Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show

What recent race scandals by avant-garde poets Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place have to do with sunglasses, the invention of the fingerprint, and the atom bomb.

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If April is the cruelest month, this spring has been the cruelest season for American poetry’s genteel pastures, thanks to two poets and their forays in a sadistic but hardly untrendy high-art genre: the avant-garde minstrel show. On March 13, the poet Kenneth Goldsmith—an Nth degree Warhol Xerox in an animated GIF world—performed an appropriative poem that drew on the Saint Louis County autopsy report detailing the corpse of Michael Brown. Goldsmith read for half an hour, backlit by the projected graduation portrait of Michael Brown, unsmiling above perhaps in disapproval, and concluded his reading by quoting, “The remaining male genitalia system is unremarkable.” This was perhaps not the cultural legacy the parents of the murdered 18-year-old expected when their quest for justice catalyzed a new civil rights movement. After the Twittersphere roasted Goldsmith alive, the witty bon vivant crawled blinking from the wreckage to explain himself on Facebook. Gone was his trademark faux-highbrow smirkiness. Rather, his status update affected an atypical earnestness. (Is this the first time a Facebook status has become a high-profile primary document for a poetics?) Humanist, defensive, and as smarmy as commemorative 9/11 tchotchke, Goldsmith wrote that he had wrought a “powerful” and “uncomfortable” poem about American tragedy, a poem “that is able to tell the truth in the strongest and clearest way possible.” He did not apologize.

Two months after Goldsmith’s reading, a similar scandal occurred featuring Vanessa Place, the Empress Palpatine of process-based poetics, who you may imagine cackling euphorically from that narcotic high called the will to power. If Goldsmith appropriated Michael Brown’s body, then Vanessa Place has appropriated black appropriation. If Goldsmith concluded with Michael Brown’s male member, then Place’s appropriations obsess over stereotypes of black femininity—she is, you might say, intersectionally racist. On May 16, a Change.org petition demanded that the national MFA trade show—Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference (AWP)—remove Place from the committee that selects conference participants. The reason? For several years, Place’s Twitter account has published only text lifted from Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel Gone With The Wind, most noticeably the novel’s wince-inducing racist dialogue. @VanessaPlace is a durational performance that, Place alleges, taunts the Mitchell estate to sue her for infringing on its copyright. A potential cease and desist letter
would mean the Mitchell estate owning up to *Gone With The Wind’s* overt racism. In practice, Place has found in the novel a vehicle that allows her to disseminate 1930s racism over 21st century social media, gleefully garnishing the Internet with the N-word. As Place once said in an artist statement, “I have stolen Margaret Mitchell’s “n**gers” and claim them as my own” (asterisks, unfortunately, mine). The petition worked. AWP dinged Place from its selection committee, and Place also scurried to Facebook to issue her own poetics and non-apology.

Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place are respectively the court jester and law-giver, the brand manager and ideologue, of Conceptual Poetry, a poetry movement whose chief affect is a snickering, joyless humor (the poems often read like punch lines with the laughter redacted) and whose writers subject text to “uncreative” processes, such as redaction, appropriation, situation, and Oulipo-based routines. It is a movement they have relentlessly marketed and one that, in the past few months, they have destroyed. While the techniques of Conceptual Poetry will continue to be deployed after Spring 2015—just as poets still deploy Imagistic tropes without thinking they continue the politics of Ezra Pound—the brand is perhaps dead. An anonymous poetry collective called The Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo has led a charge against Conceptual Poetry, spearheading the campaign around Place’s role at AWP. In Berkeley, Place was scheduled to appear at a poetry conference. Most of the participants dropped out in protest. Undergraduate poets of color released a letter boycotting the conference. The conference fell apart. And yet to appropriate Conceptual Poetry’s media kit, Goldsmith and Place’s individual authorship is insignificant. They are symptoms, not super villains. This is not the first time a white poet has publicly embarrassed himself by writing about Ferguson, nor is it the first time that Place herself has been banned for opportunistic blackface.

This is why when poet Heriberto Yépez dropped out of the Berkeley conference, he wrote: We are all Vanessa Place. This was not a display of solidarity, but a critique of avant-garde poetry as an institution. What Goldsmith and Place’s appropriations showed is that Conceptual Poetry *requires* racialized bodies. The racial body in avant-garde poetry is: mere material to own; a site of violation; or simply something to instrumentalize if you want to flaunt your nihilist street cred and perform, one might
say, your whiteness. If the avant ideology says that poets of color can never be avant-garde because they are anthropology, the mute primitivists of pure material—then by the same logic, the perfect ore to mine comes in only one vein: racial trauma. And so Conceptual Poetry has created an aesthetically justifiable way to ingest the racial body: the use of supposedly neutral tropes (quotation and appropriation) as a force field that can both repress and exhibit the excessive “authenticity” of race. Let us start with Kenneth Goldsmith.

State Us

How did Goldsmith defend himself? He argued on Facebook that his Michael Brown reading was not tasteless, since it merely duplicated the procedures he used in his book *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, which concerns national tragedies such as 9/11, the Challenger explosion, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy, whose autopsy report he did not read. The Michael Brown reading and *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* do have one thing in common. These works seem suspiciously unlike Conceptual Poetry’s self-description. Rather than presenting a free-floating self playing with apolitical signifiers, they show that Goldsmith’s recent work articulates something deeply, even sentimentally political: American nationhood.

They differ in one major respect: the “viewpoint” that is being transcribed. In *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, Goldsmith transcribes news broadcasts responding to the tragedies—in other words, an imagined public sphere. The tragedies are conceptualized as having happened to “us.” In his most recent piece, Goldsmith did not transcribe mass media responses to Michael Brown’s death, perhaps because he did not see Brown as one of “us.” Instead, he read Michael Brown’s autopsy report. He literally performed the role of the state, the man slicing apart the fallen body of Michael Brown. When I first heard about the performance, I was initially struck by how Goldsmith’s
reading felt less like a faux-pas or a mistake, than the kind of deeply revealing slip from a psychoanalytic case study, that gesture by which the subject reveals the unconscious self-knowledge that they did not know they possessed. What I learned when Goldsmith read the autopsy report of Michael Brown is this: Conceptual Poetry literally sees itself as white power dissecting the colored body. Goldsmith saw Michael Brown not as a body but as a death-archive to be enumerated, dissected, and possessed (in the sense both of property and haunting). He wrote in another lineage—not just Western Modernism, but also the literary tradition that made modernity possible: the documents, the ledgers and the logs of the slave trade.

**Mathematics of the Unliving**

The slave trade required documents like Brown’s autopsy report: texts that testified that these bodies were actually things. The black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick writes: “historic blackness comes from: the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving.” In an incredible, rhapsodic essay titled “Mathematics Black Lives,” McKittrick quotes old slaver ledgers—what Goldsmith might call “dry texts.” One of them ends: “Jenny Frederick, 32 years, ordinary wench... Certified to be free by Jonah Frederick of Boston, New England... Betty Rapelje, 21 stout wench, (Peter Brown)... *Says she was born free* at Newton, Long Island.” Commenting on this sudden last eruption, the cry of Betty Rapelje asserting her freedom from within the ledger book, McKittrick writes:

> Worn out, bill of sale produced, certified to be free, ordinary wench, proved to be the property of, formerly slave to, formerly the property of, all with parenthetic possessors. New world blackness arrives through the ordinary, proved, former, certified, nearly worn-out archives of ledgers, accounts, price tags, and descriptors of economic worth and financial probability. The list of
slaves upon these ships is a list of properties commodities. The slave is a
possession, proved to be property. Yet a voice interrupts: says she.

The tropes of Goldsmith's performance are here: the anodyne documents of the
exploitative power and the necromancy of anti-black violence—but McKittrick hears
one voice speaking back within the archive: Says she was born free. What McKittrick
identifies is the surprise of this utterance—the wonder that a piece of property could
speak back. And this wonder, this listening deep into the archive of the slave trade,
forms the basis of one of the most compelling recent poetry books of the archive. In
1781, the captain of the slave ship Zong had thrown almost 150 slaves overboard and
sought to recover restitution from his insurers for his lost property. More than two
hundred years later, Canadian-Caribbean poet M. NourbeSe Philip's similarly titled
poetry collection appropriates text from the only record of the massacre: a legal case
called Gregson v. Gilbert, which sided against the slave-trading syndicate that operated
Zong, but did not dispute that it was legal to kill one's own slaves. Philip does not
simply recapitulate the ledger book of triangular trade, but deforms it to resurrect the
traumatic music, the moans, ululations and utterances smothered by the records of the
law.

Just a few years after the Zong massacre, a woman was born who went on to become the
most famous black public body: Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815), the African woman who
was exhibited as the Hottentot Venus, after growing up as an indigene in a South Africa
that was being reshaped by Dutch and British forces. Baartman was part of an imperial
culture dedicated to displaying the bodies collected from the periphery in the empire's
urban centers. The World's Fairs—which so inspired Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project,
itself a model for Conceptual Poetry—were heterotopias of globalization, wondrous
exhibitions where the denizens of the metropole went to see the rest of the world
packaged and presented as objects. These Worlds Fairs were supreme sites of
appropriation, festivals dedicated to identifying, cataloging and quoting snippets of
colonized objects. Objects, in the eyes of the empire, included persons.

At one fair, the Khedive of Egypt was invited and asked to occupy a simulated palace,
one exhibited to Londoners as though in a Natural History Museum. In the Opium
Wars of China, where the British and the French sacked the Emperor’s Summer Palace, her Majesty’s soldiers stole what they believed to be the skull of Confucius, which later ended up for sale at Christie’s. In Saint Louis, just two years after the United States killed almost a quarter of a million people in the Philippines, the 1904 World’s Fair showcased indigenous Filipinos as a “living exhibit”—a project written about most recently by the poet Aimee Suzara in her book *Souvenir*. As Timothy Mitchell writes, many Nineteenth Century writers—Melville, Nerval, Gautier, Flaubert, Bentham, Edward Lane—wanted the bustling streets of the Middle East to conform to what they saw at the World’s Fairs—that is, a commodified diorama. These writers sought to cleave themselves from what they saw as the squalid Arab Street (to use a phrase that still has purchase today), all the better to imbibe its signifiers and incorporate it into one’s work. In Giza, servants carried Europeans on litters to the ruined vertices of the Great Pyramid, where their gaze could extend panoptically and behold all that was before them. Back in the city, the Europeanized Turkish elite began to wear sunglasses—this was the fashion of surveillance. Many of these writers found themselves searching for an authentic East, but found the actual east too impure to match the one they dreamed. Nerval wrote to Gautier that the true and “authentic” Cairo was not in Egypt, but in the operas and cafes of Paris. It was not the Egypt of actuality, but the abstract Orient fantasized by the Western mind, that was real. And in the South Asian subcontinent, the learned orientalists essentially invented the traditions of Indian religion and philosophy, having found the actual lived rituals and practices of contemporary Indians too base and primitive to match the more perfect India they imagined. As the writer and artist Youmna Chlala has written in a poem, “Authenticity died with colonialism”—that is, authenticity did not predate colonialism, the remnant of a pristine pre-colonial Eden, but was created by the curatorial eye of those who came to own the world.

Colonialism gave to art a new framework in which to contain, exhibit, and quote those it had conquered. Who implemented these colonial exhibitions? Not brutes and bigots, but sophisticated arts professionals: the philologists and translators of the British Empire, the museum and festival curators who exhibited the world entire, and the greatest writers of Western romanticism. These colonial curators could no doubt have
defended their actions much more convincingly than Place and Goldsmith. They also had pretexts and complicating intentions.

If these arts professionals sought to archive a primal racial essence, then so too did Vanessa Place, who wrote in her Facebook non-apology: “Both babe and Mammy are examples of what I call radical mimesis, direct representation of the thing itself... the thingness of racism.” The target may have changed from the essence of race to the essence of racism, but the colonial tropes and intentions remain unchanged. In the last few years, we have seen the rise of so-called “ironic racism”—a speech act in which the speaker simultaneously asserts and disclaims a racist statement. When Stephen Colbert says he wants to start the “Ching Chong Ding Dong Foundation,” when Charlie Hebdo portrays the women kidnapped by Boko Haram using the right-wing imagery of black “welfare queens,” when Daniel Handler makes a comment about racist watermelon jokes at the National Book Awards, they do not satirically intervene against racism. Rather they have it both ways. The racist perpetrator gains a cover by creating another context and delegating the excessive racist intention—the racist jouissance, one might say—to that other domain. The racist taboo is exhibited within that other context, which serves as a containment cell against possible culpability. Such an act could be understood not as meta-racism, but as quarantine from accountability, as alibi. Vanessa Place’s framing device around her racist Twitter project is just a 21st century form of racial containment, not unlike these old colonial forms like the diorama, the fair, or the exhibition. What has persisted is that same downward looking stare, this eye that saps those whom it strikes of their agency and empiricism—the gaze of the imperial overseer.

If you think the British Orientalist tradition possesses little relevance to avant-garde poetry in English, consider the foundational poem of Anglo-American Modernism: T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Inspired by James Frazier’s anthropological catalog of indigenous tribal practices, *The Waste Land* imagines London as a site of phantasmagoric globalization. The poem jingles with both early mass culture (London as metropolis of pop songs and ragged newspapers) and Near Eastern imperial echoes: Alexandria, Carthage, the Phoenician Sailor, and a Smyrna Merchant who literally stays at a hotel called “The Metropole.” Marjorie Perloff, the doyen of Conceptual criticism,
has retroactively canonized *The Waste Land* as a precursor of Conceptual Poetry. It is the maximalist poem of appropriation, one that echoes everything from Webster to ragtime boogie-woogie and culminates in an eleven-line “tissue of quotations.” But what is the content of these quotations? When *The Waste Land* was published, its world-weariness voiced the melancholic spirit of the West, laid waste by modernization and the Great War. Eliot ends the work by reenacting a key scene from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, where the decayed ruins of the poem find themselves healed by the authentic and universal love of Oriental mysticism. In a time when few people in America finished high school, Eliot had all but completed a PhD in Oriental Studies at Harvard and Oxford. He could read Sanskrit. He thought that Indian Buddhists like Nagarjuna—the brilliant critic of authentic essences, whose words Eliot appropriates for the start of *Four Quartets*—made the European philosophers look like “schoolboys.” If *The Waste Land* created the tradition for our own individually talented appropriators, then it is a tradition brought to you by British colonial knowledge. As Eliot has two characters sing at each other in *Fragments of an Agon*:

You’ll be the cannibal!

You’ll be the missionary!

**Body-Phobia**

In 1955, Aimé Césaire wrote that colonization was thingification: the process by which the empire converted the self into a mere object. Much Conceptual Poetry mines sources that are not people (say, Google search results), but when its gaze does alight on people, these people, too, find themselves rendered dumbly into things. In what can now be seen as unknowing self-satire, Kenneth Goldsmith once documented his own every movement, including his own art practices of masturbation. This piece, which was called *Fidget*, adopts the surveillance view of the body, the body as mechanistic sub-
routines: “Eyelids open…. Palm corkscrews. Thumb stretches. Forefingers wrap. Clench. Elbow bends.” Rather than reveling in the affective messiness of the flesh, à la visual artist Carolee Schneemann, works like *Fidget* monitor and discipline the body, processing it into a series of procedures that are video-gamed by the mind. Conceptual Poetry seeks to wind back the clock to an old-timey Enlightenment notion of the self, the self not as organism, situated and political, but as pure cogito. Conceptual Poet Craig Dworkin has even defined the movement as one based on “intellect rather than emotion,” a poetry of “meticulous procedure and exhaustively logical process.” What is missing from this account is the body.

Conceptual Poetry could not ethically grapple with the murder of Michael Brown, since its mission has been to disappear the racial body. Seeing themselves as post-body, post-racial, and post-identity, the Conceptual Poets view identity as either redacted and irrelevant or fluid and mutable, a signifier ping pong that, after information technology and global capitalism, never stops or stands still. Eliot famously wrote that poetry was the extinction of personality—and about a century later, this mantra is a Conceptualist commonplace. Perloff writes that conceptual practices lead to the “elimination of the ego.” Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman write: “‘I’ do not exist.” A more comprehensive and leisurely précis on avant-garde post-identity lies in Goldsmith’s essay “Poetics of Hyperrealism” in his book *Uncreative Writing*. After a boilerplate disclaimer about how the “rise of identity politics” has helped “voices that are still marginalized and ignored,” Goldsmith states that his identity is endlessly mediated through interactions with others, information technology, and the culture industry, his sense of self “up for grabs and changing by the minute.” (People of color, of course, never change when talking to their friends or reading things online.) Goldsmith’s template for identity is the atomized consumer, whose self is constantly collaged with the joyful play of web pages, advertisements and mass media. He also valorizes the transgendered person, who he disembodies into a non-gendered shape-changer. Goldsmith further discusses the movement’s Internet Platonism when summarizing a keynote address by Marjorie Perloff at a 2008 Conceptual Poetry Conference: “[Perloff] questioned the values of a poetics based on identity in a time when neither phone numbers nor email addresses tell us where caller and recipient are actually located... when an AOL or Yahoo address,
for example, reveals neither nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, age—and often not even gender.” The argument, based apparently on mid-1990s fears of identity fraud in an AOL chatroom, is that the body no longer exists because one can surf the Internet. In fact, thanks to the Internet, race, class, and gender themselves no longer exist! How to make sense of such obvious untruth, such theoretical unsophistication? By reading these statements as specimens of racial expression.

The decentered self imagined by these poets is the elite white self. If the ethnic self is an unmediated body, Goldsmith and Perloff imagine themselves as a disembodied white self: the self as hero of individualism and technology, a cogito levitating freely above the racial mob. As for the Internet, it goes without saying that Second Life, The Sims, and Minecraft did not replace reality. Blacking up on Twitter did not make Vanessa Place black. Instead, the Internet has consolidated our new tribal clubhouses, as group identities like ISIS and Gamergate show, and invented more innovative ways to oppress underclasses, harass women, and gentrify public space. Rather than resisting the status quo of our techno-libertarian overlords, like a good avant-garde should, Conceptual Poetry revels in the Singularity theologies of Silicon Valley body-phobia. For its occupants (otherwise known as us), the Internet has erected the empire of Big Data, a surveillance regime unparalleled in human history. Rather than diluting identity, electronic identification has granulated it, so that we are tracked by location, user-submitted photo, purchasing history, class status, and viewing history. When New York City recently indicted seven separate gangs, almost half the evidence came from police Facebook-stalking of 300 black youth crews. More globally, American military forces deploy biometrics identification units in Afghanistan, where drone operators view the body from above, annihilating all the adult-aged males they see into pure death. The NSA has indexed the pornography of Muslim fundamentalist clerics who the agency hopes to discredit as closet pornhounds. Whether in the classic age of colonialism or now, the empire maintains its power through its indexicality. In India, the British colonialists assimilated the subcontinent via maps, surveys, translations, and new schemes of taxation and property development; it is the British colonial system that invented the fingerprint. And these biometric control systems—these “arithmetics of the skin,” to quote a phrase that Katherine McKittrick attributes to Simone
Browne—“can be linked to the tracking of escaped slaves—the black enslaved body, the black escaping body, was recorded and coded as biometrically knowable (or findable and searchable).” In our biopolitical age of mass incarceration, conceptual poetry mimics the disciplinary tropes of the state, simultaneously surveilling the body and omitting it from its theoretical horizons. In stark contrast to Conceptual Poetry’s virtualization of the self, Michael Brown was not killed because of anything he believed or wrote, but because his identity was automatically processed by the militarized state police as a threat. This state power saw him not as a self, but as a pure black body—not as a citizen, but as a “demon.” His family received no justice, because the system—from the police department to the prosecution to the jury and witnesses—was designed to contain, discipline, and crush members of the black undercaste.

In Goldsmith’s performance, Michael Brown was not a person, not a body, not a boy who was murdered for no reason. He was a transaction. Goldsmith saw a transcription of Michael Brown’s body being dismembered as simply another “dry text,” just another document undifferentiated from any other document and ready to be “massaged” into literature. He wrote, “I did not editorialize; I simply read it without commentary or additional editorializing,” and yet he edited the report to end with a description of Michael Brown’s “unremarkable” genitalia—a classic obsession of the white overseer. In America, minstrel shows featured the common trope of black castration—as did another quintessentially American social occasion, the lynching. While Goldsmith obviously did not lynch anyone, he unknowingly mimicked the narrative structure of the lynching by ending a half-hour long reading on the state inspection of Brown’s genitalia, despite it having little relevance to Brown’s murder. This took intention. The line was not prominent in the original report; it’s mentioned in a list of unremarkable organs on page ten of sixteen. Goldsmith is not the first white male poet to pen a phallocentric Ferguson poem. The Pulitzer Prize finalist Frederick Seidel’s “The Ballad of Ferguson, Missouri”—published in The Paris Review—starts: “A man unzipping his fly is vulnerable to attack. / Then the zipper got stuck.” But Goldsmith’s autopsy poem captures Conceptual Poetry’s bipolar relation to the body, at once repressing its existence while simultaneously exhibiting it in its most private aspects, death and sex.
“I saw the body. I saw the blood.”

How then to represent, to use a verb from both racial justice and semiotics? What is the ethically responsible way to show the occult photographs of lynchings, saturated with the dark spectacle of slaughter, or the leering grimace of minstrel iconography? How can one present such images of sublime horror without either simple-mindedly reenacting their violence or disenchanting them into clichés? How can one gaze on the memento mori of colonial horror without staring with the gaze of Medusa? What is the line separating one writer as a poet of witness and another as a poet of expropriation—and what prevents either from being a producer of the kitsch of atrocity? One gets the sense of these images as asymptotic in their dark unknowability. The more we see them, the more we etch away their horror. Their witchy power erodes and they become merely iconography. In Ferguson, Rika Tyler of Hands Up United said that she became an activist when she inadvertently encountered Michael Brown after he had been shot by Darren Wilson: “I went to Canfield [Drive, where Michael Brown was killed]... I saw the body. I saw the blood. I just broke down.” Why did Tyler see Michael Brown’s body? “They left [Brown] in the street for four and a half hours in the hot sun on concrete, just for display,” she said. “That reminded me of a modern-day lynching. Because you know, they used to lynch slaves and then have it displayed. And that’s basically showing us that this system is not built for us.” Tyler connects Michael Brown's body not just to a tradition of race killings, but also to a tradition of racial spectacle: the black corpse as exhibited death-object.

How can one depict the violence that rained upon the body while not again exhibiting that body? The poet Marc Bamuthi Joseph's *Black Joy in the Hour of Chaos*—a multimedia dance and spoken word piece performed outdoors under a parachute-turned-revival-tent—seeks to emphasize an affect of joy against the racial justice movement’s predominant mood of grief. Another poet that engages with this mimetic dilemma is the Canadian-Caribbean poet Dionne Brand. In an essay titled “Plantation
Futures,” Katherine McKittrick describes Brand’s long poem *Inventory* as a counter-archive of globalized violence. The scope is broad. We travel from Hurricane Katrina and the criminalized black urban spaces of Canada to more international landscapes of violence (Baghdad, Cairo, Darfur). McKittrick notes that *Inventory* does reify the black experience as another litany of violence, but writes that “this poetics dwells on postslave violences in order to provide the context through which black futures are imaginable. The decolonial work of *Inventory*, therefore, does not lie in archiving and naming violence; the decolonial work of *Inventory* lies in the analytical possibilities that arise from reading casualty-data as soldered to the creative.” Similarly, a new piece choreographed by Paloma McGregor deploys the movement vocabulary of police savagery (being choked; the victim holding their hands up) to create what the *New York Times* called an “activist elegy.” Created by an experimental dance initiative called Dancing While Black, such a dance imagines the possibilities of the body moving through a state structure devoted to policing it. If you can’t walk down the street without being stop-and-frisked, what does it mean to dance?

**Conceptual Poetry as Minstrel Show**

If the political question is one of complicity with a racially unjust state power, then Vanessa Place ignores the question. As she wrote on Facebook, probably to no one’s disagreement: “These works are cruel. It is a cruelty to display these images... I embody the perpetrator, historically and currently.” In other words, in language that self-servingly references a Kara Walker presentation, Place admits her actions are racist. What is her justification? She essentially argues that her racist act is valid because it shows the existence of racism, but as the poet Shane McCrae wrote, “How does one justify hurting black people to teach white people a lesson [about hurting black people]?” Place’s paradoxical rationale—that any reenactment of racism exposes rather than repeats racism—would sanction any manner of brutal conceptual poetry projects.
Presumably at some point, Place’s allies would find her alibi too wispy to cover her violation. If this is the case then, as the experimental writer John Keene has asked, what is the limit case? If we have not already reached it, then it must be because these white critics ultimately find this particular violation to be trivial. Ultimately, Place’s Twitter piece represents a strange dematerialization of racism, a conversation about racism in which black people are strangely absent. Place and her allies accept her piece as anti-racist, regardless of the opinions of actual black onlookers, whose thoughts and agency are presumably irrelevant to this charged conversation about America’s racist legacies.

Place strains credulity when she claims to expose *Gone With The Wind*’s racism, since the text is overtly racist, a foundational document of the Mammy stereotype. The novel’s racism hardly needs further exposure, since it has already served as the basis for a similar project: a potentially copyright-violating novel by a black author, *The Wind Done Gone* by Alice Randall. One would also find Place’s anti-racism more plausible had she not so casually decorated her Twitter account with a drawing of a leering Mammy, lifted from the cover of sheet music for an 1899 minstrel song called “Jemima’s Wedding Day.” (For her profile photo, she chose a portrait of the woman who won an Oscar for *Gone With the Wind*’s film adaptation, Hattie McDaniel, grinning in Mammy garb.) If one seeks to expose the racism of Margaret Mitchell’s work, why use a racist image utterly unrelated to her work? Why casually throw around the N-word, as we saw earlier, when describing the piece? If many artists have thoughtfully wrestled with the ethical representation of anti-black violence, Vanessa Place has bragged about publishing minstrel text without any context or intervention. In fact, that’s how her piece in *Poetry*, the nation’s most prestigious poetry journal, was published.

But one can go even further back to cement doubt in Place’s purported anti-racism, because she has actually done another project where she simply performs lines from old minstrel routines. Titled *(1957) The Black and White Minstrel Show (1978)*, the performance features her reenacting the role of the “coon shouter”—the white women who would wear blackface and perform minstrel songs in a time when they were the most popular musical genre in America. Here, *Minstrel Show* has no contextual wrapper—that is, she cannot attribute her racism to Margaret Mitchell—and Place has explicitly said she performs the piece with no intention to exculpate or critique
minstrelsy’s racist legacy. When she tried to perform the piece at the Frye Museum last year for an event called “Coon Songs, Kitsch and Conceptual Writing,” the Museum Director canceled it, stating that “the potential to cause hurt and harm was just not an option for us.” One could respond to this news by reenacting an old Culture War opposition—one that pits controversial speech against so-called diversity. Or one could suggest something else: that the Museum Director and Place actually shared the same interpretation of the piece—that it was evil. This is the term that Place routinely uses to describe her own work, but if her pieces are evil or nihilistic, they lack the ideological conviction of evil. They instead attest to a belief that nihilism is the best publicity strategy. In her most famous piece, Place reads the court testimonies of alleged child molesters, men who she claims to have represented as their attorney. In *Minstrel Show*, the history of black appropriation offers itself as simply another abject reservoir of taboo.

What drew her to minstrelsy, Place has said, is that she found the tradition had “no point of authenticity, no point of origin.” If the avant-garde is perpetually obsessed with origin and lineage, then blackface offers a Mobius strip where fakeness and authenticity loop forever intertwined. Place’s *Minstrel Show* appropriates the work of Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, the traveling performer who supposedly invented minstrelsy in the late 1820s, when he came upon an elderly black stablehand, singing and dancing, but dancing a dance marred by a deformed shoulder and crooked leg. According to an *Atlantic Monthly* story, Rice literally bought the ragged clothes off the man’s back. He also took the words the man sang each time he turned on his one straight leg. The song that Rice recorded became an international smash hit, a pop song so synonymous with America that one American explorer recounted that a Mexican brass band played the song upon his arrival, thinking it was the national anthem. And we ourselves continue to know the name of the song in the Twenty-First Century: “Jump Jim Crow.” This original act of black appropriation named our system of legal apartheid, born at the end of the Reconstruction and persisting today in the very police department that killed Michael Brown.

Was Thomas Rice a Conceptual Poet? He helped invent American popular music not by being an original creator, but by being an expropriator. One of the purposes of this
origin myth was to prove that Rice's minstrelsy was not fake, but authentic. The encounter with the stablehand supposedly showed that blackface could be traced back to some “real” foundational act from black culture. But it is highly likely that this primordial encounter between Rice and the black stablehand never happened. The only mention of this story is the *Atlantic* article, which was published nearly 40 years later in 1867 and called, by minstrel studies theorist Eric Lott, “probably the least trustworthy and most accurate account of American minstrelsy’s appropriation of black cultural practices.” Rice’s minstrel act was both inauthentic and authentic—it was based on a story that both testified to its connections to black culture and to foundational white expropriation, an origin story that may not have happened. While blackface minstrelsy represented the commodification of a people already oppressed by slavery, it is also an example of what historian Lawrence Levine called the “unpredictability of the past.” The word “coon”—as David Roediger notes—originally referred not to blacks, but to white country identity. At minstrel shows, audience members sometimes believed that the white performers in blackface actually were black. (This is what Mark Twain told his mother.) Some minstrels actually were black and still wore blackface to fulfill the signifiers of minstrelsy, whose fakeness (it seems) they could use to better represent themselves. One of these black minstrels was W.C. Handy, who spent his early years playing cornet in the Chicago's Worlds Fair and then joined Mahara's Colored Minstrels. From these experiences germinated Handy’s contributions to the Blues tradition, one of the traditional sources of black authenticity. And as Lott has pointed out, Horace Greeley, James Weldon Johnson, and W.E.B. DuBois rather counter-intuitively considered black minstrelsy to be tied to black authenticity. Perhaps this fluctuating, fraudulent authenticity interested Place, for one can easily see how the minstrel show offers another perfect analogy, another perfect allegory, for the Conceptual Poet. If Goldsmith inadvertently imagined himself as the professional dissector of corpses, then a similarly perfect avatar for the Conceptual Poet would be Place's minstrel.

Like Place and Goldsmith, the minstrel approaches what she takes to be authentic (the black self) and extrapolates it into both a sexual object to be defiled and a fantasy to be performed. For Place and Goldsmith, the most famous Conceptual Poets, black trauma is simply a trauma commodity, automatically poignant subject matter than they can
deploy from above. And one might look at the roles they performed as two avant-garde reactions to supposed ethnic authenticity: the overseer, the supposed rational intellect who dissects and surveys the primal subject of color; and the minstrel, the emotive artist who does not insulate herself from the “wild” emotions of people of color, but enviously seeks to perform them herself. And how is one supposed to read their works? Surely, as an art genre dedicated to the confiscation of content, Conceptual Poetry must have developed a sophisticated hermeneutics of appropriation. Let us consider Marjorie Perloff’s reading of another Vanessa Place work, dealing with another community of color.

“Families”

At a 2010 Columbia poetry conference, Marjorie Perloff stated that reading Vanessa Place’s work helped her learn that Latino rape victims were “at least as bad or worse than the rapists.” Perloff was lecturing about Place’s appropriations of the alleged rapists she defended as an attorney, primarily poor Latino men. The poet Stephanie Young narrates what happened when she heard Perloff say this: “[T]here’s this wave of faces in reaction throughout the room. The faces are audible, there are gasps... I’m watching her face... I sort of expect someone to stand up and shout but nobody does, not even during the Q & A, it doesn’t come up at all.” When Young posted this account on her blog, Perloff submitted the following reply, in which she describes Place’s work and her reaction to it:

Cases that come before the court occur primarily within certain interfamilial situations involving poor people—in LA mostly among Latinos—in “families” that live in terribly cramped conditions: a step-uncle may be sleeping on the living-room couch and his cousin from another marriage is sleeping on the floor; they get drunk and the next thing you know, the 16-year old girl in the
next room is attacked... The rapist gets something like 30 years. But the boy [another victim of rape] himself may have committed similar crimes... In other words, it's a horrible socio-economic situation within which often mothers refuse to give evidence in support of their daughters because, as illegal immigrants, they fear deportation and so on. It's a horrific social problem. Read the book! That doesn't mean the rapists aren't guilty; of course they are and have already been sentenced. But they ar [sic] not always <<worse>> people than those in the larger network involved.

What happens when the most prominent avant-garde literary critic, renowned for her prowess as a formalist close-reader and a theorist of textual indeterminacy, encounters what she takes to be simple primary material? She loses all critical faculty. Having encountered what she imagines to be pure evidence, Perloff reads the work with infinite credulity (“Read the book!”), as though the poem constituted an obviously true social document, rather than an edited text taken from an unusual sample set in a highly specific legal context. Perloff proselytized about Place’s work on Young’s blog, stating that it contained “a wealth of information from over 10 years of work in the field”—as though Place were a social worker or an anthropologist, rather than an avant-garde appropriator. What Perloff saw in the work was a mirror for her own racist and classist assumptions, many of which seem to mirror the Moynihan report’s right-wing characterization of black and Latino families as possessing a pathological culture of poverty. Having ventured on a sociological foray into lower-income Los Angeles, Perloff emerges with two revelations: first, that rape only happens to poor people; and second, that Latino child molesters are “not always worse than” the children they molest, presumably because those children are from the same poor Latino family, a family she can only recognize in scare quotes (“families”!) and names using a racial slur (“illegal immigrants”).

Presumably if a Latino poet had simply written autobiographical poetry, Perloff would have dismissed it as artless self-anthropology, as she’s done many a time. Because Place frames another Latino subject’s testimony within an appropriative project, Perloff can find the resulting text valuable as simultaneously an intervention into poetic genre (Was this or was it not poetry?) and as the opposite of poetry: pure content.
another poet questioned online whether it was ethically appropriate to use the lives of poor people of color to make a fairly uninteresting point about genre, Perloff wrote back, “Why is it wrong to use the stories of poor people to make a point about genre? Would it be OK to so use rich people? I don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

The more interesting feature of Place’s piece was not simply publishing obviously non-poetic text (court testimony), but asking what it means to confiscate the testimony of those who are presented as obviously abject, because of their race, class and supposed criminality. When questioned about Perloff’s statements, Vanessa Place coyly replied that they “neatly [. . . ] prove[] the point that whatever is in the text is brought there solely by the one experiencing the text. The text is simply a conceptual portmanteau.” When pressed further on the Internet, she wrote that “Marjorie’s remarks were both misreported and misunderstood” (surely a point that would not apply to Perloff’s written response, which I have quoted), but in “the context of the collection in the book, her observation is entirely accurate.” That Perloff does not even comprehend the question points to a larger theoretical gap within conceptual poetry: its ignorance on how to manage the meaning and ideology of content, and its inability to theorize the ethics of appropriation.

Conceptual Poetry has no politics of appropriation. One could say that the movement’s major theoretical texts spend significantly more time discussing, say, John Cage, Sol Le Witt, and Walter Benjamin than they do the power relations of cultural exchange, but this would give the wrong impression. The texts do not discuss the latter at all. When one reads Craig Dworkin’s Protocols for Literary Listening, a survey of listening-based conceptual projects, it is curious to see him list each project by technique and render politicized categories like “labor,” “dialect,” and “fluency” into purely art terms. (This is the opposite of the old Language Poetry and Marxist dicta that literary forms do not appear ex nihilo, but express ideologies of power.) Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman’s Notes on Conceptualisms simply admits that appropriation is “confiscation” and adds that “re-iteration or re-cognition seems more apt, as the work is re-invented via its adoption.” Translation: an appropriating poet creates a fresh new romantic creation, a beautifully composed aesthetic object that obviates the need to formulate a politics of appropriation, even if what one is confiscating is a dead body. The text also mentions in
passing that conceptual writing “must be considered [as] “gendered.” “Race,” it helpfully
adds, “is also consideration.” To which one is tempted to reply—Oh really? When
Vanessa Place argues that she fights racism by posting minstrel imagery and reciting
“coon songs,” then one has simply given up any pretense of thoughtfully possessing a
politics.

Goldsmith also defended himself by giving up the Conceptual Poetry paradigm. If
Conceptual Poetry held itself out as uncreative anti-art, Goldsmith on Facebook
described it as a traditional compositional practice, one in which the author
“massage[s] dry texts to transform them into literature.” If Conceptual Poetry saw itself
as a poetry of “intellect rather than emotion,” Goldsmith justified his performance by
saying it was emotionally “powerful”—just as affecting, one might say, as lyric poetry!
And rather than being apolitical nihilism or Art for Art’s Sake, the Brown autopsy was
another “horrific American document”—unremarkable, according to Goldsmith,
because it was part of his larger project of articulating American national tragedy. What
does it mean to write poetry that commemorates national tragedy? Poetry based
neither on the lyric self nor formalist dislocation, but on the pure content of historically
authentic suffering, whether the martyrdom of Michael Brown or the necromancy of
blackface? This is not how you would describe historical avant-gardes, like Fluxus,
Dadaism, surrealism, or Language Poetry. This is how you would describe the most
uncouthly politicized genre of them all: Poetry of Witness.

**Genre as Political Ideology**

What exactly differentiates Conceptual Poetry from a genre like Poetry of Witness? Or
for that matter what separates it from a genre heavily influenced by Poetry of Witness,
Documentary Poetics? Like Conceptual Poetry, Documentary Poetics deploys non-
compositional moves (quotation, redaction, multimedia) and relocates the author from
composer to appropriator, archivist and situation-maker. Compare Place and Goldsmith’s quotations of the law with Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony: The United States (1885-1915)* (completed 1978-9), a two-volume opus that quotes from hundreds of volumes of testimony from court reporters to tell a historical account of American racism. One section of *Testimony*, titled “Negroes,” begins: “they found a Negro / under a workbench / within six or eight feet of the window / holding a piece of plank before his face— / begging them not to shoot.” Like Place and Goldsmith, Reznikoff quotes from the legal testimony related to people of color, but *Testimony* portrays its speakers as real people, rather than dead totems of racial spectacle. Rather than glancing at his subjects with the necrophiliac eye of the white overseer, Reznikoff wrote *Testimony* as an inquiry in the history of racial violence. What mattered was not furthering a genre about investigating genre, but grappling directly with the narratives of power embedded within the testimonies: in other words, the content. Or consider Muriel Rukeyser, whose most famous book (like that of Vanessa Place) orients itself around testimony, violence, and a legal dispute: specifically, interviews that Rukeyser conducted in 1936 Gauley Bridge, West Virginia with miners who were dying of lung disease, unprotected from toxic silica by their mining company. You can hear their voices in Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*, which includes letters from the miners, congressional testimony, medical examinations, back-of-the-envelope calculations about worker wages, the Union Carbide stock readout, and an overview of the legal response to the Gauley Bridge deaths. For Rukeyser, what mattered about the testimonies was the people who spoke them and the stories about power that they told.

In other words, Documentary Poetics and Conceptual Poetry resemble each other in technique, but differ wildly in their politics (Cultural Front leftism versus high-art conservatism), their ideological positions (social justice content versus artistic nihilism), and their site (in the world outside of literature versus inside one’s reliquary of dead aesthetics, one’s Uncle Scrooge Moneybin of cultural capital). If Documentary Poets like Solmaz Sharif and Philip Metres redact the documents of the American military complex, then Kenneth Goldsmith found little problem with performing for the Obama White House during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the rise of drone warfare. His visit led the poet Linh Dinh to asked, “Did Bertolt Brecht dance for Hitler?”
Other avant-garde poets attacked Dinh for this hyperbole, but it’s worth remembering that our post-9/11 wars have slaughtered 1.3 million people. If Place and Goldsmith deploy aesthetic forms as a shield to protect their own power, then Documentary Poetics, the poet Mark Nowak writes, “needs to find its feet outside of AWP and art galleries and instead locate itself ... on factory floors, in union halls, at political rallies... to shift the Draconian policies under which conservative school boards, Tea Partiers, and neoliberal politicians of the world (unite!?!?) seek to police the rest of us.” Documentary Poetics thus differs not just from Conceptual Poetry, but also from those writers whose political fights—say, calling out large literary institutions like AWP or famous poets like Place and Goldsmith, as this essay does—remain safely within the domain of literary politics.

Depending on your perspective, Documentary Poet Mark Nowak’s artistic trajectory may look like it culminates toward his own authorial evaporation or towards an even richer blossoming of democratic fullness. After he started out writing first-person poems of working-class Polish American identity (Revenants), Nowak’s work grew increasingly heterogeneous, appropriative and multimedia, as he collaged together testimony, photographs, and public documents in Shut Up Shut Down and Coal Mountain Elementary. Nowak now seeks to reimagine the writing workshop out from the institutions of literary professionalism and mastery: the workshop as the unit of the poem, the workshop as unit of organizing. He has conducted writing workshops with Ford autoworkers in Detroit, who were fearful of globalized outsourcing, and with workers in South Africa, who saw their American compatriots as privileged elites of the global north. Once Nowak held a joint workshop with both groups over Skype, the two sets of workers reimagined themselves as allies in the struggle of labor against capital, rather than class competitors. Nowak more recently hosts workshops with the cutting edge of the alternative labor movement, groups like Domestic Workers United and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. While these workshops sometimes integrate themselves into a campaign, they are not strictly about creating “protest poetry” that can become a messaging tool for the movement. Rather, Nowak lifts a page from Jacques Ranciere’s Proletarian Nights, which argues that the 19th Century French workers movement sought not just to rebel against specific labor conditions, but to
wield poetry as a way to imagine more liberated images of their selves beyond their pre-determined worker identities. Nowak’s workshops use the words of other people, but one would never say that they deployed appropriation, since the low-income people of color within the workshops possess power with, rather than under, the poet-instructor. A workerist heir to June Jordan’s Poetry for the People and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy for the Oppressed*, Nowak’s workshops incubate sites of radical democracy.

As its vanguard model and fascist histories imply, avant-garde poetries might be imagined as poetries of anti-democracy. While more traditional poets have attacked Conceptual Poetry as a supposedly “parasitical” and anti-authorial practice, it would be more accurate to call it a supercharged version of the old-fashioned Romantic autonomous author: author as showman, actor, personal brand, and expropriator. How does Place and Fitterman’s *Notes on Conceptualisms* talks about participation? It discusses how readers read books! How do readers participate in the text? *Notes* frames this in terms of allegory, a literary genre older than the English language. Aside from some hand-waving about institutional critique, Conceptual Poetry offers no theory of the author’s positionality, despite the author becoming the central engine of these poetries as performer and extractor. If Goldsmith’s performance decontextualized Michael Brown’s death from a national movement against state power, this simply continued Conceptual Poetry’s tendency to erase social contexts and better angle the spotlight at the author. Vanessa Place did not care about what people of color thought about her minstrel pieces. When she quoted the alleged sex offenders, she stated that she was merely quoting the public record. I have not read her say what her subjects themselves think of her work. What matters is not the consent of those who speak, but the approval of the state.

And when referencing the brand names of Conceptual Art, Conceptual Poets ignore those artists for whom identity was central (say, Adrian Piper, Nikki Lee, or Felix Gonzalez Torres), unless to use them as alibis for their own racist practices. They have also missed what was fundamentally interesting about the white male artists they adore. In their quest to imagine Sol Le Witt and John Cage rather counter-intuitively as singular auteurs, Conceptual Poets have erased these artists’ radical sense of context. John Cage’s most famous piece, *4’33*, features himself sitting silently at his piano as the
audience hears the ambient noise of the concert hall. Avant-garde poets have described the piece as investigating universalized abstractions of silence and indeterminacy, but 4'33 was also a collaboration. What the audience heard was not silence, but their own participation. For Cage, silence and indeterminacy were not noumenal abstractions, but racially coded—the embodiment of Zen Buddhist practices from Japan. As for Sol LeWitt, his famous wall drawings consist of vectors drawn directly on museum walls, not by the LeWitt himself but by assistants following exacting guidelines. Conceptual Poets have read these pieces as models of pure concept, authorship bereft of the author’s hand. This interpretation erases the curious fact that LeWitt’s wall drawings were also collaborations. LeWitt even asked draftsmen to randomly sketch onto the walls. “Each person draws a line differently,” he said. In other words, rather than representing the absolute ideation of the auteur, these drawings directly drew in that most contingent, anti-conceptual mark of all: the scribble.

**Writing While Black**

Mark Nowak’s writing workshops could be imagined as the outside strategy to the inside account offered by the black experimentalist Fred Moten. If Nowak imagines a democratized space for poetry beyond the literary institutions, then Moten and his co-writer Stefano Harney contend that it is impossible for professors to escape their complicity with the corporate university. Most poets teach in university departments, and Conceptual Poetry and other avant-garde poetries could be read as genres of academic discourse. Moten and Harney’s book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* argues that attempts to deconstruct the university will only end up reifying it, allowing the corporate education structure to incorporate dissent. The university is not the antidote to crime and social immobility, but a corporate structure whose ideology justifies the prison industrial complex. The answer, Moten and Harvey suggest, is not radical critique, but radical disengagement. Their organizing locus is the
undercommons, an anti-institutional slacker cell, comprised largely of misfits of color, where one simply does not comply.

Moten recently came under fire from an avant-garde poet named Daniel Tiffany, whose essay “Cheap Signaling” seeks to revive the class struggle and demystify poetry by writers of color and women. “Identity politics,” he writes, “displaces the necessarily economic antagonism of authentic social transformation.” While an allergy to identity politics is commonplace among the left and the right, Tiffany attacks another surprising target: workers. For Tiffany, both workers and people of color are romantic illusions, folk icons too pure to be real. Instead, he lobbies for his pet aesthetic category: the trashiness of kitsch, which, being already impure, requires no demystification. Tiffany thus grants kitsch a strange authenticity and, like an inverted inquisitor, goes about disinfecting poetry of the dirt of purity. He spends a third of the essay targeting Fred Moten, who, he says, cannot be a real class warrior because he writes using black vernacular. Tiffany quotes a fizzy poem by Moten that zigzags and code-switches, but Tiffany flattens the poem into a statement of primal authenticity that must be deconstructed. Apparently unfamiliar with the genres par excellence of anti-essentialism, cultural studies and ethnic studies, Tiffany writes that “Moten’s poetry privileges the black vernacular as somehow authentic and genuine” and, oddly enough, requests that Moten and all other poets of color declare that their writing is “inauthentic, or cheap: discounted, vulgar, imitation, unfair, and even criminal.” By “criminal,” Tiffany means kitsch, but the word choice is unfortunate. If Tiffany finds Moten guilty of Writing While Black, then it is because Tiffany sees blackness not as the marker of our American underclass but as simply another essence to be debunked.

And yet Moten and Harney’s Undercommons anticipates and rebuts Tiffany’s positions, which look naïvely metaphysical against the duo’s institutional skepticism. If Tiffany seeks to unmask the essences of worker and black identities, then Moten and Harney see such unmasking as just another Enlightenment game of one-upmanship played by theory bros looking to beef up their CVs. If Tiffany’s essay imagines class politics only as the quoting of Marxist diction by his favorite professor-poets (that is, class politics not as revolution but as the privileging of one’s own vocational position), then Moten and Harney see such depoliticized gesturing as just the corporate university doing its job. If
Tiffany is skeptical of the People, then Moten and Harney are as well: not to perform some cheesy positivist unveiling, but because they believe the community is always coopted by corporate governance. For Moten and Harney, blackness is not simply slang or a feel good multiculturalism, as Tiffany seems to think, but a political position. They write that the “dismissal of any possible claim regarding the essence or even the being of blackness... becomes, itself, the dismissal of blackness,” and such de-essentialism, in their view, can only constitute a form of social control. De-essentialism is a routinizing system of governance. Blackness, they argue, means to evade institutional control through politicized anti-labor.

One can understand Tiffany’s essay—and another high-profile essay also published in *The Boston Review*, Marjorie Perloff’s “Poetry on the Brink”—as freak-outs about the increasing share of people of color within the exploding poetry labor pool. These pieces make sense less as literary criticism than as ideological white papers in a war of position: avant-garde anti-democracy. Both essays formulate a new cadre class of white avant-gardists and argue against the mongrel democratization of poetry posed by ethnic poets. While Tiffany and Perloff discuss a few poets of color, this is only to say that they’ve accomplished that most corporate thing of all: promoted diversity. Such racial window-dressing belies the ultimate function of both essays: to retaliate against the threat posed by poets of color and to denigrate certain poets (read: black poets) for their noncompliant authenticity.

A panic about labor surplus starts Perloff’s “Poetry on the Brink,” which begins: “What happens to poetry when everybody is a poet?” Noting that the national MFA faculty has increased to about 22,000 hapless creative writing instructors, Perloff argues that the plague of poets has meant an increase in bad, standardized poems, poems whose badness possesses, in her words, “a degree of variation, so that we have Latina poetry, Asian American poetry, queer poetry, the poetry of the disabled...” Such pluralism has made it increasingly hard for Perloff to maintain her own role as critic, that omniscient sorter of hierarchies. The essay narrates her transition to Conceptual Poetry from a 1980s-1990s avant-garde poetry movement called Language Poetry. This transition is theoretically curious, since Perloff describes the two as formal opposites. Language Poets break poems into fragments to permit the reader to supposedly assemble
whatever meanings they want—supposedly a more just power division between author and reader. Conceptual Poetry, as Perloff depicts it, is an author-centric affair. Its poems must be read using that most conservative of hermeneutic techniques—close-reading—to ascertain the exact textual edits made by its composer. (One could solve this inconsistency with the observation that Perloff arguably does not understand Conceptual Poetry: for example, she apparently believes Kenneth Goldsmith’s transcription of traffic reports is an allegory for *The Great Gatsby*, since both feature green lights.) Perloff’s switch from one camp to another with more cultural cachet could be read not just as opportunism, but also as white flight. Perloff laments that by “the late ’90s, when Language poetry felt compelled to be more inclusive with respect to gender, race, and ethnic diversity, it became difficult to tell what was or was not a ‘Language poem.’” Conceptual Poetry provided a gated community: in our chaotically democratizing times, it renewed the comforting authority of the writer as master and ideologue. If mainstream poetry seemed a morass of confusing pluralism, swamped by surplus poet-laborers, then Conceptual Poetry purified the language of the tribe, creating a system by which to exclude most poets and rank those avant-gardists that remained.

If Conceptual Poetry was the answer, what was American poetry’s problem? Perloff’s answer is “tepid tolerance,” which she sees exemplified in a poem by Natasha Tretheway titled *Hot Combs*. In the poem, the narrator comes upon old hot combs and recollects her mother searing her hair straight. In a tone that is not a little patronizing, Perloff reads as clichéd “the memory of the painful hair straightening ritual the poet’s African American mother evidently felt obliged to perform”—as though women do not use hot combs today! In other words, Perloff starts her essay on the disembodied white genre par excellence, Conceptual Poetry, by expressing displeasure at a black poet for writing about the pain of the body. The point seems to be that the black body is always unoriginal, always lost in some antediluvian past.

The occasion for Perloff’s essay was a rather innocuous object called *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century Poetry*, edited by Rita Dove, a Pulitzer Prize winning black poet. Contemporary poetry is often described as a sparring of partisan camps, but the attack on the Penguin anthology came from both archconservative critics like Helen
Vendler in the *New York Review of Books* or William Logan in *The New Criterion* and so-called experimental ones like Perloff. Both sides hated the anthology for the same reason: the book included poets of color, as well as women and other “politically correct” persons. The critical consensus between Vendler, Perloff, and Logan shows that our poetry wars are not really positioned around aesthetic camps (say, experimental versus mainstream poetics), but by hierarchies of racial segregation. The Penguin anthology, for example, included many Language poets, the very poets traditionally thought to be too subversive for Official Verse Culture. If for Perloff, the Dove anthology triggered vitriol for “includ[ing] many more minority poets than is usually the case,” this is only to say that most American poetry anthologies omit people of color—even anthologies that one would imagine would be racially marked, like *American Hybrid* (four people of color out of 78), *The New American Poetry of Engagement: A 21st Century Anthology* (five poets of color out of 50), *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry* (no people of color), and *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders* (two black poets out of 35 total).

When one calls out poets like Vanessa Place and Kenneth Goldsmith one diminishes the problem to one of personality. What I have tried to demonstrate is the comprehensive and institutional nature of avant-garde poetry’s race problem. To quote Brian Droitcour, a poet who attended the convening where Goldsmith performed the autopsy report, “[Goldsmith’s] choice to read Michael Brown’s autopsy at a conference that was overwhelmingly white might have been conceived as an intervention in that whiteness, but in retrospect I suspect he was taking advantage of it as a ‘safe space’”—that is, a safe space for white writers. Vanessa Place has similarly bragged about how she has been Tweeting and publishing her minstrel texts for years without any pushback. Consider all the institutional components we have identified, all dedicated to maintaining what Harryette Mullen has called “aesthetic apartheid”: the movement’s leading poets, the fields most influential critics, its theoreticians, professors and anthologists, its intellectual journals, poetry institutions, bloggers, and conference organizers, not to mention the small presses and journals who have published this work, the magazines and book reviews that serve as the movement’s mouthpieces and fawning press machine, and the colleges and cultural groups that invite these writers to
speak. When an institution decides not to further such anti-democratic exclusion, like the Frye Museum or AWP, it is the exception—an act so unusual that the power structure defends itself by saying it is being censored. The National Coalition Against Censorship has called for AWP to reinstate Vanessa Place. Writers in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *The Daily Beast* have also defended Place, also buying into the censorship narrative. Vanessa Place has even created another Twitter account bearing a cover photo that says, “Silencing Vanessa Place.” But no one has censored Vanessa Place, who continues transcribing away *Gone With The Wind* on Twitter. AWP removed Vanessa Place from a committee devoted to selecting writers, after she publicly announced her artistic project was to perpetuate cruelty towards people of color—an act analogous to firing a volunteer HR coordinator who’s made bigoted statements.

Cries of censorship can often be the sound of powerful institutions smothering actual debates about content. That so many institutions have supported Vanessa Place has the paradoxical effect of showing how non-transgressive her work actually is. Rather than pushing up against the status quo or proving too edgy for easily offended minority groups, Conceptual Poetry is the status quo poetry of American state segregation.

Because people of color are almost always excluded from the avant-garde, last year the Asian American Writers’ Workshop presented an event series called the Counterculturalists, which sought to put forth a vision that included avant-gardists of color (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Martin Wong, Pedro Pietri, Afrika Bambaataa) and ethnic radicals (C.L.R. James, Yuri Kochiyama, Eqbal Ahmad, Grace Lee Boggs). When I spoke with one of our advisers—the writer and cultural activist who I had a storied career that ranged from free expression to indigenous issues—I was surprised to discover that we had both flirted with Language Poetry in our youth. I should not have been surprised. What the cultural activist told me was this: *Language Poetry was a way for me to pass.*

Because avant-garde literature is racialized as the literature of white cultural elites, when one joins its ranks one can achieve a derivative white identity. In fact, many Language poets like Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten have literally described their genre as a *white ethnic writing*. And one way to read essays like Trisha Low’s “On Being Hated: Conceptualism, the Mongrel Coalition, the House That Built Me” is as an
attempt to come to terms with passing in a white power structure. Because becoming an avant-gardist of color means becoming integrated into a white power structure—that is, joining in the spoils of an anti-democratic, discriminatory diversity—I have wondered whether people of colors’ attempts to diversify the avant-garde simply constitute another form of respectability politics.

The Sublime of Authenticity

In the early nineties, some of the most prestigious poetry journals in the country began publishing the work of an only recently discovered Japanese poet, a man who had survived the nuclear holocaust of Hiroshima. His name was Araki Yasusada. Born in 1907, influenced by Roland Barthes and Jack Spicer, Yasusada fused Japanese and American avant-garde techniques with a survivor’s trauma. Language poet Ron Silliman called Yasusada “a poet whose work simply takes my breath away.” When he read these poems of nuclear holocaust, which seemed slightly familiar, as though influenced by contemporary American experimental poetry, Silliman said, the poems “kept me up last night and probably will again for another night or three. I recommend them highly.” Yasusada was published in Grand Street, Conjunctions, and the American Poetry Review, which organized a special portfolio of his works. Wesleyan University Press prepared to publish a selection of his poems. There was only one problem. Araki Yasusada did not exist.

Yasusada, it is generally agreed, was the creation of the poet Kent Johnson, who was not a deceased Japanese war survivor, but a then 41-year-old white poet who taught at Highland Community College in Illinois. Johnson not only wrote Yasusada’s poems, he wrote Yasusada’s letters. He wrote secondary sources purportedly written by Japanese critics. He may have also invented one or more collaborators who he claimed were the real authors of Yasusada’s oeuvre. (He also edited the anthology of American Buddhist
poetry, mentioned above, which only included white poets.) The poems themselves mixed genuinely powerful lyricism with orientalist fantasy (e.g., a line where Yasusada describes himself as “obediently bowing the white flowers”) and Americanized non sequitur that in retrospect looked almost like clues, Johnson’s taunting of the reader to find him out (“The voices of the sorority girls sing of fucking in a plaintive way”). As Yasusada’s true identity leaked out, Wesleyan University Press canceled the publication of his book. Arthur Vogelsang, the editor of *The American Poetry Review*, called the hoax “a criminal act.” These reversals struck many poetry observers as hypocritical. “If they thought it was such good writing,” Marjorie Perloff wrote, as though describing a blind taste test, “they should still think it was good writing.” For critics like Perloff, the target was “identity politics” and a cultural studies framework that prioritized race and biography over the traditionalist humanist creative ego. A sneering attack on poetry of witness, the Yasusada hoax—as Eliot Weinberger said—put to end the idea of “poetry where you had to have been there.”

Kent Johnson—who has called Place and Goldsmith a “right-wing avant-garde”—has not been included in the canon of Conceptual Poetry. In fact, he has trolled the movement in rather ingenious ways. He impersonated the poet Craig Dworkin writing under the name “Kent Johnson” and then threatened to sue Dworkin for identity theft. But one could consider the Yasusada hoax as one of the inaugural moments of Conceptual Poetry. Bubbling with Conceptual Poetry’s Duchampian vibe of mischievous self-promotion, the Yasusada poems were one of the earliest recent literary works, parallel to or pre-dating Goldsmith’s early pieces, whose frisson came from a poet generating their own extra-compositional context. Twenty years later, I have come to view the Yasusada poems not as a hoax or a critique, but a performance—not a fraud accidentally uncovered but as an artist-created situation. The poems did not deconstruct “poetry where you had to be there.” Rather, they ushered in a new age of poetry that required precisely that. *Poetry in which you had to be there*—is a perfect definition of Conceptual Poetry. Re-contextualized in this way, one can see how Perloff failed to engage with both the ethical and avant-garde dimensions of the Yasusada poems. While she argues that Yasusada was a trap for those who craved poetry flavored with Orientalist fantasy, she does not implicate Johnson himself in such exoticism.
Johnson’s cultural appropriation and possible fraud do not matter, she says, because they fall into a traditional literary form: the hoax. In other words, she moots political questions of cultural appropriation by erasing the Yasusada poem’s strange, performative nature and familiarizing it into an already familiar genre. One would not describe a work by Vanessa Place or Kenneth Goldsmith as poetry that you should like regardless of what you know about the author’s processes. And for Perloff, knowing that a white experimental poet wrote the Yasusada poems did change their meanings: it is how she knew they were a metatextual critique. Their false authorship, along with the way Yasusada wrote like an American Language poet, elevated them above actual poems written by Japanese holocaust survivors, which she clearly saw as primitivist anthropology.

A group of Asian American writers called Yasusada something else: a minstrel show. These poets—Juliana Chang, Walter K. Lew, Tan Lin, Eileen Tabios, and John Yau—wrote that Johnson’s “act of yellowface at once plays into an existing and apparently vigorous orientalist fantasy, exposes American ignorance of both Japanese poetry and recent Japanese history, and levels a critique against an experimental writing community to which the author also seeks to ingratiate himself.” People often reduce race into simply racism—and racism into only hateful bigotry. This Manichean view elides the often unpredictable, dialectical nature of racism, the way in which the racist worldview can comingle Eros and hate, desire and abjection. Many of the British Orientalists in India were often not bigots in the “politically incorrect” sense—e.g., a person who utters the taboo words of racial hate. Their problem was the reverse: they thought they loved Indian classical philosophy so much more than the brute savages who actually happened to be Indians. The white minstrel actors performed the ultimate act of dehumanization, but they often did it with joy. Black identity was an escape hatch from which they could creep out from the confines of their whiteness. These minstrels could delegate their less ‘civilized’ emotions to their other, racialized selves and play the carnivalesque clown. (Eric Lott has read the minstrel show, for example, as a pretext for white men to express repressed desire for black men.) Perloff characterized the Yasusada poems as bait for mainstream liberal suckers, but she elides how the poems found many admirers in the avant-garde. No one would ever consider Ron
Silliman a reader of poetry of witness. As Juliana Chang and the other Asian American poets pointed out, what Yasusada created was a way for avant-garde white writers to give themselves emotional permission to enjoy lyric poems of suffering. Such authenticity envy also motivates works one might not think of as racist. In the domain of fiction, for example, Dave Eggers’s second novel, *You Should Know Our Velocity*, centers on straight white men who feel an emptiness in their lives and try to find their social conscience in a foreign country. If this problem was autobiographical, Eggers solved it by situating his next two books around the traumas of men of color: *Zeitoun*, the story of Abdulrahman Zeitoun, a Syrian man who survives Hurricane Katrina only to find himself mistakenly targeted by the War on Terror; and *What Is the What*, a novel told from the point of view of Valentino Achak Deng, a man who fled the Civil War in Sudan to find freedom in America. If Eggers’s first few novels are primary documents of white feelings of insufficient soul and excessive privilege, these next two books showed the elixir: for the white author to vanish and achieve derivative authenticity by telling stories through the mask of a traumatized person of color.

Similarly, Kent Johnson *himself said* that he objected to “the strong impression that the Yasusada corpus presumes to set itself above, and in judgment of, first-order testimonial literature—namely, poetry by those who witnessed, as victims, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” He wrote poems of sympathy rather than sneering deception:

The Yasusada is most emphatically not motivated by an impulse to critique anything at all in hibakusha literature, nor does it presume to set itself as an equal partner inside or alongside that body of work. [It] exists in relation to hibakusha writing at a distance, as an after-image or echo of it, if you will. And I would hold that Yasuada's apocryphal status makes that echo no less real. It whispers something about the double-fusing and mutually-deformed flowering of our two cultures, about our unacknowledged confusion in each other, about some kind of deeper yearning to find our voices entwined with an otherness that we know has been inside of us always. All of which is pure speculation and fancy on my part, but I do feel strongly that the echo is authentic...
That Johnson sees the echo as authentic, that he sincerely admires actual Japanese poems of witness—these facts do not make the piece less racist. The intermingling of disgust and desire is, after all, why Eric Lott titled his book on minstrelsy *Love and Theft*. What Johnson’s sincerity reveals is this old longing for authenticity, the painful sense of white ethnic inadequacy and self-erasure. Johnson invented a fictional author who was more “authentic” than himself, even though he existed and Yasusada did not. Like the minstrel, Johnson performed Yasusada, a fictional survivor of real racial trauma. Johnson, Vanessa Place, and Kenneth Goldsmith—all three are white simulators of colored bodies, which are seen at once as “authentic,” traumatized by world historical catastrophe, and only accessible via the fantastic desires of white identity.

After the angry pushback against Goldsmith and Place’s appropriations, the Language poet Ron Silliman asked if “the signers of the petition to the AWP [were] really that different from the police officer who fired at Michael Brown?” For Silliman, the most significant poetry blogger in the country for about a decade, the answer was an obvious “no.” He called those who objected to avant-garde racism an “online lynch mob” comprised of “thuggish... fascist jackboots.” The Language Poet Barrett Watten also said that Place’s critics resembled drones, hovering to attack. What is noticeable about these comments, what one finds curiously insidious about the appropriations of Goldsmith, Place, and Johnson—is how they appropriate the wounds caused by American empire itself. It is not enough for the colonizer to own the world—the only thing missing, the only thing escaping his grasp, is to own the trauma that he himself authored. In a recent video of a #BaltimoreGirls meeting, a community mediator named Erricka Wonder Voice Bridgeford delivers a devastating *ars poetica*—a speech about style not as a decadent surface or an autonomous aesthetic, but as the sublimation of and rebuttal to black oppression:

They see the glitter that we put on top of our pain, so they want to rock cornrows too... They love our culture, but they don’t fucking love us cause they don’t know us. They don’t know our experience. They don’t understand that it’s not just what you think—it’s a million times worse than what you think. Which is how beautiful and fucking powerful we are, that we are living
this experience and we still rock that shit…. We make oppression look good.

Greg Tate famously titled a book on black appropriation, *Everything But the Burden*, but it is precisely that burden which represents the most precious commodity, precisely because it cannot be appropriated. Because it represents a visible but inaccessible “realness,” because it cannot be assimilated, the trauma of colonialism represents the ultimate lack for the colonizer and those who possess it become the object of infinite desire. If the white subject feels bereft of content, neutral and disembodied, then these traumatized racial bodies represent the sublime substance of identity. They come imbued with that pure primal ethnicity imputed to them by the colonizers and stolen also by the colonizer, ingested through simulation: the excess of authenticity.

*Conversations with Youmna Chlala and Robert Chlala helped me conceptualize this essay.*

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**Tags:** Conceptual Poetry, Kenneth Goldsmith, Vanessa Place, avant-garde, poetry, racism
Guest

Meekness. Meekness. Meekness.

Sisters

I too wander the temple of knowing.

We watch heat lightning clamor against clouds.