Abstract

This essay suggests that with the increasing prominence of "historical poetics" as a set of social collectives, methodologies, and debates (especially about literary analysis), now seems to be an ideal time to assess its history and consider its future. The first part of the essay offers a genealogy of historical poetics, accounting for some of the central tenets of the group and considering detractors of these assertions, especially about the idea of "lyric reading" and the "lyricization" of poetry. The second part explains how the institutional history of historical poetics affects what it might become in the future, particularly if scholars expand its scope to include poetries not aligned with the 19th century Anglo-Atlantic world. It suggests how postcolonial literary studies and the history of empire might alter some of the original insights of the Historical Poetics group. Examples draw from poetry printed in India's earliest anglophone newspapers between the 1780s and 1800s, part of the "unread poetry of colonialism." Recovering an historical understanding of this poetry demonstrates that Anglo-Indian newspapers, while poignantly aware of their debts to Britain, perceived their verse as adapting borrowed British literary institutions. Insights devised from historical poetics provide another way to analyze seriously the conventional and common poetry of 18th century Anglo-Indian newspapers, to assess how its authors perceived the institutional contexts of their writing, and to describe how it differed from Europe's norms.
For the past 20 years there has been a movement among poetry scholars that has come to be known as “historical poetics.” Over that time, it has attracted strong proponents and critics and has reached a widening circle of English studies faculty. With the increasing prominence of historical poetics as a set of social collectives, methodologies, and debates (especially about literary analysis), now seems to be an ideal time to assess its history and consider its future.

My assessment has three parts. In the first part, I offer a genealogy of historical poetics, during which I describe the initial group of 19th century Anglo-American poetry specialists who became the Historical Poetics group, which popularized the term “historical poetics.” I account for some of the central tenets of the group and consider detractors of these assertions, especially about the idea of “lyric reading” and the “lyricization” of poetry. In the second part, I explain how the institutional history of historical poetics affects what it might become in the future, particularly if scholars expand its scope to include poetries not aligned with the 19th century Anglo-Atlantic world. I suggest how postcolonial literary studies and the history of empire might alter some of the original insights of the Historical Poetics group. My examples draw from poetry printed in India’s earliest anglophone newspapers between the 1780 and 1800, part of a large archive of as-yet unread poetry of colonialism. (There are numerous world anglophone and nonanglophone archives that might do the same.) Recovering an historical understanding of this poetry demonstrates that Anglo-Indian newspapers, while poignantly aware of their debts to Britain, perceived their verse as adapting borrowed British literary institutions. Insights devised from historical poetics provide another way to analyze seriously the conventional and common poetry of 18th century Anglo-Indian newspapers, to assess how its authors perceived the institutional contexts of their writing, and to describe how it differed from Europe’s norms.

In the third part, I conclude with some thoughts on what historical poetics might reveal about intellectual labor in the professional literary academy. Ultimately, historical poetics is not only about how we study poetry, but is an extended conversation about the value of history in literary study. Scholars can use historical poetics to consider larger questions about how to distribute their attention and how it might be rewarded by their colleagues and professional organizations. Over the next 10 years, it will prove crucial for scholars of historical poetics to reengage with questions about what archives are valuable for an historical reading of poetry and what those archives mean for the analysis of poetry in the academy.
A HISTORY OF HISTORICAL POETICS

"What is Historical Poetics?:" it is a question that has been asked a number of times and has been answered in equally numerous ways.¹ In this section, I will touch on some of those answers to consider what they indicate about the current debates in historical poetics and what they might mean for its future. The history of historical poetics can feel confusing because it has two disciplinary stems that correspond with two different working groups, both of which have been labeled "historical poetics."

One group is largely associated with comparative literature and is an outgrowth of 19th and early 20th century Russian formalism, traced to the philologist Alexander Veselovsky (1838–1906) and then continued by Mikhail Bakhtin, Olga Freidenberg, and Mikhail Gasparov (Kliger & Maslov, 2016, p. 1). In the 1970s, their insights were taken up by poetics scholars, such as Itamar Even-Zohar who described literature as a "polysystem" (1978, p. 11) balanced between subsystems of canonized and noncanonized items. According to Ilya Kliger and Boris Maslov, the recent editors of a collection on this lineage, historical poetics is a "Russian scholarly tradition that approaches literary form as a recursive and mediated response to historical processes" (p. 1). Jessica Merrill suggests that Russian formalism always possessed an interest in reconstructing culture’s historical context ("to the smallest possible detail") but that the conflation of Russian formalism with French structuralism has obscured this original "historical comparative perspective" (pp. 520–521). Although relatively obscure now as a critical tradition in the Anglo-American academy, Russian historical poetics attempts to "practice literary criticism on large historical scales" (Hayot, 2016, p. viii) that emphasized the ability to draw broad comparisons across periods, rather than to assert unchanging categories. This attitude toward history, Eric Hayot believes, has renewed attention to its value for comparative literature (2016, p. viii). As comparative literature scholars have revived these techniques, they have organized themselves into what they call the Historical Poetics Working Group.²

A second tradition also identifies itself as historical poetics, particularly within English literary studies, organized around the Historical Poetics group (historicalpoetics.com). This group is "dedicated to the individual and collaborative critical explorations of Anglophone poetry from the long 19th century, considered in transatlantic and broadly comparative framework."³ It traces its origin to a 2002 conference at Rutgers University called "The Traffic in Poems," which was organized by a member of the group, Meredith McGill. Since then it has steadily expanded its presence in the study of poetry. Some anchoring texts of this tradition include Virginia Jackson’s Dickinson’s Misery (2005), McGill’s edited collection The Traffic in Poems (2008), Meredith Martin’s The Rise and Fall of Meter (2012), Jackson’s and Yopie Prins’s The Lyric Theory Reader (2014), and the 2016 MLQ collection “Historical Poetics,” edited by V. Joshua Adams, Joel Calahan, and Michael Hansen, which grew out of a 2014 conference at the University of Chicago, “Poetic Genre and Social Imagination: Pope to Swinburne” (Adams et al., 2016).

As most of these publications confirm, 21st century historical poetics possesses enormous variety—the Historical Poetics group insists it is "not an ideology, not a school, not a single methodology" and that it takes "many forms."⁴ Some premises, however, seem widely shared. The first is that scholarship on poetry must account for historical understandings of poetry’s social life and verse forms. Historical poetics attempts to recover earlier period’s ways of identifying and reading poetry while also using those recovered modes of reading to develop new methods for analyzing poetry. In a memorable phrasing, Yopie Prins defines the relationship between a poem and its historical context as a process of looking at poetry from the outside inwards and from the inside outwards ("What is?" 2016, p. 14).⁵ Looking both inward and outward requires scholars to "think again about poetic practices that now seem obscure, obsolete, even obtuse," such as those Victorian poems that were not "intensely subjective, personal utterance" but poems of "public performance" (Prins, 2008, p. 230) that invert the lyric. The Historical Poetics group is drawn to authors (Emily Dickinson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow), genres (dramatic monologues, ballads), and poems ("Pan and Luna" [1880], "The Wreck of the Hesperus" [1842]) that meditate on poetic change and think about poems’ transmission among social worlds.

The second premise governing historical poetics is a suspicion toward the idea that there are stable critical concepts or categories for the analysis of poetry. "Historical poetics tries hard not to normalize contemporary analytic
categories." Meredith McGill notes, instead viewing them "as part of a longer, more sinuous and vexing history" (2016a, p. 291) that champions some concepts but not others. No amount of critical acuity will "stabilize the constantly shifting subject" and it is inevitable that "bringing some poets and poems to the fore" (McGill, 2016a, p. 291) will mean occluding others. Recovering period-specific understandings of poetry has propelled the rediscovery of vibrant debates about meter and prosody and measured how they defined poetry and mediated central issues of modernity, such as nation formation. By reestablishing the "lost history" (p. 4) of 19th century clashes about meter, Meredith Martin’s The Rise and Fall of Meter (2012) dispenses with the idea that meter is a stable category of "old-fashioned" (p. 4) literary production. Instead, she describes the "interrelated metrical cultures" and "metrical communities" of 19th century Britain that sought out meter as a way to "order and stabilize their relationship to the changing nation-state" (Martin, 2012, p. 5). Michael Cohen uncovers similar examples in 19th century American poetry, which require a type of "historical reading" that grasps the "social functions and meanings of poems" (2015, pp. 10–11) based on local dissemination, ephemerality, and disposability, rather than aesthetic pleasure, linguistic complexity, and literary innovation (2008, p. 10, 13). Valuing once-vibrant, now obscure meters or ephemeralism and disposability can be hard to reconcile with the academy’s focus on the prestige of literature’s exclusive canon.

Shared principles of historical poetics have drawn attention to the different ways that literary scholars interpret poetry. Perhaps the most active site for this discussion concerns the role of the lyric in literary history. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins together suggest that literary scholars have distorted the way that poetry was actually understood in previous centuries by naturalizing the lyric as a supra-category of poetry. Their arguments have evolved from their books (Prins’s [1999] and Jackson’s [2005]), their coauthored article “Lyrical Studies” (Jackson & Prins, 1999), a section of a 2008 PMLA issue titled "The New Lyric Studies" (Jackson & Prins, 2008), Jackson’s entry on lyric in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (2012), and the introduction to their coedited anthology, The Lyric Theory Reader (Jackson & Prins, 2014). The lyric, Jackson argues, is a “modern invention” and a “modern poetic ideal” that arose primarily during the 18th and early 19th centuries; likewise, the “personal lyric” was created retrospectively by modern critics to identify categories that ancients and early moderns did not use themselves (Jackson, 2012). At bedrock, Jackson’s and Prins’s hypothesis about lyric reading is an argument about changes to literary criticism: that beginning in the 20th century there was a tendency to combine what had until then been seen as distinct items into one genre—lyric—at the same time that scholars assumed that all poetry was lyric. As Jackson notes, the idea that poetry was "one genre" (2014, p. 246) is an effect of lyricization: the merging of songs, elegies, epitaphs, sonnets, and riddles into one category called "lyric," which then displaced other poetic genres.

This hypothesis has been strongly debated, and for that reason it is important to note that Jackson’s and Prins’s arguments about the lyric are not offered as axioms of historical poetics but conclusions arrived at using its methods. Some scholars, most notably Stephanie Burt, Jonathan Culler, and Simon Jarvis, reject the lyricization hypothesis and the role of history in poetics more generally. In different ways, they all suggest that lyric was identifiable to its participants across time and that the methods utilized by historical poetics have obscured this recognizable lyric tradition, over-specifying what is one of humanity’s most enduring cultural achievements.

Burt, for example, argues that “the history of a word [lyric] is always related—but can often be distinguished—from the history of the practices it may denote” (2016, p. 425). Burt focuses on the lyric as a mode of disembodiment; it is a fiction that scholars use to describe the technical alienation of authors from those printed objects that are meant to convey their forms and voices. "To read a lyric poem is not to follow directions but to have an experience" (2016, p. 429) writes Burt, following Allen Grossman’s Summa Lyrica. Similarly, Jonathan Culler has claimed over the past decade that the "category of the lyric makes sense" and he asserts “there is a Western lyric tradition, created by poets themselves who read each other, who attempt similar things, even though these poems may be created in very different social and political circumstances” (2017, p. 7). Against the idea of perpetually unstable and historically shifting analytical categories, Culler calls for “new normative models of lyric” that might act as “new typologies” (2008, p. 205). With his “theory of the lyric” (2017, p. 10) Culler hopes to rescue lyric reading by refocusing it on “experiencing the poem itself as an event” (2015, p. 2) whose goal is not a “new interpretation” but the “knowledge of a tradition” (2015, p. 5).
In perceiving the poem as an event to be experienced, Culler aligns with the work of Burt and of Simon Jarvis, who believes the historical context of a poem "may be of interest" but "the pressure point, the point of historical formation and action in the poem, is always that of technique" because that is where the poem is made" (Jarvis, 2014, pp. 931–932). A poem is not made by history but by authors employing techniques and for Jarvis "poetics does not get more historical by tying cultural–political labels onto whole meters" (2014, p. 932). Jarvis subordinates the idea that authors might themselves be historically contingent to the notion that poetic techniques can appeal to lengthy traditions like the lyric and thus escape history’s pinpointed moorings. His arguments necessitate what he calls "verse-thinking" about a "poetics of repertoire" that captures the "quasi system of local expressive forces that individual prosodic gestures may take on or develop in particular authorships, coteries, periods, and genres" (2014, p. 934). Slightly differently, Tim Fulford objects that Jackson’s arguments about lyric reading overstate the importance of the lyric among other genres in an effort to demystify it, making her argument unfalsifiable (2018, p. 12).

Some of these critiques fundamentally misrecognize the methods and conclusions of historical poetics—no historical poetics scholar has denied the existence of lyrics before 1800 or suggested that authors did not recognize earlier traditions of lyric poetry, as Burt seems to suggest they do (2016, p. 429). But other differences, like those of Culler and Jarvis, are disagreements about which analytics best capture the overarching spirit of how scholars should read and teach poetry: the Historical Poetics group invests in genre whereas scholars like Culler or Jarvis focus on techniques and make room for "experiences" of lyric embedded within traditions. Yet the examples of Emily Dickinson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, or the "political poetess" of 19th century Britain demonstrate how verse techniques are understood differently across historical periods. Techniques now viewed as simple or even silly, were, in the 19th century, reflections on the hierarchy of genres. Dickinson’s poems were often combined with other physical objects, like crickets, raising questions about how expansive a textual poem may be (Jackson, 2005, p. 103). Similarly troubling is Longfellow, who may seem now to be "a vision of American poetry before poetry was ruined by literary criticism" (Jackson, 2014, p. 240), but throughout the 19th century was a lightning rod for debates about what qualified as poetry. Edgar Allen Poe insisted Longfellow did not even write poetry because his verse did not seem universal and timeless (Jackson, 2014, p. 245). Poems like Longfellow’s "The Wreck of the Hesperus" demonstrate to McGill the necessity of considering poems not only as texts but also as a function of format and medium that otherwise might remain invisible to literary analysis that only sees words on a page (2016b, p. 166). Likewise, Tricia Lootens undoes the "dream" separation of poetics from politics with her "polemical reception histories" of the 19th century poetess tradition (Lootens, 2017, p. 2), while Naomi Levine focuses on one of those poetesses, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to show Browning’s eager connection to the period’s "live debates in literary historiography" (Levine, 2016, p. 83) that was closer and more intimate than we now assume with our focus on technique.

That historical poetics seeks to ground literary readings in history might seem uncontroversial. (Few critics of prose would object to analysis of a novel that originates in what actual historical readers thought were novels.) Nonetheless, among some critics, poetry still produces a sense of transhistorical stability: the strongest dismissals of historical poetics arise from those who desire a recognizable tradition running largely unchanged from antiquity to the present. It might be possible to assume that poetry is a special form of human cultural production that is unusually stable over time, but that seems improbable. Poetry, like every other art form, responds to social and historical forces that alter not only how poetry was written but how readers understood what it was. Furthermore, as Carolyn Williams indicates, the subgenres of poetry, like all genres, are never new but made up of those elements that preceded them (2010, p. 12). Or, as Michael Cohen succinctly summarizes the relationship among genre, history, and technique: "[t]he complex of forces that rendered certain poems popular also made them old, thereby making them generic, and thus turning (or returning) them into history" (2016, p. 155). History requires “change over time” to identify itself; genres do too. Persistent continuity is not history, and unchanging genres do not produce literary history. For genres to recognize themselves, they must change. Perfect repetition and reproduction do not allow for genres to exist; to understand the lyric as lyric, it must be altered. The question is not whether genres change, but what forces make them do so.
For scholars like Williams and Cohen, historical poetics is ultimately motivated by ideas about genre in history. It is also, therefore, another turn in a long-running discussion of how to pursue the literary history of poetry. The central tenets of historical poetics—historicizing the way that poetry has been read by subdividing its genres; resurrecting now-outmoded but then-vibrant theories of poetry writing and reading; understanding poetry in its historical context—is a rejuvenation of how history contributes to literary scholarship at a time when the relationship between literature and other disciplines, particularly historical scholarship, has become antagonistic for some scholars.7

Of course, reading poetry historically is not unique to historical poetics; its genealogy can be traced back decades, or longer. How we read poetry historically has been a focus of the academy since at least new historicism, with collections like The New Eighteenth Century (1987), whose editors, Laura Brown and Felicity Nussbaum, called attention to the value of history as a marker. The specificity found in Marjorie Levinson's analysis of William Wordsworth's “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798) reminds scholars of the way that economic and historical detail opened new avenues for Romantic poetry criticism (Levinson, 1986). Lest we forget, Frederic Jameson began The Political Unconscious with the slogan “always historicize!” (1981, p. 9).

But how we historicize has never been singular or universally agreed. Marxist approaches have produced their own thread of poetic analysis inflected by history, especially among studies of 18th century and Romantic-period laboring-class poetry by Donna Landry, John Goodridge, Bridget Keegan, and William Christmas, themselves indebted to earlier works like Raymond Williams's The Country and the City (1973) or Marxism and Literature (1977), all of which proposed literary analyses that connected cultural representation with material conditions. Paul Fussell's determination that quarrels about English versification would not cease “until prosody is approached historically” (Fussell, 1966, p. 154) seems prescient for the latter half of the 20th century (though perhaps too optimistic about reaching consensus). His influential exposition on “historical prosody” (Fussell, 1966, p. 161) leads eventually to the historical account of the “traditional” (Attridge, 1982, p. 3) and “linguistic” (Attridge, 1982, p. 28) approaches of Derek Attridge's The Rhythms of English Poetry (1982) and onward to historical poetics, which reinvigorated the value of seemingly sedate prosodic debates. It has been a long time that scholars have had to balance attention to the “contingencies of the reader” that might be called historicist with the “abstract conjecture, socio-political elucidation, and ideological intervention” (Lubey, 2017, p. 335) that has come to be called theory. Historical poetics delivers an advancement on this historically and theoretically informed criticism through granular analysis of those who read poetry and in what ideological attitudes and social circumstances they decided what poetry was. It reconfirms that poetry's formal apparatus is an agent of history rather than a vessel or container that merely represent political and social changes.

If we think of historical poetics as another turn in the process of reading poetry historically, then it is possible to see the two most effective directions the field might follow in the next decade. One path, which I will describe more in the next section, would expand the geography and archives that are subjected to the techniques of historical poetics. A second path would focus more on the specialized knowledges of anglophone literary studies. In many ways, both of these steps are already underway and I expect they will only intensify in coming years.

Scholars of 18th century studies and British Romanticism, for example, have supplemented and reworked the insights of historical poetics from their fields' particular histories. These scholars have documented the proliferation of subgenres and the popularity of nonlyrical poetic genres during the 18th century, rather than confirmed the previous position that before the Romantic period lyric was assumed to be a “miscellaneous collection of minor forms” (Culler, 2015, p. 1). Anna Foy considers georgic circumlocution and ideas of epic as historically constituted categories that can be difficult for modern readers to negotiate (2016a; 2016b). Courtney Weiss Smith has explored how poetry participated in cutting-edge philosophy during the early modern period (Smith, “The Matter of Language”) while Joshua Swidzinski examines the possibility of prosody as a unit of literary history rather than a science of specific sound or mode of address. Jeff Strabone has sought out the metrical variations of bardic nationalism as an important literary historical enterprise and Lisa Lynn Moore has looked for the lesbian history of the sonnet by tracing same-sex desire into the genre's periodic historical revivals. Dustin Stewart has historicized blank verse to reveal
continuities between 17th and 18th century poetics, two periods whose poetry has been considered incompatible (2016, p. 205).

Shared intellectual investments have drawn many of these scholars into an 18th century studies version of a Historical Poetics group, whose purpose is to demonstrate the enormous variety of poetic experimentation that occurred before the dominance of the 19th century lyric and its particular modes of reading. Some of these genres and understandings persisted, such as those of epic address, whereas others, like the 1670s natural historian Robert Plot, who attempted to better understand the physics of echoes by reading poetry aloud in between hills (Smith, 2019a), or those printed approximations of oral folk performance found in James Macpherson’s Ossian poems and Thomas Gray’s bardic imitations that I described in Sounding Imperial (Mulholland, 2013), were experiments that burned out and for that reason characterize the wide potential of poetry and prosody that existed before modernity.

The pivotal importance of the Romantic period for lyric address and in the lyricization hypothesis has made the recent contributions of British Romanticists important as well. Julia Carlson, Ewan Jones, and D. B. Ruderman view British Romanticism as a "site" for "testing the limits and the guiding principles" (Carlson, Jones, & Ruderman, 2018, p. 4) of the Historical Poetics group, objecting in particular to the idea that lyric was homogenized after 1800. Tim Fulford shows that the 1790s and early 1800s were an influential period for the politicizing of meter (2016, pp. 471–472). The relationship between meter, history, and politics dates from at least the 16th century, however, as Erik Weiskott has shown with his analysis of medieval English poets composing at a moment when “vernacular poetics had not yet become an academic subject or a sustained cultural discourse” (p. 476). Medieval English poetry has the advantage of existing “before prosody” and before other distinctly modern institutions (such as nations, universal education, and the globalization of the English language), and thus its case studies might afford a “paradigmatically alien” (Weiskott, 2016, p. 476) perspective that can expose the gap between the practice and the theory of poetics in English history.

Since “historical” and “poetics” remain “contested concepts,” as Prins has noted (2016, p. 14), it would seem useful over the next 10 years for more scholars from other periods—particularly those before the 19th century—to take those two terms apart (again), asking how they change when examined in the new social and political relations provoked by these alternate histories. While the early 21st century may still look like a “default-historicist” (Smith, 2019b, p. 83) era for poetry scholarship, in the estimation of David Nowell Smith, the different ways that poetry creates history and registers its effects means that scholars cannot assume the effortless adhesion of “historical” to “poetics” (Smith, 2019b, p. 85). The expertise of scholars from other subfields might produce new studies of poetics that reenergize the usefulness of literary period just as it has begun to decline as the operative organizational tool of professional prestige in the academy (Underwood, 2013, p. 3).

2 | FOR AND AGAINST THE DRUM; OR, HOW ANGLO-INDIANS UNDERSTOOD THEIR POETRY

At the conclusion of the last section, I suggested that the early modern period, the 18th century, and the Romantic period might offer some alternate answers to historical poetics’ two maxims: that poetry should always be historiciied and that our analytical concepts for understanding poetry as genres in history are themselves unstable and changing. This, I argued, would be one fruitful path for historical poetics over the next decade.

Another route would be to expand the geographical scope of historical poetics beyond its primarily Anglo-American focus. When combined with new literary periods, the British Empire supplies new contexts within which to examine the question of how poetry was understood in its periods and geographies by differing authors and audiences. The advantage of these new contexts would be particularly evident for those archival questions that have been an important substratum of historical poetics—the evaluation of unusual, forgotten, disregarded authors, poems, poetic styles, and tastes. These types of archives, and their geographical dispersion within empires, with its centrality to the formation of the modern world, might alter our notions of what is “historical” and what is “poetics.”
Understanding the fundamental role of European colonialism in establishing what is historical is a necessary addition to scholars’ understanding of historical poetics. It would also expand the viability of historical poetics techniques for non-anglophone literary traditions.

Poetry has not been as prominent as travel narratives and fictional prose in postcolonial literary study (Mulholland, 2013, p. 5). Historical poetics can help change this dynamic. Expanding on those studies of poetry and empire that do exist in historical poetics would open up new methodological vistas. Crossing boundaries and borders has always been an important component of historical poetics, and ethnohistories and cross-cultural exchanges should contribute even more to the expansion of historical poetics in the next decade.9 Historical poetics might benefit from Margaret Cohen’s observation that late 20th century debates about the composition of the canon still retain a powerful force because they have been reformed into 21st century archival decisions about what gets preserved, transmitted, and studied (p. 61). It would offer an approach that reads poetry as a record of imperial history, an extension of the way that colonial archives were reinterpreted using techniques from literary criticism exemplified by the scholarship of Anjali Arondekar and Betty Joseph. Decisions about what gets studied inevitably will have ramifications on what is considered to be the proper methods of historical poetics, indeed what is even thought to be poetry, as the 19th century debate about Longfellow might remind us.

In addition to thinking about the historicized notion of poetic reading, we should also continue to expand what archives beyond the Atlantic world have been submitted to historical poetical scrutiny, as Mary Ellis Gibson, Jason Rudy, and Tricia Lootens have done. Gibson has documented the “mutually constitutive history of English and Indian poets” (2011a, p. 3) working within “complex multilingual contact zones” (2011a, p. 20) like Calcutta. Her book Indian Angles offers a systematic reassessment of the conditions by which this poetry was made in South Asia that pushes English language poetry out of its national contours and into the “transperipheral” relations of “multilingual space” (2011a, p. 6). Indian Angles is complemented by her “critical anthology” Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India, 1780–1913, which returns anglophone poetry of India to its subcontinental history by embedding its contents in extensive contextualizing detail. (Gibson’s work, when combined with Máire Ni Fhlathúin’s two-volume The Poetry of British India, 1780–1905 [2011b], shows that anglophone India provides a massive still-underused archive for considering historical poetics.) Rudy has described how the transportation of literary forms, especially poetic ones, engaged with specific regionalisms (such as dialect) while also becoming generic: accessible to others as a reference to a traditional historical poetics. (p. 2) Indian Angles played a significant, necessary role in the crafting of new colonial identities abroad. Lootens has traced the movements of Toru Dutt, an influential 19th century Indian woman in Britain whose poetry was driven by the forces of “transnationalism and translation” (2006, p. 574).

Other scholars have demonstrated how poetry might be used to think through the relationship between poetry and empire. Suvir Kaul’s account of John Horsford, a military officer in the Bengal army, uncovers a late 18th century Anglo-Indian literary scene that commemorated metropolitan audiences (2016, p. 34) and sought to join in on national conversations “from afar” (2016, p. 38). He suggests a locale like Calcutta as one of a number of “provincial outposts” (Kaul, 2016, p. 34), which included Edinburgh, Dublin, and Boston, oriented toward literary London. More broadly, Rosinka Chaudhuri’s collection A History of Indian Poetry in English (2016) examines anglophone Indian poetry across two centuries, redeeming it from its existence as what she calls “an unclaimed tradition” that lacks “a proper history” (p. 2). Manu Samriti Chander offers the marginalization of “brown Romantics” as an expression of anglophone culture and Nikki Hessell pioneers how globality operated in complicated ways through the translation of British authors within Australasian regions. A collaborative project like University College Dublin’s “SouthHem” (http://southhem.org/) seeks a synthetic account of the southern hemispheric literature, putting poetry at the center of transregional comparisons of intercultural contact.

Some of these scholars, like Chaudhuri, Chander, Hessell, and those involved in SouthHem, might not immediately think of themselves as engaging in historical poetics. That scholars might use the techniques of historical poetics without identifying it as such indicates the long tradition of reading poetry historically but also the fraught question of what happens to methodological innovations when they expand beyond their initial social collectives. As
historical poetics becomes even more visible it will need to reckon with the idea that similar scholarly attitudes and methods might be grouped under different headings.

Examinations of the regions, climates, and socio-politics of imperial ventures beyond the British Isles, however they are categorized, provide new assessments of what poetry was and what it sought to accomplish. We must correspondingly alter our notion of what poetry means when it is composed or printed in Bristol or Bengal, even if the poems from each place “look” or “sound” the same. What more can historical poetics offer scholars of imperial poetry before 1800 composed outside of Britain? One set of answers might be found in the published verse found in 18th century India’s earliest newspapers. Daniel E. White has described the reciprocity between British and British Indian literary cultures during the 19th century, but I want to focus here on their divergent opinions about meter, prosody, and subject matter. For simplicity, I focus on Calcutta’s newspapers, but related versions of this dynamic can be seen throughout South Asia.

Anglo-Indian newspapers were among the most important institutions to sustain public poetry in the region. They appeared soon after the establishment of printing presses in South Asia and by 1800 the major cities of British India (Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay) had multiple weekly newspapers even though each had a population of white European-descended residents that totaled in the low thousands. Only a few decades later, there were anglophone and multilingual newspapers in Penang, Ceylon, Batavia, Sydney, as well as itinerant and short-lived printing and publishing aboard ships that were traveling the trade routes of the globe, as Rudy has shown (2014).

There remains a tendency to think of these newspapers as an extension of British national identity. The historian Jeremy Black asserts that their distribution indicates a world-wide British “colonial press” that produced useful information and “underlined the urban character” (2002, p. 98) of the British colonial presence (something lacking, he argues, among French colonies). James Belich names these connections “Anglo-world,” a “politically divided but culturally and economically united intercontinental system” (2009, p. 9). Indeed, India’s newspapers borrowed their forms from Europe and often mirrored what occurred in British provincial newspapers during the same period (Barker, 1998, p. 95), when circulation increased and the number of newspapers doubled (Barker, 1998, p. 111), acting as a “financial prop” (Raven, 2007, p. 263) for many printer-booksellers. But scholars have overemphasized the importance of European news and newspapers by ignoring the significance of locally produced content, especially poetry. Many of the initial issues of India’s first newspapers, such as Hicky’s Bengal Gazette (est. 1780) and the Calcutta Gazette (est. 1784), were filled with poetry and nearly all of 18th century Anglo-India’s newspapers had regular poetry columns called “Poet’s Corner,” “The Parnassian Spring,” or simply “Poetry.”

Some of these poems, like the newspapers that published them, were visually complex, linguistically multiple, and formally variegated vessels for the anglophone public sphere. Newspapers published poetry in multiple languages, including English and Persian, but also Bengali and occasionally Brajbhasha, a dialect of old Hindi from northern central India. These poems were often translations and adaptations of a rapidly solidifying orientalist canon of Hafiz, Ferdowsi, Sa’di, and Amir Khusrau that also brought genres like ghazal—a transregional poetic genre that had migrated from Arabic to Persian beginning in the seventh century CE—into view of Anglo-India’s multilingual readers. Their productions were not yet regimented into the finely segmented hierarchies of the late 19th century British Raj.

Alongside this multilingual poetry was another set of newspaper verse that situated the conventions of English-language writing in regional India. Questions of marriage and relations between the sexes abound, often presented humorously as satires. Also included were silly epigrams, riddles, and bad puns, most of which were published anonymously or pseudonymously from correspondents across the Indian subcontinent (though not everything was printed and rejections were often noted in the newspaper itself).

The variety of local topics and conditions raises possibilities for examining the function and meaning of poetry as an institution in Britain's Asian empire. In the following examples, I focus on how newspaper verse satirized poetry itself as a way to understand that growing empire. Especially poignant are those poems that rewrite conventional English conceits, such as the “Impromptu on the Verses ‘Supposed to be Sung by a Lark’ (1787) published in the Calcutta Gazette in response to another unnamed and untraced poem from the India Gazette, a rival Calcutta newspaper. The poem is attributed to “Nobody” and the lark, so familiar as a figure for tunefulness, is used to ridicule
another author and another newspaper’s poetry. The lark, Nobody argues, is “so rare a bird” and such a “rare beauty” that this competing newspaper’s poet must be a “Peerless Lover” and a “Peerless Bard.” “After so unmatch’d a strain” as the India Gazette’s poem, Nobody asks the “peerless Bard” to “never sing again.” Nobody’s praise of this poet and his conceits has the effect of bringing poetry crashing to the ground. Competition between newspapers or poets is not unusual, of course, either in Britain or India, nor is the lark such a rare conceit that the poet Nobody and the wannabe-lark should consider themselves to be unique talents. The poem dismisses both authors, and poetry itself, as a vehicle of ridiculous aggrandizement that only indicates self-deluded mediocrity. The right response to these poems, the “Impromptu” suggests, is for the bird to shut-up and for poetry to halt. It is an attack on another poet who is retarding the advancement of poetry in Anglo-India. It is also a playful self-mockery by Nobody about the state of verse-making. Nobody argues that advancements still needed to occur before Anglo-India could be thought to possess a reputable literary culture of its own.

The conceit of failing poetry was familiar in Calcutta as it was in Covent Garden, and often the institutional space devoted to printing poetry in anglophone newspapers counter-intuitively dismissed poetry as useless and unworthy of publication. Hicky’s Bengal Gazette, India’s first newspaper, founded in 1780, possessed some of the most humorous dismissals of poetry in its own “Poet’s Corner.” One is a “dialogue” between “the Driver of the Calcutta Vehicle for News. Poetry &c.”—referring to James August Hicky, the proprietor of the newspaper—and a “Wit.”13 In the dialogue the “Wit” appeals to Hicky to publish his poems, asking him to “take a small Bundle of / Rhymes to Parnassus,” because “[y]ou must know I am a Wit, / and my vote ‘always passes.’”

Hicky is not amused. He replies, “H–g Your wit and your / nonsense I’m loaded enough, / I’m brimfull already of dullness and Stuff.” He has “no room for wit,” and besides, he remarks cuttingly, “if I take your nonsen- / sical trash in, / Where the duce must I put all / my people of Fashion?” He jokes that he will not relegate gossip about the “Circle of Beauty” to “the Basket” just for a little bit more poetry.

Hicky was a crude but capable poet who published his own satirical verses for his newspaper, and poems in this newspaper, like the one above, often referred to Hicky by name. There is some chance this poem was composed by him but unattributed, since the poem’s self-consciously bad metrical structure can be found in the line break that divides his reference to “nonsense / sical trash.” This unadorned poeticizing is compounded by the too obvious irony of Hicky publishing a poem in his newspaper that criticizes the publishing of newspaper poetry. Poetry might be witless dross, but it is effective if it fills up the newspaper. Aesthetic, criteria are ostentatiously subordinated to quotidian economic ones.

These examples show that newspaper poetry acted as a marker for Anglo-India’s conventional literary culture that was wedded not so much to typical canonical values of posterity, fame, and self-aggrandizement, but more conventional goals of immediacy and relevancy. No issue was more immediate to Anglo-India’s readers than warfare, and poetic meter and musicality captured the controversial politics of imperial expansion, much as in the 19th century system meter captured the dizzying politics of the nation-state, as Meredith Martin has shown. For late 18th century India, warfare was pervasive: between 1757 and 1799, the East India Company, supported by regular British army regiments and the British navy, fought repeated conflicts with many of South Asian polities, particularly four wars against the Kingdom of Mysore and Tipu Sultan (also known as Tipu Tiger). Three poems published in the Calcutta Gazette in 1784, titled “For the Drum,” “Against the Drum,” and “Against Verse,” offer different viewpoints on the “martial Drum” that served as a figure for militarism.14 There is no indication of their authorship, although “Against the Drum” follows almost exactly “Ode XIII” (1782) by the Quaker poet, John Scott, which has become a popular antiwar poem known now as “The Drum.”15 The other poems, in content and form, seem to revise Scott’s ode, in one case avowing the violence associated with the drum and in another using Scott’s format to critique verse-making. All three poems are printed down the newspaper’s second page and onto the top of the third page, in columns, as if to be read in sequence. The titles and placement of these poems suggest that Anglo-India was ripe for encompassing different ideological views on British militarism.

Drums possessed symbolic significance for military units—used in recruitment but also acting as musical accompaniment for military punishment and discipline—making them the “formal music of imperialism” (2013, p. 243),
according to Trevor Herbert and Helen Barlow. During the 18th century, drums also became the “regulator of the cadence of the various species of march” (Herbert & Barlow, 2013, p. 20); it was the drum that kept time for Europe’s ever-larger armies.16 “For” and “Against” the drum recognize that meter provides the structure and pace for these martial poems much as drums do for military units. The poems reveal a variegated, highly localized audience for arguments about meter and musicality. The speaker of “For the Drum” claims to “LOVE the Drum’s enliv’ning sound, / When strife, and war, and death surround” because it offers “courage” to “cheerless hearts” and “makes them brave the bloody fields” to “march, and fight, and fall, in foreign lands.” The drum’s “inspiring beat” is championed over the “baggpipe’s snuffling notes” or the “quaver’ing trills” of “eunuch’s throats” because the “martial drum” is literally and figuratively an instrument of advancement and the drum’s “enliv’ning” sound is meant to deceive soliders away from the possibility of death. The reference to the “eunuch’s throats” might offer a more specifically South Asian context to the poem, with the rumors of castration among Mysore’s Anglo military prisoners, who were often forced to convert to Islam and conscripted into its slave battalions to fight their former comrades.

“Against the Drum” offers a counterpoint. Scott’s poem, published a few years earlier as “Ode XIII” but appearing here under the title “Against the Drum,” takes the regularity of the drum’s beating as an indication of its evil. Instead of advancement, the drum makes a “discordant sound, / Parading round, and round, and round”—rather than move forward, the drum’s sound is repetitive, its regularity indicative of the ceaseless training of the armed forces that march in circles. The sound of the drum ultimately leads to the destruction of happiness, itself made audible in the landscape with “mangled limbs, and dying groans, / And widows tears, and orphans moans.” (These widows’ tears and dying groans repeat within another Scott poem, “Serim; or the Artificial Famine” [1782] that he described as an “East-Indian Eclogue,” which criticized EIC conduct by imagining the “sonless mother’s calls” for her infant who had starved during widespread famine in 1760s Bengal.) Even as these poems make different arguments, therefore, they do so with the same meter and the same slippery rhyming lines, so that identical formal structure contributes to opposite (and offsetting) political conclusions.

It would seem natural for this series of poems to end there, with two different versions of the drum that correspond with two different positions on the regularity of rhyming poetry’s meter. In one poem, the driving metrical lines are meant to enliven those who face death, and in the other, the meter and rhymes wrap “round, and round, and round” endlessly repeating spasms of violence that strike discordantly on listeners’ ears.

Yet a third poem, “Against Verse,” printed adjacent to these first two in the same issue of the Calcutta Gazette, disrupts this neatly packaged point and counterpoint and underscores the notion that any poem might want to capture the martial drum in its meter. As with Nobody, the author of “Against Verse” rails against the “scribbler’s skill that’s bound / With rhyme to jingle round, and round” that “lures youth from gainful arts / On useless verse to try his parts.” The language of “round, and round” repeats that of “Against the Drum,” making the drum’s ability to incite warfare equivalent the meter’s ability to entice young men to poetry. Meter’s repetition, which is deathly and deceiving in “Against the Drum,” becomes the “smooth” but “labor’d” flows of regularized poetry in “Against Verse.” “Tho’ smooth the labor’d measure flows,” the speaker insists that “Plain truths are easier told in prose,” suggesting the musicality of poetry itself is deceptive and responsible for the warfare that “[m]y ears the scribblers, studies wound.” Not blades or bullets but ballads and rhymes injure the reader of 18th century Anglo-Indian newspapers. Meter’s ability to sustain opposite conclusions becomes the focus of the poetic sequence: musicality and cadence itself is suspected of duplicity. The placement and origins of the poems raise more questions about the status of verse-making in Anglo-India. Scott’s discordant drum becomes associated with its counterparts in militarism and verse, and all three poems, printed in succession, act as a cluster that draws together issues that are portable across empire yet antitope to Anglo-Indian life.

The sound of drums, represented in the regularity of meter and the “round, and round” of rhyming, allegorizes the idea that even sound can be politicized in specifically historical ways—the type of insight that has been popularized by scholars of historical poetics. Poems about poetry in Hicky’s Bengal Gazette and the Calcutta Gazette demonstrate how the most generic conceits and figurations of English literature, such as the tuneful lark or the discordant drum, were imported to India but reworked into assessments about the state of Anglo-Indian literary culture as it appeared in its most important early institution, the newspaper. Historical poetics offers a broad range of dispositions that could be...
utilized more fully by scholars of empire, turning them toward formats, like newspaper verse, that provide new understandings of the link between imperial politics, art-making, and aesthetics. At the same time, empire offers scholars of historical poetics the ability to stretch their concerns to new domains and reinvigorate the field’s original emphasis on the politics of 19th century nationalism and the transatlantic world. There are many other archives of empire that would be refreshed by historical poetics and that would, in turn, offer new tests for its techniques.

3 | HISTORICAL POETICS AND THE FUTURE OF LITERARY STUDY

The issues raised at the end of the last section might help to trace the way that anglophone poetry was reconstituted in specific geographical locales due to the larger, semiglobal forces of the British Empire. While Anglo-Indian literature was constituted during the late 18th century as institutions, practices, participants, and debates about issues like meter and musicality, they also created a local and regional counter-trend to the reproduction of British culture throughout the colonies. This examination can be advanced further by combining the efforts of postcolonial literary critics since the 1990s with the methods of historical poetics, which would seek Anglo-Indian understandings of poetry’s role in empire (and would benefit from the more diverse geographies and populations that imperial archives could provide).

What can local anglophone poetries contribute to the broader world of poetry criticism? The expansion of historical poetics to other literary periods, language traditions, and scholarly clusters will allow for a wider picture of poetry in history—a sort of collective “large reading” across the globe that has been initiated by the Historical Poetics group and Russian-formalist historical poetics in two different ways (Lanser). This large reading—“poised between the close and the distant” (2014, p. 248), in the words of Susan Lanser—would use the social function of historical poetics as a scholarly movement to expand the range of archives under investigation and proliferate understandings of poetry and its genres and subgenres, practices and debates, that existed at any point in history. The result can only be a more finely differentiated and particularized understanding of poetry.

At the same time, the shift toward wider anglophone archives must be situated within the institutional frameworks of the academy and professional literary studies. From this vantage, historical poetics is not about flashy new methods that claim to offer theoretical revolutions, but rather the opposite. In some sense, like all collaborative scholarly projects, movements, or trends, historical poetics is an argument for how scholars should dispose of their time and attention: deciding, when confronted with the vast scope of literary and cultural production, what deserves reading and what the profession should value for its prizes, teaching positions, and promotions.

Historical poetics’ scholars will always need to balance its particularizing function with the need for general conclusions, as V. Joshua Adams, Joel Calahan, and Michael Hansen have noted, but this is not a new problem for literary criticism (and one that has been ably addressed during the past half century). Some scholars, like Meredith Martin and Brad Pasanek, are already beginning to use the techniques grouped under headings like digital humanities, computational literary studies, and humanities computing on these kinds of historical poetics questions (though large majorities of DH projects still are devoted to prose, especially novelistic fiction, which is likely to continue as the prestige object of the academy). This means that the archival impulses of historical poetics will remain an important supplement to the different scales of scholarly inquiry that have emerged in the past decade (whether close reading, distant reading, Lanser’s “large reading,” or the mid-level and meso-level analysis of the social sciences). The archive of literature is too vast to be understood in its entirety, whatever technologies or techniques we develop.

If scholars want to have a robust understanding of how human beings have used poetry as a social endeavor, then we will need to theorize how changes in historical understandings of what qualifies as poetry have dictated decisions about what we considered valuable to be studied. Fittingly, changes in attention and enthusiasm about literature are exactly the subject of historical poetics.

My call for archival expansion that follows geographical contours is not methodologically revolutionary, but it might be revelatory nonetheless. When crossed with the techniques that have arisen from postcolonial studies and histories of empire, historical poetics asks us to pay attention to those interesting things that too few of us have had...
time, energy, or dispensation to pay attention to, while at the same time asking why we have not paid attention and what happens when we finally do. With limited time and comparatively few personnel, we undoubtedly will have to prioritize what we want to study and how we want to study it. As the techniques of historical poetics expand into new fields, it will have to address what Margaret Cohen has identified as the problem of selecting what gets studied and what does not, what gets preserved and what discarded. Turning to empire and anglophone literature’s widely dispersed geography in the modern world would intensify these quandaries, but it would also extend one of historical poetics central intuitions: that scholars might recover an earlier period’s understandings of poetry as a way to revive our comprehension not just of their cultural tastes, but of how poetry operates in the present. These insights create “histories of the present” (Aravamudan, 1999, p. 17), which would link the knowledge retrieved by the methods of historical poetics with the active political critique that has always motivated postcolonial studies from its beginnings.

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ENDNOTES

1 See, for example, Prins, “What is Historical Poetics?; Jarvis, “What Is Historical Poetics?”; and Adams et al.


3 See the "About" section of the Historical Poetics website: https://www.historicalpoetics.com/about; retrieved May 24, 2019.


5 Prins sees this as an important point of contact between the Russian formalist and American traditions of historical poetics. She writes that there is a "schematic division" among these different genealogies of historical poetics, whereby cultural historians (i.e., the Russian formalists) “read from the outside in” and literary critics “read from the inside out” (Prins, “What is,” 14). Prins seeks ultimately to combine these two dispositions, creating a method that “works recursively as a loop, reading simultaneously from inside out and from outside in” (Prins, "What is,” 14).


7 See Kramnick, 17–32.

8 There is a tendency, especially in the Carlson et al. collection of Essays in Romanticism, to assume that the Romantic period was the proliferation of interest in the lyric, whereas the eighteenth century lacks a robust prosodic equivalent to that of the nineteenth century. This position seems to repeat a scholarly artifact of the twentieth-century academy that associates the Romantic period with innovative poetry and the eighteenth century with prose and the novel.

9 See, as an initial entry point, Martin 2015.

10 For an introduction to the history of print and empire in India, see Shaw, Ogborn, Ghosh.

11 Graham Shaw, perhaps the most knowledgeable scholar of anglophone Indian printing, suggests that newspapers from Britain were “eagerly awaited” in India because information “available locally...was extremely limited” (Shaw, 568), but the opposite was the case.

12 The poem is from the Calcutta Gazette (Nov. 15, 1787). A copy of the India Gazette with this poem has not been found.

13 Hicky’s Bengal Gazette XVI (Saturday May 6th to Saturday May 13th, 1780).

14 Calcutta Gazette, n. 39 (Nov. 25, 1784).

15 There are small word differences between John Scott’s ode and the reprinting in the Calcutta Gazette. My thanks to Michael Rothenberg-Schwartz for pointing me toward Scott’s poem.

16 Practically, drums were an essential part of the regimental organization, in which they provided a means of communication among men on the march (rather than being played in battle, during which time military musicians typically acted as stretcher bearers for wounded soldiers) (Herbert and Barlow, 248–50).

17 Adams et al. ask how can theories of poetry remain historical without losing poetry’s distinctness from other cultural phenomena that might be said to have their own "poetics" (Adams, et al. 2).
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