

Introduction

American Poetry since 1945

As Donald Trump was thundering away in November 2015 at a campaign rally in Springfield, Illinois, during his first run for the presidency, viewers noticed something unusual happening over his left shoulder: A young African American woman was holding a book up to her face, reading intently during his speech, to the apparent annoyance of white rally goers seated near her who tried to get her to stop. It was not just any book. To the surprise of many, what this young woman was reading was a volume of poetry: *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine. One of the most critically acclaimed and influential books of poetry to appear in the past several decades, *Citizen* is both a powerful work of art and a searing indictment of systemic racism, which compels us to consider the fraught nature of American citizenship and identity. With its appearance at one of Trump's rallies, a book of poetry, of all things, became a small but pointed act of symbolic disruption and resistance played out on national television.

Rankine's book – like so much poetry since 1945 – builds on and extends the entire tradition of American poetry itself in fascinating ways: As I will discuss near the end of this book, *Citizen* questions what poetry is and can be, expands the possibilities of poetry's subject matter and formal parameters, and explores what it means to be American, to be a citizen, and to be a self in the contemporary world. This surprising appearance of Rankine's best-selling book of poetry also suggests two important things about poetry in the twenty-first century – its enduring power and relevance and its role as a vehicle for cultural critique and social change. In some ways, it can stand as one endpoint for the story this book seeks to tell about American poetry since 1945. As this book will show, over the past seventy years, the genre of poetry as a whole has been tirelessly experimenting, like Rankine, with its own medium and formal possibilities, while simultaneously becoming ever more diverse and inclusive.

Indeed, the period since 1945 represents a particularly rich and exciting chapter in the history of American poetry. This may be surprising to some readers, given that the genre of poetry appears to be less central to our culture today than it was in earlier periods, when poetry was studied extensively in

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school and generally considered one of the pinnacles of high art and learning, and when major poets, like T. S. Eliot, were well-known public figures and arbiters of taste. However, in spite of its decreased visibility in our culture, the poetry produced in the United States since 1945 represents something of a high-water mark for the genre. Filled with a seemingly limitless number of interesting poets and poems, this is a period of great abundance, led by a host of major figures – including household names like Allen Ginsberg and Sylvia Plath and others who play a significant role in the cultural history of the past half century, like Amiri Baraka, Robert Lowell, and Rankine herself – and featuring a wide range of memorable, powerful poetry composed in an almost dizzying variety of forms and styles.

Nevertheless, for many readers, the poetry of our own time remains intimidating – hard to penetrate, off-putting, and inaccessible. The sheer amount of poetry published today can seem daunting, leaving contemporary poetry in the paradoxical situation of being overabundant and underread. One challenge for casual readers is that it can be hard to understand what recent poetry is responding to and what its sources, aims, and goals are. For many, it can seem equally difficult to make one's way through the thicket of voices all clamoring for attention. Without basic coordinates and signposts to assist readers in understanding its innovations with form and content, it can be hard for them to know where to begin with both contemporary poetry and its recent history. To many, poetry can feel obscure and esoteric, the stuff of classroom lectures in college auditoriums rather than an essential part of our ongoing reading life. One aim of this book is to counter that general predisposition by offering both a guide to help readers unlock and understand American poetry's recent past and a map to its current landscape.

To put it succinctly, this *Cambridge Introduction* will tell the story of American poetry's development from 1945 to the present, a time of rapid and dislocating change for American culture at large and dramatic shifts within the art form of poetry. By exploring the major poets, movements, and landmark poems at the heart of this era, this book presents a new version of the history of American poetry that takes into account its variety and breadth, its recent evolution in the new millennium, its ever-increasing diversity, and its ongoing engagement with politics and culture. Combining close readings of a wide range of representative poems with detailed discussion of historical, political, and aesthetic contexts, this book aims to give readers both a thorough grounding in the history of post-1945 American poetry and the tools to appreciate an especially fascinating and varied body of writing. This book also seeks to help readers better make sense of the wildly diverse poetries of our own epoch, of *today*.

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In presenting this rich period of poetry, my goal is to appeal to a variety of audiences at once: undergraduate and graduate students and other general readers who may be unfamiliar with or intimidated by contemporary poetry, or poetry in general; scholars who focus on different or adjacent fields of study or those who wish to brush up on the field for teaching purposes; and poets who wish to go more deeply into the recent history of their art. At the same time, I also aim to provide a helpful new account for fellow specialists, one that reflects recent developments in scholarship and offers a new view of our field from the vantage point of the current moment.

What follows is not intended to be a monolithic history or exhaustive survey of this field. In my effort to give narrative form to a huge and unruly period and body of writing, I inevitably shape it according to my own inclinations, taste, and biases, highlighting poets and movements that I find particularly valuable, compelling, and lasting. In other words, this book provides merely one out of many possible versions of this story. That said, I have tried to offer a multifaceted and capacious account of American poetry's development over the past seventy-five years, taking into account a variety of traditions, aesthetic predispositions, poetic communities, and subject positions.

Considering the period with a wide-angle lens, one can detect a general trend over the span covered by this book toward greater freedom and openness in poetry, accompanied by important shifts in the institutions that produce and circulate poems (which will also be a recurring theme in what follows). This has resulted in a dramatic reshaping and widening of the canon, fueled by the inclusion of new voices and identities within the world of poetry; it also means that the old historical narratives and frameworks scholars and readers have used to make sense of the period are less useful and rigid than they once were. Indeed, as this book will argue, the decentering of white male literary authority and explosion of diverse voices is one of the most exciting and notable aspects of American poetry since World War II, so it will stay close to the surface in what follows.

Furthermore, even as the focus of this book remains trained on *American* poetry, I am mindful that the very idea of "America" as a bounded entity and concept has been thrown into question by globalization and interrogated by scholarship across the disciplines, not least in literary studies. Nonetheless, I have chosen to confine my discussion primarily to poetry written by authors born in the United States (and writing mainly in English) as one way to encompass an otherwise unmanageably large field, but I do so while remaining aware of all the attendant problems of national boundaries and the treatment of nationalities as fixed categories. Indeed, questions about what America *is* and what it means to *be* "American" are central themes for

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many of the poets discussed in what follows, whether it appears in the work of Latinx poets blending Spanish and English in order to critique monolingualism and rigid concepts of nationality, or black poets exposing the ugly truths of white supremacy at the core of America's own bedrock ideals, or Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg skewering the jingoistic, militaristic fervor of American nationalism. Though my focus remains on American poetry, I think it is important to remember the cosmopolitanism and internationalism of this period's poetry.¹ In other words, this book acknowledges the porous boundaries and transnational circuits underlying any conception of American poetry, especially in the period under discussion, which has been marked by unprecedented globalization and dramatic upheavals in how we conceive of national, racial, and ethnic identities.

To help draw together the disparate materials and strands that make up this complex and variegated period, throughout this book, I argue that at the heart of American poetry since 1945 pulse three central, overlapping themes and issues that poets grapple with in a wide variety of ways: *self*, *language*, and *culture*. Although these may seem rather self-evident as concerns for literature, I argue that these three guiding concepts are particularly salient preoccupations during the period under consideration, and as such, can serve as especially useful lenses to help readers better understand post-1945 American poetry and its chief preoccupations and innovations.

As we will see in all the chapters that follow, each of these areas of concern is put in question, or even thrown into crisis, during this period, so I want to briefly preview them here. Within the general category of "self," this book will argue that post-1945 poetry is driven by a series of vexing questions about the nature of identity, mind, consciousness, and the relationship between poetry and autobiography. Fostered by new developments in Freudian psychology, new understandings of the brain and human consciousness, and the interrogation of subjectivity and the social construction of the self in philosophy and theory (from existentialism to post-structuralism to posthumanism), contemporary poets examine the nature of selfhood and ponder whether the self is a coherent, fixed entity, is inherently unstable and changeable, or is merely a fiction or function of discourse and language. Over the course of this book, I will frequently assess how different poets either move toward and away from various forms of "personal" or "impersonal" poetry, debate the merits of relying on a central "I" or singular voice, explore how selfhood is shaped by identity categories like gender, race, ethnicity, and class, or take up philosophical

¹ For important recent studies that explore the transnational nature of twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry, see Feinsod and Hunter.

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and psychological debates about subjectivity and identity. We will consider why contemporary poets become so invested in probing childhood memory and trauma, exploring the influence of family relations on the individual, representing the workings of the mind and consciousness, and exploring tense relationships between self and other, individual and community.

Within the general category of “language,” this book will consider why poets of this period so often wrestle with the nature of language as a medium and questions about representation and literary form. In conjunction with the linguistic turn in modern philosophy and literary theory, many poets during this period are preoccupied with philosophical questions about language, regarding issues such as the fraught relationship between verbal representations and the “real” and debates about meaning, indeterminacy, and the politics of language. In terms of form, I will return frequently to the ongoing tensions between poetic convention and formal experimentation in poetry of this period; new ideas about how content relates to poetic form; and the period’s widespread adoption of playful, experimental, and challenging aesthetic strategies (including collage, appropriation, minimalism, the use of constraints and procedural poetics, parody and pastiche, and so on). I will also explore heated debates over the politics of poetic form versus content that recur throughout this era, as poets argue over whether poems must address explicitly topical subject matter in order to have political meaning and force or if experimental formal features can be subversive in their own right.

Within the category of “culture,” this book will consider further questions about poetry and politics. How do post-1945 poets wrestle with their art form’s always vexing relationship with culture and history? In contrast to the modernism that preceded it – or at least to the myth that modernist poetry prized the self-contained autonomy of art and wished to transcend the fray of politics and ideology – postwar poetry begins to conceive of the relationship between art and politics in quite different terms, as writers increasingly come to see poetry as a tool for cultural and political critique. As Adrienne Rich, a leading poet of the period, will write in the 1960s, “Poetry never stood a chance / of standing outside history” (*Fact* 325). In all the chapters that follow, we will see that post-1945 poets respond directly to specific historical events and crises, from McCarthyism to the war in Vietnam, from the murder of Emmett Till to 9/11, from Allen Ginsberg telling Cold War America to “go fuck yourself with your atom bomb” to the black poet Terrance Hayes’s lament in the age of Trump: “America’s struggle with itself / Has always had people like me at the heart of it” (*Collected* 146; *American Sonnets* 74). We will see how post-1945 poets often compose poems that lament the costs of institutional racism, critique American foreign policy and militarism, expose the evils of misogyny

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and homophobia, explore the pleasures and pitfalls of living in a culture of consumption and commodities, and deplore the invasion of neoliberal capitalism into every facet of daily life.

These three interconnected themes and preoccupations are hardly the only issues of importance to post-1945 American poetry, but they do surface repeatedly and in fascinating ways. I have threaded these concerns throughout this book because I think that considering how a given poem navigates questions related to the self, language, and culture can be a very useful starting point for understanding the work in question and assessing its goals and achievements and how it fits into the big picture of American poetry since World War II. Although the discussion of these categories will at times be more submerged in my account and at times more explicit, they will be operative and in play throughout every section of the forthcoming chapters.

From Modernist to Contemporary Poetry

The rest of this book will go into much more detail about how American poetry evolves throughout this period and will chart the significant developments, movements, and turning points in poetry since 1945. For now, I would like to offer a brief and general introduction to the period, and an outline of its main features, beginning with its strong reaction to the poetry that preceded it.²

As with any literary period, to really understand post-1945 American poetry, it is very important to have a good sense of what it is responding to and rebelling against. In this case, that means having some familiarity with modernism, the movement that dominated the first half of the twentieth century and cast such a long shadow over the second half. While this book will not discuss modernism in detail, it will stress that post-1945 poetry is rooted in a powerful reaction to modernism and the group of towering figures at the heart of modernist poetry.³ This generation of poets, who are born between the 1870s and 1900 and whose work begins to appear in the first two decades of the twentieth-century, includes such famous names as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, H. D., Mina Loy, D. H. Lawrence, W. H. Auden,

² For some of the most important and useful of the many excellent critical works on post-1945 American poetry, see works by Altieri, Ashton, Breslin, Burt, Davidson, Golding, Keller, Nielsen, Perloff, Rasula, Vendler, Von Hallberg, and Yu.

³ The scholarly literature on modernism is too vast to encompass in a footnote, but for a useful introduction to the field, see Pericles Lewis's *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*.

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Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, and Hart Crane. Alongside this remarkable Anglo-American tradition are a long list of key modernist poets writing in languages other than English, like Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Guillaume Apollinaire, André Breton, Rainer Maria Rilke, Federico García Lorca, César Vallejo, and Vladimir Mayakovsky.

To put it bluntly, modernism refers to a broad, international movement across the arts that responded in forceful ways to the widespread sense that modernity constitutes a moment of rupture and crisis. As the nineteenth century progressed, Western culture had attempted to navigate the destabilizing shocks of the industrial revolution and urbanization, growing secularism and challenges to traditional religion (embodied in earth-shattering developments like the introduction of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution), and rapid technological changes that fostered a sense that modern life had become increasingly sped up and chaotic. Together, these forces brought about a profound crisis of faith and belief. In the early years of the twentieth century, writers and intellectuals felt sure that they were on the cusp of a new world that was utterly unlike the past. Virginia Woolf famously pinpointed the moment of irrevocable transformation when she wrote: "On or about December 1910, human character changed." The cataclysmic global event of World War I (1914–18) seemed to represent an even sharper breaking point between the old world and a terrifyingly uncertain future and only exacerbated the belief that old forms of order and meaning had collapsed or were simply no longer viable. W. B. Yeats indelibly captured this mood in his apocalyptic modernist poem "The Second Coming": "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold" (Ramazani, Vol. 1, 111).

Faced with this disorienting, fragmented world, now stripped of its former assurances, foundations, and religious consolations, modernists declared that inherited literary conventions and aesthetic structures were hopelessly outdated and stale. Convinced that old, familiar modes of representation – such as the realist novel, the perfectly rendered landscape or portrait, or poetic forms like rhyme and meter – were no longer capable of addressing the realities of modern life, they were restless to "make it new," as Ezra Pound put it in a famous modernist rallying cry. In their attempt to make it new, modernist writers, painters, and composers – from Joyce and Woolf to Picasso to Stravinsky – experiment with radical new methods of capturing the complexity and sped-up chaos of the modern world.

This explains, in part, why modernists tend to be so drawn to fragmentation and flux. At the same time, many hope art and poetry might provide "a momentary stay against confusion," to borrow Robert Frost's memorable definition of poetry – in other words, new forms of order and ballast, even

fictive or temporary ones, that could serve as a bulwark against disintegration (Ramazani, Vol. 1, 985). Thus, when Eliot famously writes “these fragments I have shored against my ruins” at the end of the extraordinarily jumbled mosaic that is “The Waste Land,” he expresses the common modernist wish that gathering the bits and pieces of a disintegrating world might help stave off chaos and collapse, even if only briefly and provisionally (Ramazani, Vol. 1, 487). At times, for some modernists, this sense of loss and crisis can turn into a nostalgia for the past, or a backward-looking, conservative desire for the kinds of stability and order once provided by religion and authority – an outlook that links some strains of modernism (though certainly not all) with conservative or right-wing politics.

For all the variety to be found in modernist poetry, the desire to “make it new” gives rise to certain concerns and poetic techniques that run across a wide range of poetry. In terms of content, modernist poetry insists that poetry must attend to the stuff of modern life, from airplanes, skyscrapers, cinema, and jazz to modern urban alienation, twentieth-century warfare, and newly unsettled gender roles. They also turn away from grand subjects and heroic figures and train their attention instead on the lowly, ordinary stuff of daily life – as when Eliot evokes “the smell of steaks in passageways” or William Carlos Williams compels us to notice a red wheelbarrow glazed with rain-water next to some white chickens or the way shards of broken glass suddenly shine in an alley behind a hospital (Ramazani, Vol. 1, 466). In reaction to what they viewed as the excessive personal emotion and sentimentality of Romantic and Victorian poetry, modernist poets (led by Eliot) argued that poetry should be impersonal rather than autobiographical, tough and hard-edged, unsentimental, anti-romantic, and ironic.

In terms of form, modernist poets embrace fragmentation, and compose poems that can often feel like “a heap of broken images” or a patchwork of different voices, images, and fragments (Eliot, Ramazani Vol. 1, 474). Collage – the stitching together of disparate materials often taken from different sources – becomes a key tool. Modernist poetry (especially under the influence of the movement known as Imagism) also insists on the importance of particular, concrete images, and on the idea that a poem should show, rather than tell, using specific, objective imagery to convey emotion and ideas rather than the direct statement of personal feelings. “Go in fear of abstractions,” Pound warned, an idea also at the heart of Williams’s famous credo “No ideas but in things” (Ramazani Vol. 1, 930; 304).

Another distinctive feature of modernist poetry is its use of compression, omission, and elision; modernist poets strip away extra words and editorial commentary (“use no superfluous word,” Pound declared), sometimes

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resulting in radically brief, minimalist poems like Pound's famous two-line poem "In a Station of the Metro" or Williams's 16-word piece "The Red Wheelbarrow," sometimes in longer poems that leave out explanations or leap between images or passages without clear connections between disparate parts (Ramazani, Vol. 1, 930). Especially in its "high modernist" phase associated with Eliot and Pound, modernist poetry is also highly allusive and polyglot (that is, filled with a mixture of languages), often incorporating quotations and allusions to a wide range of literary (and nonliterary) sources, both in English and in foreign languages. They also draw on stories and images from ancient myth to create parallels between modernity and antiquity, as part of their effort to take the vast storehouse of Western and Eastern literary tradition and make it new by resuscitating and updating it. All these traits combine to make modernist poetry notoriously difficult and challenging, as it demands a careful, active, and erudite reader, while also leaving it open to charges of elitism and snobbery.

Modernist poetry broke so much new ground and was so powerful and innovative that it cast an enormous shadow over the poets who are the subject of this book, those who began to publish in the period just after modernism's peak. The poet Randall Jarrell, a prominent member of what came to be known as the "middle generation" that followed in the wake of the modernists, wondered "How can poems be written that are more violent, more disorganized, more obscure, more – supply your adjective – than those that have already been written?" (Jarrell, *Kipling* 48). As Jarrell suggests, many poets who came of age in the 1940s and 1950s felt a pervasive sense of belatedness, a feeling that the big revolution had already occurred and there was little room left to do anything truly new and not simply derivative. This feeling was exacerbated by the fact that in the period after World War II many of the leading poets of the modernist generation were still alive and going strong, still publishing some of their major works, such as Williams's *Paterson* and Pound's *Pisan Cantos*. Nearly every poet who begins writing in the period after World War II feels the need to position him or herself in relation to these "canonized revolutionaries," whether building on their achievements, paying homage to their genius, parodying their styles, or attempting to escape their influence (Breslin 2).

For reasons of space and cohesiveness, this introduction to poetry since 1945 will not focus on modernist or late modernist poets (like the Objectivists such as Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen) – despite the fact that some of its central figures continued to produce major work long after the starting point of this study – beyond noting that they exert a powerful influence on the new poetry of the postwar period. My focus in this book will primarily be on poets

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born in the 1910s and 1920s or later: those who come of age in the 1940s and beyond, and whose first major works appear after 1945.

Even though they must struggle under the heavy weight of modernism, the poets who begin to publish after 1945 do manage to develop exciting, groundbreaking styles, forms, and movements in poetry that can be seen as both growing out of and moving away from the modernism that precedes them. For instance, where modernism stressed the need for poetry to be impersonal, post-1945 poetry generally (with many exceptions) swings in the other direction, turning inward to explore the self and identity, insisting that the poet's own life – including the poet's own personal traumas, mental illness, and sexuality – can be the focus on poetry. While modernism had generally turned its attention to the small-scale and ordinary stuff of daily life, postwar poetry extends this interest in the everyday but often takes it to an extreme – frequently insisting on the ordinary, unromantic *dailiness* of the everyday rather than describing moments of epiphany that lift one out of it. Postwar poetry goes even further in exploiting the resources of colloquial language, slang, and vernacular speech, cultivating an even more conversational and relaxed voice for poetry; it also deploys looser, more organic forms, viewing the poem as an exploratory space open to chance, accident, and the flux of experience. Some postwar poets take the modernist interest in fragmentation and collage even further, embracing the jumble of disparate bits and pieces and voices without any irritable reaching after order as a protective shield against one's "ruins." One can also detect a general shift in temperament and philosophy: To speak in general terms, the modernist faith in or hunger for "order" and certainty gives way to a more postmodernist acceptance of chaos, indeterminacy, and randomness.

In contrast to the general modernist disdain or ironic stance toward "low" culture, post-1945 poets are much more likely to embrace and revel in pop culture and mass media, including movies, television, and, later, the experiences of the digital age. Post-1945 poetry also stands in opposition to some strains of modernism that emphasize the autonomy of the artwork and its distance from the messy realities of contemporary history. By contrast, this body of poetry is often more directly responsive to politics and current events, attending to the unfolding political crises and debates of its own moment – for instance, poets compose powerful poems about the tragic events of the Civil Rights era, protest against wars in Vietnam or Iraq or caustically critique sexism and rigid gender roles. Furthermore, to reiterate a claim I made earlier, one of the most distinctive features of this period, is the ever-increasing diversity and variety of voices contributing to American poetry, as writing by poets of color begins to flourish and forever alter the landscape of poetry.