

Introduction: poeties

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In calling this issue of the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* “poeties,” we aim to expose a series of hoaxes: among them, the idea that poetry is dead (it’s not), the belief that it belongs to the academy (it doesn’t), and the suspicion that it takes one or another singular shape (it is many, it contradicts itself). “Poetry”—capital P, fixed—centers a cluster of sticky critical terms: “masterpiece,” for example, “canon,” “lyric,” and “close reading,” “ageless,” “artful,” “arresting,” and—yes—“alliterative.” In the plural, however, poeties move around, switch sides, and multiply; they do things, have politics, say more than they know, and are free, like all forms of discourse, to be abysmal, ephemeral, territorial, or tentative. How poeties do this is the subject of the essays that follow.

Like Bruce Smith in his introduction to *PMLA*’s recent issue “On Poetry,” we invoke the term in its radical meaning as poesis, “a making, a made thing,” whose materials—in speech, miked or taped, in print, typed or typeset, or in flickering or flashing pixels—are language and rhythm. Poeties are thinned or thickened language, language on broadsides, billboards, or newspapers, language scrapbooked, staged, or screened. Wordslinging, words lingering, words slinking, linking, inking, even Inc.-ing, poeties include, but are not limited to, found poetry and sound poetry; riddles, charms, spells, and oaths; canonized poetry, magazine poetry, fakes, and doggerel; concrete poetry and ad copy, cheers, couplets, and cantos. The essays that follow take up the cant of the criminal classes (Tiffany), verses on wartime postcards (Nelson), the juvenilia of a failed “poetess” named “Fern Gravel” (Brunner), the puncepts of Sylvia Plath (Clinton), the gangsta rap of *Def Poetry Jam* (Somers-Willett), and, most capaciously, the “‘weird English,’ graffiti ... gnostic

thought-bytes and ... auratic verbal detritus" of localized "micropoetries" (Damon).

In this issue of this journal, however, the term "poetries" has an additional resonance. For our purposes here, it also serves as a portmanteau that packs together the name of a genre—*poetry*—with the name for a set of critical approaches to social phenomena—*cultural studies*. As Michael Davidson points out in the preface to his book *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word*, early Marxist critics such as Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, and Theodor Adorno granted poetry a role in the production and reproduction of social life that all but a few left-oriented cultural studies scholars of the last two decades have ignored (xii). One reason for this is a long-standing agreement to disagree that locks Cultural Studies into a differential relationship with Poetry. In marking their identities by excluding each other, more recent Cultural Studies scholars caricature the genre of Poetry as the repository of mystified concepts—creativity, genius, eternal value, mystery, etc.—ripe for appropriation by right-wing ideologues; Poetry scholars, in their turn, cartoon Cultural Studies as one of a slew of fads from which Poetry's creativity, genius, eternal value, mystery, etc., provide a refuge. This too—and here's our point—is a con: as the contributions to this volume show, "poetries" of all sorts have long been not just active but essential in the production and reproduction of everyday life.

Outside the constriction Charles Bernstein calls "official verse culture"—the domain of old new critics, new new formalists, and participants in the consortium Mark Nowak terms "the American MFA industry"—poetries have been and continue to be wherever the action is. Like the purloined letter, they have been, all the time, under our noses and/or at our ears. If, as Cary Nelson argues in his landmark book *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*, "[w]e no longer know the history of the poetry of the first half of this century; most of us, moreover, do not know that the knowledge is gone" (4), our hope in this issue is to participate in a widening that looks back to the taverns of Elizabethan England and forward to HBO's cable TV and the URLs of the World Wide Web. To borrow Daniel Tiffany's figuration, we aim to make poetries' hidden lives more than an "open secret."

This issue is a celebration of sorts because, as Maria Damon proposes, "some kind of moment has been reached" in the contemporary reevaluation and pluralization of poetry. Such a moment is, however, also and inevitably critical, for to insist on the full range of rhythmic materials as they function within and across cultures is to attack the set of idealizations that constitutes "real poetry"—a.k.a., in some sites, "just poetry" or "only poetry." Joining an unlikely alliance of writers and critics—among them, documentary poets, Language Poets, performance poets, and micropoets, Marxists, cultural materialists, poetic activists, scholars of the history of the book, reception theorists, and new media theorists—we want, with Rachel Blau DuPlessis, to call the "deceiving elf" on the carpet. Poetry has a "naturalized investment in 'the aesthetic'"? It insists on "sincerity, interior realizations, sensibility, epiphany"? It peaks in the eloquences of lyrical humanism? Not—or, more precisely, not necessarily, not only, not always, not, perhaps, most importantly.

The term "poetries" shelters the ode and the (not so self-evidently) odious—the

low, the popular, the vernacular, the vulgar—under the sign of crafted speech and rhythm. If, on the one hand, like Heather Dubrow, we are not interested in throwing out the beauty with the bathwater, we are not, on the other hand, out to normalize or reign in micropoetries and their various unregistered kin. The umbrella term “poetries” covers without conflating, much less obliterating, the imbricated realms of high culture, low culture, and subculture(s). With its coalition of interests in readers and users, makers and machines, performances, social formations, political ideologies, and everyday life, cultural studies is the most viable way not just to expose the hoaxes of Poetry but to reveal the robustness and flexibility of “poetries.”

If Nelson is right—and we think he is—the breadth of the term “poetry” in the first half of the twentieth century in America is not what’s remarkable: what’s remarkable is that we’ve lost sight of it, to say nothing of its predecessors in work songs, vendors’ cries, beggars’ chants, insults, rhymed narratives, and other poetries from the Anglo-Saxon forward. The first of this issue’s two sections, therefore, contains six essays that offer a glimpse of the material awaiting scholarly work driven by or oriented under a broad set of cultural studies assumptions.

In “Enigma Variations: Poetry and Modern Nightlife,” Daniel Tiffany starts us out in the tavern of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*, where—via the topology of the nightclub and the topos of drinking songs, flash talk, curses, and cant—he locates the linguistic and material elements of what will later emerge as an incipient avant-garde. The 1881 opening of the Chat Noir, Paris’s first modern nightclub, and the 1912 christening of London’s Cave of the Golden Calf, the nightclub where Vorticism began, register the commercial conflation of a threatening-yet-titillating nightlife, a criminal underworld, and edgy, often illicit publishing ventures. In such establishments, Tiffany writes, “the alien tongue of the underworld lost some of its insularity and obscurity” even as the artist was integrated “in a deliberately flamboyant manner” Occurring as it does at a crossroads between the staging of a newly-illuminated urban night and the inventive riddling of tavern-talk, this exchange allows Tiffany to propose a theory of “the lyric stanza and its tenuous substance” as ‘a placeless place,’ “open and closed, flagrant and secretive.”

In “Only Death Can Part Us: Messages on Wartime Cards,” Cary Nelson builds on the notion of a “choral poetics” first elaborated in his 2001 study *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left*. Working with an archive of 10,000 postcards, envelopes, and miniature broadsides mailed to and from the fronts during World War I, he argues that the postcards’ mix of popular poetry, public iconography, and personal scrawls creates a “textual microhistory” or “chorus of the ordinary” that demonstrates how soldiers and their loved ones used—and were used by—lyric discourse. Contemporaneous with the Vorticist fulminations of *Blast*, these no-less-complex back-to-back private greetings and public verses allow Nelson to access not just the anxiety attending wartime correspondence but also the cynicism of a bureaucracy that yoked the erotics of wartime love, patriotism, and self-sacrifice to the eloquences of lyrical humanism. In this analysis, Nelson offers a method of reading popular poetry by way of its unoriginality—by way, that is, of the conjunctions that occur “when a dozen people use the same or comparable language” in the communications of everyday life. This substantial, awkward,

poignant, and heretofore overlooked archive positions poetics of “only the most marginal literariness” at the heart of a historically based, politically engaged, and class-conscious cultural studies.

For Edward Brunner in “‘Writing Another Kind of Poetry’: James Norman Hall as ‘Fern Gravel’ in *Oh Millersville!*,” the “marginal literariness” of the poems in an elaborate and successful 1940 “mock-hoax”—poems the author of *Mutiny on the Bounty* passed off as the compositions of a farm girl named “Fern Gravel”—is significant because only “bad” poetry could serve Hall’s ends. Inspired by a Depression-era urge toward documentary, Hall recognized that, Modernist claims to the contrary, traditional genteel forms could best capture Fern’s incipient modern consciousness. In an act of authorial cross-dressing that gives a complex authenticity to what becomes, for Brunner, “a worker narrative about poetic labor and the toil of becoming a poet,” Fern’s halting couplets and quatrains versify details from Hall’s childhood in turn-of-the-century Colfax, Iowa. Taking up such topics as Mrs. Smouse’s visiting cards, the Reverent [sic] Sam Jones’s chautauqua, and the visiting “African boy choir,” these poems create for Brunner a sort of “pocket epic that pretends to be nothing at all, even as it silently, secretly goes about using all the resources of poetry to comment on the limits of American institutions, to sing the praises of the machine and the new technologies, and to sketch a beguiling portrait of a young girl who was most certainly destined to exemplify the New Woman.” As Brunner examines how Fern’s expanding worldview chafes against the outmoded forms available to her, the essay serves to caution us against dismissing “bad” poetics on the basis of what might initially appear to be their formal, thematic, or emotional simplicity.

As Brunner uses the poems of *Oh Millersville!* to look back to rural life at the beginning of the century, in “Sylvia Plath and Electracy” Alan Ramón Clinton uses the poems of *Ariel* to look forward to the digital logic of the century’s end. Plath’s canonical poems, Clinton argues, are not simply the confessions or obsessions of a suicide-to-be but intuitions of the remediated rhetoric of an electronic era. More than a psychological trace or a seductively shifting signifier, the punceptual force of Plath’s keyword “Ariel” creates a circuit between her favorite horse, God’s biblical lioness, Shakespeare’s airy spirit, the aeriels that receive radio waves, and the name of an international communications satellite whose transmissions were interrupted by U.S. atom bomb testing. As theorized by Gregory Ulmer, this conductive way of thinking—Ulmer’s “electracy”—joins personal, historical, political, and technological registers unrelated in inductive or deductive thought. More typical of dreamwork and poetry than traditional logic, such conductivity, Clinton suggests in closing, is crucial because it overcomes the rift between the personal and the global that has, as Bruce Robbins argues, paralyzed the Left in late capitalist culture. “Perhaps,” Clinton speculates, “an understanding of digital technology and the decentered, networked structures of global power arising from it will require that we all become connoisseurs of poetry’s ability to make unexpected connections.”

For Susan Somers-Willett in “*Def Poetry’s* Public: Spoken Word Poetry and the Racial Politics of Going Mainstream” the aggressive marketing of HBO’s *Def Poetry Jam* raises unsettling questions about the consumption of black poetics by white audiences. Like the energetically rhymed criminal slang Tiffany explores, the gangsta

rap that *Def Poetry* performers both cite and critique is a ghetto lingo, but unlike tavern-talk, which is performed for members of an “in” crowd, *Def Poetry*’s cant is produced for variously motivated others—in this case, a largely white male teen audience mesmerized by what it perceives to be a powerful black pose. As Somers-Willett concludes, this poetry affords otherwise marginalized voices a mainstream audience but in the end further marginalizes them through the counter-aggressions of “liberal violence” and “racial voyeurism.” In arguing for the complicated politics of staged and televised poetry, “*Def Poetry*’s Public” also suggests the importance of extending critical attention to poetics that flourish in other commercial venues—among them, advertisements, movies, subway placards, broadcasts, and podcasts.

Not long ago, the poetics these five essays consider would have been difficult if not impossible for the academy to assimilate. In the wake of profound changes in the field of literary studies, however, scholars of poetry can recognize, if not necessarily embrace, both the critical moves these essays make and the materials they bring into view. In “Poetics, Micropoetics, Micropoetics”—part review essay, part meta-commentary on or critique of the term “poetics,” and part ethnographic inquiry—Maria Damon takes an even larger step back from Poetry in order to champion “para-literary instances of expressive culture” that “comprise traces of the ‘poetic’ within the everyday, unworked over.” In doing so, Damon (a.k.a. Made-moiselle Doggerelle) not only admits to having cross-stitched poems but demands creative autonomy for all “furtive and idiosyncratic” practices in the “poetic borderlands.” Such practices, Damon argues, not only de-alienate everyday life (whether linguistically or not) but challenge poetry critics to enact an ethnography that includes those practices. Writing “for the ones with big ears,” Damon’s essay is a clamorous audition of poetry studies—an act of listening—capable of taking do-it-yourself “bicycle bricolage,” MySpace activities, memorial poems, “the smallest bits of linguistic *stuff*,” literary theory, and even this issue’s call for papers as legitimate objects for an expanded scholarly field.

If this reconfiguration of poetry studies constitutes a “moment,” as Damon suggests and this issue affirms, the entries in our concluding “Reading Lines” section are meant to explore its emergent history and texture. Inspired by the “What Are You Reading?” segment of the Modernist Studies Association’s annual meetings, we wrote to a variety of individuals who have made—and continue to make—substantial contributions to studies of Poetry and poetics and asked them to tell us how their recent reading reshapes the interaction between “poetics” and Cultural Studies. The responses we received—lines of communication, ancestral lines, party lines, lines in the sand, even, perhaps, pick-up lines—confirm that under any large rubric it’s possible to differ, firmly and fiercely, on particulars yet assume the importance of the questions under debate.

The most vociferous debate involves the role of the aesthetic, conventionally—and now problematically—the standard measure of poetic value. Like Edward Brunner, for whom the fact that Fern Gravel’s poetry is “abysmal” only sharpens its appeal, many contemporary critics of poetry turn aesthetic analysis from formal to cultural uses. The term “poetics,” we believe, puts to rest two outmoded positions: the notion that materialist or culturalist approaches render issues of aesthet-

ics irrelevant, on the one hand, and, on the other, the notion that aesthetic approaches can or even should bypass a work's cultural context and political or ideological implications. But just how important are aesthetic considerations? Jerome McGann positions the aesthetic as the dominant feature of poetry, while Paula Bennett considers it only part of what we seek in poetry. Heather Dubrow argues that "the aim of challenging a previous generation's putatively uncritical celebration of art has supported a demonizing of aesthetic considerations that do remain significant in their own right and also in fact intriguingly interact with material and cultural vectors." Meta DuEwa Jones seconds this notion when she calls, with Erica Hunt, for "a culturally situated study of poetics." "In the most provocative new writing on poetics," Barrett Watten concludes, "there is a sense that the form as well as the content of critical writing must be informed by the agency and the cultural moment of the work it takes up," but, he insists, "the aesthetic—and more particularly, the poetic—is necessary for any political claim."

Much cultural studies scholarship privileges the popular. What claims, then, can be made for a cultural politics in experimental traditions? The avant-garde, Marjorie Perloff insists, "should be of great interest to readers of this issue." In its "calibrated resistance to normative assumptions about what a poem is and how it operates," DuPlessis argues, *Language Poetry*, in particular, can be seen as an influence ("loosely, largely") on cultural studies readings of poetry. Aldon Nielsen calls for a consideration of poetry *as* cultural studies (rather than culturalist approaches to poetry), noting that "some of our most interesting contemporary poets have been demonstrating how poetic space can itself be a locus of cultural critique." And yet, this said, it is hard not to be haunted by Carrie Noland's description of an avant-garde festival at which a "handful of visitors wander vaguely under a tent ... fingering volumes of experimental poetry" while adjacent bars overflow with fans cheering the World Cup semi-final between France and Brazil.

Whatever its angle of argument, each of these entries foregrounds the political role of poetry in the plural. "It now seems to me," Paula Bennett summarizes, "a most peculiar form of self-blinding that leads so many art and literary historians to ignore (or fail to acknowledge) the vital role that art and poetry played and still plays in public life." Poetry speaks from within a cultural matrix but, Philip Metres argues, articulates a "differential stance to that culture." How then do we understand poetics of political resistance, whether native (for example, American countercultural poetry of the 1960s) or postcolonial (for example, the poetics of El Salvador, South Africa, or Third World national liberation movements)? "How is the lyric subject transformed," Michael Davidson asks, "when we consider it from the standpoint of citizenship or diasporic movement? ... What models might we use to access the shape-shifting and rhizomatic qualities of global forces?"

Just as these reading lines suggest that a Cultural Studies rubric has the capacity to return us in new ways to the topic of aesthetics, so they provide a panorama of contemporary criticism that is engaged in a breathtaking range of discourses. No longer the domain of well-wrought urns and heroic couplets, reading poetics is now an interdisciplinary endeavor to which the subject of trade agreements and cross-border treaties is as appropriate as the study of trends in art history or

developments in popular music, where the history of the book is as pertinent as the history of websites and digitized archives, and where inquiries into authorial agency and subject formation overlap inquiries into the ways in which poetries organize and present information. A pluralized “poetries” produces—and is in turn produced by—a pluralized range of “criticisms.”

Although this issue’s intent is to celebrate poetries’ ongoing vitality, its cover shot is an epitaph from a headstone in Boot Hill cemetery, Tombstone, Arizona:

HERE
LIES
LESTER MOORE
FOUR SLUGS
FROM A 44
NOLES
NO MORE

Reports of the death of poetry have been greatly exaggerated, for, as this epitaph suggests, its less and its more are still very much with us. Poetries’ persistence is audible in lines that might make the most ardent adherents of Poetry roll over in their graves, visible in schema that keep fans lingering under a tent with a chapbook, clickable on MySpace screens, palpable on buses, performed on stage, and present in the rituals of everyday life. Mappable at the many junctions of Poetry and Cultural Studies, poetries offer materials and approaches important to every aspect of contemporary thinking. Here, we say, lies wordslinging—or, perhaps, hear, we say, words lingering. Their less and their more live on.

Works Cited

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