

Sachin C. Ketkar
 Professor, Department of English,
 Faculty of Arts, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda
 Vadodara, Gujarat

Self-Portrait in a broken Mirror: Reflections on 21st Century American Poetry

Self-Portrait of Librarian with T.S. Eliot's Papers

By Alison C. Rollins

In the year 2020, T.S. Eliot's papers will be unsealed.
 Let us go then, you and I. Let us take the dust in
 our claws, lap the hundreds of letters spilling secrets
 into the wasteland of our irreverent mouths.
 Have we no couth? Have we not been trained
 to know good things come to those who wait?
 Each year we gather round the cave. We don our Sun-
 day best, come to see what young muse has risen
 from the dead. Tomorrow brings the past wrapped
 in plastic eggs, the seal of history broken in present tense.
 Storage units preserve our culture's haunted houses.
 The canon is merely a ghost story. Write a poem *after* me
 before I'm gone, and please do not include *rest in peace*;
 only those who are forgotten go undisturbed, only things
 kept in the dark know the true weight of light.

Alison C. Rollins's poem 'Self-Portrait of a Librarian with T.S. Eliot's Paper' from her debut collection *Library of Small Catastrophes* (2019) is a remarkable one. It reveals not only the irreverent, sarcastic and parodic attitude of a young contemporary poet towards the long dead canonical white modernist poet who wrote in the beginning of the previous century, but also reveals the mysterious place of 'tradition' for a black woman individual talent writing (herself a librarian) in the second decade of the twenty-first century America.

The muse in the poem refers to the collection of more than one thousand letters from the US-born Nobel laureate to his close friend Emily Hale which was to open for research at Princeton University Library in 2020. By the time the seal of history was broken in contemporary moment and past came in wrapped in a plastic egg, the canon had become a ghost and culture a haunted house. The speaker desires to be canonical and not forgotten and hence does not want to be 'rested in peace' and be disturbed by later generation. Black woman poet's desire to be canonized and remembered, even before her death ("write a poem after me/ before I am gone") seem to resurrect the ghosts of exhausted debates on 'tradition

and the individual talent' in the beginning of the twentieth century, and Harold Bloom's (in) famous 'anxiety of influence' and his diatribe against the multiculturalist academic politics and 'the school of resentment' in *The Western Canon* (1994) towards the turn of the twenty-first century.

While the poem reveals its distance in time, history as well as poetics from the famous dead white modernist poet referred, it also reveals, in certain sense, the distance covered from so-called 'postmodern' phase in American poetry which probably lasted till late nineteen eighties – a phase that can be represented by a well-known ekphrastic poem 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' (1974) written by another famous dead white poet John Ashbery¹. The modernist classic ekphrastic poem is 'Self-Portrait: The Old Shepherd' by William Carlos Williams- a dead white male- in his famous sequence "Pictures from Brueghel" (1960)².

While surfing the internet, I came across around 80 or more poems by a wide assortment of American poets using the device of using 'self-portrait' in the title, most of the poets are from the twenty-first century. Apart from the famous John Ashbery 1974 poem, I came across poems with this title by renowned and established poets like Gerald Stern ("Self-Portrait", 1975), Derek Walcott ('Self-Portrait', 1980), Emily Grosholz ("Egon Schiele's Self Portraits", 1984), Jorie Graham ("Self-Portrait as Both Parties" and "Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persephone", 1985, "Self Portrait as Hurry and Delay", 1986)), David Graham ("Self-Portrait with Stage Fright", "Self-Portrait with Nostalgia", and "Self-Portrait with Self Doubt", 1986), Robert Creeley (Self-Portrait, 1991), Joanna Rawson ("Self-Portraits by Frida Kahlo", 1992) and Frank Bidart ("Self-Portrait, 1969", 1997). Rest of all the poems with 'self-portrait' in the title - around seventy or more- were published in the twenty-first century.

Many prominent contemporary American poets today engage with visual arts and the trope of self-portrait remains important in their works. For instance, Robin Coste Lewis 's "The Ark: Self-Portrait as Aphrodite Using Her Dress for a Sail, xxx", "The Ark: Self-Portrait as Aphrodite Using Her Dress for a Sail, ii" and "Self-Portrait as the Bootblack in Daguerre's Boulevard du Temple" from her 2022 collection *To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness*, Henri Cole's "Self-portrait in a Gold Kimono", "Self-Portrait as the Red

¹ See Michael Davidson essay "Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem" (1983) and David Sweet's "'And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name": John Ashbery, the Plastic Arts, and the Avant-Garde" (1998) for discussion on Ashbery and postmodern ekphrastic poetry.

² See Mary Ann Caws, "A Double Reading by Design: Breughel, Auden, and Williams" (1983) for a theoretical reading of a modernist ekphrastic poetry.

Princess”, ‘ Self-portrait with Hornets’, and “ Self Portrait with Red Eyes” from his selected poems *Pierce the Skin* (2010) , Kathleen Graber’s “ Self-Portrait with No Internal Navigation”, “ Self-Portrait with *The Sleeping Man*”, “ Self-Portrait with No Shadow”, “Self-Portrait in Suspension” and “ Self Portrait with Moon” in her collection *The River Twice* (2019) , Cynthia Cruz ‘s collection like *The Glimmering Room* (2012), Diane Seuss’s collection *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl* (2018) , Dean Rader’s collection *Self-Portrait as a Wikipedia Entry* (2017) . There are several individual poems by Jane Hirshfield (“Late Self-Portrait by Rembrandt” , 2003), Roger Reeves (“ Self-Portrait As Vincent Van Gogh in the Asylum at Arles” , 2011) , David Roderick (“Self-Portrait as David Lynch”, “Self-Portrait as David Hockney” , 2013 and “ Selfie”, 2018) , Ocean Vuong (“Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds” , 2016) , Chen Chen, (“ Self-Portrait as So Much Potential” ,2017), Aimee Nezhukumatathil (“Self-Portrait as C-Section Scar”, 2018), Deborah Pardez (“Self-Portrait in the Year of the Dog” and “Self-Portrait in the Time of Disaster”, 2020), A.D. Lauren-Abunassar’s Self Portrait as My Father (Trying to Use Siri) (Filling the Time), 2020), and Yuxi Liln (“ Self-Portrait as a Masturbator”, 2023) are some of the prominent examples of the device. It is possible that this device is a common one taught in the creative writing programs that many of these poets either undertake or teach.

I intend to show that the face of the protagonist in the late twentieth century American poetry of self-portraiture was mostly that of a white person – the face of John Ashberry, Frank Bidart, Jorie Graham, Robert Creeley, David Graham, and Emily Grosholz, the faces reflected today are largely markedly multiracial, multiethnic and gender-fluid. This shift is correlated to the shift in the very definition of who an American is and can become the representative face of America today. It cannot continue being the white male protagonist of the American narratives posing as a racially, unmarked, natural and universal American (himself an immigrant, a settler colonizer, and ex-slave owner). The broken mirror is the mirror of heterogeneity, chaos and conflict. If the self-portraiture involves looking into a mirror and identifying with it as the self, then this process of identification is essentially a process of misidentification and misrecognition as Jacques Lacan famously theorized in *Ecrits*. Not just that, the mirror used to portrait the self in American poetry in the late twentieth century was largely analogue mirror, now in the twenty-first century today, it has become digital.

While self-portrait is a popular self-reflexive genre in visual art³, in poetry it can be ekphrastic⁴ – inspired by actual or imagined paintings- but it works more broadly as a metaphor for a lyrical composition that preoccupies overtly or covertly, sincerely or playfully, with autobiographical self-reflection, self-portraiture and self-representation. In fact, as Peter Barry notes, the Greek roots *ek* and *phrasis* in combination imply 'speaking out' or 'out-speaking', which can also bear the connotation that what the poem speaks of lies unambiguously 'outside' the poem, rather than within the poet's imagination, even though it is not in the 'real' world, but in the parallel universe of art (155). This implies that *ekphrasis* as a generic label can be broadened to indicate the larger process of 'expression' and self-expressivity and artistic self-reflexivity in the poems of self-portraiture.

Historically, this preoccupation is a distinctly Romantic, and modern tendency in western civilization, it is closely associated with narcissism and humanistic bourgeois individualism. The later self-representational writings of the twentieth century sought to displace this bourgeois individualism by experimenting with masks, myths and dramatic monologues during the modernist phase and language-centred writings of the postmodernist phase informed by philosophies of structuralism, semiotics and deconstruction, thus underscoring the fact that the question of modern individual subject and its relation to symbolic expressive forms is a crucial historical problem. Hence, in order to appreciate the poetics and politics of lyrical self-portraiture, it is necessary to situate this contemporary trend in a larger literary and cultural context of American history and poetic self-representation.

Renowned historian of American literature and poetry Richard Gray says “In the global marketplace, it may well be America that is now the biggest item on sale; in a postcolonial world, it equally well may be that the imagination has now been colonized by the United States. But the United States itself has become what Ishmael Reed has called “the first universal nation” (367). If world literature is a global marketplace, American literature and poetry may be the biggest item on sale and if in a postcolonial world such as ours, our imagination has now been colonized by the United States, mostly through its glossy superbly-

³ See James Hall's *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*. (2014).

⁴ Ekphrasis is a well-discussed field. See Murray Krieger's *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992), James A.W. Heffernan's *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (1994). More recent works are Barbara K. Fischer's *Museum mediations: reframing ekphrasis in contemporary American poetry* (2006), Emily Bilman's *Modern Ekphrasis* (2013), and Maria-Eirini Panagiotidou's *the Poetics of Ekphrasis A Stylistic Approach* (2022)

wrapped popular culture, it becomes necessary to critically examine the history of recent American poetry.

I intend here to provide a brief overview to the historical trajectory of American poetry after World War II till date in order to situate contemporary moment in its historical context and argue that one cannot understand the 21st century American poetry without understanding this history and its tradition in the previous century, and also that one of the most important transformative phenomenon that has altered American poetry in the twenty-first century is the phenomenon of post-1989 globalization.

Elsewhere I have researched how globalization has transformed post-nineties Marathi poetry (Ketkar, 2021), the poetry at the peripheries of the globalized world literary polysystem and semiosphere. In this essay I intend to study how the processes of globalization have transformed the semiosphere of American poetry –the poetry of the most central cultural spaces of world literary systems from within- as an instance of studying world literature inside out. In some abstract way, the processes and poetics of contemporary American poetry have also become isomorphic to other peripheral literary spaces as well due to globalization, though the historical context of its reception remains the key marker of difference between the American poetry and the other poetries of the world today.

Self-Portraits in American Literary Mirror (mostly White and Convex)

The questions of autobiographical self-representation, along with individualistic and narcissistic self-preoccupation have remained particularly significant to history of American poetry starting with the Founding Fathers and Mothers of American Poetry like Walt Whitman (1819 – 1892) and Emily Dickinson (1830 –1886) who inaugurated the project of developing a modern and *distinctive* national poetic tradition based on the democratic politics and authentic self-disclosure, and pronounced individualism⁵. American poetry right from the beginning disclose the inherent tension and between the loud political and prophetic

⁵ Stephen Matterson points out that the term was first used by Alexis De Tocqueville who considered this humanistic philosophy as being central to American thought and attitudes. Matterson also notes that while individualism emerged in England in the 18th century, it found its fullest expression in the United States where as a broadly Protestant concept, it is often seen as part of Puritanism's legacy and is enshrined in the American Constitution and the Bill of Rights which safe guard personal protection and individual responsibility (107-108)

voice of Whitman with the quiet and meditative inwardness of lyrical subjectivity found in Dickinson.

The individualistic and non-conformist tendencies are also central to the globally influential modernist poetry of Ezra Pound (1885 –1972), T.S. Eliot (1888 - 1965), William Carlos Williams (1883 –1963), Hilda Doolittle (1886 –1961), Wallace Stevens (1879 –1955), Marianne Moore (1887 – 1972) and Gertrude Stein (1874 –1946) which reacted sharply against sentimental subjectivism of Romanticism which had become clichéd and disconnected from social, cultural and political realities of early twentieth century western culture. The most famous articulation of this tendency is the case made for impersonality, oblique expressivity, and neo-classicism by Eliot and Pound in their critical writings, thereby attempting to redefine the relationship between art and the life of the author. The continental avant-garde poetics of imagism, surrealism, primitivism and cubism deeply influenced the poetics of these poets. Nevertheless, as Albert Gelpi observes the break from Romanticism and Victorianism that the modernist sought was not absolute and the key to Modernism resides, “in its attempt, in the wake of declining faith and debunked reason and decadent Romanticism, to affirm the imagination as the supreme human faculty of cognition for (and against) a secular, sceptical age”.

Reaction against the poetics of impersonality, masks, myths and neo-classicism embodied in the Eliot-Pound school of modernist avant-garde came to be felt in the agonizingly personal post-World War II poetry of Robert Lowell (1917 –1977), Elizabeth Bishop (1911 –1979), Sylvia Plath (1932 -1963), Anne Sexton (1928 – 1974) , W. D. Snodgrass (1926 – 2009), and John Berryman (1914 – 1972). This early Cold War period poetry was labelled as ‘confessional’ poetry by critics like ML Rosenthal. Gelpi notes that this reaction is a characteristic of first generation postmodernist poets after World War II. It is important to note that it is the question of self-representation and expressivity that is self-portraiture that seems to be a crucial point of disagreement between the so-called ‘confessional’ poets and their modernist precursors.

However, there were other trends at work which were more conservative. For instance, one can consider the highly popular and influential poetry of Robert Frost (1874 – 1963) and W. H. Auden (1907 – 1973), the famous British poet who became American citizen. Mention must also be made of ‘The Fugitives’ a group of Southern critics and poets

who contributed to a literary magazine of poetry and criticism named *The Fugitive* published at Vanderbilt University in Nashville from 1922 until 1925 which included the faculty as well as students of this university, like Randall Jarrell (1914 – 1965), John Crowe Ransom (1888 – 1974), Allen Tate (1899 – 1979), Robert Penn Warren (1905 – 1989). Their criticism- more popularly known in academia as New Criticism -has left a deep impression of the development of literary criticism and also poetics that inspired many poets (see Epstein, 15-27 for further discussion of the poetics and practices of the Fugitives). The emphasis on ‘intentional fallacy’ by their major critics resonates with Eliot’s famous theory of impersonality. Their poetics became mainstream and institutionalized, along with the poetics of modernism; the later avant-garde poetry grew in opposition to the institutionalized poetics of New Criticism and were celebrated in the internationally influential anthology *The New American Poetry 1945–1960* edited by Donald Allen published in 1960.

The New American Poetry and After

Allen’s anthology claimed to consist of ‘the third generation’ modernist poets after the Eliot-Stevens-Pound generation and Elizabeth Bishop’s generation. Allen famously grouped the poetry of the period in three broad, often overlapping groupings: the New York School, the Black Mountain School, and the Beats along with the poets of no fixed geographical location. Nevertheless, some of the most important American poets of the twentieth century defy easy classification, for instance, poets like Charles Simic (1938 – 2023) and the poets like Theodore Roethke (1908 – 1963,) Stanley Kunitz (1905 – 2006), James Wright (1927 – 1980), A. R. Ammons (1926 – 2001), John Hollander (1929 – 2013), J. D. McClatchy (1945 – 2018) and the recent Nobel Laureate Louise Glück (1943 – 2023).

Post-nineteen sixties, a movement called ‘Ethnopoetics’ conceptualized by poets and scholars like Jerome Rothenberg (1931-) and Dennis Tedlock is remarkable instance of transcultural and transnational engagements. In Tedlock’s words, the movement seeks “to hear and read the poetries of distant others, outside the Western tradition as we know it now” (Ethnopoetics on Poets.org). Outstanding poets of earlier generation like Charles Simic (1938–2023), and younger poets like Illya Kaminsky (1977-) can also be understood as exhibiting non-American almost East European sensibility, while Willis Barnstone (1927-) and his son Tony Barnstone are notable for their deep engagements with eastern cultures. This can also be considered as a precursor to what Michael Davidson terms as ‘cosmopoetics’

a sensibility produced by the processes of globalization that transcends simple nation-states or national cultural identities (“Introduction”, 606).

Rothenberg, along with poet Robert Kelly (1935 –) is also associated with the notion of ‘Deep Image’ drawn from continental modernist poetics. Poets loosely associated with Deep Image poetry, apart from Rothenberg are renowned translator-poets like W. S. Merwin (1927–2019) and Robert Bly (1926 – 2021). Also, poets like William Stafford (1914 – 1993), Galway Kinnell (1927 – 2014), Louis Simpson (1923 – 2012), Mark Strand (1934–2014), and Charles Wright (1935 –). David Caplan has observed that two seemingly contradictory characteristics mark the American poetic project: to create a distinctively American poetic based on the assumption that American experience and American language is distinct from those of other nations on one hand, and a deep engagement with transnational and transcultural developments and influences (1) and the above-mentioned poets embody this paradoxical feature.

The label “San Francisco Renaissance” is used to refer to writers and intellectuals around San Francisco Bay Area after the World War II. Along with Kenneth Rexroth (1905 – 1982), Robert Duncan who was associated with the Black Mountain poets is also an important member of this group. Earlier the 1930s, Rexroth was associated with ‘the Objectivists’, a mostly New York group gathered around important poets Louis Zukofsky (1904 – 1978) and George Oppen (1908 – 1984). James Merrill (1926 – 1995), He also influenced a movement intertwined with San Francisco Renaissance labelled famously as ‘the Beats’. The Beats Movement centred in the bohemian artist communities of San Francisco’s North Beach, Los Angeles’ Venice West, and New York City’s Greenwich Village, comprised of writers like Allen Ginsberg (1926 – 1997), Gary Snyder (1930 –), Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919 – 2021), Jack Kerouac (1922 – 1969), Gregory Corso (1930 – 2001) and Everett LeRoi Jones who renamed himself as Amiri Baraka (1934 – 2014).

As Britannica entry notes, its adherents, “ self-styled as “beat” (originally meaning “weary,” but later also connoting a musical sense, a “beatific” spirituality, and other meanings) and derisively called “beatniks,” expressed their alienation from conventional, or “square,” society by adopting a style of dress, manners, and “hip” vocabulary borrowed from jazz musicians. They advocated personal release, purification, and illumination through the heightened sensory awareness that might be induced by drugs, jazz, sex, or the disciplines of

Zen Buddhism.” The non-conformist individualism and bohemianism of Whitman, Williams and Pound as well as poetics of self-disclosure found in the “confessional” poetry can be found in the Beats poetry as well (see Epstein, 43-59 for further discussion of the Beats and the San Francisco Renaissance poetry). The aspect of performance is also very prominent feature of the Beats, something that became popular with Poetry Slam and the Spoken word movements later at the turn of the century.

The poets classified as The Black Mountain poets, also called ‘projectivist poets’, were a group of poets centred on Black Mountain College in North Carolina the *Black Mountain Review* (1954–57). Important figures associated with this group are Charles Olson (27 December 1910 – 10 January 1970), Robert Duncan (1919 –1988), Robert Creeley (1926 –2005) and Denise Levertov (1923 –1997). Andrew Epstein observes that while the avant-garde movement tends to flourish in large metropolitan cities like Paris, London, New York and San Francisco, the Black Mountain School emerged a small experimental school from a tiny, rural town in the mountains of western North Carolina and became an extremely important crucible for the mid-century American avant-garde (28).

Charles Olson’s essay, “Projective Verse” (1950) became something of a manifesto for the Black Mountain Poets and it called for a poetry of “open field” composition to replace traditional closed poetic forms, ‘the inherited line’, with an improvised form that should reflect exactly the content of the poem. This form, according to Olson, was to be based on the line, and each line was to be a unit of breath and of utterance. The content consists, according to Olson, “one perception immediately and directly (leading) to a further perception”. In many ways, such a conceptualization combines the earlier individualistic tendencies towards free verse found in post-Whitman poetry with poetry of ‘discontinuous’ perception, the stream-of-consciousness poetics of modernist generation. Nevertheless, this poetics remained predominant in American poetry and very often in tension with the followers of the great poets like Dickinson, Robert Frost and WH Auden who continue the poetry of coherence and closed forms. The poetics of breath and everyday speech in Olson can also be understood as ‘ekphrastic’ in ancient etymological sense pointed out by Barry, as ‘speaking out’ or ‘out-speaking’.

The New York School comprising of poets like John Ashbery (1927 –2017), Frank O’Hara (1926 – 1966), Kenneth Koch (1925 –2002) and Barbara Guest (1920 –2006)

continued the avant-garde poetics of surrealism and stream of consciousness techniques of previous generation poets and also displayed an intense engagement with visual arts, in particular the action painting of their friends in the New York City art world circle such as Jackson Pollock (1912 –1956) , Willem de Kooning (1904 – 1997) and renowned composers like John Cage (1912 –1992) (see Epstein, pp 60-86 for more elaborate discussion on The New York School of poetry). The close engagement with avant-garde visual arts in New York School is critical to understanding of John Ashbery’s ekphrastic –art-critical poem like ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’.

Donald Allen enthusiastically notes that these poets, “they are our avant-garde, the true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry’ and they have “one common characteristic: a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse “(xi). The avant-garde anti-academic tenor and left politics of the *New American Poetry* anthology continued in various incarnations later on. The late twentieth century version was a movement called L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry taking its name after the magazine named L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E edited by well-known poets Charles Bernstein (1950-) and Bruce Andrews(1948-) that ran thirteen issues from February 1978 to October 1981. Along with Bernstein, Ron Silliman (1946-), Lyn Hejinian (1941-), Rae Armantrout (1947-), Clark Coolidge (1939-) and Susan Howe (1937-) are the major poets associated with this school.

Deeply influenced by poststructuralist and structuralist theories of language, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet believe in emphasizing the role played by material language and the reader’s response in production of the meaning. Almost echoing Heidegger’s proposition that it is the language that speaks, not man, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets seek to displace the tradition bourgeois subject as a source of cultural meaning in the manner of Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author”. This project is reflected in the preoccupation to displace individual voice as a primary constituent of poetic language in the manner of Derrida’s deconstructive critique of logocentric-phonocentrism and metaphysics of presence undergirding the history of western thought. This graphocentric poetics that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets seek to develop in spite being an impressive theoretical experiment cannot be seen as a successful poetic experiment.

Albert Gelpi notes that the conscious break with modernism of the first half of the twentieth century came about only in the nineteen seventies and the eighties as can be seen

in poetic theories and practices of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. Nevertheless, the question of self-expression and language remained at heart of this debate. Gelpi observes,

“The Modernist master merely put the mask of impersonality on the Romantic ego-genius, and any such exaggerated individualism led to an elitist pose of disdain for politics that itself masked the equally elitist sympathy for totalitarianism which helped make Fascism and Nazism and Stalinism possible. In this view what was left of Modernism was immolated in the war it in part brought about. Some commentators cast the post-war crisis primarily in psychological terms, some in terms of physics, others in political terms, and others still in linguistic terms; but these different emphases overlaid and enforced one another. Einstein's theory of relativity was followed by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Lacan elaborated the dislocations of Freudian theory into a no-exit maze. In poetry the perceiving "I" of the lyric or narrative or dramatic mode disappeared into the anonymous, decentered ego echoing the polyglossia of popular culture.”

Regarding this Michael Davidson notes, “The expressivist character of postwar poetics became the target for a good deal of innovation that followed in the 1970s and 1980s. Language poetry's critique of the expressive subject on the avant-garde side and the New Formalism's return to traditional stanzaic and metrical patterns on the more academic side provided the extremes of a spectrum within which poetic dis-course was conducted. Somewhere in the middle of this arc was a more relaxed, discursive poetry of minor epiphanies and modulated surrealism (“Introduction”, 599). The later 21st century version of ‘our avant-garde’ is Conceptual writing/poetry. The tension between the ‘academic’ verse and the avant-garde that Donald Allen proposes remained problematic as many of the anti-academic poets gradually became integral to the American academia and thus becoming canonical.

The rise of critical theory in literary and cultural studies academia, which seems to be a primary influence on the poetic theory and practice of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets as well as many other postmodern poets, called into question what Catherine Belsey terms as ‘expressive realism’ or the common sense theory that “literature reflects the reality of experience, as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual, who expresses this perception in a text which enables other individuals to recognize its truth... belongs roughly to the last two centuries. It coincides, therefore, with the period of industrial capitalism” (6).

One wonders if the reaction against the hegemonic white male heteronormative subject in some ways reverts back to this pretheoretically assumption, albeit by marking ethnic, class, gender and sexual difference of this new subject in spite of radical politics it espouses.

The American Mainstream Poetry at the turn of the Millennium

The emergence of what is labelled, rather fuzzily, as ‘the mainstream’ poetry is also an important development of the period. The institutional context for the emergence of the mainstream poetry is the explosive growth of MFA graduate writing program that begun with Iowa Writers Workshop in 1936. Epstein has pointed out that this explosive institutionalization of poetry inaugurated ‘the Program Era’ altered the nature of being a poet (139). The number of such creative programmes rose from 79 in 1975 to 852 in 2010 and it produced poems very often dismissed as ‘the workshop lyric’ “the workshop poem” or “the scenic mode” or “the epiphany poem” or “the suburban epiphany”.

Speaking about the poetics of this variety of poetry, Epstein notes that such a poem usually has a plain-speaking voice that seems closely aligned with the poet himself, tells a straightforward linear anecdote, often about the self in nature and the poem pivots on sudden epiphany. (140). These neo-romantic lyric poems avoid philosophical, theoretical or political orientation. These poems tend to have refreshing lucidity, attention to quotidian detail and explorations of pleasures, sorrows of love, work and family life and the paradoxical nature of language, relationship and human desire. They often, Epstein observes, update myths and archetypes to reflect on family, childhood and marriage (142).

Poems by poets such as James Wright, Stanley Kunitz, Robert Hass, Anne Sexton, Carolyn Forché or the Nobel Prize winner Louise Glück serve as template for the mainstream poetics. What Epstein does not emphasize enough that this poetics of “the backyard epiphany lyric” usually operates from a liberal humanist and politically ‘unmarked’ white subject as the speaker, the speaker who is not very different from ‘the avant-garde’ or ‘postmodern’ poets in terms of racial and ethnic privileges. Whether ‘mainstream’ or avant-garde, these are the self-portraits of a liberal white speaker who occupied the mainstream privileged position in American society for long, but whose centrality came to be questioned aggressively from the margins by several minorities after the late sixties

The tensions between the mainstream, academic and avant-garde were further complicated by significant growth in the popularity of spoken word, performance poetry and poetry slams after the nineteen eighties. The notion that poetry is a performative and oral genre stands in stark contrast with the avant-garde aesthetics of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. The concept of slam poetry emerged in the 1980s in Chicago, Illinois, when a local poet and construction worker, Marc Kelly Smith, feeling that poetry readings and poetry in general had lost their true passion, had an idea to bring poetry back to the people. He created a weekly poetry event—the poetry slam—where anyone could participate. The name slam came from how the audience has the power to praise or, sometimes, destroy a poem and from the high-energy performance style of the poets. Today slam poetry is considered an artistic movement as well as a genre of poetry and spoken word. The slam poetry movement inspired hundreds of poetry slams across the United States, Canada, parts of Europe, and Japan, and slam poets influenced many aspects of modern culture, such as political movements, art, media, literature, and entertainment. (Banales, Meliza. "Slam poetry"). The rock star Robert Allen Zimmerman better known as Bob Dylan (1941-) who surprisingly won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016, seem to occupy an intersectional position with the Beats, the spoken word and the American mainstream poetry.

The Death of the American Subject?

Donald Allen's enthusiasm and nationalism, however, elided something that is central to American culture: the politically fraught questions of colonialism, migration, gender and race which are increasingly seen as being fundamental to any discussion of American culture. He bypassed 'Harlem Renaissance' (c. 1918–37) of African American culture, in the creative arts, and the most influential movement in African American literary history. Embracing literary, musical, theatrical, and visual arts, as Britannica.com informs us participants sought to reconceptualize "the Negro" apart from the white stereotypes that had influenced Black peoples' relationship to their heritage and to each other. The most influential poets of Harlem Renaissance were Countee Cullen (1903-1946), Langston Hughes (1901 – 1967) and Claude McKay (1890 – 1948). Allen's anthology is also blind or rather 'color blind' to the literature of on-going Civil Rights Movement of the fifties and the sixties.

The Black Arts movement followed the assassination of powerful black leaders like Malcolm X in 1965 in New York and the championship of "Black Power" by civil rights

organizations. This aided to rouse a generation of young Black writers into reconsidering the purpose of African American art-practices (See Britannica.com). They rejected any notion of the artist that separated him or her from the African American community. The Black Arts movement engaged in cultural nation building by sponsoring poetry readings, launching community theatres, creating literary magazines, and setting up small presses. In 1968 poetry, fiction, essays, and drama from writers associated with the movement appeared in the landmark anthology *Black Fire*, edited by Amiri Baraka (who was previously associated with the Beats) and Larry Neal. Larry Neal summed up its goals as the promotion of self-determination, solidarity, and nationhood among African Americans (Britannica.com). The most significant poets directly or indirectly involved with and influenced by Black Arts movement were Sonia Sanchez (1934-), Etheridge Knight (1931-1991), Haki R. Madhubuti (1942-), Nikki Giovanni (1943-), Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000), Robert Hayden (1913-1980), Ishmael Reed (1938-) and Lucille Clifton (1936 -2010).

Closely linked to the question of race was the question of gender and Women's Liberation Movement (second wave Feminism) gained momentum after the late nineteen fifties. The National Organization for Women (NOW), founded in 1966, is an important landmark in the struggle for gender justice. Influential women poets like Adrienne Rich (1929 – 2012), Ann Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, Audre Lorde (1934 – 1992) have remained a powerful presence in post-war American poetry (See Epstein, 160-173 for feminism and women's poetry). A significant new era in gay activism and gay pride was initiated by Stonewall riots of 1969. Overtly political poetry also emerged during the Cold War era especially in response to the Vietnam War, (1954–75) (see Poetry Foundation site for Poetry of Vietnam War). In 1982, African American poets Alice Walker (1944-) became the first African American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and Rita Dove (1952-) became the first United States Poet Laureate in 1993.

Along with the revolutionary Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and early 1970s—including the Chicano movement , Chicano/a Arts movement, the Puerto Rican labour activist movement and the Nuyorican Arts movement, American Indian Movement (AIM) and the American Indian literary resurgence, the nationalist/Black Power and Black Arts movements, the Asian American movement, and the Women's movement, the 1970s and 1980s were , according to W. Lawrence Hogue , “renaissance periods for the literatures of American Indians, Latinos/as, African Americans, and Asian Americans”. Then, by the late 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s the literature of writers of color in the U.S. had developed

sufficiently and transformed American literature (See Epstein pp. 174-203 for discussion on multiculturalism, diversity and identity in American poetry from 1970-2000).

Hougue notes that the literatures that emerged from this period were further developed and institutionalized with the re-printing of pre-1960s literary texts, the establishment of ethnic studies programs and departments on the campuses of American colleges and universities, and the inclusion of ethnic literature in mainstream American literature courses, allowing the literatures to be taught, studied, assessed, written about, and therefore to remain in print. Hougue uses the theorization of 'minor literature' proposed by Deleuze and Guattari to conceptualize the contribution of these minority writers of color in a predominantly white culture whose function is "to disrupt, decode, or deterritorialize the majority language's official or institutional functions and to re-compose the devalued stereotypes, to evoke a people who do not yet exist." (175)

Hougue goes on to state once the writers of color entered the mainstream literary discourse, made it acknowledge their marginalized histories, cultures, and subjectivities, that they created subjectivities outside coded ethnic/racial and American identities, thereby transforming the mainstream. Besides, they received prestigious awards and fellowships like Alice Walker, and Rita Dove in the eighties and the nineties, and taught in major creative writing programs, showing a wide readership. They, unlike white American male writers in particular, never become, as Hogue puts it, "the American representative". They never stand for the American norm, become the American every man or woman, or "speak as a racially unmarked universal, transcendental subject" (189). In 1991, scholars like Gregory S. Jay would declare, "It is time to stop teaching "American" literature. The combined lessons of critical theory, classroom practice, and contemporary history dictate not only a re- vision of the curriculum and pedagogy of "American" literature courses, but forceful uprooting of the conceptual model defining the field itself".

This displacement of the unmarked, universal, and transcendental subject who was predominantly white and male and often heterosexual as a normative and canonical subject alters the poetics of lyrical self-portraiture and self-disclosure in unprecedented ways as can be envisioned in the contemporary American self-portrait poems. One wonders whether the developments in Critical theory, literary studies and cultural studies academia spoke about 'Death of the Author' in the wake of structuralism and poststructuralist theories of language

and meaning also imply the death of the White American Heteronormative Male author or all authors.

Reviewing nine major books and anthologies to emerge in the late nineteen eighties, Hank Lazer observes that there are two overlapping areas of thinking emerge as pivotal when one thinks of contemporary American Poetry: “The first is the dissemination of “the subject,” accomplished variously by formal innovation, theoretical argument, and multicultural studies. The second is the politics of poetry as a resistance to appropriation: resistance to the official verse culture, the marketplace, the dominant culture, and hegemonic ideologies” (504). These observations remain crucial in the third decade of the twenty-first century as well.

In fact, the most distinctive and important development in the twenty-first century American poetry has been this rapid diversification, in terms of gender, sexuality, sexual identity, ability, and race, ethnicity and intersectionality. Dorothy Wang argues that poetry studies as we have been practicing it for almost a century in the Anglo-American context is no longer viable in the twenty-first century (220). She notes that *The Lyric Theory Reader* brought out in December 2013, not a single entry was written by a US minority scholar and not a single entry or even a passage touched on the issue of race and the lyric and the March 2017 special issue of the *Journal of Literary Theory* devoted to the theories of the lyric omitted any discussion of race. Wang states that no one bothered to consider that the core concept undergirding our idea of the lyric, such as the notion of the poetic speaker, are racially inflected. Wang asks, “After all, whose interiority was for centuries deemed worthy of expressing? Why are the musings of a speaker in a poem read by a white straight middle-aged gentleman farmer in Vermont automatically read as universalizable, while those of a speaker in a poem by an Asian American female poet from Oregon are inevitably read, even by well-trained poetry critics as if they are transcriptions from her diary? (222).

If one agrees with Andrew Epstein’s observation that since the 1990s, one of the defining features of American poetry has been a general movement beyond the binary logic of “raw” versus “cooked,” “experimental” versus “mainstream” – the schism that has so often structured our sense of the period and limited its possibilities since the dawn of this era in the 1950s (210), this notion of ‘American hybrid’ seems to be more of a stylistic description rather than a description of deeper cultural conflict and crisis.

After the Fall: American Poetry in the Runaway World

According to Epstein, the most important changes in American poetry since 2000 are (1) the collapse of the old binary opposition between mainstream and experimental and the emergence of a new “hybrid” mode; (2) a new openness to remix, sampling, and the use of found language and documentary materials in poetry, which can be seen, in part, as a response to the rise of the digital age and new questions about originality and appropriation it has ushered in; and (3) a resurgence of politically engaged, formally adventurous poetry, especially by poets of color, in the era of Obama and Trump (210). My argument is that the driving force behind such changes is the phenomenon of post-1989 globalization.

While the processes of cultural, economic, political and technological globalization predate the contemporary moment by centuries, it is the period after 1989 that follows the collapse of Soviet Union, end of the cold war and emergence of U.S. as a sole global superpower and globalization of neoliberalism along with explosive developments in informational technology that has produced a newer form of globalization. While the term globalization has been defined and contested in various ways, it is useful here to think of globalization as what Anthony Giddens calls “the post-1989 world” whose everyday life is transformed by “worldwide communication revolution” driven by the satellite communication, the Internet, and the smart phones today, the globalist market place marked by the massive influence of financial markets and the emergence of weightless economy that throws up a new range of risk situations and the questions of ecology (*Global Capitalism*, 1-2).

Giddens has also pointed out that the distinction between postmodernity and modernity need not be overemphasized. He views modernity as intrinsically globalizing and instead of considering the second half of twentieth century as a postmodern period, he argues that all the critiques of modernity, like that of Nietzsche or Lyotard are part of the reflexivity that is in itself modern. Hence, Nietzsche’s critique of rationality and will to truth is itself driven by the will to truth and rationality. Hence, postmodernity, for Giddens is intensification and radicalization of modernity where the sources of social dynamism are not exhausted but have intensified exponentially with the progress of time leading to the current “runaway world” we inhabit

Another influential theorist Arjun Appadurai has argued that the new global cultural economy has to be seen as “a complex, overlapping disjunctive order that cannot any longer

be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries)”, he proposes an elementary framework for exploring such disjunctures consisting of five dimensions: five dimensions of global cultural flows that can be termed (a) ethnoscapas, (b) mediascapas, (d) technoscapas, and (e) ideoscapas where each landscape constitutes a building block of the imagined worlds and not merely imagined communities in which people live today. These imagined worlds, according to Appadurai, are also at times able to contest and subvert the official mind and the entrepreneurial minds that surround them (32-33). The diversity and pluralism of American literary culture is produced by ethnoscapas, ideoscapas of neoliberalism and its contestation. along with digital mediascapas and technoscapas also profoundly constitute the imagined world of Americans in the twenty-first century and American literature, along with many other literatures in the world, discursively participate in this transformed landscape.

Mark Poster has commented on how the contemporary globalization raises problems which are different from earlier post-colonial globalization debates. He notes that peoples of the non-Western world are now, in large numbers, in the Western World, an outcome that has led to theories of multiculturalism and diaspora (31). Secondly Poster states that the tremendous impact of the economic aspect of globalization has brought Western commodities to the rest of the world and has incorporated non-Western labor into the design and manufacture of Western goods, and even increasingly for services, for markets all over the world. Postcolonial nations are now suffused with Western commodities, including the labor skills learned in Western universities and exported back home. Thirdly, Poster says cultural objects now extend back and forth between the West and the rest through global communications systems (32).

The twenty-first century opened, it might be recalled, in America began with a bang instead of Eliotian whimper: with the terrible disaster of September 11 attacks the deadliest terrorist attacks on American soil in U.S. history after Pearl Harbour Attack, killing more than three thousand people. 9/11 had a profound impact on American society, culture and literature. The ‘Fall’ with its symbolic connotations to the Biblical ideas of Fall also symbolized the fall of American hegemony in the global arena for some.

Many scholars in the book *Literature after 9/11* edited by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (2008) have examined literary representations of 9/11 and the tension between the symbolic suggestiveness of the World Trade Center and the fact of its

destruction through obvious lenses of trauma and politics of representation. Aimee Pozorski has attempted to understand these questions of representation and trauma in post-9/11 American literature as a response to crisis in national tradition. Richard Gray attempts to understand the historical moment through the three unusual factors that might be handily summarized in terms of invasion, icons, and the intervention of the media. Gray emphasizes how 9/11 was a global media event (*After the Fall*, 4). Gray adds,

“It was a demolition of the fantasy life of the nation in that it punctured America’s belief in its inviolability and challenged its presumption of its innocence, the manifest rightness of its cause. It was also a dark realization of that fantasy life, in the sense that it turned the nightmare, of a ruthless other threatening the fabric of buildings and of the nation, into a palpable reality.” (*After the Fall*, 11).

For the first time in its history, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) invoked Article 5, allowing its members to respond collectively in self-defence and on October 7 the U.S. and allied military forces launched an attack against Afghanistan. The Afghanistan War lasted for more than fourteen years. To help facilitate the domestic response, Congress quickly passed the USA PATRIOT Act (the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001), which significantly but temporarily expanded the search and surveillance powers of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other law-enforcement agencies (Duignan, Brian. "USA PATRIOT Act). Additionally, a cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security was established. It was followed by Iraq War, (2003–11). American military casualties in the conflict included some 4,500 service members killed and some 32,000 others wounded.

American intelligence contractor and whistle-blower named Edward Snowden who in 2013 revealed the existence of secret wide-ranging information-gathering programs conducted by the National Security Agency (NSA). The case highlighted a host of issues, including the secret use of government power, privacy in the digital age, the ethics of whistleblowing, and the role that the Internet and anonymous browsers on the dark web such as Tor can play in facilitating such whistleblowing (Michael Ray, 2023). All these developments associated with complex and chaotic processes of globalization have deeply influenced not just American society but the entire world and American literature and American poetry cannot be seen in isolation from these historical contexts.

Timothy Yu notes that there was a new urgency to address public issues in poetry after 9/11 and a turn away from modernist hermeticism and post-confessional solipsism. He states that the notion of post 9/11 literature corresponds to the widespread public sense of sharp rupture that altered American's sense of themselves and the world. Yu points out how the editor of the 2003 collection *Poets Against the War* began when the poet Sam Hamill was invited to the White House but the event was cancelled when the poet made it known that he was going to use the event to protest against the war in Iraq. Hamill later solicited poems through his website (6). The period also produced poetry by Arab or Muslim American poets Ibtisam Barakat, Suheir Hammad and Khaled Mattawa who come from communities that have been targets of discrimination, profiling and violence since 2001.

Scholars like Nouri Gana have critically discussed how the post-9/11 intensification of racism against Muslim and Arab Americans reflects the protean forms and shifts in focus and locus of racism from ethnic and color lines to religious and cultural affiliations or differentials. She has attempted to chart out the history of this ideologically driven racism and show how Muslim and Arab American writers have sought not merely to expose but also to intervene in the material and palpable workings of the complicit apparatuses of racism and war.

The question of increased voluntary migration brought about by globalization has complicated the question of race in America. For instance as Ava Landry has discussed how this voluntary migration, in stark contrast with the involuntary transatlantic slave trade, troubles the distinct "Americanness," or the assumption of deep cultural knowledge, collective memory, and common heritage undergirding African American racial identity. Africans come to America with diverse cultural heritages and identities and in the process very often become "ethnicized Other" within racialized and marginalized black community and larger population as a whole (127).

Stephanie Li has discussed the ways in which the African American Literature can be historicized in the twenty-first century. After critical investigations into patriarchal and homophobic undergirding of Black Power Movement, many attempts were made to identify the future of contemporary African American literature in terms of post-black, post-soul, the newblack, and even the new new black (631). Li points out that one of the most significant political uprisings after Civil Rights Movement is the Black Lives Matter Movement and "twenty-first-century African American literature, in this respect, seconds the urgency,

vision, and hope that we associate with the Black Lives Matter movement⁶ (633). The role played by social media in expression of this movement is something that cannot be overlooked. Therefore, the new movements for social justice are notable for the use of new digital media especially the international circulation or ‘flow’ of mediascapes and ideoscapes on social media platforms like Twitter (now X), Facebook and Instagram.

In a remarkable development in 2015 Donald Trump rally a picture of a woman named Johari Osayi Idusuyi went for viral after she was spotted reading Claudia Rankine’s famous poem *Citizen: an American Lyric* while sitting front row at a Donald Trump rally in Illinois (Willoughby, 2015). The poem is not merely influenced by the Black Lives Movement but articulates the outrage behind the police killings and brutalities against the black Americans. It ends with

In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis
 In Memory of Eric Garner
 In Memory of John Crawford
 In Memory of Michael Brown
 In Memory
 In Memory
 In Memory

The words "In Memory" continue down the page, eventually fading out to white. On the facing page are the words "because white men can't / police their imagination / black men are dying."

In 2011, a conflict had broken out between Tony Hoagland, a well-known white American poet and Rankine’s colleague for a brief period of time at the University of Houston on Poets.org website. Her letter concerned a poem of Hoagland's called "The Change." In it, the speaker recalls a tennis match between a "tough little European blonde" and a "big black girl from Alabama" with "cornrowed hair and Zulu bangles on her arms" who has an "outrageous" name like "Vondella Aphrodite” (Rankine, A Dialogue). Tony Hoagland responded by saying

“Just as you find the posture of "angry black person" simplistic, I find the posture of "apologetic liberal white person" not just boring, but useless. I don't believe in explaining my

⁶ Black Lives Matter (BLM), international social movement, formed in the United States in 2013, dedicated to fighting racism and anti-Black violence, especially in the form of police brutality. The movement began in 2013 as an online movement (using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media) by three Black community organizers—Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi. They formed BLM after George Zimmerman, a man of German and Peruvian descent, was acquitted on charges stemming from his fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, in Sanford, Florida. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Black Lives Matter". Encyclopedia Britannica, 22 Dec. 2023)

poems to other poets; they are part of my tribe, and I expect them to be resilient readers. I want some of my poems to alarm people with their subjects and attitudes. I think poems can be too careful. A poem is not a teddy bear. When it comes to the subject of American race, it is a set of conditions we all suffer, whether in our avoidance or confrontation. We will need to be roused for another fifty, or a hundred years. I would rather get dirty trying to dig it out of the ground, than make nice. I am easy in my conscience. Finally let me say that I think my poem "The Change" is not "racist" but "racially complex. (Tony Hoagland, "Dear Claudia")

Another important and influential social justice protest movement in America was Occupy Wall Street (OWS), which agitated against severe economic inequality and the corruption of corporate laws produced by hegemonic neoliberalism that occurred in 2011, centered in New York City, thus beginning of a new focus on wealth disparity in American politics. The protest took place in the wake of the financial crisis of 2007–08 and the resulting Great Recession. Financial crisis of 2007–08, severe contraction of liquidity in global financial markets began in the United States as a result of the collapse of the U.S. housing market. It threatened to destroy the international financial system; caused the failure (or near-failure) of several major investment and commercial banks, mortgage lenders, insurance companies, and savings and loan associations; and precipitated the Great Recession (2007–09), the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression (1929–c. 1939) (Duignan).

The economic downturn significantly worsened the living standards of many Americans, chiefly younger adults born in the 1980s, while increasing the disparity of income between the rich and the poor. The protesters were inspired by how many Egyptians turned out to protest Hosni Mubarak's regime in Tahrir Square in January 2011 (Volle, 2023). These movements and others reshaped the Democratic Party by making income inequality a dominant issue in its 2016 and 2020 presidential primaries. Another influential protest movement was *Me Too* movement. The awareness movement around the issue of sexual harassment and sexual abuse of women in the workplace that grew to prominence in 2017 in response to news reports of sexual abuse by American film producer Harvey Weinstein. While the phrase had been in the lexicon for more than a decade, a tweet by American actress Alyssa Milano sparked a social media phenomenon that raised awareness, gave voice to survivors, and led to sweeping cultural and workplace changes. The movement is credited with giving visibility to the scope of sexual violence within the United States and across the world (Brittain, Amy, 2023). The international dimensions and the role played by Internet

and social media in mobilizing these movements are of critical importance here as they underscore the nature of twenty-first century globalization.

The rich and vibrant ethnic diversity of contemporary American poetry can be discerned by looking at some of the names. The significant black poets of the current period are Claudia Rankine, Tracy K. Smith, Terrance Hayes, Natasha Trethewey, Carl Phillips, Kevin Young, Fred Moten, Tyehimba Jess, Jericho Brown, Ross Gay, Robin Coste Lewis, Morgan Parker, Danez Smith, Shane McCrae, Nate Marshall, Hanif Abdurraqib, Patricia Smith, Major Jackson, John Murillo, Eve Ewing and Allison Rollins whose poem is discussed in the beginning of this essay. Latinx poets Juan Felipe Herrera, Ada Limón, Daniel Borzutzky, Eduardo Corral, and Carmen Giménez Smith, Native American poets like Sherman Alexie, Joy Harjo, Natalie Diaz, Layli Long Soldier, and Tommy Pico, poets of Middle Eastern descent Kaveh Akbar, Solmaz Sharif, and Philip Metres and Asian American poets Victoria Chang, Cathy Park Hong, Ken Chen, Ocean Vuong, and Paisley Rekdal are regarded among the most important poets in this century. As Epstein states, “To put it plainly, the landscape of American poetry in the twenty-first century has changed so dramatically and has become so much more pluralist, multi-ethnic, and inclusive that it would be almost unrecognizable to a reader in the 1950s” (209).

Epstein points out that out of the six poets to serve in this role since 2012, there has been only a single white poet, Charles Wright. Apart from two African American poets, Natasha Trethewey (2012–14) and Tracy K. Smith (2017–19), the United States named its first and second Latinx poets (Juan Felipe Herrera in 2015 and Ada Limón in 2022) and its first Native American poet (Joy Harjo in 2019) to the position. Before Trethewey, the last person of color to serve in the post was Rita Dove in 1993 as mentioned. Likewise, over the past decade, poets of color have received foremost annual poetry awards, such as the Pulitzer and the National Book Award, in much greater numbers than in the past (Epstein, 209).

An interesting ‘self-portrait’ poem by a young Chinese-born American poet Chen Chen is titled “Self-Portrait With & Without” from his collection *When I Grow Up I want to be a List of Further Possibilities* (2016) is relevant in this new transformed landscape of American poetry as it reveals in a light-hearted way, the autobiography of an immigrant Chinese-origin queer person and his conflicts that are generational, ethnic, and linguistic

With dried cranberries. Without a driver's license. With my mother's
 mother's worry. Without, till recently, my father's glasses. With an
 A in English,
 a C in chemistry. With my mother saying, *You have to be three times
 better
 than the white kids, at everything.* Without a dog or cat. With a fish.
 With a fish I talked to before bed, telling him my ideas for new
 kinds
 of candy. With a tutor in Mandarin. (33)

The poem goes on to speak also about the relation of the contemporary young poet
 with the literary past very much like Alison C. Rollins poems discussed in the beginning, the
 past canon that was distinctively white and American. The poem also speaks about his queer
 sexual orientation, 9/11, body-shaming, and the crucial issue of immigrant's citizenship.

With the cry of bats. With the salt of circumstance.
 Without citizenship. With the white boy in ninth grade who called
 me
 ugly. Without my father, for a year, because he had to move away,
 to the one job he could find, on the other side of the state. With his
 money,
 transferred to my mother. With William Carlos Williams. With the
 local
 library. With yet another bake sale for Honduras in Massachusetts
 suburbia.
 With the earthquake in my other country. With my mother's long-distance
 calls.
 With my aunt's calls from China, when the towers fell.
 How far are you from New York? How far are you from New York?
 With cities fueled by scars. With the footprint of a star. With the
 white boy
 I liked. With him calling me ugly. With my knees on the floor. With
 my hands
 begging for straighter teeth, lighter skin, blue eyes, green eyes,
 any eyes brighter, other than mine.
 (34)

Poems of self-portraiture by young colored minority poets like Robin Coste Lewis, Roger
 Reeves, Ocean Vuong, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Yuxi Liln, and A.D. Lauren-Abunassar are
 'ekphrastic' (in the widest sense of the word) expressions of identitarian multicultural
 politics represented by Chen Chen's poem. Nevertheless, to see them simply as ethnographic
 texts or expressive texts is to injustice to the poet's creativity.

Closely associated with this ethnic and sexual diversification of contemporary
 American poetry is the tremendous growth in the Spoken word and poetry slam. The
 premiere of Def Poetry Jam on HBO cable network in 2002 and it gave new prominence to

already established culture of spoken word performance and very often it placed poets of color at center (Timothy Yu, 4). Susan B. A. Somers-Willett has explored this crucial association between the identity politics and poetry slam. She points out that as most slam poems engage a first-person, narrative mode which encourages a live audience to perceive the performance as a confessional moment, one of the most defining characteristics of slam poetry is a poet's performance of identity and identity politics. She explains that although certainly not all works performed at poetry slams are identity poems-poems which directly proclaim the performer's "self"-the performance of such poems has become increasingly common on the National Poetry Slam stage.

Susan B. A. Somers-Willett states that the prevalence of identity poems performed at recent National Poetry Slams caused one veteran (Van Cleve) of the scene to note the progression of slam "from a lyrical collaborative art to that of an art of self-proclamation" A great deal of the work appearing in recent slam and spoken word anthologies and films confirms the trend of proclaiming one's identity for an audience. Although the proclamation of identity seems a key part of a successful slam poem, the craft and execution of that proclamation is just as important as the statement itself. How slam poets perform their identities is just as essential as what they say about their identities. Performance, as one should expect in a genre such as slam, is the instrument that makes the poem ring true or false with any given audience (52). The slam has become a global phenomenon and a Canadian poet Rupi Kaur of Indian origin is one of the most popular poets to emerge from these new spaces. In short, the mirror that reflects the face of American poetry today does not show a singular reflection of a white American male but faces of multiple colors, sexualities and ethnicities. The mirror has ceased to be analogue. It is digital now.

Self-Portraits in a Broken Mirror: American Poetry in the 21st Century

Self-Portrait as Cindy Sherman's Instagram Account

Elizabeth Knapp

And why not Sherman herself, you ask?
 Because in this instance, the inclusion
 of social media denotes a postmodern
 approach to self-portraiture, a Baudrillardian
 hall of mirrors in which the self is projected
 against a million anonymous eyes, all hungry

for a taste of her. How will she deform
 herself next? Will she sport a new prosthetic
 chin, her hair stand on end, electrocuted?
 A Dr. Frankenstein in the lab with herself.
 A million followers and not one will ever
 know her—nipped, tucked, and bruised beyond
 all recognition. Das Umheimliche: an unhomely
 home. A rubber crotch on a mannequin.

Elizabeth Knapp's 2018 poem evokes the provocative and postmodern oeuvre of photographic self-portraits of Cindy Sherman (1954-)⁷ with certain mock-theoretical, mock theatrical and comic undertone. The Museum of Modern Art website informs us, "For four decades, Cindy Sherman has probed the construction of identity, playing with the visual and cultural codes of art, celebrity, gender, and photography. She is among the most significant artists of the Pictures Generation—a group that also includes Richard Prince, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Robert Longo—who came of age in the 1970s and responded to the mass media landscape surrounding them with both humor and criticism, appropriating images from advertising, film, television, and magazines for their art."

Sherman's range of self-photographs that predate the obsession with selfies in the twenty-first century. Unlike selfies, Sherman's photographs are not taken by her. Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay on Sherman notes, "her works are photographs; she is not a photographer but an artist who uses photography. Each image is built around a photographic depiction of a woman. And each of the women is Sherman herself, simultaneously artist and model, transformed, chameleon-like, into a glossary of pose, gesture and facial expression".

The self-reflexivity of this poem is itself postmodern in its articulation. The mock self-representation in this self-portrait poem intertextually connects with Cindy Sherman's own playful experimentation with the genre of self-representations which the speaker mimics. Nevertheless, the innovative avant-garde poetics of playful, pseudo-theoretical, superficial style of the poem shows its historical connection with the American postmodernist movements.

Postmodernist avant-garde represented by the *New American Poets* anthology poets as well as its descendants L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets seems to be challenged and displaced

⁷ See a sample of Sherman's works on Broad. Org website <https://www.thebroad.org/art/cindy-sherman> and The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/artists/5392>

by the multiculturalist poetics of the twenty-first century poetry. In fact, it was in 1996 that the critics like Charles Altieri declared, “I think postmodernism is now dead as a theoretical concept and, more important, as a way of developing cultural frameworks influencing how we shape theoretical concepts. With its basic enabling arguments now sloganized and its efforts to escape binaries binarized, it is unlikely to generate much significant new work”. However, the postmodern impulse in the twenty-first century was carried forward in a new digitalized space in the form of Conceptual Poetry and Flarf.

Elizabeth Knapp’s poem which evokes the conceptual artist Cindy Sherman can be considered as one of the poem embodying these traits. The speaker of this poem wants to highlight the fact that the poem is a self-portrait a self-portrait as Cindy Sherman’s Instagram Account and not Sherman herself. The evocation of social-media is done in a theoretically self-conscious postmodern way as the references to Baudrillard and popular culture suggest. The poem, in fact, becomes a sort of postmodern pseudo-Selfie. The poem also indicates the ways in which media ecology was transformed in the twenty-first century with the explosive growth in digital media.

Conceptual writing and conceptual poetry is a form of conceptual art. One of its foremost practitioners and theorist Kenneth Goldsmith says, “In conceptual writing the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an author uses a conceptual form of writing, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the text” (2007). Goldsmith goes on to define its poetics as ‘uncreative writing’ which is

“a poetics of the moment, fusing the avant-garde impulses of the last century with the technologies of the present, one that proposes an expanded field for 21st century poetry. Conceptual writing’s concerns are generally two-pronged, as manifested in the tensions between materiality and concept. Conceptual writing obstinately makes no claims on originality. On the contrary, it employs intentionally self and ego effacing tactics using uncreativity, unoriginality, illegibility, appropriation, plagiarism, fraud, theft, and falsification as its precepts; information management, word processing, databasing, and extreme process as its methodologies; and boredom, valuelessness, and nutritionlessness as its ethos. Language as junk, language as detritus” (2008).

The emphasis on “self and ego effacing tactics” and drawing upon the previous centuries’ avant-garde impulses of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, the New York School,

Objectivist poetics, Black Mountain School as well as Eliot-Poundian modernism in the contemporary context of Internet age of Digital revolution is a crucial feature in the study of the poetics of lyrical self-disclosure and self-representation associated with ‘self-portraiture’ in poetry.

Closely associated with conceptual writing is a movement known as Flarf. Poetry Foundation website informs us that it started originally a prank on the scam contest sponsored by the organization Poetry.com, the experimental poetry movement Flarf has “slowly assumed a serious position as a new kind of Internet-based poetic practice. Known for its reliance on Google as a means of generating odd juxtapositions, surfaces, and grammatical inaccuracies, flarf also celebrates deliberately bad or “incorrect” poetry by forcing clichés, swear words, onomatopoeia, and other linguistic aberrations into poetic shape. Flarf poets collaborate on poems, revising and sometimes plagiarizing them in semi-public spaces such as blogs or webzines. Original members of the “Flarfist Collective” include Sullivan, Sharon Mesmer, K. Silem Mohammad, and Nada Gordon. Poetry magazine published a special section devoted to flarf in its July/August 2009 issue, guest-edited by Kenneth Goldsmith.

Comparing conceptual writing with flarf, Goldsmith observes,

“Our immersive digital environment demands new responses from writers. What does it mean to be a poet in the Internet age? These two movements, Flarf and Conceptual Writing, each formed over the past five years, are direct investigations to that end. And as different as they are, they have surprisingly come up with a set of similar solutions. Identity, for one, is up for grabs. Why use your own words when you can express yourself just as well by using someone else’s? And if your identity is not your own, then sincerity must be tossed out as well.” (2009).

Effacement of the traditional humanist subject – the self – of poetry of self-portraiture is what connects flarf with conceptual writing in the new digital environment. In an interesting experimentation with conceptual writing and self-portraiture, the poet David Buuck from Oakland who is the founder of BARGE, the Bay Area Research Group in Enviro-aesthetics, and co-founder and editor of Tripwire, a journal of poetics came up with the idea of conceptual self-portrait poem in which he hired a private investigator to follow & photograph him at various times over a week in Jan 07 2009, and then send him his ‘report’. The report appeared as a poem titled (a conceptual self-portrait experiment) on his blog titled Buuck/BARGE on wordpress.com.

The recent multicultural poetry like the poetry of Allison Rollins and Chen Chen discussed above reveals a new cultural landscape of American society produced by globalization's flows of new ethnoscapings of immigrant population, new mediascapings and technoscapings affecting the new social movements like Black Lives Matter and are driven by social media and the internet. While this poetry interrogates the 'unmarked' universal American identity as being largely white, male and often straight, it seems to retrieve the poetics of what Belsey has termed 'expressive realism' which was related with the rise of industrial capitalism on which poetics of so-called 'confessional poetry' was based. The avant-garde varieties of the New York School, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E or conceptual writing, drawing upon structuralism and poststructuralist theories, attempted to question this expressive realism, but achieved only with limited success as their innovations are 'original, creative, and individualistic' in spite of their insistence upon 'unoriginality' and 'uncreativity' and 'found' nature of their works as the Buuck experiment or the Elizabeth Knapp poem. Nevertheless, both these divergent poetics seem to be more in conflict, though sometimes they may even converge.

The tension between the two currents of contemporary American poetry can be seen in the controversy that erupted after Kenneth Goldsmith read a document of his 'found' conceptual poem "The Body of Michael Brown" after 18-year-old unarmed black man named Michael Brown was shot by a white police officer. A week after the U. S. Department of Justice cleared police officer of all charges of Brown's death; Goldsmith participated in the Interrupt Conference at Brown University where he read a document which he calls Goldsmith says of his conceptual poetry practice of taking pre-existing texts and remixing them, "I always massage dry texts to transform them into literature..." In the case of "The Body of Michael Brown" he slashed and cut into county autopsy reports, essentially the language representing the bone and flesh of the slain young black man. Goldsmith's rearrangement of his chopped and hacked pieces of Michael Brown's body ends with the young man's genitals. Goldsmith apologized for the insensitivity but returned with a new hashtag "the left is the new right" (Caconard, Poetryfoundation.org). Whether the left is the new right or the other way round, the digital mirror in which Americans gaze at their own reflections is clearly shattered.

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