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21st-Century American Poetry in the Anglosphere

American poetry critics and teachers have recently shown more interest in world Anglophone literature. We see this in a 2014 anthology edited by Catherine Barnett and Tiphanie Yanique called *Another English: Anglophone Poems from Around the World*, a 2009 article called "The 90's" in which poet and critic Juliana Spahr tries to yoke "formally experimental" and "anti-colonial" poets in the shared project of "turn[ing] away from standard English," and job postings on the MLA's Job Information List for tenure-track positions in "world Anglophone literatures" (Spahr 2009, 159). When we see this category, it often indicates a relatively unthreatening pluralistic project of folding non-English and non-American literatures into the existing canon. It less often (and Spahr's essay is an exception) suggests how opening up the canon in this way might destabilize the category of American poetry as we know it, or, how American poetry is already taking its shape in response to the context of the Anglosphere.

In this brief overview, I will approach the Anglosphere from a less-than-obvious direction: through readings of 21st-century American poems. I want to make three interrelated claims. The first is historical: that even though you need to know the key American texts of the American poetry tradition to grasp American poetry, it is now just as necessary to read it in global context. The second, formal: that 21st-century American poets' use of the figure of what I will call the "precarious subject," a figure of a subject who in some way registers the near-impossibility of speaking with confidence from the subject position as we know it, is all the more explicable when you read 21st-century American poetry in a global context. The third is political: that when we do read 21st-century American poetry in global context, we can see a burgeoning interest in a non-state vehicle for the exercise of political agency. In my overview, I will look at a text by the New-Delhi-based RAQS Collective, and use it to shed light on texts by American poets Claudia Rankine and Dana Ward. I will also differentiate what I have to say about these and other 21st-century world Anglophone poems by contrasting my claims with Jennifer Ashton's broadsides at contemporary American poets' efforts to refigure the subject.

However, I will begin by looking at America as an addressee, through an image: a photograph that circulated widely on social media in October 2011. In this photograph, a man stands and holds a sign that says, "From Egypt to Wall Street / don't afraid / go ahead / #occupy oakland, / #ows." Behind him we see: a wide thoroughfare, with five or six cars abreast, several of them taxis; a few dozen people scattered between the cars, probably also protesting; palm trees, the windows and balconies of large, dense, low-rise housing complex, and a bit of grey and hazy sky. It is impossible to know if the image has been cropped, but the sign dominates the composition in all versions of the image available online. It is centered, on white paper with script in red and white marker, and it seems to have been made in haste, since the words are crowded on the right and at the bottom. The man's facial expression is inscrutable and ambiguous – he offers just a hint of a smile in an otherwise neutral countenance.

The image circulated without any attribution, but it seems to be a photograph of one of a group of protesters who marched from Tahrir Square to the US Embassy in

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Cairo, on October 26th, 2011, in response to the news that police in Oakland, California, had shot an Occupy Oakland protester named Scott Olsen in the head with a tear gas canister and gravely injured him the day before. Soon, protestors in Oakland were marching with a banner announcing in response, "OAKLAND AND CAIRO ARE ONE FIST." I encourage readers to find this image online, where it persists, though it is beginning to lapse into obscurity. It has proven impossible to find the photographer to secure permissions to reproduce this image, and it does not seem to have been picked up by institutional media. It traveled instead through social media and on blogs. It is both famous and obscure: it almost seems to have been custom-made to have a non-mainstream existence. The photographer and protester remain anonymous—and perhaps they wish remain so to avoid being tracked, or for their safety.

There are at least three layers or levels of meaning at which we can read this one image. The first is that of the text of the sign, whose hasty appearance actually suggests its de-emphasis, so that the link that the protester makes between Egypt and the US, his simple expression of solidarity, is more significant than the particular phrasing of "don't afraid / go ahead." In the second layer, we could step back, think of this as a photograph, and consider the photographer’s choice to include the protester in the composition, as if to authenticate that the sign is a real person's sentiment. The profile photographs and avatars that accompany online handles to give them a human face come to mind. The third layer of meaning to consider when we look at this image is the context in which it circulates. We can note that the sign was crafted to pass from its physical form into circulation online: the protester in Egypt refers to Occupy Wall Street and Oakland using hashtags, and, perhaps more strategically, has written his message in English, and marched with it to the US Embassy, anticipating that he will be photographed, and that the photograph will then be uploaded online, where it can "go viral." That is to say, the protester is co-opting the ubiquity of social media and Global English to broadcast his expression of cross-border solidarity.

Nevertheless, the context of the Anglosphere is complicated, and the more time we spend time considering this photograph, the more it seems the protester’s inscrutable facial expression reflects the ambiguous status of his medium, the English language. Even though Global English facilitates international communication, it is far from value-neutral. It stands for finance and technology – knowing it might help some Egyptians get a better job, for example – but it is also both colonial and neocolonial, and, in Egypt, in historical tension with Arabic. The protester has made a choice to write his sign in English, within the ideological parameters that English dictates – either he has taken sides, or English is just expedient for him. For example, by writing his sign in English and transforming it into a photograph he propels it into circulation, but also limits the nuance it can carry, since it will have to do its work in a glance. In his willingness to be represented, he has had to surrender control over exactly how he will be represented. We might ask: Who wrote the message? Who organized the protest? Who staged the photograph? Do the photographer and protester know what the sign says? The fact that we do not have answers to these questions does not invalidate what the protester says, or how he says it, but it does ratchet up the tension that we can read into the image.

In many ways, then, it is crucial that we read this image in the global context of the Anglosphere. When we do, the man and his sign begin to seem like less like the "subject" of the photograph than the political and linguistic context that form its background. One might even speculate that the image's immediacy derives from its suppression of the kinds of "formal" qualities that a traditional close reading would
It opens up instead onto a set of questions about what a 21st-century Anglophone audience sees or reads, and how we make sense of it. Even though we cannot know how much say the protestors had in crafting this picture, we know he is savvy about how images and words move in global networks. We also know how he is willing to accept certain trade-offs to put his message of cross-border solidarity into circulation, where it will imply that protests all over the world are linked, and part of one growing movement – a powerful, if unstable, message.

A similar awareness of context as we see in this image informs the work of many contemporary global Anglophone artists and poets. For example, in a 2012 text-art piece titled "The Robin Hood of Wisdom," the New-Delhi-based RAQS Media Collective promulgate an instruction manual for infiltrating networks of reading. In it, they prompt their audience to handwrite pages and insert them into library books to interrupt print with individually written interventions. Excerpts from the text:

PREPARE yourself
Before setting off.
Select a passage from a book that is dear to You.
Write, or paint it. With elegance, flair and affection on a quality piece of paper.
[...]

SELECT a book, at random, from the library's shelves.
[...]
INSERT the paper bearing your selected passage, between the pages of this book.
[...]
REPEAT the procedure as often as possible.
INFECT knowledge with wisdom.
(RAQS 2013)

It is worth noting that the RAQS Collective makes use of poetic techniques such as lineation in this piece. Reading it with poetry in mind might attune us to an ambiguity in it that rises to the level of tension: while "The Robin Hood of Wisdom" playfully undermines the authority of the archive, the subject of the piece, the reader, is a projection, furtive and unidentified. The people who read and write leave traces of themselves with the RAQS Collective's intervention, but the evidence of their existence is both facilitated and absorbed by the vastness of the library. In the language of the piece, the agent of the intervention, the would-be Robin Hood figure, is valorized ("wisdom"), abjected ("INFECT"), and relegated to obscurity from the outset: as clever as the piece is, it is uncertain whether it can be said to subvert the archive or contribute to it. In the RAQS Collective's pieces, the anonymous subject is all at once disruptive, ghostly, omnipresent, and marginal.
The subjects of both the Tahrir Square image and the RAQS Collective's text are very curious: as specified as they are as subjects, they are negated in circulation. As uncertain of a foundation as this ironic situation provides, I want to hold onto the affect with which the subjects of these texts are charged, and the way their acts serve to light up global networks of subversive solidarity. I also want to suggest that the contextual tensions they negotiate are present in 21st-century Anglophone poetry, where they are given form in the recurring figure of what I call the "precarious subject:" the figure of a person constrained by his or her context. As I see it, precarious subjects cannot achieve their ends by their own power, due to a problem with what is out of their hands, a shortcoming of available options. When I use the word "precarious," I mean to suggest two complimentary valences of the word. First, and most basically, "precarious labor" is the name for temporary, contract, freelance, undocumented, un-benefited, and/or insecure labor – the type or class of labor, the "precariat," that has grown the most in the 21st century, so that the new millennium has come to seem marked by the condition of "precarity." Second, the word evokes what it supplants, or, the rise and fall of the middle class in developed countries in the 20th century, a running-down that is now serving to bring the longstanding, underlying, global conditions of poverty and insecurity to the attention of relatively privileged populations. This forms the background for 21st-century poetry, so that the subjects or topics of the poems are often framed by conditions of vulnerability, and the subjects or persons in them often seem more like not-persons. We can better understand these poems by reading them in the 21st-century global context of precarity.

I think, for example, of the subject in American poet Claudia Rankine's books Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric (2004) and Citizen: An American Lyric (2014). Numerous readers have already written perceptively about both, so here I will focus on just two aspects of these texts that I take to be key. First of all, the anger and detachment evident in the subject's language. For example, in Don't Let Me Be Lonely, we read:

Cornel West makes the point that hope is different from American optimism. After the initial presidential election results come in, I stop watching the news. I want to continue watching, charting, and discussing the counts, the recounts, the hand counts, but I cannot. I lose hope. However Bush came to have won, he would still be winning ten days later and we would still be in the throes of our American optimism. All the non-reporting is a distraction from Bush himself, the same Bush who can't remember if two or three people were convicted for dragging a black man to his death in his home state of Texas. You don't remember because you don't care.

In this passage, the subject's anger comes across palpably in the two italicized sentences ending with "...you don't care." Her affective flatness comes across in the staccato sentences and passivity of the predicates that follow on her "I": "stop," "abruptly," "cannot," "lose," "resist," and "find myself talking." The subject of Rankine's book is marked by her despondency, her habituation to powerlessness. Elsewhere in the book, Rankine writes about suicide, death, insomnia, pharmaceuticals, loneliness, grief, and police brutality against blacks, and her subject's pervasive anger and detachment becomes a lens through which we see these topics.

Don't Let Me Be Lonely and Citizen also both blur reality and fiction in a particular way. On the above page, between the two stanzas or paragraphs, Rankine places an image of a circle of peoples' feet around the bloodstained spot of blacktop in Texas where James Byrd Jr.'s torso was found after he was dragged to death by three
assailants. The reader might justifiably say that with her use of images and prose, Rankine is giving lyric poetry a real-world jolt. Nevertheless, we should pause before we attribute the book's subject's words to Rankine, because it is doubtful whether Rankine is entirely the subject of her books – there is ample evidence to suggest the subject is fictional. For example, later in Don't Let Me Be Lonely, we read the book's first person saying, "My sister had a daughter and a son. Is she dead? Is he dead? Yes, they're dead. My sister's children and her husband died in a car crash [...]" Then, two pages later: "Or a friend's mother dies [...]" In these interjected questions – "Is she dead? Is he dead?" – and that "Or" that begins the later sentence, I see hints that Rankine is not only interested in presenting a personal narrative but also in thinking about what it is like to be a person right now.

This then sheds light on a passage from Rankine's more recent book Citizen, where we read:

You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed; he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there.

You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having.

Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me? You wish the light would turn red or a police siren would go off so you could slam on the brakes, slam into the car ahead of you, fly forward so quickly both your faces would suddenly be exposed to the wind.

As usual you drive straight through the moment with the expected backing off of what was previously said. [...] (2014, 10)

Rankine herself may or may not have been in a car at some point, listening to a male professor make this racist statement. Either way, the passage elicits our indignation on the subject's behalf. We have to remember that this is a conversation that not only could have happened, but that does happen, constantly, the kind of racist statement we hear all the time. If we do read it as such, and try to place ourselves in relation to it, it becomes just as much about the overall context and the range of responses available as it is about these particular circumstances. Notice again that the subject is marked by an anger tempered by restraint, and that it is only after passing out of the "real" situation and into the fantasy of an imagined car-crash that the "you" takes on the active verb, "drive." Rankine declines to give the reader the vicarious satisfaction of reading about the subject's righteous response, and leaves the situation unresolved.

Rankine's subject's fictionality hints that she is trying to grasp and document the state of 21st-century subjectivity as a whole: I see her working in these anecdotal passages to build up a kind of aggregate contemporary subject. Her account of contemporary subjectivity partly comes through in her subject's balanced anger and detachment, which speaks to her frustration with the current parameters of subjectivity – the options available for expression, objection, and protest. The longer we sit with Rankine's books, the stranger the subjects in them seem, their detachment almost at odds with the way that the events transpiring around provoke outrage. In a way, this is Rankine being true to life, in that she is reluctant to depict a subject taking action because of the limitations of subjective agency in the context of systemic racism. Her precarious subject becomes a reflection of our limitations.

Reading Rankine's texts in this way helps us anticipate a possible criticism of her work, too. Some might say that when we focus on such "microaggressions," we just
attend to how people feel, rather than "real" conditions. As I read it, however, Rankine stages these scenes to link feelings to a broader historical, social, and political dynamic. In the passage from *Citizen*, if the woman in the car speaks up, her interlocutor might apologize, but the big picture will stay pretty much the same. Notice again how Rankine leaves the situation unresolved. As I see it, Rankine looks at the inseparability of individual experiences from the context of systemic racism. In this way, the subject of her texts begins to seem similar enough to the subjects of the image from Tahrir Square and of the "Robin Hood of Wisdom" that we can begin to see grounds of mutual intelligibility. Rankine does not particularly address the ambiguity of the English language, but she registers a similar dissatisfaction with the modes and means available to say what she wants to say, and the context in which her words will be read.

Along those lines, it is notable that Rankine uses the subtitle *An American Lyric* for both books: she announces a project to engage the mode in which a reader can vicariously inhabit another person's subject position. In Rankine's texts, lyric is not neutral: when she flags it as "American," she locates it historically and politically – and, as in the first passage, Rankine does not idealize America. In addition, the subject in Rankine's texts is black, and if readers who are not black are going to relate, they will have to bear the historical context of systemic racism in mind. Rankine also makes her lyric texts superficially unfamiliar, by, for example, not always using line-breaks, and, not limiting her lyric to a traditional poetic form. In this, she seems to be making broad claims for lyric: lyric can come in many shapes. So, the lyric in Rankine's book is both ambitious and yet troubled, through-and-through: the grounds of mutual intelligibility between the subject in the text and the reader are shared rage, frustration, and the sense of being limited.

The lineaments of the current debate about lyric are too intricate to account for fully in the space of this overview, but I want to turn to critic Jennifer Ashton's take on the lyric and her reading of an excerpt from a poem by Dana Ward to clarify the way I read the figure of the subject in 21st-century American poetry. In a recent short piece, "Poetry of the Twenty-First Century: The First Decade," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945*, Ashton makes the striking assertion that in 21st-century American poetry, "the lyric has won." The reason Ashton's claim is "controversial," or at least counterintuitive, is that a lot of late-20th and early-21st-century American poetry – Language-centered, conceptual, post-lyric, and post-Lang poetry – has taken opposition to the lyric as its starting point. Regardless, Ashton claims that "the entire post-1945 era of American poetic production..." was "committed to the valued representation of subjectivity, if not of 'self'" (2013, 216). For example, Ashton says that Language-centered poetry's emphasis on an "open" text that permits the reader's participation is a kind of relativism that elevates subjective interpretation over objective conditions. For Ashton, the fact that "the lyric has won" is a disaster: she levels the charge that Language-centered poetry and much that has followed in its wake has missed the point, so that "material social relations" have "tended to remain obscure," and poetry has been politically impotent (217). In general, Ashton's take on poetry leads her to disdain pluralism, postmodernity, identity politics, affect theory, and popular culture, and to advocate a more serious objective politics in their stead. Here and in other essays she offers brilliant readings of a range of poems that give some credence to her contrarian views. Nevertheless, her readings of the subjects in 21st-century American poetry are remarkably abstruse.

One example of Ashton's blind spot is her reading of an excerpt from a poem of Dana Ward's called "Things the Baby Likes (A–Z)" from his 2013 book *The Crisis of
Infinite Worlds (46–76). Ashton's reading comes in an essay of hers called "Poetry and the Price of Milk" which appeared on nonsite.org in 2013, as part of an issue of nonsite on Bertolt Brecht. The passage Ashton reads from "Things the Baby Likes (A–Z)," which sprawls from pages 46 to 76 of The Crisis of Infinite Worlds, is as follows:

BRECHT: Bertolt Brecht was a great writer with a special feeling for the question of solidarity, & it seems people don't talk much about him anymore is there some idea that his work is too didactic or plain in its political motivations to satisfy certain contemporary sensibilities conditioned to prize only those aesthetic objects that reflect an education in certain critically (& now canonically) privileged strategies of experimental modernism & postmodernism I guess I mean is the avant-garde too myopic to really love Brecht? I'm not sure about any of this of course but I have an image of him in my mind that I love where he's on a little fishing boat with Benjamin have I conjured this picture for my private pleasure or is there a photograph like this in circulation? My favorite poem of Brecht's is called 'Concerning Poor B.B.' & the insouciance in it is manly, very social & delicious in perhaps the way we remember Snoop Dogg as a teen. (2013, n.p.)

Ashton objects to what Ward writes here about Brecht because Ward talks about how people feel, and uses such language as "contemporary sensibilities," "matter[s] of taste," and "insouciance." She resists what she takes to be Ward's postmodern comportment, which she finds in the "Infinite Worlds" of his book title. In the above passage, she especially protests against his reference to Snoop Dogg, claiming he "replaces" Brecht's "political motivations (fairness and justice, say, or the critique or defense of capitalism)" with "consumerist ones (pleasure and satisfaction)." Ashton counters that we ought rather look to the forms Brecht came up with to realize his politics; later in the essay, she presents persuasive readings of several poems of Brecht's along these lines, including one where he repeats and re-contextualizes the words, "the price of milk." Still, at the end of the essay, Ashton fires one last shot at Ward while taking a swipe at "metamodernism," writing that the latter "is nothing if not capitalism's fantasy of the market, one in which what we 'like' can also masquerade as a politics. Reading Brecht correctly might well serve as its antidote" (Ashton 2013, n.p.).

There are, first of all, problems of context and tone that undermine Ashton's reading: the "BRECHT" section is, as one might guess, only 1 of 26 sections of the poem "Things the Baby Likes (A–Z)," and Ward does not present an argument about Brecht in the entirety. The "BRECHT" section is Brecht's only appearance. In her polemic, Ashton does not account for the form, tone, or structure of Ward's poem, which, in short, undoubtedly put Ward's statements about Brecht and everything else into ironic suspension. There is a lot of humor and flippancy in the poem, too. For example, two pages after the Brecht entry, we read in an entry for "FRAGGLE GRAVEYARDS" that "Jimmy Buffet has a number of illegitimate children of all shapes & sizes & species, some are kittens, some are biscuits" (55).

That said, Ashton's attack on Ward is all the more strange because even through his levity, and in this short passage, we still see several points of agreement with Ashton. For example, Ward suggests that many of his contemporaries have misconstrued Brecht's writing because they have persisted in seeing it as "too didactic or plain." Here, we can see how he looks to Brecht for a poetic form with which to engage political content and context, focusing in on Brecht's "special feeling for the question of solidarity." In this, Rankine and Ward are similar: both work with a foreknowledge of the history of politics and aesthetics in the 20th century. This is not uniformly the case for 21st-century poets, and one would think it might endear them to Ashton. Indeed, it would not be too far off the mark to say that Ward and Rankine
start from the same place as Ashton: with a consciousness of 20th- and 21st-century poetry's political inefficacy, and the need to re-think the subject.

So, how does Ward figure the subject in "Things the Baby Likes (A–Z)?" In this poem, as in many of his, we can find an "I" who seems just like Ward himself. The run-ons and ampersands in the text give the reader a sense that we are encountering a writing subject, a poet, without the filter of much editing, and in this poem, in the section of the poem on "FORMALISM," we can actually read about the form of this poem itself, and that "the book you're now reading was written with the temporal constraint of a deadline" (56). This first-person poet of the poem is very up-front about his self-doubts and uncertainty, so that we read such qualifiers as, "I guess I mean," and "I'm not sure about any of this" (53). In other poems, the subject of Ward's books seems to have a working-class background, when we read about wage work and childcare. In sum, the subject of Ward's poems feels earnest, unsure, naïve, and brilliant but not highly educated. In "BRECHT," this comportment frames the memorable image of Brecht on a boat with Benjamin: "I'm not sure about any of this of course but I have an image of him in my mind that I love where he's on a little fishing boat with Benjamin have I conjured this picture for my private pleasure or is there a photograph like this in circulation?"

While Rankine's subject is characterized by affective flatness, Ward's seems poignantly vulnerable. He is creatively exuberant, but wracked with self-doubt, rushed, and error-prone. That is why Ashton's attack on Ward's reading of Brecht seems so disproportionate: the subject in Ward's poem does not at all assume an authoritative voice, but exposes himself, seeking to connect through the shared grounds of precariousness. There is a politics to this mode of "solidarity:" in the "REVOLUTION" section of "Things the Baby Likes (A–Z)," Ward uses the words "momentous fragility" (68). Though the subject in Ward's text is working-class, and that of Rankine's black, both are shaped by and respond to the 21st-century global context of precarity, the cognizance of which opens up onto a global context. Rankine and Ward do not frame the grounds of this "solidarity" or mutual intelligibility in terms of the rights and privileges secured for the subject by the state, but as affects given shape by shared exposure to precarity. In the Anglophone sphere, we can see both the potential for political agency outside the boundaries of the state, and limitations. All of the texts I have touched on in this article are working in that ambiguous context.

Works Cited


