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Contemporary U.S. Poetry and Its Nationalisms

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Just weeks after September 11, 2001, Charlotte Beers, a prominent adwoman often associated with the J. Walter Thompson agency, was hired by the U.S. State Department as undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs. Among her projects was the publication of an essay collection to be distributed by U.S. embassies called *Writers on America: Fifteen Reflections*. This publication is an unusual example of old-fashioned, government-sponsored literary propaganda. It could not be distributed within the U.S. because of the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act, which forbids domestic distribution of propaganda materials intended for foreign audiences by the State Department.[1] It features fifteen American writers, among them poets laureate Robert Pinsky and Billy Collins, writing about and celebrating being an American. George Clack, executive editor of the publication, states in his introduction that the

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1. See Robert Lalasz's "Ego Pluribus Unum" for more discussion of the international distribution and U.S. reception of this publication.

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publication "could illuminate in an interesting way certain America values—freedom, diversity, democracy—that may not be well understood in all parts of the world." With obvious nationalism, the writers featured in *Writers on America* promote U.S. freedoms. And much of the work omits the negative role that the U.S. government plays in the lives of its citizens and does not reference the hugely detrimental impact that the U.S. government has had on the lives of citizens of other nations. Poet Naomi Shihab Nye, for instance, writes: "Everything was possible in the United States—this was not just a rumor, it was *true*. He [her father] might not grow rich overnight, but he could sell insurance, import colorful gifts from around the world, start little stores, become a journalist. He could do *anything*."

Writers on America is just one example of the George W. Bush administration's peculiar interest in literature. In this article, I will tell the story of this interest through the genre of poetry, affirming T. S. Eliot's claim that "no art is more stubbornly national than poetry" (8). This story will be full of oxymoronic synergies between nationalism and privatization, the same oxymoron that so defines contemporary capitalism. It will note how the Bush administration returned most of the National Endowment for the Arts funding that was cut during the Clinton years and the NEA's partnership with the Boeing Company. And it will focus on the special synergy between the Bush administration and the Poetry Foundation, a not-for-profit organization founded during the reign of Bush. I will also tell a related story about poetry's resistance, which I will locate in the movement poetries of the 1960s and 1970s and the development within the U.S. of a poetry in English that uses other languages, a formal gesture that I read as contesting poetry's frequent nationalism. As I tell these stories, I rely upon work by Steve Evans, George Yúdice, Mark McGurl, and Pascale Casanova, all theorists who mix close reading with a sort of sociological formalism indebted to Pierre Bourdieu and others. Among the assumptions upon which this article rests is the belief that nationalist U.S. poems are more likely to be well-crafted, English-only explorations of the emotional life of first-world citizens than the obvious explo-

rations of American freedom that make up *Writers on America* or rousing supports of various wars.

While I will be arguing that there is an intensification of interest in literature's possible nationalism during the Bush years, it is not that the U.S. has completely dismissed the idea that literature and other arts are useful tools in nationalism. During the cold war, the Central Intelligence Agency established and funded the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which published magazines, held cultural events, and provided funds to numerous writers and artists so as to disseminate their work in Western Europe.[2] But it is also worth noticing that there is an aura of belatedness and also a lack of interest that shows up again and again in any direct relationship between the U.S. government and the arts. The U.S. government tends to do less direct funding of the arts in comparison to European and South American nations. Unlike many other governments, the U.S. does not provide funds for the translation of U.S. literature into other languages. The NEA was not founded until 1965 (by Lyndon Johnson), and its budget was very publicly contested throughout the 1980s. There was no poet laureate position in the U.S. until 1986.[3] And the poet laureate of the U.S. is not required to do the one thing that it is assumed poets laureate ought to do: write poems in defense of the government. Although at moments some U.S. poets laureate are asked and some do. Collins, on September 24, 2001, wrote in *USA Today*, "A poem about mushrooms or about a walk with the dog is a more eloquent response to Sept. 11 than a poem that announces that wholesale murder is a bad thing" ("Poetry"). But when asked by the Library of Congress to write a poem to be read before a special joint session of Congress that was to commemorate the U.S. victims of September 11, he obliged with "The Names," a poem about a walk (without a dog), with a narrator who sees various names "of citizens, workers, mothers and fathers" inscribed on windows,

2. Frances Stonor Saunders, in *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, documents this history in great detail.

3. Although this situation, too, is complicated. The position "Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress," in existence since 1937, became "Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress" in 1985.

in the air, on bridges (47). And before Collins, there was a long tradition of poets who wrote nationalist poems without being asked. Walt Whitman, for instance, wrote many defenses of the imperial mission of the U.S. and received no national funding for them. My favorite example here is Robert Frost, who recited from memory his nationalist "The Gift Outright," a poem that begins "The land was ours before we were the land's," at Kennedy's inauguration, after the glare and the wind made it impossible for him to read "Dedication," the poem he had written for the occasion.[4]

Further complicating this story of literary nationalism, perhaps the largest and most far-reaching way the U.S. government supports the arts is through an arcane series of tax breaks to not-for-profit institutions. This is one of the reasons why any discussion of U.S. literary nationalism must at the same time consider the privatization of the arts that occurs through support from foundations, arts institutes, poets' houses, and other nonprofit organizations. The intensifying of this privatization in the 1980s and 1990s is the focus of George Yúdice's "The Privatization of Culture." As Yúdice notes, the U.S. government encourages various private partnerships that "blur the boundaries between the private and the public, a composite arrangement already foreshadowed in the nonprofit corporation, which is simultaneously private and public" (26). Yúdice does not mention the poet laureate position, but it is exemplary of his analysis, as it is nationalist in its title and alliances with the Library of Congress and yet privately funded. Yúdice continues, "It makes no sense to speak of public and private, for they have been pried open to each other in this triangulation" (26).

There is, in short, nothing simple in this story of U.S. literary nationalism, a story that grew even more complicated during the Bush years. Much of this complication can be located in the accident of history that is September 11. It was September 11 that

4. There are few meaningful poems in U.S. literature that are as much about the complicated intersection between nationalism and privatization as is "The Gift Outright," which overwrites Native American presence and naturalizes the relationship between European immigrants and land-ownership.

provided the impetus to hire Beers. September 11 also brought a renewed interest in poetry in the media and popular imagination. Poetry received an unusual amount of public attention after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It began with W. H. Auden's strangely relevant "September 1, 1939" showing up in everyone's in-boxes within minutes of the collapse of the World Trade Center towers.[5] After the attacks, the mainstream press was intent on defining poetry's somewhat limited social role. Over and over, articles talked about a supposed renewed interest in poetry. Mark Bibbins, in *Publishers Weekly*, in an article titled "Solace and Steady Sales," argued that "people turn to poetry in times of crisis." Mary Karr announced in *The New York Times* that "the events of Sept. 11 nailed home many of my basic convictions, including the notion that lyric poetry dispenses more relief—if not actual salvation—during catastrophic times than perhaps any art form." In *USA Today*, Collins wrote, "Poetry has always accommodated loss and keening; it may be said to be the original grief counseling center" ("Poetry").

Prior to Bush and prior to September 11, the NEA was much besieged. Each year that Clinton was in office, the NEA budget was cut: when he was inaugurated in 1993, its budget was $174 million; when he left office in 2001, it was $104.7 million. Despite the Bush administration's rhetoric of small government and cutting subsidies to a liberal elite, each year Bush was in office, the NEA's budget went up. By 2009, $50 million of the $69 million cut from the NEA under Clinton had been returned.[6] To oversee this largess, the administration in 2003 appointed Dana Gioia—one of many businessman-poets associated with the Bush administration—as chairman. Gioia immediately declared an agenda to take "the agency beyond the culture wars" ("Beyond the 1990s"). Among his attempts, exemplary of that oxymoron of nationalist privatization, was the partnership between the NEA and Boeing, in which the NEA organized and Boeing funded fifty writing workshops attended by six thousand troops

5. In *Disappearing Ink*, Dana Gioia talks of beginning a reading on September 12 with Auden's poem.

6. See *National Endowment for the Arts Appropriations History*.

and their spouses, resulting in the published anthology *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*.[7]

The partnership with Boeing is an obvious example of how under Gioia the NEA supported the development of a specifically militarized national tradition. A less militarized partnership took shape between the Bush administration and the Poetry Foundation. In 2002, Ruth Lilly (the scion of Eli Lilly of the Lilly pharmaceutical corporation) bestowed on *Poetry* magazine between $100 million and $175 million. By 2004, *Poetry* magazine had become the Poetry Foundation and hired banker-poet John Barr as its president. Millions of dollars is an unusually large gift for a small literary magazine to receive. For comparison, the net assets of the Poetry Project in 2009 were $1,377,000, and for the Poetry Society of America $2,873,000. Both are established arts organizations with a long history of programming support for poets and significantly more program offerings than the Poetry Foundation.

What Barr did with the Poetry Foundation millions during the Bush years is a peculiar model of public and private overlap. Barr's funding decisions are especially interesting because the Poetry Foundation is so fiscally conservative. In 2009, the Poetry Foundation's total assets were $179 million. It spent $6.7 million of this, mostly on infrastructure. In 2004, according to Barr, the mission of the foundation was to "inaugurate and manage its own programs" ("2004 Annual Letter"). The organization continued to support *Poetry* magazine, established its own website (at poetryfoundation.org, which initially used the *Huffington Post* model of having much of its content provided by underpaid

7. Gioia's preface states at least three times that the book is not an "official" government publication. He writes: "It is not an official publication" (Carroll xi); "The Department of Defense played no role in selecting the contents of the book" (xiv); "Someone suggested the book be marketed as the first 'official' account of the war, but 'official' is exactly what *Operation Homecoming* is not" (xv). He also claims that "[t]here is something in *Operation Homecoming* to support every viewpoint on the war—whatever the political stance" (xiv). But he is, as one might imagine, exaggerating. While there is some talk about the horrors of war, there is little analysis that connects the recent wars to U.S. imperialism, an analysis that one might expect from an anthology promising to represent every viewpoint on the war.

poets), hosted an annual Printer's Ball, commissioned a $700,000 survey about what people want from poetry, and established a children's poet laureate as well as some unusual prizes, such as one for humorous poetry and one for unpublished poets over the age of forty. Once one looks beyond its own limited programs, however, the Poetry Foundation starts to seem like a granting organization for federal programs—albeit one without a clear application process—funding governmental initiatives that blur the line between public and private, such as American Life in Poetry (Ted Kooser's poet laureate project, co-sponsored by the Library of Congress), Poetry Out Loud (a series of high school poetry recitation contests, co-sponsored by the NEA), American Public Media (Garrison Keillor's production company for his National Public Radio and Public Broadcasting Service programs), and the NewsHour Poetry Series (Jim Lehrer's PBS program).[8]

The Lilly bequest got and continues to get a lot of attention. There were accusations that the bequest was timed to draw media attention away from Eli Lilly and Company's falling stock price. Meghan O'Rourke alluded in *Slate* to charges that Ruth Lilly's mental state had rendered her incapable of making the bequest and that the bequest was publicity for the Lilly corporation: "Ruth Lilly has been mentally incompetent, by law, for some 20 years (few of the major papers bothered to report this). Her estate was managed first by her brother and is now controlled by her lawyer, Thomas Ewbank."[9] In 2006, the Poetry

8. The Poetry Foundation released its 2009 tax returns on its website. The numbers are somewhat fascinating, although I am unable to draw many conclusions from them. Barr made $237,749 (which is high for a president of a not-for-profit, especially one who does not have to raise money, but unsurprising in the context of the Poetry Foundation's budget) (14). The support staff for the foundation was paid about $403,000. Otherwise, the largest expenditure was $1,835,000 spent on "educational and public programs." Poetry Out Loud received a major part of this money. Other notable donations: The Academy of American Poets received $10,000; American Public Media (it produces Keillor's work) received $84,000; Poetry Society of America, $10,000; Friends of Lorine Niedecker, $5,000; and WETA (producers of *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*), $200,197 (15–31).

9. John Stehr, in "Ruth Lilly's Relatives Seek New Financial Controls," also mentions this fact. C. J. Laity writes on his blog: "Questions would soon arise whether or not Lilly indeed intended to give such an outrageous amount of money to one single poetry organization, since she couldn't walk, had a feeding tube and had trouble comprehending

Foundation and Americans for the Arts (also a beneficiary in the Lilly will) sued Ruth Lilly Charitable Remainder Annuity Trust for failure to diversify the trust assets. The Indiana Court of Appeals ruled against the foundations in 2006; there is rumor of an appeal to the Supreme Court of Indiana.[10] Christopher Borrelli notes:

> He [Barr] immediately rubbed much of the poetry community the wrong way: He announced plans for a building (which some foundation trustees considered wasteful and unnecessary), briefly put his wife on the payroll (drawing cries of nepotism) and was accused of an anti-education approach to outreach. The more benign critics wondered if poetry's stature could be raised by marketing campaigns; the more damning—including more than half of the dozen trustees who resigned or said they were forced out by Barr—cried allegations of mismanagement.[11]

In addition, several former members of the Poetry Foundation's board have filed a brief with the Illinois attorney general that mentions "possible conflict-of-interest and governance issues that they thought might put the Poetry Foundation in violation of the laws regulating nonprofits" (Isaacs).[12]

It is hard to tell if all of this controversy is just the inevitable growing pains of the suddenly disproportionate wealth of the

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when her 'guardian' signed off on it. It has been speculated that she actually intended to give one million dollars to one hundred different 'poetry magazines' but that her family, who would eventually be awarded guardianship, misunderstood what she was trying to communicate. One source, who quotes an Appellate Court's published opinion, claims that there were actually as many as twenty different sophisticated wills drafted for Ruth Lilly, wills that involved charitable trusts and limited liability companies, but her guardians believed that executing the most recent will would be too complicated and would involve too much work and too much risk. According to the source, her guardians took advantage of an Indiana law that allows for the creation of an estate plan for a 'protected person.' They honored only one will, a will that was written in 1982. When the will that *was* honored was written, Lilly's intention was to donate a percentage of her estate estimated at $5 million to Poetry Magazine. However, when it was finally put into motion, it was twenty years later, and Lilly's fortune had grown by 1000%, thus turning Poetry Magazine's percentage into an unintended, shocking amount of money."

10. There is an interesting discussion of this case in an anonymous pamphlet called *This Rhymeless Nation* (Banditto).

11. Also hired was Danielle Chapman, the wife of *Poetry* editor Christian Wiman. See the Poetry Foundation's "Related Parties Statement."

12. This issue is also discussed in Grossman.

Poetry Foundation or if it is in response to Barr's leadership. As much as the Poetry Foundation has had its share of controversy, so has Barr. He has been unusually, at least for a poet, involved in various boom-and-bust cycles that have had an impact on many ordinary citizens. Barr's banking career began at Morgan Stanley, where Barr specialized in utility mergers. During this time, he was also founder and chairman of the Natural Gas Clearinghouse, now known as Dynegy. He left Morgan Stanley and, in 1990, co-founded the boutique investment firm Barr Devlin. Barr Devlin oversaw some 40 percent of the dollar volume on utilities mergers between 1990 and 1995 (Strom). In 1998, Société Générale bought Barr Devlin, giving the firm international reach and support. That same year, the Power Company of America, LP, a firm largely owned by the same people who owned Barr Devlin, was one of the first power trading companies to default, serving as an early warning of the vulnerability of a deregulated market.[13] Similarly, Dynegy was accused of accounting fraud and price manipulation in this same deregulated market. As if all of this were not enough, Barr was also chairman of the board of trustees at Bennington College when it abolished tenure and fired a third of its faculty in 1994, giving it the distinction of being at the forefront of what is now the long march toward an increasingly casualized faculty in the academy.[14]

Steve Evans, in "Free (Market) Verse," has charted the Bush administration's unusual interest in poetry through the rise of a group that he calls "Poets for Bush." "Through men like Dana Gioia, John Barr, and Ted Kooser," Evans writes, "Karl Rove's battle-tested blend of unapologetic economic elitism and reactionary cultural populism is now being marketed in the far-off reaches of the poetry world" (25). Evans begins his article with the Lilly endowment and includes a list of the changes he says "rhymed with the *Poetry* bequest" (27). These include "the aesthetically conservative poetry insider" Ed Hirsch being picked to preside over the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation in 2002 and the 2003 appointment of Gioia as the NEA chairman (28).

13. See Kranhold for further discussion.
14. In a letter to *The New York Times*, Barr takes responsibility for this decision.

Evans is right that there are deep social and institutional connections among Barr, Gioia, and Kooser. Most obviously, it is not just Barr who has a business background. Gioia was an executive at General Foods for many years, and Kooser is a former vice-president of Lincoln Benefit Life Company. These "real" jobs show up prominently in the poets' PR materials and are often presented as a mark of their authenticity, their commitment to the American values of commerce. But that is just the beginning of the connections. As its president, Barr put the Poetry Foundation's monetary muscle behind Kooser, and it often feels as if Kooser sprang out of obscurity because of a combination of the poet laureate position (he, like Collins, held the position twice under Bush) and the foundation. It is not as if Kooser had done nothing before 2004, the year he was awarded the poet laureate position, the first year of the Poetry Foundation's operations, and the year when his Pulitzer-winning *Delights and Shadows* was published. At the time, he was in his mid-sixties and had published a number of books with undistinguished presses, to minimal critical attention. Gioia, one of the few people to write about Kooser prior to 2004, argues in "The Anonymity of the Regional Poet" that Kooser was invisible because he was a regional poet, and as a result, the system had been stacked against him: "His fellow poets look on him as an anomaly or an anachronism. Reviewers find him eminently unnewsworthy. Publishers see little prestige attached to printing his work. Critics, who have been trained to celebrate complexity, consider him an amiable simpleton" (94). For its part, the Poetry Foundation invested a lot in proving that Kooser's "unnewsworthiness" was no longer true. One of the foundation's inaugural programs was the founding of *American Life in Poetry*, a website that featured a "brief" and "enjoyable" poem by a poet and an even shorter commentary about the poem by Poet Laureate Kooser (*American Life*). The program's mission, for reasons that remain unclear, was to get poetry into midsized and rural newspapers.[15]

15. In a 2005 press release, the Poetry Foundation claims that over seventy newspapers ran the column (*American Life*).

It is Barr and Gioia who seem the most entangled and the most representative of the alliances between private and public agencies. They both controlled millions of arts-intended dollars during the Bush years. They both tended to use the same rhetoric of populist anti-intellectualism in their claim to be for the common man against a literary, often academic, elite. In "Can Poetry Matter?" (1991), Gioia argues that poetry does not matter anymore, in part because "[o]nce poets began moving into universities, they abandoned the working-class heterogeneity of Greenwich Village and North Beach for the professional homogeneity of academia" (12). He implies that this move into the academy has made them especially susceptible to modernist influences. Barr echoes Gioia in "American Poetry in the New Century" (2006) when he writes: "Modernism has passed into the DNA of the MFA programs. For all its schools and experiments, contemporary poetry is still written in the rain shadow thrown by Modernism. It is the engine that drives what is written today. And it is a tired engine" (433).[16] In their fight against poetic elites, self-declared common men Barr and Gioia both used significant funds to commission big "state of the art" surveys. Gioia's *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* "showed literary reading rates falling precipitously in every demographic group—all ages, incomes, education levels, races, regions, and genders" (Bauerlein and Grantham 156). It received a lot of press and was used to justify Gioia's emphasis on putting more money into "populist" programming, such as Poetry Out Loud.[17] Barr's survey was less alarmist, finding that "poetry readers tend to be sociable and lead active lives" and that "[m]ore than 80 percent of former poetry readers found poetry difficult to understand," although the study summary notes that only 2 percent of respondents don't read poetry because they feel it is "too hard" (Schwartz et al.).

16. This is an aside, but I think Barr is wrong here. The legacy of modernism shows up in contemporary experimental traditions such as Language writing, which has had limited impact upon M.F.A. programs.

17. Weirdly, an NEA follow-up study, "Reading on the Rise," shows reading rising dramatically. The NEA used this as evidence of the success of Gioia programs like Poetry Out Loud. See "Data and Methodology" in the *Reading on the Rise* publication for some discussion about how the two surveys differed.

Evans's big three are Barr, Gioia, and Kooser. I might add Garrison Keillor to Evans's troika, even though he tends to present as a Democrat. Keillor's folksy defenses of white ethnicity define his various government-funded cultural projects, including NPR's *A Prairie Home Companion* and *The Writer's Almanac*, PBS's short film series Poetry Everywhere, and his Good Poems series of anthologies. Barr lists the Poetry Foundation as "the major sponsor" of *The Writer's Almanac* in his 2006 "annual report to the poetry community" ("2006 Annual Letter"). Keillor has returned the favor as a judge for the NEA/Poetry Foundations's Poetry Out Loud. And Keillor's various projects provide an interesting example of how these writers often overlap in print publications. Barr, Gioia, and Kooser have all had poems featured on *The Writer's Almanac*; Gioia and Kooser have also been prominently included in various Good Poems anthologies. Barr was on the editorial panel of *Operation Homecoming*, the publication created out of the NEA-Boeing partnership that Gioia orchestrated.

In describing these overlapping concerns, I do not intend to present them as a conspiracy. I want instead to describe a sort of constellation that gets configured through a relationship to literary nationalism. Barr-Gioia-Kooser-Keillor, and Collins also, are doing the sorts of things that a nationalist poet might do in this moment of private and public funding synergy.[18] The Bush moment is interesting because we live in a society that is used to literature being an irrelevant genre, one that requires impassioned defenses such as Giorgio Agamben's *The End of the Poem* or Susan Stewart's *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (to name just two in a possible long list), or a resistant genre that actively opposes the government. That literature, even and especially

18. Collins also regularly intersects with Barr and the Poetry Foundation. Barr and Collins have been on the board of the Poetry Society of America (before the Poetry Foundation, the PSA was the most prominent aesthetically conservative poetry arts organization). Collins blurbed Barr's second book, *Grace*. Collins, poet laureate for two terms during the Bush administration, has a long history of prizes from *Poetry* magazine. His agent's website lists the Oscar Blumenthal Prize, the Bess Hokin Prize, the Frederick Bock Prize, and the Levinson Prize, all from *Poetry*. Collins was also the inaugural recipient of the Mark Twain Prize for Humor in Poetry from the Poetry Foundation.

poetry, might matter to the military-industrial complex that is well-represented by Boeing and the Bush administration verges on being counterintuitive and perhaps even surprising.

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I do not want to suggest that there was no dissent among poets during the Bush years. I have only been talking about three or four men among the thousands of U.S. poets. Most of Barr-Gioia-Kooser-Keillor's poetic contemporaries were not supportive of the Bush administration, and some took Percy Bysshe Shelley's line about poets being the unacknowledged legislators of the world as a mandate. There is a long tradition of the White House hosting a poetry event, as well as a long tradition of pointed refusals to read at them. Adrienne Rich notably refused the National Medal for the Arts in 1997 (under the Clinton administration).[19] In 2003, when Laura Bush attempted to set up an event honoring Langston Hughes, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman, it was eventually cancelled after several of the poets she had invited made their distaste with the wars of the Bush administration clear and declared their intentions to further clarify this at the event, or refused to attend. Among these was the poet Sam Hamill, who declined his invitation and encouraged poets to send antiwar poems to Laura Bush. He then set up the popular *Poets Against War* website that invited individuals to submit a poem or "statement of conscience" (*Poets Against War*). Over thirty-thousand poems were submitted before the site stopped accepting new poems.

This is business as usual for the motley crew that is U.S. poets. What makes poetry during the Bush administration so peculiar and interesting is that, as many before me have noted, in the last half of the twentieth century, poetry decentralized and localized so as to separate itself from explorations of national identity, often so as to critique the government. Instead of writing a poetry that claims to speak for or unite all U.S. citizens, many poets—even the most prominent and important—aligned them-

19. See her "Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts."

selves with specific forms of resistant activism, often grouping themselves by their ethnicity, or race, or gender, or sexuality, or class and writing from and about that position. Many, although not all, of these groups formed in dialogue with minority cultural activist movements, many of which have a special interest in the arts as they can represent and preserve cultures and their values. Many notable poets have come out of these movements. John Trudell, for instance, was part of the occupation of Alcatraz Island and credits his activism for his turn to poetry. Alurista was so tied into the origins of Chicano nationalism that one of his early poems opens *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*. Few of these poets present themselves as representatives of a national aesthetic or voice. Amira Baraka's, and the Umbra collective poets', black nationalism is willfully separatist. Baraka's poem "Black Art" proclaims, "We want a black poem. And a / Black World" (220). Many late-twentieth-century poets forcefully declared their opposition to the U.S. government. Some, like Kenneth Rexroth and Jackson Mac Low, identified as anarchists.[20]

These movements have cultivated community-based patronage systems such as publishing houses, journals, anthologies, and reading series to distribute and promote the work. Baraka's creation of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in 1965 is often seen as a foundational moment here, but it was just one among many. Bamboo Ridge, the workshop and press that publishes mainly literature written by Asian Americans in Hawaii, was founded in 1978 and has preserved and cultivated a literature in Pidgin. Arte Público, with its claim of providing a national forum for Hispanic literature, was founded in 1979. I would also include the avant-garde-based, "experimental" U.S. traditions such as Beat and Language writing as parallel movements with activist-support models that intersect, although not consistently, with various sorts of anticapitalist political claims.

20. Kaplan Page Harris, for instance, in "Causes, Movements, Poets," points to another example of poetry's activist possibility at the time—the "benefit" readings advertised in the 1970s in the Bay Area journal *Poetry Flash*. Harris lists around twenty-two benefit readings between 1973 and 1980 in the Bay Area alone. There were readings for farm workers, for women, for the People's Community School, for the Greek resistance, for stricter regulation of nuclear power plants, for the prisoners of San Quentin, and so on.

It is not so easy, though, to say that the disorganized and decentralized Baraka-Hamill-Rich-Trudell constellation, when juxtaposed to the well-connected, well-funded, and well-organized Barr-Gioia-Kooser-Keillor contingent, is necessarily antinationalist. As Pascale Casanova points out in *The World Republic of Letters*, the nationalist or resistant resonances of aesthetic forms are not fixed: one era's formal resistance to national literary traditions is another's example of national values and expression. Casanova analyzes how national traditions compete globally for literary dominance and often absorb the very literatures written to oppose them. Her analysis is provocative. She writes, "Since language is not a purely literary tool, but an inescapably political instrument as well, it is through language that the literary world remains subject to political power" (115). As she notes, some writers, not to be beholden to what they view as an ossified national tradition, or an occupying government, or simply a government gone wrong, attempt to free their writing from nationalism through linguistic innovation, perhaps by using a vernacular or by misusing the national language. She gives many examples: Dante, the English Romantics, the modernists. And then, as she notes, the story that comes after is usually one where these literatures written in resistance become the new national tradition. It is this very constant process of resistance and cooptation that makes written language into literature.

Much of *The World Republic of Letters* is about linguistic resistance to dominant national traditions. Casanova spends little time on the reverse, on linguistic policing of the resistance, which is what I will argue was one of the goals of these poets with close ties to the Bush administration. But still, Casanova's analysis is an illuminating model for thinking about contemporary U.S. poetry up to September 11.[21] From the mid twentieth century,

21. And yet Casanova's analysis does not entirely describe the complications of U.S. literary nationalism and its oxymoronic relationship with privatization, because her focus is so on Europe, with its more singular and distinctive national traditions. She does not give much attention to how immigrant or cultural nationalist traditions might also be competing within a nation for global attention, even as they define themselves against a dominant national tradition. James English, like Casanova, examines the global fight for various literary spoils and cultural capital with a focus on the literary prize (rather than

U.S. poetry has included a series of linguistically distinctive schools or groupings. I am thinking here of how Chicano/a poets tend to use Spanish or Spanglish and Hawaiian poets tend to use Hawaiian. It isn't all that simple, of course. But there is a fairly significant tendency by poets who write poetry about their ethnic and/or racial identity and/or culture to write in English and yet also include the language associated with their identity and/or cultural tradition. Gloria Anzaldúa summed up this position in 1987 in *Borderlands* with her rallying cry, "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (81).

Rodolfo Gonzales's *I Am Joaquin* is an early, interesting example of the closeness that poetry had to cultural and language activism. Gonzales wrote the poem in an English that includes Spanish. In its 1967 edition—published by Crusade for Justice, the activist organization that Gonzales founded—it appears with a Spanish version.[22] So it pointedly circulates in both languages. And it was written as "an organizing tool," as Rafael Pérez-Torres notes: "Written in 1967 for the Crusade for Justice, distributed by mimeographed copy, recited at rallies and strikes, the poem functions within a system of economic and political resistance" (47). In the introduction to the 1972 Bantam edition, Gonzales writes, "ultimately, there are no revolutions without poets" (1). This same edition, which has a lot of ancillary material, also states, in a section called "About *I am Joaquín*," "The poem was written first and foremost for the Chicano movement"

the national tradition, although these, of course, overlap). English argues that Casanova's model does not directly apply to the U.S.: "The game now involves strategies of subnational and extranational articulation, with success falling to those who manage to take up positions of double and redoubled advantage: positions of local prestige bringing them global prestige of the sort that reaffirms and reinforces their local standing" (312). I like English's use of the terms "subnational" and "extranational" because for the most part these poetries do not really earn the term "antinationalist." Indicative of how complicated the nuances can be in this relationship between poetry and nationalism is that many of the cultural institutions created to support and cultivate movement poetries end up dependent on funds from not only the NEA but also from various state governments.

22. There are several versions of this poem (and when reprinted in *Message to Aztlan: Selected Writings of Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales*, it is with a different Spanish version). In this article, I am citing the 1967 edition. I have thus used "Joaquin," not "Joaquín," except when I am citing the 1972 Bantam edition. And I am calling the poem *I Am Joaquin* (Crusade for Justice edition), not *I Am Joaquín/Yo Soy Joaquín* (Bantam edition).

(3). What this means is that the poem's reason for being was to support struggles over issues like access to land, workers' rights, and educational access. Gonzales was, finally, more a militant who saw poetry as a useful tool than a poet for poetry's sake. (This is not a dismissal of the poem; I am talking here about how he lived his life.)

Gonzales's rhetorical choices in *I Am Joaquin* are well thought-out. Gonzales begins by suggesting to his audience, the workers he wishes to organize, that they are not a part of that national "we" that so defines Frost's "The Gift Outright." Joaquin, for instance, confesses that he is "caught up in a whirl of an [*sic*] gringo society," and his cure for that, he states, is to "withdraw to the safety within the circle of life . . . / MY OWN PEOPLE" (3). Then *I Am Joaquin* develops the multivalent and heroic identity of "Joaquin." Joaquin is many things, mainly many Latino things. He is Cuauhtémoc and Nezahualcoyotl; he rides with Don Benito Juarez and Pancho Villa; he is "the black shawled / faithful women"; he is "Aztec Prince and Christian Christ" (11, 20).

Gonzales did not invent the "I am . . ." poem. As I am sure he was well-aware, it has long been a nationalist form. Whitman, obviously, was the founding father of this sort of poem, and in his hands, it is an articulation of an inclusive U.S. national identity. "Song of Myself" includes the claims "I am the hounded slave" (837); "I am an old artillerist" (858); "I am the mash'd fireman with breast-bone broken" (846). Carl Sandburg similarly and famously wrote a poem that begins, "I am the people—the mob—the crowd—the mass" (1). Gonzales's decision to use a Whitmanesque form to delineate Chicano identity is pointed. It is similar to Langston Hughes's use of the same form to articulate an inclusive yet specific, and pointedly not national, identity in "Negro," which begins, "I am a Negro" and then goes through a series of different qualifying identities such as slave, worker, singer, victim (1–14).

Movement poetry begins with radical intents and desires. *I Am Joaquin* is pointedly a poem about identity, but a collective cultural identity that contains within it a call to action. But movement poetry had a brief moment, and its form evolved as the century went on into what I will call "identity poetry." There is

much to be gained from separating out "movement poetry" (poetry with ties to antinational activism, even if often focused on cultural uplift) from "identity poetry" (poetry that explores individual and personal identity and often becomes exemplary of that sticky mess of privatization and nationalism). What I am calling "identity poetry" is the sort of writing that Mark McGurl, in his groundbreaking study *The Program Era*, describes as literatures of institutional individualisms. In his discussion of Chicano/a literature, McGurl suggests that it might serve "the increasingly paramount value of cultural diversity in U.S. educational institutions" (332) and is yet another example of "a new way of accumulating symbolic capital in the fervently globalizing U.S. academy, pointing scholars toward valuable bodies of expertise they might claim as their own and offering a rationale for the inclusion of certain creative writers in an emergent canon of world literature" (333). I have focused here on Chicano/a literature, but what I am talking about is in no way limited to it. Spoken word poetry, for instance, started out with a similarly radical, often activist intent but eventually morphed into a form that is unusually concerned with personal identity. Indicative yet again of that synergy between privatization and nationalism, by 2011, the rapper Common performed at the White House for the Obama administration. There are endless other examples.

I want to return to Casanova's claim that writers attempt to free their writing from nationalist recuperation by refusing the dominant language practices of the nation. One way late-twentieth-century U.S. writers continue to wrestle their work away from nationalism (and also from purely private concerns) is by refusing to write only in English. They do this for various reasons. Some of them are personal and realist (that is, they live in multilingual environments). But as Walter D. Mignolo notes, numerous language preservation movements came to activist prominence in the last third of the century, along with a "clear and forceful articulation of a politics and philosophy of language that supplants the (al)location to which minor languages had been attributed by the philosophy of language underlying the civilizing mission and the politics of language enacted by the state both within the nation and the colonies" (296). The way *I*

Am Joaquin both includes Spanish in its English version and circulates from the very beginning in a Spanish version is one example of this "clear and forceful articulation." U.S. movement poetries were very obviously under the influence of the decolonization movements of the time, which themselves had a special interest in how literature can be used for uplift and representation and calls for action and also a conviction that the language in which it is written matters. It makes sense to see the doubled Spanish in *I Am Joaquin* as a continuation of the prominent debates about what it means to write in English that took place in the 1960s in decolonizing nations. The most obvious example here is the huge debate in African literature that began with Obiajunwa Wali's "The Dead End of African Literature?" and culminated in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o pledging, in 1978, to say farewell to the cultural bomb of English and write mainly in Kikuyu. But unlike Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, many writers in the U.S. who are concerned about literature's and the English language's role in globalization turn away from standard English-only literary practices not by abandoning English (which, no matter how ahistorical this belief, tends not to connote as a colonial language in the contemporary U.S.), but by including other languages and/or writing mainly in the pidgins or creoles that resulted from English-language colonialism and that are often seen as resistant to Standard English.

By the end of the century, a somewhat paradoxical situation had developed. English was the dominant or official language in over sixty countries and was represented on every continent and three major oceans. Because of its ties with colonialism and globalization, English, as Alastair Pennycock writes, "poses a direct threat to the very existence of other languages":

> More generally, however, if not actually threatening linguistic genocide, it poses the less dramatic but far more widespread danger of what we might call linguistic curtailment. When English becomes the first choice as a second language, when it is the language in which so much is written and in which so much of the visual media occur, it is constantly pushing other languages out of the way, curtailing their usage in both qualitative and quantitative terms.
>
> (14)

This phenomenon has had a huge impact on the development of a global English literature, and many writers from cultures and nations new to English now write in English. At the same time, within the U.S., a peculiar anxiety that English is "at risk" developed and provoked many states to adopt English First and English Only laws.[23] The reasons for this misconception are too various and complicated to enumerate in detail but could have something to do with the increase in immigration during the last half of the twentieth century.[24] If state legislatures happened, oddly, to be reading extensively in the U.S. poetry written in the 1990s, they would be right to be anxious, for more and more poetry written in English at the time includes other languages. An easy way to see this increasing use of a language other than English is through the poetries that developed in the last half of the twentieth century in Hawaii. In the late 1970s to early 1980s, a sort of Hawaiian American literature developed. At first, this literature was written mainly in English, with at most a sprinkling of Hawaiian words. (I am using the term "Hawaiian American literature" to distinguish it from the Hawaiian literary traditions established before European contact.) By the end of the century, however, especially if one looks at the Native Hawaiian journal *ʻŌiwi* (which began publication in 1998), one sees more and more Hawaiian being used and fewer English-only poems.

Hawaii provides a microexample of the increasing intensified use of languages other than English within U.S. English-

23. Before 1987, seven states had some sort of legislation that privileged English. By 1990, another ten had joined the trend. Currently, twenty-six states have "Official English" legislation (thirty if you count "English plus"). What all this legislation means, finally, is not much more than a statement of support for racism and xenophobia, since most of these states still have to produce government documents in other languages. I am indebted for this data to James Crawford's work in *Hold Your Tongue: Bilingualism and the Politics of English Only* and *At War with Diversity: U.S. Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety*.

24. Immigration rose dramatically in the 1990s. Foreign-born residents were at a low of 4.7 percent in 1970. After 1970, this number steadily increased, and with it the number of U.S. residents who declared that they spoke a language other than English at home increased dramatically (Gibson and Lennon). In 1990 that number was 31.8 million; by 2000, the number was 47 million (Shin and Bruno 2).

language literature, but one could see this happening on a more macro scale in the 1990s. A number of writers who came to prominence in the nineties—Francisco X. Alarcón, Alani Apio, Joe Balaz, Eric Chock, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Myung Mi Kim, Walter K. Lew, Mark Nowak, M. NourbeSe Philip, James Thomas Stevens, Robert Sullivan, Anne Tardos, Teresia Kieuea Teaiwa, Lee Tonouchi, Edwin Torres, Haunani-Kay Trask, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka—include languages other than English in their work. And a number of writers who had previously been writing in Standard English began in the nineties to publish works that include other languages or to intensify their use of other languages. These writers include Kamau Brathwaite, Juan Felipe Herrera, Diane Glancy, Harryette Mullen, and Rosmarie Waldrop. That this form—the use of languages other than English in English-language literature—came to prominence in the nineties is probably not a coincidence. The inclusion of languages other than English in much of this work was a pointed attempt by these writers to free themselves from the nationalist and imperialist expansionism of English, a way of "othering" English that points out how its growth is not natural, not inevitable, not dictated by need or a supposed linguistic superiority.[25]

The story I have been telling up to this point fits the Casanovian model. Writers, wanting to separate themselves from U.S. literary national traditions and from U.S. economic, cultural, and/or linguistic imperialism (all of which contribute to the ever-expanding reach of the English language) politicize that already political instrument of language and include other languages in their work so as to challenge English-only hegemonies. In the 1990s, I would have bet that, down the road, work that includes languages other than English would become part of U.S. literary nationalism, seen as representative of a certain sort of U.S. freedom, emblematic of a unique democracy and yet another justification for U.S. imperialism. This hasn't really happened. It is true that by the late nineties, a select few of the (mainly white and middle-class) avant-garde innovators began to be included in the category of "American literature," rather

25. I have discussed these developments in greater detail in "The 90s."

than being seen as oppositional to it. Charles Bernstein, who sometimes writes in idiolect, might be the best example here. Kaplan Harris, in his review of Bernstein's recent selected poems, notices "the thirty-year development that arguably represents the full privatization of the avant-garde" ("Zine Ecology"). Even an old-school anarchist like Mac Low was awarded the Wallace Stevens Prize from the Academy of American Poets in 1999. It is also true that many of the writers doing this sort of work enter into the academic canon through the category of multicultural literature, but this literature did not become a part of U.S. literary nationalism during the Bush years. Instead, Gioia pointedly excluded this sort of literature when he said that he wanted to take the NEA beyond the cultural wars.

It was Barr, though, who had the most peculiar, and provocative, response. Barr published an epic poem, *Grace*, with Story Line Press in 1999.[26] It is, like much of the writing of the time, written in another English, in what the ancillary materials to the book call "a Caribbean-like speech." But it has a very different intent than the anti-imperialism of someone like, say, Gómez-Peña. It is a puzzling, complicated work in the context of this increased use of languages other than English within U.S. literature. *Grace* tells the story of Ibn Opcit, a character who well exemplifies the happy-go-lucky darky stereotype of the minstrel tradition. Ibn Opcit is a gardener at the Overruth estate who is condemned to die by the court system of what is called the "Carib Kingdom." His crime was witnessing the husband of "ballbuster of de first magnitude" Mistress Hepatica Overruth kill her lover Flavian Wyoming after he walks in on them having anal sex. Or that is how I am reading the phrase "Den he settle his equipment in de lady's outback" (11). The language here is loaded and bawdy, sexualized and racialized. Barr writes of Wyoming and Overruth, "De gentlemen, he produce his próduce / like a corporate salami, and she hers, / like a surgery scar still

26. Thomas B. Byers notes of a group of Story Line–published poets that "both in aesthetics and cultural criticism, both implicitly and, surprisingly often, explicitly, the preponderance of its utterances range from moderately conservative to virulently reactionary" (398).

angry red wid healing" (11). At another moment, when Ibn Opcit describes how he was watering the plants when he saw the murder, the judge asks, "was de hose / you holdin' in your hand a garden hose / or was it your black natural own?" (15).

This happens in the first six pages of *Grace*. The rest of the book seems to be Ibn Opcit's prison ramblings to someone named Geode. The six chapters that follow have Ibn Opcit talking mainly about America and how great it is. Although there is undeniably a parodic element to Ibn Opcit's proclamations, Barr rarely has him say anything in critique, parodic or otherwise, about the empire that is America. The America that he describes is unfaltering. It has "an economy that hums / like a hamper of flies, where the top line and the bottom / are in easy walking distance" (41). In the first chapter, Ibn Opcit briefly sketches a series of male figures that represent America: Eddy Ubbjer, a businessman of some sort; Engarde Monocutter, a poet; Spillman Sponneker, a politician; and Contemptible Bede, a pastor. Barr follows with a brief chapter, "The Opposite Number," in which Ibn Opcit shares his thoughts on women. In this Carib Kingdom, women do not seem to have professions. Ibn Opcit's observations rarely go deeper than noting that wives lose interest in sex: "you happen like thunder over her; / she happen like earthquake under you / . . . Pretty soon, though, she prone to a natural disinterest" (75, 76). If this "natural disinterest" does not happen, wives apparently become whorish and likely to grab their riding teacher's "Walcott." Yes, Barr does use the name of a much-respected Caribbean national poet as a euphemism for the penis. All of this ends with Ibn Opcit asking the profound questions. "How many men marry an ass? / How many women, a portfolio?" (82). In the chapters that follow, more stories of various male figures are told. The poem concludes with Ibn Opcit perhaps escaping from jail; it is unclear if this development should be read as fantasy or as actual.

I confess that it is hard to read *Grace* with anything but open-mouthed wonder. The poem is a peculiar assertion of empire that is unique in late-twentieth-century U.S. letters. Nationalist poems in the U.S. tend to be more subtle defenses of late-capitalist bourgeois lifestyles. Barr's *Grace* is something else entirely.

It is a bold defense of empire, one that indulges in blackface in order to do so.

According to Barr, "poets should be imperialists." He continues, "I think they should be importers; I think they should be exploiters of external experience, without apology" ("Poetry"). *Grace* is a perfect example of exploitation without apology. It is provocative and telling that Barr decides to use as the language of composition not only blackface but also an aestheticized dialect, a form that, despite its early associations with minstrel traditions, had been mainly used in the last half of the twentieth century by writers such as Brathwaite or Yamanaka or Gómez-Peña as a signifier for inclusive linguistic rights, for imperial critique. Barr says that he wants to take back poetry from the rain shadow of modernism; the way that he does so in *Grace* is by demeaning and mocking. Ibn Opcit, like many blackface characters, not only is in awe of empire but demeans all things not of empire. Not only does he demean his own national literary traditions with the Walcott-penis joke, he also manages to demean, through sexual euphemism, those with similar histories of colonization, including Native Americans of the continental U.S. and the Pacific, with lines like "Perhaps he tickle her in de snickly abode / until she Sakajaweha. Maybe she hold him / by de long-neck until he Eniwetok" (91). One has to wonder what region Rick Moody has in mind when he suggests in his blurb that *Grace* is "attempting sympathy" and is "crucial for the regional literature."[27] While the slide between the values of an author and the values of a character is often complicated, Barr willingly admits to corking his face when he states in an interview that *Grace* was his "opportunity to take a fresh look at everything I wanted to talk about when I was approaching the age of 50" ("So What Do You Do").

Part of me wants to apologize for spending so much time on *Grace*. It is not as if the book has been prized or well-received. I

27. In his blurb, Collins calls *Grace* "a kind of funky *Finnegan's Wake* [*sic*] in verse with palm trees." But I think Collins is missing the point. If anything, *Finnegans Wake* is a thoughtful and complicated exploration of localism in a time of globalism. It is a defense of linguistic independence, not an attack on it.

feel a bit stupid taking it so seriously. With the exception of a four-paragraph blog-post by Kent Johnson and a mention of it in Dana Goodyear's article in *The New Yorker* on the Poetry Foundation, there is almost no discussion of it. I began by describing a nationalist contingent through the social relationships that define the overlapping national and private funding of poetry during the Bush administration. Overlapping interests, obviously, are not unique to one administration. What is unique is the large amount of money these overlapping interests control and the rigor with which these interests exclude and/or demean a thriving and important multicultural, often anti-imperial, and globally astute literature. I don't think one can understand the aesthetics of this contingent without taking Barr's provocations in *Grace* seriously. *Grace* is interesting because it is unusually explicit in its racism. It clarifies the language politics of plain speech that these poets champion and pretend is for the common man by making its arguments from the reverse direction, by refusing Standard English, by mocking a literature concerned with linguistic independence.

Barr's *Grace* is undeniably an extreme example. Most of the time, an English-only agenda is presented in a poetry of mundane subject matter and folksy language. Kooser's Pulitzer Prize–winning *Delights and Shadows,* for instance, begins with a poem about walking on tiptoe, a poem about a faded tattoo, a poem about a woman with cancer walking into a cancer clinic, and a poem about a student walking into a library. These are also the sorts of concerns that define the poems that Kooser puts in newspapers through *American Life in Poetry*. And there might be nothing wrong with this poetry if it were not being presented as more egalitarian, more popular, as representing the aesthetic concerns of the common man.

Keillor's Good Poems anthologies are also full of this sort of poem. And again, one could just notice the attention to the everyday, to the mundane moment in these poems, if a rhetoric of populism was not being used to cover over a sort of nationalist cronyism. There is no clearer example than Gioia's review, published in *Poetry*, of Keillor's first Good Poems anthology. Exemplary of this cronyism, *Good Poems* includes Gioia's "Summer

Storm," which would disqualify him from being a reviewer at most publications. But this conflict of interest does not stop *Poetry* from publishing a review in which Gioia repeatedly sets Keillor's anthology against an imagined elitism that would dismiss it. The anthology "*épater la bourgeoisie*, at least academic bourgeoisie," Gioia claims ("Title" 45). "The politesse and meekness of Po-Biz insiders is blissfully absent from his lively assessments of American poets" (45); "not a volume aimed at academic pursuits but at ordinary human purposes" (47); it "restores faith in the possibilities of public culture" (49). Putting aside the lack of any economic analysis that would let Gioia present Keillor and himself as saving poetry from the bourgeoisie, the claim of faith in public culture is particularly dissimilating, for this is for an anthology that, as Rita Dove points out in a letter to the editor of *Poetry,* has 294 poems yet includes "only three Black poets—all of them dead, no less, and the one woman actually a blues singer" (248). Dove's analysis, of course, is only the start of any accounting one might do of who is included in the definition of "public" here. Kooser, too, uses a narrow and exclusionary definition of "public culture" in much of his work. This prepossession not only defines his newspaper poems project but also his patriotically titled *Writing Brave and Free* (written with Steve Cox), a book of writing advice for those new to writing, wherein he states, "Writing doesn't use another language, but the language we're already using" (3). The statement feels as if it could be as mundane as the poem about walking on tiptoe, except that behind its purported populist advice is a dismissal not only of an entire literary tradition but also an awareness of how languages other than English might be integral for many immigrant and native U.S. citizens.

• 3 •

This story is still in progress. I am writing this three years into the presidency of Barack Obama. When I look for points of alliance between the Poetry Foundation and the Obama administration, I find them strangely clustered around conceptual writing. The various house organs of the Poetry Foundation have

somewhat embraced conceptual writing (and vice versa). By "somewhat," I mean that, in 2009, *Poetry* magazine published a "forum" on Flarf and conceptual writing. (My guess is that "forum" indicates that *Poetry* is not yet ready to include this sort of writing regularly in its pages and wants to keep it segregated from the magazine's more conventional aesthetic practice.) At the website Poetryfoundation.org, Kenneth Goldsmith, one of the main proponents and practitioners of conceptual writing, published a large number of position statements about the form (and about "uncreative writing," his term for what has conventionally been called "found poetry"). Goldsmith was invited to perform at the Obama White House in 2011, along with Elizabeth Alexander, Collins, Common, Dove, Alison Knowles, Aimee Mann, Jill Scott, and Steve Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers.

I could, and I confess that in earlier drafts of this article I did, conclude that the apolitical nature of conceptual writing makes it safe for nationalism (even as I am sure that Goldsmith knows the old line about how an apolitics is a politics). I could point out how conceptual writing is not threatening to an organization like the Poetry Foundation. Those who self-identify as conceptual writers do not spend time attacking the agendas of various governmental administrations (as poets like Hammill and Rich do). They do not align themselves with various cultural activist movements (as "movement" and "identity" poets do). And they seem uninterested in how literature can be a form of linguistic activism (as the various poets who include other languages in their work do).

But the more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that there is a constitutive difference. The Obama administration does not have the same peculiar interest in poetry that the Bush administration had, does not have the faith that poetry might be usefully exemplary of national values and freedoms. Poetry has returned to its usual status of benign aesthetic practice, as part of the nation but not as a meaningful part of a national agenda. My guess is that we are likely to see a rollback in NEA funding soon.

I feel as if I should, in conclusion, admit that I am also a poet. I have thought of this essay as a sort of autoethnographic project,

an attempt to describe the way literature circulates in the scenes in which I, too, circulate. I have been guilty at times of writing as if I have been visiting a foreign land. But this land is familiar. An important mentor of mine, Robert Creeley, was included in *Writers on America*. A colleague and several other literary associates are likewise in the anthology. I respect Goldsmith's uncreativity. I am not arguing that poets could be, or should be, pure, could ever make pure choices, or that they should not publish in *Poetry* or at Poetryfoundation.org, should not read at the White House. A piece I co-wrote has appeared in *Poetry*. Figures like Hamill and Rich are fascinating in their rigors and their refusals. But they are, like myself, first-world writers of literature, and their literature, like my own, is undeniably a nationalist practice, caught in a series of ever-forming relations with state agendas. My goal in this article is to begin to understand how nationalism works on literature in this contemporary moment, not to suggest that one could easily refuse one's way out of it.

So I am interested in how this narrative has inflected my own work. In the nineties, I also wrote some works that used languages other than English. My second book of poems, *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You*, uses pidgin and Hawaiian words. I did it for many of the reasons that I associate with those writers in the nineties. I lived in Hawaii, a multilingual state, a place where writing in English felt very fraught. I felt that it was important to use these other languages, to acknowledge them as part of my life. In *The World Republic of Letters*, Casanova talks about wanting her work to be "a sort of critical weapon in the service of all deprived and dominated writers on the periphery of the literary world" (354–55). I think I had similar, if more modest, thoughts of wanting to see my work as in alliance with, even if not a part of, the discussions about language that were happening in post- and anticolonial literatures. These other languages disappeared from my work at the turn of the century. If I were a biographical self-critic, I could attribute this to moving from Hawaii, but I moved to two places that are richly multilingual and full of colonial histories, New York City and the Bay Area. So it is not that. I think there was, and is, something different in the aesthetic air. I continue to ask myself about this air and whether it, and my

work, might have been part of the turn to plain speech during the presidency of George W. Bush.

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