

substantial as well, for Brilmyer gives us a “thing theory” that emerges out of a body of literature rather than being imposed upon it. If her associative method sometimes makes for challenging reading, it is not only appropriate to her investments and claims, which are all organized around interrelation and mobile perspectives, but also allows her to bring an impressive range and number of texts into dialogue with one another. This is a book that repays re-reading and affords some of the textural richness that characterizes the realist novels Brilmyer describes.

ANDREA HENDERSON
University of California, Irvine

VIRGINIA JACKSON, *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. Pp. xiii + 303. \$95 cloth; \$35 paper.

In the interest of self-preservation, I make a point to notice when I am in a room with someone who is a better reader of poetry than me. I have been around long enough to know the limits of my own facility with poetics, and I know the educating sting of correction well. Early in my career, a hasty hotel-desk revision of a conference paper led me to misstate the stanzaic form of a poem, and I can still hear the venerable scholar who noticed my mistake: “Those are actually Spenserians on your handout, not *ottava rima*. It matters to get these things right.” My memory of the conference room in which this silly shameful scene took place is precise. As a result, I approach the task of reviewing Virginia Jackson’s extraordinary new book with some trepidation.

Another disclosure, in the spirit of critical ethics: for several years, roughly a decade ago, I carried on an extended argument with an imaginary projection of Virginia Jackson. This preoccupation was the result of a real-life conversation I had with another scholar of nineteenth-century American poetry, to whom I had gone for advice about publishing my book manuscript about the Black poets of the abolition movement. This astute colleague suggested I should frame the project in terms of Jackson’s “theory of lyric reading,” as laid out in her book *Dickinson’s Misery* and her recently published anthology, *The Lyric Theory Reader* (co-edited with Yopie Prins). The advice was right: thinking about the lyric via historical poetics was useful, but mostly insofar as I found

myself disagreeing vehemently with Jackson's work as it seemed to pertain to mine.

The argument I was having with Jackson-via-projection ran as follows. Her "lyricization thesis" held that "the lyric" had become a black hole of genre (more on this metaphor below), which gravitationally drew in and flattened the rich array of verse forms and genres of the nineteenth century. This assertion effectively generalized the white literary history and critical genealogies that had preoccupied Jackson's work to that point. Moreover, the cultural prominence of poems featuring a solitary lyric speaker tracked neatly alongside the hegemonic rise of liberal individualism. However, I found that the lyricization thesis presented a problem from the vantage of Black literary theory. Roughly along the same timeline during which lyricization had gripped the academic study of literature, Black critics from James Weldon Johnson to Barbara Christian had insisted on the integral roles of everyday speech, song, and music in the making of Black literature. I found I could not see my way clear to reconciling Jackson's argument about white lyric theory with the African American poetic tradition's defining impetus to orality and musicality. I suppose I was wondering, "What if Black poets liked lyricization? What if they did not experience lyric poetry as a discrete object of academic inquiry or as a cultural mechanism for individuation, but as a vehicle for social connection?"

Mostly by my lonely white lyric self, I sat for some time with the frustration of this contradiction. During the rise of the lyric, white literary historians had taken little interest in the myriad permutations of poetic voice one finds in the what James Weldon Johnson described as the "long way from the plaints of George Moses Horton to the invectives of Claude McKay." When posed to specific poems by Black poets of the nineteenth century, the contradiction of Black lyricization seemed to yield nothing but negation; their poetic speakers never quite reduced to a single being, as Fred Moten would have it. Setting aside anthemic music like Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing," even poetry focused on what Elizabeth Alexander called "the Black interior" sounded to me like resistance to the enclosed aesthetic subjection of the lyric in its ostensibly ideal definition. As Jackson herself, among others, had pointed out, even the popular white poets of the nineteenth century were not nearly so unanimously oriented toward lyric estrangement as the literary-critical consensus of the twentieth century would suggest.

I puzzled over this question long enough that historical conditions changed. The late years of the Obama administration yielded

a resurgent white nationalism, and in turn, the movement against police violence and mass incarceration emerged and expanded rapidly. In the more local context of literary studies, the painful straitening of economic circumstances in English departments cut against what might have seemed, from a certain distance, like a period of efflorescence in Black studies. Amid these contradictions, the substance of my argument with lyricization faded into the background of my concerns. During the last decade's collective radicalization, I suppose a certain poetic science eluded me. But then, I came to find out that the real, live Virginia Jackson had turned her attention to the problems her argument posed to early Black poetics. The first print example of this shift appeared in the pages of *Nineteenth-Century Literature* in 2016: an essay on Paul Laurence Dunbar entitled "Specters of Ballad." Now her new book, *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric*, confronts the racism of lyricization in an impressive act of intellectual self-revision. The argument is elegantly simple: the lyricization process was the poetic expression of U.S. racial formation.

In this account, the subsumption of most poetry under the singular heading of "the lyric" effectively racialized poetry. Where once we had a range of verse genres, now we have poetries pegged to genres of people, all under one baggy formal heading. Interpolating Adorno, Jackson writes, "the deep design of the racialized social antagonism foundational to America (and not just America) became the deep design of the poetry that, over the course of the long nineteenth century, became the American lyric" (p. 6). To prove this point, the book reads the Black poets of the period, like Phillis Wheatley, Ann Plato, George Moses Horton, and James Monroe Whitfield, tangling with the imputation of the lyric model, and especially against the detached solitude that would become the hallmark of white poetics in the twentieth century. In tandem, she finds the period's popular white poets, like William Cullen Bryant and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, thinking through and appropriating the challenge of Black and Indigenous voices in their own process of adjustment to the enforced solitude of lyric culture. From Jackson's vantage, the coalescing formal logics of American poetry articulate the simultaneous coalescence of American racism, and the cost is shared, but unevenly, by all.

The chapters follow the premise of lyricization-as-racialization through aspects of period poetics: apostrophe, personification, prosody, and the poetess. Jackson uses this analytic breakdown to conduct a series of microscopic experiments. Discussions of poems like Phillis Wheatley's "On Recollection" and Ann Plato's "To the First of

August" sometimes go on for twenty or more pages, at a more or less incomparable level of technical precision. To describe this as "close reading" would be an understatement. Perhaps because the second chapter dwells on the celestial figure of the North Star, I had something like what Michelle M. Wright calls "the physics of Blackness" in mind. Jackson's investigations recall Mina Loy's poem about Gertrude Stein, who she compares to Marie Curie: "she crushed / the tonnage / of consciousness / congealed to phrases / to extract / a radium of the word."

In certain ways, the book's comparative approach to Black and white poetics recalls books by Dana D. Nelson, Eric Sundquist, and George Hutchinson published in the 1990s, following on the provocation of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. The focus here falls less on spectacular forms of racist violence or heroic resistance, and more on technical problems in poetics. But this hardly proves an apolitical choice. Jackson's acute attention suggests that the physics of Black poetics might illuminate the dark matter beyond the reach of racialization. This possibility is best made apparent in her readings of Wheatley, who is convincingly characterized here as widely influential for American Romantics. Wheatley comes across as having made significant poetic innovations in the representation of "affective intensity and reflexive subjectivity" (p. 107). Her career reemerges as "an important but heretofore overlooked origin story in the development of the idea that representative personal expression is what the lyric is all about" (pp. 109–110). At the book's conclusion, Jackson arrives at the premise that "Black poetics, in antagonism with White poetics, produced the conditions for lyricization, and particularly the conditions for the emergence of the abstract modern speaker" (p. 232). This provocation, a dialectical reversal of the apparent cultural hegemony of white poetic influence, ought to be a point of departure for any future history of modern poetry.

As I was waiting for my copy of *Before Modernism* to arrive, I was grasping for a superlative figure I might use in this review: something about what it meant for nineteenth-century American poetry to have finally found its critic. On having read the book, I see more clearly the stakes of the syntactic inversion, of the object finding its subject, belatedly. Looking backward from 1940 on the uncertainty of the antebellum period, Richard Wright saw with a darkening clarity the layered significance of slavery and segregation in sequence: "We have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of

a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him." Now well into the twenty-first century, our concerns have crystallized yet again. It's not that Jackson *discovered* the work of the early Black poets, who would, at any rate (Moten again), resist their status as poetic objects. She rightly notes the unsung bibliographic work of earlier generations of Black women scholars for their own heroic recovery work. Instead, it feels as though the problem of the book must have found Jackson as a critic of nineteenth-century American poetry more broadly, that its subject was made necessary by history, and that, in more vernacular terms, she answered the call. Jackson avoids self-dramatizing on this point, but at one moment, candidly recounts engaging with poets and critics of color around the whiteness of the *The Lyric Theory Reader*—I was happy to be reminded of a spicy blogpost by John Keene about a conference panel (again) on the anthology (pp. 52–53).

After working through this careful, generous, and hard-won book, I've been having another conversation with a new, imaginary Virginia Jackson about the responsibilities of the white critic. It has turned out that my arguments with her earlier model were mostly procedural. We had taken different trips to the same place. Beyond the obvious truisms about reckoning with divisions in our history, it seems professionally important that we agree on how white researchers ought to contribute to that reckoning, how we ought to apply the resources of our labor and our institutions to anti-racist literary-historical revision. I also find we agree that we cannot disguise our whiteness in theoretical abstractions or myths of professional objectivity. We have to be open to poetry that can change our minds. At risk is not just that we might get the literary history or poetic form wrong, but also that we might get stuck talking to ourselves.

MATT SANDLER
Columbia University