

Listening to the Margins: An Introduction

Lioba Schreyer and Lena Mattheis

Ruhr-University Bochum; University of Duisburg-Essen

In September 2016, an international group of young scholars came together at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany, to discuss their research projects in the context of the workshop *Voices from the Margins: Societal Change and the Environment in Poetry*. Not yet entirely expecting how turbulent the next few months would be in terms of poetry and protest, but very much aware of the increasing relevance of both fields and the hybrids they engender, we wanted to provide a platform to discuss poets who engage with social and environmental issues. The main focus here were poets who write from a position of marginality, be that geographically, socially, economically or on the basis of race, gender or sexual orientation. The participating scholars were also interested in the margins of canonization and therefore presented the works of authors who receive less attention due to their location, the issues they discuss or the media of publication they choose. Intersections of these different facets of the term ‘margin’ were central to the workshop and shape our understanding of the concept. As editors, we believe that poetry written from marginalised perspectives creates a collage of defining moments, thoughts and feelings, and that those add to the visibility of key issues and changes in contemporary societies. Following Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, we are particularly interested in ‘discourses of marginality ... [that] intersect in a view of reality which supersedes the geometric distinction of centre and margin and replaces it with a sense of the complex, interweaving, and syncretic accretion of experience.’¹ This is the premise under which the selected papers in this special issue investigate contemporary poetic responses to societal and environmental transformations.

Fast forward to 21 January 2017, when images of the Women’s March in Washington and its sister marches across the United States and the globe dominated the media outlets. As those images highlight, marches draw attention to social and political issues through numbers² and did so again at the one-year anniversary in January 2018. Movements such as the Women’s March or Black Lives Matter indicate that protest marches offer a platform to marginalised groups in society. They tell counter-narratives and demand to be heard. Just like the poetic voices we will concern ourselves with in this special feature, protest marches can engage the public and political sphere in a discourse *between* centre and margin, complicating a binary that we, like Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, seek to problematise.³ Prominently in this special feature, London-based poet Kayo Chingonyi comments: ‘I feel the need, in the writing that I do, to affirm my

¹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) 103.

² For a helpful visualisation of the numbers of marchers in different cities and countries, see ‘Women’s March – Crowd Estimates – 2017 – Updated 1/22/17,’ *Carto*, January 2017, 11 January 2018.

https://geographer.carto.com/viz/a229d5d2-e04a-11e6-9c98-0e98b61680bf/embed_map?utm_source=maplab&silverid=NDEzMTk5NTczMzEzS0.

³ More specifically, we aim to problematise the ‘marginality [that] is the condition constructed by the posited relation to a privileged centre, an “Othering” directed by the imperial authority’ (Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin 102) with regard to the canon, the genre of poetry, and the agency of protesters.

sense of belonging to the centre rather than the margins.’⁴ Thus, the marginal status of the poets, texts and perspectives presented here remains contested. In the course of this introduction, we will relate our discussion of margins, protest and poetry to arguments the authors of *Voices from the Margins* make while also employing Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib’s poem ‘The Day After The Election I Did Not Go Outside’⁵ to illustrate further positions of marginality.

As we implied already, protest and poetry are intertwined on three levels: historically, through immediacy and through shared spaces. Israeli poet Rachel Tzvia Back points out that poetry has ‘intrinsic attributes and characteristics that mark it as a useful tool for awakening a social conscience, for political activism and protest.’⁶ It is therefore not surprising that the poetic form has a long history as a medium of protest, as we can see in pamphlet wars, the origins of spoken word or rap, as well as in specific genres, modes and discursive formations such as literature of resistance in South Africa, war poetry and even, depending on our definition of ‘poem,’ on the posters carried by protesters. In 2015, the online movement Black Poets Speak Out called to unite ‘thousands of voices insisting on justice.’⁷ Recordings of poets reciting a poem, preceded by the movement’s mantra, were posted in several networks in reaction to the ‘grand jury’s decision on November 24 not to indict Darren Wilson, the police officer who murdered Mike Brown.’⁸ One of the later videos added to Black Poets Speak Out was Rob Gibsun’s recital of ‘The Day After The Election,’⁹ in response to the success of Donald Trump’s campaign in the U.S. presidential election. In using poetry and social media, Gibsun reinforces the connection between the ongoing police violence against African Americans and Trump’s victory, as does Willis-Abdurraqib’s poem itself. It alludes to large-scale protest but is set in a soul food restaurant, a marginal safe-space. This juxtaposition of small, marginal and wide-open public spaces runs through the articles of this special feature as a common thread. Movement across these spaces is emphasised through performance, whether it be live or recorded and distributed online.

In “‘Both feared and loved, an enigma to most’: Zimbabwean Spoken Word and Video Poetry between Radicalisation and Disillusionment,’ Ricarda de Haas analyses how these distinct locations of marginalised poetry are woven together and create transnational collaboration, reception and protest through the use of, among other media, YouTube videos made by Zimbabwean slam poets. De Haas illustrates this phenomenon by zooming in on a collaboration between Zimbabwean poet and rapper Synik and Berlin-based beatboxer Mando. In *2 Elements from H-Town to Berlin*, the two artists link distinct local places in Harare and Berlin-Kreuzberg through their joint performance and a style of video-editing that implies direct movement and small distances between Zimbabwe and Germany. De Haas examines how the

⁴ Interview with Kayo Chingonyi, in this special feature, 1.

⁵ Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib, ‘The Day After The Election I Did Not Go Outside,’ *The New Inquiry*, 14 November 2016, 16 January 2018. <https://thenewinquiry.com/the-day-after-the-election-i-did-not-go-outside/>.

⁶ Rachel Tzvia Back, “‘A Species of Magic:’ The Role of Poetry in Protest and Truth-telling (An Israeli Poet’s Perspective),’ *World Literature Today* 88.3-4 (2014) 31.

⁷ Mahogany Brown quoted in ‘About Us,’ *Black Poets Speak Out official tumblr*, n.d., 11 January 2018. <https://blackpoetsspeakout.tumblr.com/About>.

⁸ *Black Poets Speak Out*, ‘About Us’.

⁹ ‘Black Poets Speak Out – “The Day After The Election I Did Not Go Outside” by Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib,’ *YouTube* uploaded by Rob Gibsun, 16 November 2016, 11 January 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRQF0bI4D9M>.

familiar space of the ‘hood’ is thereby contrasted with an international audience watching the mediated performance.

To contextualise Synik’s oeuvre, De Haas introduces the *House of Hunger Poetry Slam*, arguably the most prominent one in Zimbabwe, thereby indicating a recurring theme that connects several of our authors, namely that of orality and the poetry slam itself. Slam poetry, Susan Somers-Willett observes in the context of the U.S., often focuses on marginalised voices in opposition to privileged centres. She draws attention to how the ‘liberal and well-meaning concern with difference ... unconsciously reifies the position of whiteness, straightness, and maleness as the norm.’¹⁰ While the binary of us v. them, margins v. centre is often the crux in protest, our interest in the marginal perspectives focuses on ‘embracing ... that marginality as the fabric of social experience.’¹¹ The fact that marginal positionalities are often employed in poetic voices to discuss global issues is another factor that distorts a perceived binary. Environmental concerns are a prominent example of this. In ‘A Poetics of Climate Change: Apocalyptic Rhetoric in Selected Poems from East Africa,’ Eve Nabulya analyses three environmental poems from the anthology *Echoes Across the Valley* (2000) and explores local experiences and visions of the effects of droughts and floods. She considers not only the research done on apocalyptic discourse but investigates the impact of the poetic mode, which lends itself to the discourse on climate change as political commentary. Moreover, Nabulya’s close readings emphasise the emotiveness that is characteristic of poetry.

Poetry’s engagement with contemporary issues and its potential in offering fresh perspectives is particularly visible in its relation to journalism, as Jahan Ramazani discusses in his seminal monograph *Poetry and Its Others*. In the chapter ‘Poetry and the News’ he explains that ‘the larger story of twentieth and twenty-first-century poetry’s intertwining with newswriting is often both affiliative and agonistic.’¹² Poetry and news differ in their perspectives on current events: ‘The arts and their patrons look toward the distant horizons of the future; the newspapers are fixated on the now.’¹³ Poems do not simply lay out a political argument but draw the reader into the conflict, lending emotional agency as well as urgency. The perspective of poetry allows readers and writers alike to connect elections with soul food spots, natural disasters across the globe with the racial divide between the persons responsible and the victims.

The latter is the subject of Emma Scanlan’s article ‘Jamaica Osorio’s Indigenous Poetics as a Challenge to Global Hybridity.’ Her reading draws out how Osorio’s poem ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ combines the global with the local Hawaiian perspective, thereby creating a causality between economic power, racial discrimination and environmental disasters. Osorio wrote ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ in California while watching a tsunami approach her home, Hawai’i, on television. Affirming Ramazani’s observation about the relationship between the two genres, poetry and the news, Osorio’s poem originates from a news report on the one hand and criticises the medium for neither engaging its viewers emotionally or lastingly. Scanlan explains the many ways in which the poem addresses and engages not only Hawaiians but the wide audiences of slam poetry.

¹⁰ Susan Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009) 72.

¹¹ Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin 103.

¹² Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014) 68.

¹³ Ramazani 68.

The rising popularity of spoken word and its impact on the poetic form are explored by Peter Marsden in his commentary on how the 'Oral Goes Viral.' His analysis focuses on the contemporary Maori and Polynesian poets who, like Osorio, revive and revise oral traditions, while also discussing the oral performance and its relation to the written word in general. Marsden comes to the conclusion that a live performance is already a form of publication which, by actively engaging a participating audience, might even carry more weight as a medium of protest than its written counterpart. The binary of written and spoken is furthermore unsettled by virtual presentations of poetry: slams and spoken word performances, as well as canonical poetry readings by well-known actors are propagated through YouTube and other social media platforms. Poets, established and new, have taken to Twitter (Benjamin Zephaniah, Brian Bilston) and Instagram (Rupi Kaur, Alicia Cook), and there are several apps dedicated to the genre (The Love Book App, POETRY from Poetry Foundation).

Whether news, stage or virtual space, so far, we have paid little attention to the more traditional ways of publishing poetry: in anthologies, journals and in pamphlets such as *Campaign in Poetry* (The Emma Press, 2015). Emma Wright, founder of the latter, explains that she and her team 'wanted to make an anthology which would capture and inspire momentum for change,'¹⁴ thus illustrating similar trends to those that we identified in protest poetry. In more conventional media, too, poetry addresses current topics and demands active engagement. The conclusion at this point is as simple as it is obvious: poetry is alive and kicking! A suitable form of protest, poetry constantly re-invents itself, bending and breaking language and form, and drawing its readers into the conflict by choosing more interactive and immediate modes of publication, transmission and reception.

The texts examined by our writers all share an additional common feature, as they express life experiences which may appear liminal. Especially through performative, interactive and viral forms of poetry, a diverse readership gains access to equally diverse texts and lifeworlds. In order to read poetry from the margins, we have to actively engage with places, languages and experiences that would otherwise remain foreign and distant. This intense involvement of the reader is facilitated by the transcultural nature of the marginalised texts. Readers, writers and scholars of poetry can find commonalities that make the often strongly contrasted realms of experience relatable. Frank Schulze-Engler's definition of transcultural studies as being concerned with 'realities of individual and collective lifeworlds shaped by the ubiquity of phenomena and experiences relating to transnational connections and the blurring of cultural boundaries'¹⁵ forms a foundation for the analysis of such perspectives. In 'Finding a "German" Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith's *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick*' for example, Lotta Schneidemesser details the process of translating the Maori and Samoan Anglophone poetry of Courtney Sina Meredith into German. Employing her own experience as a translator, she explains how often the cultural, national, and linguistic transitions pose obstacles, but at the same time emphasises the universality of certain themes which provide both herself and her anticipated German readers with a way into New Zealand poetry. Many of the issues raised in

¹⁴ Emma Wright, 'Introduction,' *Campaign in Poetry: The Emma Press Anthology of Political Poetry*, eds. Rachel Piercey and Emma Wright (Reading: The Emma Press, 2015) v.

¹⁵ Frank Schulze-Engler, 'Introduction,' *Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities*, eds. Frank Schulze-Engler and Sissy Helff (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009) ix.

Meredith's poetry collection are therefore 'not entirely bound up with a certain time or a certain place but are transcultural.'¹⁶

Bringing together the common themes of marginalisation, protest and transcultural understanding, which run through *Voices from the Margins*, our reading of Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib's poem 'The Day After The Election I Did Not Go Outside' illustrates what 'listening to the margins' looks like in practice. The poem already suggests protest – or the absence of it – by means of its title. Willis-Abdurraqib sets the scene just after the fateful day of the 2016 U.S. presidential election in a multicultural urban environment. Immediately contradicting the title of his poem with a 'But for a moment' (v. 1), the speaker goes on to describe his trip to a soul food restaurant where fragmented glimpses of a marginalised space within a transcultural cityscape create a complex image that oscillates between the everyday and the unexpected. While the urgency in the speaker's voice grows throughout the text, the ending suggests that even shock and protest have become mundane.

Our perception of the marginal space is also determined by the speaker's voice and point of view. Similarly, Marvin Reimann's article "'This is me, anonymous, water's soliloquy:': The River's Voice as a Coalescence of Humankind and Nature in Alice Oswald's *Dart*' reconstructs the many voices connected to the poetic portrait of the river Dart and analyses how they merge into one. In this process, Reimann finds numerous structural analogies between river and voice through which he carefully composes a reading that centres on the equality of human voices and those of nature. While Reimann evens out the hierarchy between the anthropocentric and the ecocentric by illustrating how a literary text can function without a human perspective at its centre, 'The Day After The Election' focuses very much on the human experience of a restaurant but employs a similar strategy in that it combines a multitude of voices into one and gives space and setting an agency which matches that of the speaker.

The central and most active space in Willis-Abdurraqib's text is the soul food restaurant. The main body of the poem consists of a list of traits that characterise the eatery:

But for a moment, to drive to the soul
food spot on Congress ave. where utensils,
large & made for the hands of no one living among
us, hang on the walls & where the woman behind

the counter yells out my order before my second
foot makes it in the door & where her laugh is like
my sister's or where her laugh is like my mother's or
where her laugh is like my grandmother's ... (v. 1-8)

The restaurant is a space of community. More than by décor or food, it is defined by its function. It is a sanctuary for women, men and children who are provided with a place where everything remains the same despite the fact that so much has just changed (cf. v. 40-44). The centrality of a detailed depiction of this one small space underlines how 'spaces are not simply the passive backdrop to significant sociohistorical action, rather they are a vital product and determinant of

¹⁶ Lotta Schneidmesser, in this special feature, 4.

that action.’¹⁷ Interestingly, all authors featured in *Voices from the Margins* stress this point in their respective analyses, although space plays a different role in each text. Whereas de Haas recounts the history of physical performance spaces, such as the *Book-Café* in Harare, Nabulya’s eco-poetic analysis posits the natural environment at the centre of her approach. At the same time, all authors, Schneidemesser and Marsden in particular, concern themselves with bridges built between distinct places. The same tension between the uniqueness of place and a shared sense of commonality is visible in ‘The Day After The Election.’

In describing the restaurant, the speaker moves from past tense in the title, which clearly anchors the poem temporally, to present tense in the poem. The present tense serves not only as a means of expressing habits and general truths; it communicates continuity, a main theme of the poem. The contrast between title and poem, past and present tense emphasises the friction following the election of Trump. However, the poem keeps landing on the side of continuity:

...& where those men ignore the yelling
& the marching on the television & where I imagine those men
have seen this movie before & know its ending & yet are still

here to watch it again & where the plates rattle when one of the men shows
his hand & says his partner ain’t shit & where I laugh because these men
could be my father & around the right table, I am everyone’s child &
where the stereo is from the 90s & so is everything that crawls out of it

& where Lauryn sings how *you gon’ win if you ain’t right within* & I am (v. 18-25)

Continuity and sense of community are moreover visualised by the ampersand, which connects the fleeting and fast-paced sense impressions that make up the soul food restaurant and the surrounding city, suggesting ‘the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli.’¹⁸ According to Georg Simmel, it is this overstimulation that characterises metropolitan life. Since this experience is universal to most urban spaces, the ampersand connects not only the sense impressions of the speaker but offers a nodal point for possible connections with similar communities and spaces all over the globe. This reflects the experience that all authors in the special feature share: encountering commonalities in singularity. In exploring marginalised poetry, all of them find different answers to a question that Edward Said posed over a decade ago: ‘Can one formulate a theory of connection between part and whole that denies neither the specificity of the individual experience nor the validity of a projected, putative, or imputed whole?’¹⁹

In his poem, Willis-Abdurraqib answers a related question which also preoccupied the marching protesters: Where do we go from here? The simplicity of the answer – the soul food spot, a place of comfort and community – sets the political events in a broader context.

¹⁷ Brian Jarvis, *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in American Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1998) 6-7.

¹⁸ Georg Simmel, ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life,’ [1903] *The City Cultures Reader*, eds. Malcolm Miles, Tim Hall and Iain Borden. (London: Routledge, 2004) 11.

¹⁹ Edward Said, ‘Globalizing Literary Study,’ *Modern Language Association* 116.1 (2001) 68.

Ramazani's statement about poetry's gaze towards 'the distant horizons of the future'²⁰ applies here too: When the speaker returns to the day after the election in stanza eight, he talks about children playing in the streets. In opening the poem to a new setting, the speaker broadens its view to take in the big picture. He singles out this one day and the one short moment in a restaurant but discusses both through the lens of continuity.

... & so I say, then:
make a border around any place you are loved & call it yours.
make a border around those who hold you up & build what
you must to keep the devils out. ... (v. 33-36)

Willis-Abdurraqib's connection of protest and poetry takes us back to our opening reflections on the images of the Women's Marches and Black Lives Matter movement. These verses turn Trump's campaign of scaremongering and hate into a sanctuary of love and protection. As a form of protest, the poem acknowledges both conflict and rupture, but through its emphasis on continuity and community also offers a broader perspective and disrupts binaries of margins and centres.

Lioba Schreyer is writing her doctoral thesis about Indigenous poetry as a platform in the struggle for land rights and justice in Australia. She finished her Master's degree at the University of Duisburg-Essen in 2014 with a thesis on the loss of language in Irish poetry, which she researched at the University of Limerick, Ireland. Lioba also holds a Bachelor's degree in English and Dutch. She was a lecturer at the University of Duisburg-Essen from 2014 to 2016 and joined the staff at the Ruhr-University in Bochum in 2017.

Lena Mattheis is a lecturer and doctoral student in the Anglophone Studies Department at the University of Duisburg-Essen. After completing a year of social service in the field of cultural education, she studied French and Anglophone Literature, as well as Media Studies, at the University of Duisburg-Essen (2010-2015). Lena finished her studies with an Master's thesis on urbanity in Namibia that she researched during an internship at the University of Namibia in Windhoek. Her PhD project is focused on translocality and urban space in global Anglophone fiction.

²⁰ Ramazani 86.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost we wish to thank the authors – scholars, translator and poet – without whom this special feature, quite literally, would not have been possible. We want to thank them for contributing their work, both to the workshop and now to the special feature, for the most pleasant cooperation in the editing process and for their readiness to respond to all types of queries (including a request for holiday pictures).

The main research area *Transformation of Contemporary Societies* at the University of Duisburg-Essen – Maïke Müller in particular – provided not only funding but also advice and support from our first call about the possibility of a workshop throughout the project until its publication. With Patricia Plummer, Barbara Buchenau and Jens Gurr, we found three advisors who shared our enthusiasm and their knowledge along the way. We are particularly grateful to have found such a supportive publisher with *Transnational Literature* and Gillian Dooley, who answered our every question at a moment's notice. Special thanks go to Frida Heitland, tireless assistant whose every e-mail comes with a smile, and to the village: colleagues and friends, students and secretaries – we owe you one!