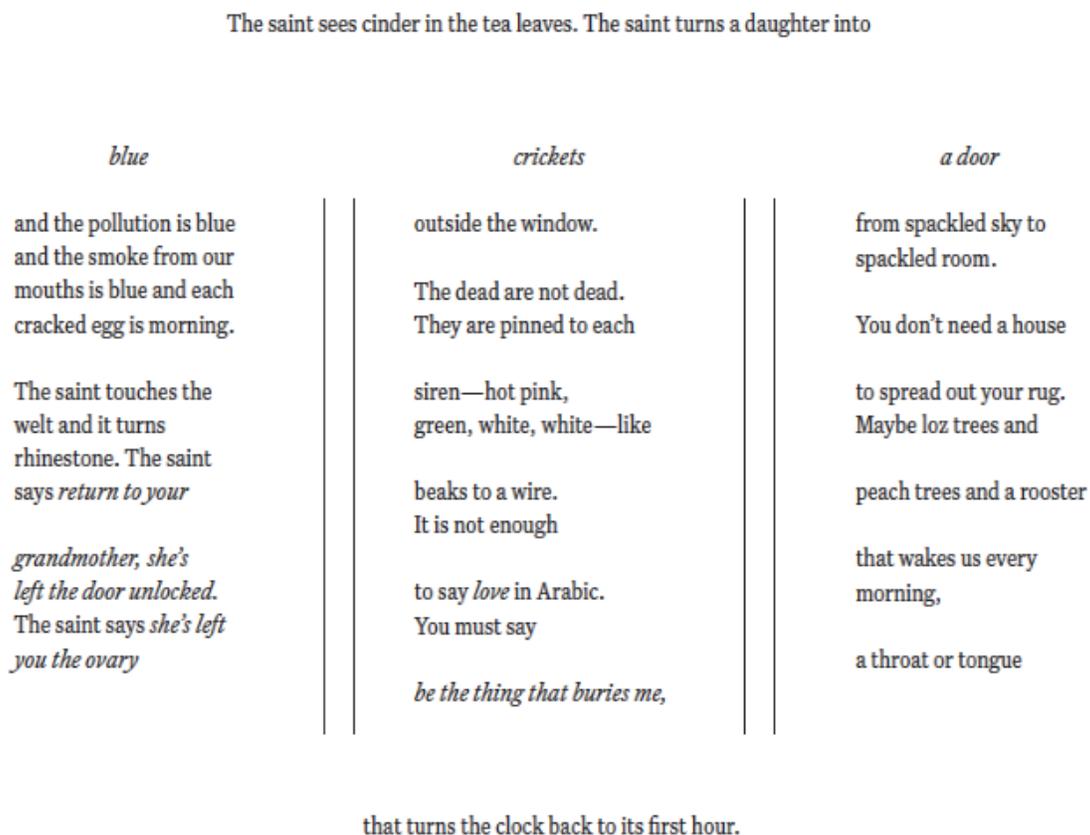
I want the miracle that makes me ordinary:

to kiss	*to resurrect*	*to leave*
the back of her hand. I pray to the rain when I pray and I pray to open and name what surfaces.	into a forked river. The mountain saints are gone	with the blackbirds.
My favorite house is my mother. The heart muffled like a speaker. There are no gardens	and it's a new country now. The women fold the desert	The Mediterranean is an accent.
here. Only another year. The tree leaves like open palms, up then out then waiting to be patted.	into a blanket. Dear cross-stitch pattern of birds. Dear	The Nile is
	patron saint of hyphenates.	an accent. My father is an accent. His Gaza
	Of lentils and clean feet. Of borders and their seven	with an opera.
	names. Of returning and tap water and bismillah.	

(Figure 40)

On the second page of each "Interactive Fiction" poem, readers encounter another line of verse

and three columns of stanzas, but also a final stand-alone line of verse below the columns

(Figure 41). Readers can choose how they want to read the poem, and each route develops a

related but notably unique experience.

The saint sees cinder in the tea leaves. The saint turns a daughter into

blue	crickets	a door
and the pollution is blue and the smoke from our mouths is blue and each cracked egg is morning.	outside the window.	from spackled sky to spackled room.
The saint touches the welt and it turns rhinestone. The saint says *return to your*	The dead are not dead. They are pinned to each	You don't need a house to spread out your rug.
grandmother, she's left the door unlocked. The saint says *she's left you the ovary*	siren—hot pink, green, white, white—like	Maybe loz trees and
	beaks to a wire. It is not enough	peach trees and a rooster
	to say *love* in Arabic. You must say	that wakes us every morning,
	be the thing that buries me,	a throat or tongue

that turns the clock back to its first hour.

(Figure 41)

For example, "Interactive Fiction: House Saints" begins with the line, "I want a miracle that

makes me ordinary:" Depending on which route readers take, the poem continues in one of three

ways: "I want the miracle that makes me ordinary: / to kiss / the back of her hand / I pray to the

rain…," or "I want the miracle that makes me ordinary: / to resurrect / into a forked river. The /

mountain saints are gone,..." or "I want the miracle that makes me ordinary: / to leave / with the

// blackbirds." The first column develops a path that centers on a longing for the speaker's mother and an image of trees that, in the absence of the speaker's mother, offer their "leaves like open / palms." The second column explicitly engages the theme of diaspora and migration, stressing "borders and their seven // names" as the speaker now longs for lentils and tap water. Here, family appears accessible, but the experience is rife with hunger and thirst, as well as the physical containment implied by borders managed by conflicting forces. The final column trades on the economy of language and patterns of repetition to emphasize unity, a path through which each of the speaker's existences becomes "an accent" as the verse builds toward her father's "opera," or song. Of the three options, this is the only path that communicates either unity or fulfillment, and it is the only one that invokes her father, rather than female relatives.

Structurally, the form echoes one of the central themes, namely the poet's movement between Brooklyn, Beirut, and Jerusalem. Alyan uses material space to further emphasize the complexities of living in diaspora, the ways in which each life and history is simultaneously a part of the story and distinctly separate from one another. The arrangement of the form seems to suggest that each path represents one potential movement or existence (i.e. Column 1 represents Brooklyn, Column 2 represents Beirut, Column 3 represents Jerusalem), thus directing readers to select a path requires them to consciously prioritize a particular experience over the others. After selecting the first route, readers arrive at the universal line, "The saint sees the cinder in the tea leaves. The saint turns a daughter into."

Centralizing this line implies that the speaker—and by proxy, the reader—will always arrive at that particular memory, a crossroads, if you will. Depending on the reader's experience on the first page, they might stick with their initial choice and select the same column on the second page, or they might elect to take an alternate route. This movement mirrors the migration

described throughout the collection, as Alyan continually articulates a push and pull between each city and the life it represents. Again, Alyan moves the narrative toward a universal close, in this case a line that implies cyclicity and redundancy as the clock is turned back. In total, Alyan uses the form three times across the collection, each time arranging universal lines and columns in the same manner. The end result is that what readers encounter as three physical poems produces dozens of possible trajectories, forcing readers to partake in the generative and creative processes that determine the path of the story.

As an educator, Alyan's interactive form immediately presented as a possibility for assignments that bridge creative writing and close reading. In my classes, I am often looking for ways that students might communicate their understanding of a text or text element outside traditional analysis. One such method that I have used in recent years is having students retell a scene from a novel from the perspective of a different character. The character must be present in the scene, but their perspective must not be central to the original telling. Before assigning the task, I work with students to discuss the ways in which our respective experiences alter our perception of even the most mundane interactions, guiding everything from the details we notice to the way we position ourselves in a space and our reading of tone in interpersonal interactions. Their goal in retelling the scene is meant to demonstrate students' understanding of a less prominent character; each change they make to the scene should reflect something about the character they have chosen, and their reflection on the changes they make to the scene should articulate their reasoning as to how certain events and moments of characterization motivated the changes.

Alyan's form presents a similar opportunity wherein students might first read the series of "Interactive Fiction" poems, then identify three specific moments in a story or novel that

represent crossroads of sorts. Next, students could be tasked with creating three possible outcomes: Column 1 represents the original outcome, retold in verse; Column 2 represents an alternative outcome based on the character making a decision different from the original; and Column 3 represents a second alternative based on the addition of a minor event or character that changes the outcome of the scene. Students would complete this task twice, using universal lines to represent the three pivotal scenes they first identified. As with most creative writing exercises in my literature courses, the assignment would culminate in a reflection that asks students to explain their thought processes with each column, as well as how the different routes might alter the outcome of the narrative as a whole and/or the protagonist.

Alyan's attention to the generative process is not limited to her "Interactive Fiction" poems, however. The collection also includes "Key," an experimentation with the mad-lib structure which begins with the instruction, "*Fill in the blank with a suitable word from the left*" (46). The remainder of the poem features two columns, one large and filled with an incomplete poem of eleven lines, and the other a small column that operates as a word bank (Figure 42). Unlike the mad-lib poem "Partition," discussed in Chapter 4, Alyan's inclusion of a word bank moves the mad-lib further toward the unreadable by limiting the possible outcomes of the poem, but also by incorporating a set of words that influence students' thought processes around making meaning. She creates movement by forcing students to move back and forth from the mad-lib to the word bank, and ensures engagement by requiring that students mentally or physically strike words from the word bank as they use them.

KEY

Fill in the blank with a suitable word from the left.

In the good country we call each other [   ]. Amendment: *garden.*

It only takes a [   ] to ruin what you've spent a year making:

the [   ] pinched into a sad mouth, o crescent bloom, o blur of

[   ] in the backseat: cloudless sky, eyes the color of island [   ].

In a [   ], I sing karaoke and swoon over my black hair. Later, saltines.

Later, seven embryos fed on ice and electricity. Amendment: *Pyrrhic.*

When we wake there is no [   ] left, only the sea pitching its echo

back to itself. This is how you winch your [   ], cooing in her ear

as she claws you. Amendment: **mutiny.** The body mirages.

The body spills into [   ] and paper. My darkest gamble:

to be *everything*, a saucer of milk, someone's [   ], molting with love.

| nightmare |
| moon |
| the miracle |
| Beirut |
| mother |
| green |
| hospital gown |
| snapdragons |
| Massachusetts |
| fruit |
| moment |

(Figure 42)

The bank includes eleven entries, yet there are only ten empty spaces in the poem. Readers choose not only which words to use in each space, but which of the eleven words will not be used at all. The word that a reader avoids may communicate as much as the words they use insofar as the poem they construct does not make space for a particular person, place, or object (all words in the word bank present as nouns, though poetically several could function as verbs depending on placement and usage). Of course, the instructions lack specificity, so readers might choose to repeat one or more of the words from the bank, a repetition that undoubtedly prioritizes a particular image and sound across the brief poem. Again, Alyan offers a *mostly* complete text that still allows for dozens of possible outcomes; again, her form rejects the "uncreative" that critics align with experimental and conceptual poetics while embracing the

"generative" characteristic. Alyan acts as an instrument, setting the parameters for creation without finalizing the act of creation; stalling before the poem comes completely to fruition is a comment on the diasporic experience, which Alyan articulates as one mired by interruptions, unexpected changes, and even alternate realities.

One final form that I will address from Alyan's book appears in "Love Poem," a poem which is presented as raw code for a generative program (Figure 43). Alyan's attention to technology and the generative process are the most explicit engagements of conceptual poetics. Unlike Franny Choi's "Turing Test" poems discussed in Chapter 4, Alyan's strict implementation of coding language resists a linear reading, making the poem appear unreadable to students. Nevertheless, Alyan again provides strict parameters that guide the generative process toward a handful of possible outcomes. The code itself develops a program that will generate a random poem based on the specified parameters, each of which is both a unique poem and one rooted in a series of universal phrases established by the code. Readers must complete the act of generation in order to make meaning of the poem and to render the code functional, effectively becoming the technological conduit. Presenting the raw code to readers, however, eliminates the random function associated with the code, imposing a distinctly human outcome that overrides the reliance on technology, a critique of the ways in which human interaction can (and perhaps should) circumvent algorithms to create more meaningful representations of love.

```
                                           LOVE POEM

   /

import random

def generate_love_poem():
    cities = ["Manhattan," "Paris," "Jerusalem," "Beirut," "Barcelona"]
    adjectives = ["shy," "accented," "wild," "gutless," "startled"]
    eye_colors = ["blue," "grain," "grey," "bottle-green," "teal"]

    city = random.choice(cities)
    adjective = random.choice(adjectives)
    eye_color = random.choice(eye_colors)

    poem = f"I love how {city} taught me.\n"
    poem += f"With eye or sea the {eye_color} of photographs.\n"
    poem += f"My {adjective} heart unspooling like raw silk.\n"
    poem += "Everywhere: shouting and apricots and reconstructed light.\n"

    return poem

print(generate_love_poem())

   /
```

(Figure 43)

"Love Poem" produces 225 possibilities through its program, two of which I have included

below as exemplars:

I love how Jerusalem taught me.

With eye or sea the bottle-green of photographs.

My startled heart unspooling like raw silk.

Everywhere: shouting and apricots and reconstructed light.

or

I love how Paris taught me.

With eye or sea the grain of photographs.

My gutless heart unspooling like raw silk.

Everywhere: shouting and apricots and reconstructed light.

Per the program, there are only three words that change from poem to poem, yet these subtle shifts can drastically alter the generated product. The first generated text, a city name, sets the poem in a particular place, bringing with it a host of memories, presumptions, images, and smells; the second generated text, an "eye-color," determines the mood of the poem[2]; the third generated text, an adjective, establishes the tone of the poem by characterizing the speaker. What stands out most, however, is that involving the reader as a conduit for generation eliminates a core requirement of the program, namely that the words are selected at random. It is an impossibility that individuals can select any of the words at random; even if they sidestep conscious choices through a pre-established pattern, the pattern prohibits random selection. In other words, Alyan "breaks" the program by situating it outside a technological interface and instead assigning function to the reader.

"Key" and "Love Poem" provide intriguing possibilities for instruction; though the poems are superficially distant from art as activism, a close reading of their structures offers students an opportunity to confront implicit bias and interrogate the rhetorical impact of various word choices. For example, both poems include concrete place names as options to complete the text. Educators can and should lead discussion about the implications of place and how situating a poem in physical space alters the meaning of a poem. What words, for example, might be associated with Massachusetts, and how does that list of words differ from those associated with Beirut? Naturally, word association will generate a different list for each student depending on their respective experiences, internalized biases, and background knowledge. Confronting this concretely in the classroom helps students to understand why setting is essential to meaning making, as well as how different people can generate such divergent meanings from a single text.

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[2] According to Mental Health America, color has a discernable impact on mood, with shades of both green and blue associated with calmness and serenity, while grey is associated with comfort, maturity, and calmness.

With regard to "Love Poem," students should consider how the selection of place predisposes them to certain choices for "eye-color" and "adjective" based on their individual reactions to each city. Educators could also extend such a conversation to discuss the association of place with specific communities, presumed characteristics of place, etc., and how such associations develop narratives that may or may not accurately reflect the communities in question. Why does the invocation of Southside Chicago produce associations like "crime," "Black," "Chiraq," "guns," or "projects"? More importantly, how do these associations impact the people who live in Southside Chicago in terms of policy or economic investment? On the surface, Alyan's poems may appear apolitical, but this does not necessitate an apolitical investigation of either poem[3].

Thus far, I have concerned myself with authors who allocate significant space to experimentalism and/or conceptualism in collected works. I pivot, now, to "Jotxland Epic," a stand-alone poem by Roda Avelar, a trans woman poet and recent recipient of the Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship. "Jotxland Epic" fundamentally refuses a linear reading through its use of space and materiality (Figure 44). The physical organization of "Jotxland Epic" is complex and discombobulating, with text arranged in various shapes that meander across white space, as well as text that overlaps sometimes to the point that it is impossible to read. Though it is possible to experience this conceptual poem without a close reading, instead fixating on Avelar's refusal of order and linearity, such an experience ignores the fact that Avelar has composed complex and lyrical verse that is clearly meant to be read. When I teach this poem, the first question that students ask is how to read the poem—it resists a linear reading, and there is no obvious pattern to how they should encounter the various verses. Rather than provide a set

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[3] This may appear an obvious statement, but I include it here to highlight how educators might circumvent legislation that prohibits explicit discussions or CRT, systemic racism, etc. through the analysis of "apolitical" poems and still convey important understandings about the correlation between policy, economy, and prejudice.

method for approaching the poem, I encourage them to read the poem instinctively, moving across the text in whatever way feels most natural to the poem. Not every student makes the same choices, which shifts the arrangement of the poem and, by extension, their approach to making meaning of the lines.

(Figure 44)

While students may diverge in their approaches to the poem, most agree that Avelar has intentionally drawn the reader's attention to certain phrases, including the framed text in the top left corner, just under the poem's title, which reads, "WELCOME TO / Nuevo Parangaricutirimícuaro / The Best Little Pueblo on Jotxland / ZAPATA BOULEVARD."

Together with the shape of the border that surrounds the text, this functions as a sort of street sign to orient readers in place, situating the poem in "Nuevo Parangaricutirimícuaro," or "New Small Town." The further identification of the space as a "Pueblo" on "ZAPATA BOULEVARD" alludes to indigenous communities and/or Mexican communities that resisted colonizing forces. These first few words, for many students, are unfamiliar and serve as an opportunity to research the historical context evoked of Zapatistas and Aztlan. Students also point to the text contained inside the circle, as it, too, is framed and set apart from the body of the poem. This text reads, "We listen to Charli XCX: / Candlelight, out on a starry night, / you brush my hair to the side, / and you tell me I'm pretty. / YUCK!" Despite their frame, these lines do not immediately signal any significant meaning, and students frequently dismiss them as another

attempt to set the scene. After reading the entirety of the poem, however, students return to the lines as an early allusion to the speaker's struggle to accept their trans identity. In this context, the person telling the speaker they are pretty seems to acknowledge and embrace their femininity. The response, "YUCK!," complicates this image because it is not clear if this is yelled by the same person, or by the speaker in response to hearing that they are pretty. Students who associate "YUCK!" with the person who says the speaker is pretty suggest that the person is put off by the discovery that the speaker is trans and not a "real woman," while students who associate "YUCK!" with the speaker interpret the line as an example of self-loathing wherein the speaker is unable to accept that their trans identity is acceptable and/or valuable.

Avelar uses "Jotxland Epic" to chronicle her transition and her fraught relationship with the Indigenous/Mexican communities. Some of the first images on the far left of the poem describe how the speaker loves "him," carefully trimming his hair and beard, and how his face transforms into a woman's face in front of the mirror after beginning SRS. Just below these images, Avelar includes the line, "Transfiguración a mito a no a poema a montaña a culebra a río a risa a rincón a llorona a malcriada a sí y sí y sí," a line that emphasizes the role of transfiguration across the poem. Avelar then borrows phrases from the line to construct "a quiz" that the speaker finds in a pamphlet titled, "*Girls Just Wanna Have Vaginoplasty!*" The quiz is presented as a means of determining "What kind of" vagina the person wants to have, with possible answer choices including:

a) Transfiguracion a mito a no a risa a si a no a cora a brindis.

b) Transfiguracion a verguenza a risa a carcel a tierra a lago.

c) A si y si y si.

d) A no y no y no.

The repetition of certain phrases stands out, as do certain inclusions. The first iteration of the phrase includes "poema," for example, a metapoetic recognition of the text as a performance of the body, and the body as performance of the text. In contrast, answer choice "b" introduces the word "carcel," emphasizing the literal and metaphorical incarceration associated with trans identity. The final answer choice, "e" presents an inverted text that reads "Yo me transformo," which extends into a dizzying repetition that creates a black cloud separating most of the first half of the poem (left side) from the second half (right side).

To the right of this textual array, Avelar reiterates one of her early lines, specifically the one that signals her transition ("I contort my body into image. The waist coming in on command.") with lines branching off from each of the two sentences. These lines deepen the meaning of apparently simple statements by providing context; for example, a litany below "The waist" specifies that nearly every part of the body changes, including "the brow bone / the double-chin / the nail bed." A line extending from "contort my" leads to a series of phrases that repeat the same eight words in varying orders, none of which is coherent to the reader (or, presumably, to the speaker). Piecing out these statements of transition structurally emphasizes the ways in which the body, and one's connection to their sense of self, fractures during the process of transformation. Ultimately, the poem builds toward a second cloud constructed of the phrase "Yo me transformo," which offsets a simple yet vulnerable admission from the rest of the poem: "So I guess I'll just say it: / I've never felt beautiful."

There are certainly elements of "Jotxland Epic" which make it a complicated and controversial poem to include in the classroom, but I argue for its inclusion on the basis that 1) the poem fundamentally alters our understanding of how to "read" literature, and our cognitive processes as a result, and 2) the poem sets up vital discussions about the performance of identity

and the ways in which students must continually navigate the conflict between their internalized sense of self and outward expectations. Avelar masterfully critiques not just transphobia, but beauty as social construct, encouraging readers to consider the myriad ways we are encouraged to mold ourselves into more digestible, more "fuckable" versions in order to increase the currency afforded by our respective bodies. Avelar further uses materiality to capture how overwhelming these transformations can be, and how the mind descends into utter chaos as it works to make sense of a body in flux, a sense of self that vacillates between vivid articulations of grace and utter incoherence. Students have shown a willingness to invest in a close reading of this poem across several semesters, most likely because the anxiety attached to poetry analysis is alleviated by the inability to approach "Jotxland Epic" in any traditional sense. Though educators can remind students that there is no "right way" to read a poem ad nauseum, most dismiss or resist the statement in the wake of far too many scenarios where a "right way" to interpret is required to succeed in exam settings. "Jotxland Epic" acts as a real-world example of how poets themselves reject the idea of a "right way" to encounter art as much as it functions as a concrete argument against a "right way" to encounter the body.

Despite ongoing debate about the characteristics and definitions of conceptualist and experimental poetry, the poets discussed herein are evidence that writers of color have a vested interest in disrupting our expectations of textuality and exploding understandings of what poetry can do. Alyan, Avelar, and Smith exploit digital and textual space, layering words and phrases to create visual artifacts that wholly reject convention, urging readers to relinquish their commitment to physical and metaphorical constraints just as the poets have done with their respective texts. The inclusion of experimental and/or conceptual poems in the classroom is understandably frightening given the common apprehension to teach poetry in general. Educators

who are uneasy about their own understanding of poetry, or their ability to properly guide students toward defensible readings of poetry, will indubitably experience additional anxiety about presenting poems which intentionally disrupt understandings of how to read or experience literature.

Rather than avoid poetry that trades on material and lyrical techniques to render meaning, educators should approach experimental and conceptual poetry as an invitation to explore literature alongside students. It is important to demonstrate discomfort and communicate to students that encounters with literature need not always result in understanding. The misunderstanding of a conceptual poem is part of the process, and approaching a conceptual text more like a puzzle than a traditional poem reinforces key techniques of close reading. Poems that challenge basic understandings, such as how to move across the page, are fundamentally acts of resistance, even if their resistance is exclusively a refusal of the imposed boundaries of genre, but they are also tools through which educators can alter students' cognitive processes—not through manipulation or toward a particular result, but as an organic process unique to each student. The poems presented in this chapter act as examples of how educators can guide students toward a cognitive process that makes meaning even in the face of apparent chaos, that establishes connections between seemingly disparate ideas, that returns language to its most pliable and puts students at the center as they strive to reconstruct it as individuals.

Conclusion

When I began this project, I was responding to more than a decade of classroom experience and countless discussions with colleagues around the necessity of poetry in the curriculum. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of my colleagues have resisted the inclusion of poetry for various reasons, including the belief that the close study of poetry does not ultimately benefit students outside the literature classroom. While one might think that this perception was most common during my years in secondary education, I have found the opposite to be true; nearly all the educators in the English Department at my college avoid poetry entirely, arguing that poetry is antithetical to their focus on rhetorical analysis in first year writing courses. Likewise, my colleagues in other disciplines continually communicate that poetry has no place in discussions of history, psychology, or even speech. At the same time, recent discussions with my colleagues are proliferated with lamentations about the ever-restrictive environment of higher education in Texas, and the seemingly universal sentiment that students are woefully unprepared for college courses. These same colleagues communicate feelings of hostility and tension in the classroom, as well as an inability to connect with students over "literally anything." As one might imagine, this generates a shared sense of frustration between educators and their students, one exacerbated by a world in crisis. As I write this in 2024, there are four active genocides, an ongoing war in Ukraine, and college students being arrested for peaceful protest on their own campuses.

One month into my writing, Israel launched a full-scale military assault on the Palestinian people which has grown into an unrelenting genocide. My social media timelines are filled with horrifying images and daily updates about the tens of thousands killed by the Israeli military. I mention this fact because a pervading question around this project has been, why poetry? The

question has haunted me for months, leaving me to wonder whether or not poetry really is an effective and meaningful intervention. Each time I lose sight of early twenty-first century poetry as a site of resistance, however, I am reminded that a large majority of American poets remain deeply invested in destabilizing systems of oppression. That commitment is evident in the boycotts of the Poetry Foundation (Farah) and PEN America (Matza), two of the largest arts foundations in America. Poets have withdrawn their work from consideration for prizes, taking the lead as organizers to demand that the institutions representing American poetry use their platforms to denounce the Palestinian genocide and divest from organizations that fund the Israeli military.

Additionally, Palestinian poets both in Palestine and in diaspora have turned to poetry as a shared site of resistance. According to Atef Alshaer, Senior Lecturer of Arabic Language and Culture, Palestinians have looked to poetry since the 1930s to compensate for "their lack of physical power" because "they have been…left with nothing, so they use their voice to the maximum [extent] possible." Tariq Luthun adds that simply existing as a Palestinian in the world causes controversy, an internalized sense of unbelonging that follows Palestinians wherever they go; this sentiment manifests in Luthun's poem, "Harb (or On Waging War in Spite of God)," where the speaker imagines his future son who "will ask [him] about the red / in the river of [their] name, where it turned" (lines 29-21), as well as in "To Those We Left Behind," where the speaker asks his mother what they should do "when [they] can't fight / and there is no money / left to give" (lines 1-5).

For Luthun, protest is inextricably linked to his Palestinian identity, resistance a lineage that passes from his parents to him, from him to future generations. Fady Joudah mirrors this internalized conflict and its correlation with lineage in "Birth," where the speaker explains, "The

price of milk / It goes up in war / My son is here to teach me / My temperament is genetic." Speaking about his most recent collection *[…]*, released in March 2024, Joudah explains, "these poems came immediately to me because they had existed in me, on the Palestinian carousel, for years: the dehumanization, the complicity, the silence, the disdain, and the process of attritional extermination. But also beauty, music, and desire had been living in me just as fully." Joudah further notes that he wrote *[…]* between October 2023 and December 2023, highlighting the urgency inherent to poetry as a viable site of resistance for Palestinians writing in diaspora. His collection is one of at least three published by American presses in Spring 2024 alone, all of which contain material written in direct response to the most recent attacks against Palestinians.

Something About Living, by Lena Khalaf Tuffaha, is one of those collections. Tuffaha draws on her Palestinian, Jordanian, and Syrian heritage to craft a collection that centers on colonial empire and its effect on the Palestinian people. Though the poems resonate as a direct response to the most recent attacks on Gaza by Israel, Tuffaha makes clear that these attacks are part of a long and deliberate genocide meant to eradicate Palestinians at any cost. In "Variations on a Last Chance," Tuffaha employs the litany to create a series of counternarratives rooted in survival, variations that act as resistance to empire and invert the inevitability of death that Palestinians face. The poem includes a loose application of anaphora through the repetitions of "the snipers" and "the bullets" to emphasize the legacy of violence predicated on Palestinians by Israeli forces, a strategy that upends perceptions of the most recent attacks by Israel as anomalous. What makes the litany most successful, though, is Tuffaha's use of imagery to move beyond abstract political rhetoric and recenter the human condition.

In Tuffaha's "Variations on a Last Chance," Snipers miss their shots because they are busy "sexting their girlfriends" and taking lunch breaks, then gradually "lose interest in shooting
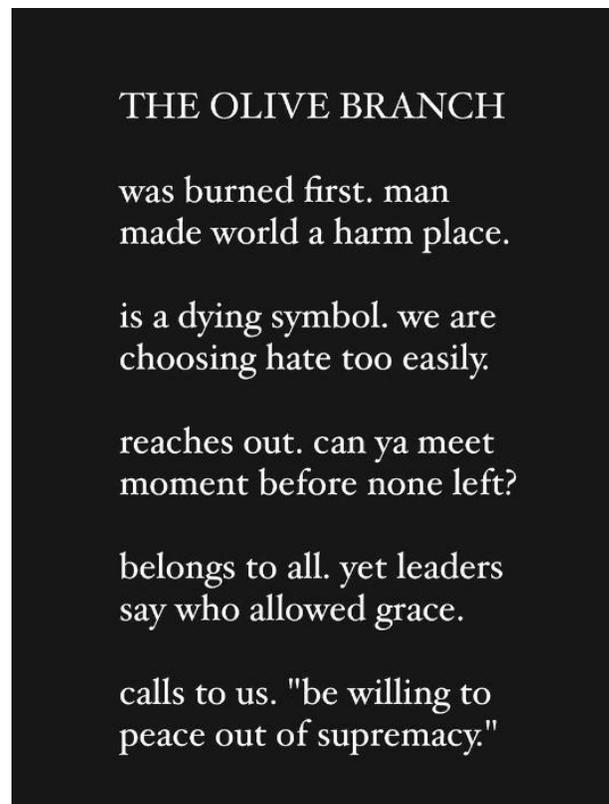
at medics evacuating the wounded" and eventually "make eye contact with one of [them] and see" (lines 5-16). The desert "blooms of its own volition" and "the wire sheds its barbs, softens to silk thread," while "the boys' sandals sprout wings" that lift him above the bullets (4-14). The last, wrenching act of resistance resounds in the final line, where the dead are buried along the fence line and their roots "reach the other side of home," circumventing the literal and physical barriers meant to repeatedly suppress occupied peoples (line 20). As diasporic witness, Tuffaha is not writing from a place of direct experience but, like Alyan, she accepts responsibility for telling the stories of those who have been martyred. She also interrogates the place of language and poetry explicitly as a meaningful site of resistance. In "Lost and Found Poem," the speaker laments, "I used to write poems when I believed / there were people to read them" and "I used to believe / or did I? It's long past time / to ask what is worth believing / in the silence of thousand-ton bombs" (lines 10-32). In "Beit Anya," the speaker argues, "All language is littered with corpses / of words, the shrouds we make / for them, the sacred oils we spill," but also that "All language is legend—we grow into its landscapes" (lines 7-46) Tuffaha considers the trope of revisionist history in "To Be Self-Evident," which proclaims, "Every empire tells its subjects a story / of revelation," and "The children thrive on filtration, / their classroom air and their selfies sanitized" (lines 1-5).

What Alyan, Joudah, Luthun, and Tuffaha demonstrate is an intense sense of obligation and commitment to serving as witness, to using their respective platforms to voice the experiences of Palestinians for a readership that may otherwise overlook the systemic and perpetual destruction of Palestinians. For my students, Palestine is an abstract idea, a history and a geography that has, for most of them, never been mentioned in a classroom. Encountering diasporic poetry, then, serves a vital role in ensuring that students learn about the present

genocide not just from woefully passive media coverage but also through the voices of Palestinians themselves. At a time when Palestinians are pleading for the world to remember them across every social media platform, educators have an opportunity to honor those pleas without explicitly defying anti-ethnic legislation restricting public school curricula. Alyan, Joudah, Luthun, and Tuffaha exemplify storytelling as resistance, recognizing the innate power of documenting their experiences and developing alternative histories that challenge the dominant histories of their respective communities. Educators can and should supplement the curriculum with poems that act as counternarratives, a practice that affirms the diverse experiences in classrooms and effectively resists efforts to perpetuate a legacy of erasure around the history of Palestine and the Palestinian people.

I centered this project on the argument that educators and students benefit from an attention to form, and that early twenty-first century writers of color turn to form as a site of resistance regularly. Allow me, then, to close with a brief discussion of the oorei, a form invented by Chinese American poet and actor Beau Sia. Sia launched his description of the form on October 16, 2023, just nine days after the present genocide in Palestine began. Since that time, Sia has posted oorei poems to his Instagram page regularly, almost all of which engage the form in solidarity with the Palestinian people. According to a pinned Instagram post on Sia's feed, the parameters for the oorei are: "A poem in stanza multiples of five, with each stanza being two lines. The title of the poem is to be recited aloud or read in the mind, either before or after each stanza. If before, it is an ooreio. If after, it is an ooreia." Scrolling through Sia's feed, there are examples of the oorei dating back more than a year, but there is a marked shift in the content of his oorei poems after October 7, 2023.

Four days after Israel launched its most recent attack on October 7, 2023, Sia posted an oorei titled "The Olive Branch," reproduced below (Figure 45). Based on the parameters in Sia's pinned post, the poem functions as an ooreio, as each stanza of the poem lacks a subject independent of the title, implying that we are to begin each stanza with a repetition of the title. This repetition allows the poem to be as economical as possible, a key element given that Sia describes one of the guiding principles of oorei as an exploration of the space between what is spoken and what is unspoken.

THE OLIVE BRANCH

was burned first. man
made world a harm place.

is a dying symbol. we are
choosing hate too easily.

reaches out. can ya meet
moment before none left?

belongs to all. yet leaders
say who allowed grace.

calls to us. "be willing to
peace out of supremacy."

(Figure 45)

Fittingly, the poem centers the image of an olive branch, one of the classic symbols of peace across Western literature. Sia subverts expectations in the first two stanzas, however, by suggesting that the olive branch has been "burned first" and that it "is a dying symbol" (lines 1-3). These two stanzas explicitly name man as culpable for the lack of peace and the destruction

of "the olive branch," an act which Sia uses to refer to the literal destruction of olive trees in Palestine as well the continued commitment to conflict.

On the second day of student-led protests at Columbia University in New York, which began on April 17, 2024, Sia posted a set of three oorei poems each carrying the title, "Occupy Power." In a comment accompanying the post, Sia explained that the series was shared "In solidarity with the Workers, Students, Artists who are refusing to let genocide be completed on their watch." Like "The Olive Branch," the set functions as an ooreio, where the phrase "Occupy Power" serves as an imperative at the beginning of each line. The set implores readers to occupy power "in every building your fate / is decided without your say," and "at the intersection of racism / and capitalist greed" (lines 1-2, 9-10). The second poem in the set shifts from descriptions of spaces where readers can resist to modes of resistance. Sia urges readers to occupy power "with your voice that's tired of / contorting for kings' comfort" and "with your friends who already / suffer empire's threat to you" (lines 2-4, 7-8). The final poem in the set shifts again, this time offering five reasons to occupy power, including "because the cost of not will / reduce what's left to ash" and "because the time to take back / what's been stolen is now" (lines 6-7, 9-10). Together, the trifecta functions as a rhetorical argument in favor of resistance, presenting readers with concrete spaces, methods, and reasoning for their resistance. In effect, Sia offers a microessay in poetic form, one that is easily shared via social media and consumed on a mobile screen without scrolling; this attention to portability and immediacy demonstrates the same urgency and attention to resistance that all the poets I have cited exemplify, participating in and evolving the tradition of poetic form in real time.

My first chapter argued for educators to center received forms written by authors of color in the early twenty-first century, specifically the sonnet and its variations, the pantoum, the

villanelle, the sestina, and the ghazal. The second chapter broadened this lens to include a discussion of invented forms such as the duplex, golden shovel, obverse, and Arabic forms, a tradition to which I have now added the oorei. These two chapters demonstrate the ways in which authors of color operate inside and outside formal constraints like meter, length, and repetition as mechanisms for sociopolitical commentary. My third chapter centered erasure and its increasing application as a means of social protest by early twenty-first century writers, highlighting several authors who have sourced government documents and implemented erasures to create counternarratives that combat the historical erasure of raced and marginalized communities. My fourth chapter presented numerous iterations of what I term nontraditional forms, namely forms with which readers are familiar, but which are not readily associated with poetry, such as mad libs, menus, blueprints, and bingo cards. The work described throughout Chapter Four bridges the constraint implied by formal structures with conceptualism to reimagine how poetry can operate outside traditional modes of writing. The fifth and final chapter centered conceptualism more concretely, offering a close reading of three early twenty-first century poets who invert understandings of textuality and linearity, offering poems that resist conventional readings and require that readers make meaning through the interpretation of both the material and language elements of their poems.

While attention to form is not the only effective way to introduce students to poetry as a site of resistance, I maintain that there are demonstrable benefits to grounding pedagogy in an attention to poetic form. First, and perhaps most importantly, poetic form offers educators and students a concrete and accessible entry into analysis in that their first observations of the poem need not be interpretive or analytical. In addition, my analyses have made clear that many early twenty-first century authors of color deliberately push against form in order to challenge

structures of power and oppression. Through structural analysis, students begin to understand how poetry seeks to dismantle power structures and create ideological shifts in understandings of those structures as impervious. With an attention to poetic form and its utilization by early twenty-first century poets, students can engage in conversations about prescient issues that affect their daily lives and encounter poets who share their experiences. The urgency of this call has never been more present—in just the first five months of the 2023-2024 academic year, book bans and legislation focused on censoring public school classrooms had already outpaced those for the entire 2022-2023 academic year (PEN America). Educators have a responsibility to ensure that students experience meaningful representation and engage texts that address the issues most relevant to them; there is no more effective method than an engagement with poetic form.

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