DIALOGUE
*The Interdisciplinary Journal of
Popular Culture and Pedagogy*

Experimental Forms and Identity Politics in 21st Century American Poetry

Ronnie Stephens
Tarrant County College
Arlington, TX 76063
ronnie.stephens@tccd.edu

ABSTRACT

"Experimental Forms and Identity Politics in 21st Century American Poetry" explores the function of form in American poetry and its proximity to whiteness. Through an analysis of experimental and nontraditional forms I argue that poets Fatimah Asghar, Jericho Brown, Franny Choi, Natalie Diaz, Ilya Kaminsky, and Danez Smith challenge traditional notions of what a poem is; these authors use graphics and co-opt familiar text objects to challenge larger assumptions about gender identity, ableism, and the immigrant experience. These experimental forms are grounded in a larger poetic tradition that alters traditional forms, such as the sonnet, to disrupt and further dialogue related to oppressive tactics in American poetry. They also signal an intentional departure from strict forms associated with colonialism and mark a shift in contemporary American poetry. For educators, including nontraditional and experimental form poems in the curriculum encourages students to engage poetry as a living genre. It also invites conversation about the implications of gatekeeping in both the publishing and education industries. The co-opting and evolution of form is not just a rebellion against classic American poetry but an opportunity for students of color to engage with the literary canon on their own terms.

Keywords: Poetry, Counternarrative, #DisruptTexts, Decolonize, Technology, Sonnet, Cyborg, Pedagogy

The use of nontraditional forms, such as matrices and crosswords, is increasingly common in contemporary poetry concerned with identity. Poets like Fatimah Asghar, Franny Choi, and Ilya Kaminsky all challenge traditional notions of what a poem is, using graphics and co-opting familiar text objects to challenge larger assumptions about gender identity, ableism, and the immigrant experience. These experimental forms are grounded in a larger poetic tradition that alters traditional forms, such as the sonnet, to disrupt and further dialogue related to oppressive tactics in American poetry. By disrupting the visual experience for readers, contemporary authors are disrupting traditional perceptions of poetry as elitist and inaccessible, thus arguing in favor of a more inclusive and more diverse conception of American poetics. In many instances, these same authors juxtapose highly experimental forms with strict formal poetry, further asserting that their choice of format is guided not by a rejection of tradition but by a desire to expand and innovate the genre. I argue that these forms are particularly common in dissent poetry, defined here as poetry that seeks to critique the sociopolitical climate in 21st century America, and that authors who employ these forms often use their writing to argue in favor of more expansive conceptions of gender, race, and the human experience.

Form has long been linked to poetry and, in many instances, used to identify poetry as distinct from other writing genres. In Western literature, Greek tragedy makes use of strict meter and rhyme scheme as early as the 8th Century BCE. Additionally, the form established by Greek epics appears in Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and British epics, as well as American poet Barlow's *The Columbiad*. Shakespeare is known as much for his use of the sonnet as he is for his plays. Italian poets, however, popularized the form ahead of Shakespeare's career and several notable poets developed alternate forms of the sonnet during the Renaissance and Romantic periods. Twentieth-century poets showed increasing devotion to odes, sestinas, and villanelles, as well. Over the past two decades, poets have also utilized mirror poems and pantoums more frequently. But poets have also resisted form, especially since the middle of the 20th century. Blank verse offered poets a way to break away from the sonnet without abandoning iambic pentameter, while free verse gave poets license to write outside any form at all. Though free verse remains the most common choice among 21st-century poets, several poets are now using strict forms not readily associated with poetry to change the way readers think about and experience poetry. These poets often make use of these forms specifically to challenge traditional thinking and construct counternarratives.

Educators are in the unique position to usher these nontraditional forms into the classroom, situating living poets alongside the strict formalists of the canon to highlight the fluidity of poetry as a genre. Students experience poems written by authors who are still alive and creating, a necessary endeavor in its own right. They would also deepen their understanding of form through the analysis of poems which alter or reject those forms. Non-examples are consistently utilized to teach concepts across numerous disciplines, engaging students in an investigation of various pitfalls on their way to mastering the parameters of a given concept. Nontraditional forms of poetry function as non-examples, inviting discussion first about where the form has been altered and then about what the effect(s) of disrupting the form is in understanding the poem as a whole. Many 21st-century poets engage the sonnet form, for example, providing dozens of excellent nonexamples to teach alongside the iconic Shakespearen and Petrarchan staples in most textbooks.

ADAPTATION AND INVENTION OF FORM AS COUNTERNARRATIVE

Form is synonymous with poetry, insofar as most educators and literature students associate form the classical origins of poetry. Meter, for example, is almost exclusively taught as a poetic device, despite the fact that meter appears across all genres. Many educators like introduce argument by outlining traditional essay structures, whether or not they refer to them as form. Lessons on plot almost always include a graphic representation of story development and tension, but rarely ascribe form directly to narrative. Like poetry,

classic prose often relies on a fairly rigid formula. Contemporary authors push against these forms as an act of resistance, co-opting tradition and taking ownership through variations on form. For educators, pairing traditional sonnets with contemporary adaptations offers an opportunity to discuss not just the evolution of poetry, but also how non-white authors are making space for themselves in the American literary community by revising the parameters for inclusion.

Danez Smith, speaking of a sonnet sequence titled "crown," says, "Sonnets are maybe my favorite form. I write so many 'loose' sonnets. Loose in the sense that I don't follow every rule each time, cause where's the fun in that?" (Smith "Interview") Smith includes eight sonnets in the sequence, and the purist will immediately note that many of the lines do not adhere strictly to pentameter, or even a discernible rhyme scheme. Still, each 14-line section mirrors the sonnet in many ways, from the use of the iambic to the function of the volta. Smith believes that "form...has this way of allowing for delight even when writing about something traumatic and tender," which readers can see in "crown." Though sonnets are associated with love and romanticism, Smith uses the form to write about the HIV-positive lover who transmitted the disease to Smith. Readers might expect a poem that rages, or languishes, but instead, Smith presents a tender, almost magical tryst with images of "[breaking] apart like glitter." Though "crown" closely resembles the sonnet, Natalie Diaz pushes further in her own version of the sequence, "My American Crown." Readers encounter a series of diagrams that resemble a public transit route rather than a poem, with lines intersecting and branching off at various angles. Diaz situates words along the lines, but they do not follow a linear pattern. Readers must give meaning to the collection of words, structuring and ordering phrases to give them meaning.

Readers may wonder just what the juxtaposition of lines and words means, as it clearly does not resemble the sonnet in any traditional sense. Grammarians and seasoned educators may immediately recognize the use of sentence diagramming, but today's students are likely unfamiliar with this method. Diaz explains that "[t]he sonnet, and especially the sonnet crown are visual to [her]" (Diaz, "Sonnet Crown Feature"). She describes the sonnet as a box, and her interpretation of the sonnet as a box that has been opened. The sonnets in "My American Crown" are, visually, "contained spaces that are also fractured moments." Diaz clearly articulates her deviation from the traditional crown, showing a deep understanding of the form and thoughtful intentionality behind her own choices. She leans into the word "savage," for example, rather than repeating a full line from sonnet to sonnet. By framing each sonnet as a sentence diagram, Diaz co-opts a once familiar and dreaded form of rhetorical analysis. Today's students and readers are forced to make meaning of seemingly disparate sets of words, not unlike the ways in which colonized peoples have been forced to enter English from a distance and make meaning of the colonizer's

Both Smith and Diaz speak to operating within form and using slight variations in form to present counternarratives, Smith in discussing a love affair with a man and Diaz in addressing prejudice against Native Americans. These authors clearly understand form and display an ability to adhere strictly to the rules of sonnet, yet the small deviations from form echo their deviations in thought. Some poets choose to adhere even more strictly to form, using "all the trappings of the oppressor" while presenting strong opposition to traditional narratives (Jones). Ashley M. Jones' "Slurret" is a perfect sonnet by formal standards, yet the content is "comprised mostly of slurs used against Black people...a retaliation against the literary canon, and the traditional sonnet form." Critics must contend with the fact that Jones has mastered the form and reimagined it as a space in which to challenge white supremacy, notable considering that the sonnet is associated almost entirely with Anglo-European literary traditions. Franny Choi, too, exemplifies her ability to navigate the sonnet in "We Used Our Words We Used What Words We Had," which uses the form to discuss the varied ways that a collective "we" attempted to use language. The poem closes with an expression of frustration, "meanwhile tide still tide./& we: still washed for sounds to mark. & marked." This close suggests that, despite their best efforts, the "we" in the poem has failed to accomplish anything with the language they have employed.

The duplex, a form introduced by Jericho Brown in his Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *The Tradition*, is another contemporary response to the traditional sonnet. Candace Williams describes the duplex as a form which "renders the musicality and structure of the ghazal, the sonnet, and the blues on a single plane" ("Gutting the Sonnet"). It does this in several ways: first, the form uses a couplet structure; second, the original duplex is fourteen lines total; third, the form uses repetition of the second line in each couplet, alluding to aspects of the ghazal and retaining a discernible rhyme scheme similar to the sonnet. Though the form does not require that the poem be limited to fourteen lines, both the couplet and use of repetition are mainstays. During an interview with Candace Williams, Brown described his thought process in developing the form:

> I feel completely in love with and oppressed by the sonnet. You know, because I'm a poet. I can conjecture about my obsession with the sonnet. I mean, I'm educated in the sonnet. It's been pushed down my throat the entirety of my life. There is something in me that doesn't like that, and doesn't trust that, because I'm a rebellious human being. I need to be a rebellious human being because I'm black and gay in this nation and in this world which has not been good to me or anybody like me. ("Gutting the Sonnet")

It is clear from Brown's reflection that the duplex is an intentional departure from a form almost entirely associated with whiteness. His hope, as he explains in the interview, is that educators use forms like the duplex to illustrate the importance of creating an individual poetics, one that is ever-changing and influenced by the books they choose ("Gutting the Sonnet"). Brown understands the influence that his success offers, and he has deliberately engaged with traditional poetic form as a means of pushing against the idea that poetry is static, or that it can exist only in proximity of whiteness.

Terrance Hayes pushes the genre even further with his invention of the golden shovel, a form that directly engages existing poetry to create new meaning. Hayes initially conceived of the form when writing a poem in conversation with Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool." Don Share explains the form such that "the last words of each line in a Golden Shovel poem are, in order, words from a line or lines taken often, but not invariably, from a Brooks poem" ("Introduction: The Golden Shovel"). Share further notes that the goal of a golden shovel poem is to "[add] something even where it subtracts; the sum isn't necessarily greater than the parts, but in keeping with the spirit of paying tribute, it is more than equal to them." Hayes' poem, aptly titled "Golden Shovel," is split into two sections; the first is a memory in which the speaker and his father meet a boy on the road, while the second invokes images of Black generational trauma and displacement. In the first section, the speaker explains "how sometimes a tune is born of outrage," then casually remarks that the boy they've met will end up in prison later that year. The second section opens with a collection "we" entering a tented city with fire at their backs, then moves into a long reflection about the grief and struggle into which the speaker and their companions are born. Both sections end with a word from Brooks' "We Real Cool," a brief and well-known poem that also addresses generational trauma and death as inherently tied to Blackness. The golden shovel invites engagement with classic poetry and encourages authors to think deeply about the poem with which they write in conversation. Additionally, "We Real Cool" is oft anthologized and included in classrooms. Hayes' form invites conversation in the classroom about how authors use form to both celebrate those who come before and extend the messages embedded in the poems that speak to them. It also offers educators an opportunity to help students ground themselves inside the literary tradition, not by emulating forms popularized by Europeans centuries ago but by directly engaging the poems that speak to them on a personal level.

TECHNOLOGY AS POETIC FORM

When Alan Turing asked in 1950 if machines could think, it was an honest question. Though Turing was aware of his homosexuality from adolescence, and at least somewhat forthcoming about his sexual proclivities with fiancé Joan Clarke, he was, to the general public, not yet grotesque, not yet grossly indecent. He was human. And in a handful of years, he was erased. Poisoned. He had emerged from chemical castration a different man; softer, breasts forming even as his mind drifted, a listless fog over brilliant machination. He was a man. And then he wasn't. He existed post-gender, transcended the heteronormative binary, surrendered autonomy for the sake of State (Valiunas). He became Donna Haraway's cyborg, "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction," not quite human and yet not devoid of humanity (149). It seems a fitting origin story for Korean American poet Franny Choi's exploration of humanness in the "Turing test" poems that pepper her second full-length collection, *Soft Science*. Choi aligns her collection adjacent to both Turing and Haraway in "A Brief History of Cyborgs," where she writes that

Once, a scientist in Britain asked *Can machines think?* He built a machine, taught it to read ghosts, and a new kind of ghost was born… Here, in a seed, is a cyborg: A bleeding girl, dragging a knife through the sand. An imaginary girl who dreams of becoming trash. Choi describes her use of the cyborg as a thought experiment for investigating aspects of her own identity, namely her gender identity and her Korean American identity. According to Choi, the appeal of the cyborg is that it is dualistic, both human and machine, making it an ideal metaphor for exploring nonbinary gender and multicultural ethnicity.

Choi acknowledges the legacy of cyborgs in each section, formatting poems which center cyborgs using programming code. Noticeably absent from these poems are coding symbols for "stop," which simultaneously forces us to consider the cyborg as complicit in its own trauma and echoes the lack of an origin story described by Haraway. Fittingly, Choi's use of the cyborg to explore feminist issues reflects the function of "the cyborg [as] a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience" (Haraway 149). She has chosen an apt metaphor to carry her critique of patriarchy and misogyny, one that neatly bridges lived experiences with a technological mythos specifically designed to further contemporary feminist thought. Choi converts the book itself into a piece of technology through her formatting, further challenging the traditional conception of poetry as static and/or dead. *Soft Science* functions as a direct response to literary criticism that dismisses post-modernist poetry for its rejection of elitist language and rigid forms. Choi rebuts with a futuristic approach to language, co-opting decades-old forms from computer science to argue that poetry is not only alive but perfectly capable of metamorphosis. This rejection of formalist poetry perfectly mirrors the content of the poems, which continually challenge traditional understandings of gender, race, and personhood. Further, by incorporating programing language throughout the collection, Choi places the reader at the keyboard, implying that each of us is an active participant in our own indoctrination, and that each of us chooses either to perpetuate the issues that the poems address or to rewrite the code ourselves.

She organizes *Soft Science* through a set of poems that reference the Turing test in their respective titles. These poems serve as section breaks, each one setting up a particular inquiry related to the humanity of the speaker in the poems. The poems follow a structure similar to computer code, challenging preconceptions of poetic structure and situating the reader as the scientist meant to determine the humanity of the speaker. "Those slashes are a technology I learned from sam sax and Jan Beatty…I liked the way they chunked sentences into pieces…made the language something I could gather and manipulate rather than asking it to bear the burden of coherence" (Choi). This technology effectively forces readers to confront their complicity in the objectification of the speaker and, by proxy, the dehumanization of those the speaker represents. In "Turing Test," the speaker is asked if they understand the questions, where they come from, and how old they are. All of these questions relate to Othering, the process by which the public identifies non-whiteness as synonymous with outsider. "Turing Test_Empathetic Response" centers emotional complexity, ending with the question,

"do you believe you have consciousness;" to which the speaker responds, "sometimes / when the sidewalk / opens my knee / i think please / please let me / remember this." These lines simultaneously complicate our understanding of cyborgs by linking emotional capacity to consciousness, though the computer implies that a correlation is not absolute. The speaker directly relates pain to consciousness, associating the physical destruction of the body and the introduction of blood with cognition. "Turing Test_Boundaries" confronts the hypersexualization of the Other as the questions fixate on pleasure and consent. The question "does this feel good" is left unanswered, while the response to "can i keep going" apologizes for the delay. Unlike the first two poems, wherein the responses appear to be from a human speaker, the detachment implicit in the close of "Turing Test_Boundaries" suggests a speaker unconcerned with being physically touched, a traditional ideation of the cyborg as sex slave. These lines help contextualize a section of the book in which Choi grapples with the inevitability of sexual trauma and the desire to numb oneself to it as a means of survival.

CO-OPTING NONTRADITIONAL FORMS

The use of nontraditional forms, such as the computer code in Choi's collection, is gaining steam among 21st-century poets. Readers are more and more likely to see poems structured as film scripts, word searches, matrices, and crosswords, especially if they are experiencing poems outside traditional literary journals. Fatimah Asghar, in *If They Comes for Us*, routinely co-opts nontraditional forms to offer counternarratives that address the immigrant experience and non-traditional family dynamics. "*How We Left:* Film Treatment," tracks the speaker's departure from the Pakistan-India region, British partition, and being orphaned through the use of a traditional film treatment. Asghar, an Emmy-winning writer, may be familiar with the form, but it is unfamiliar to many readers of poetry. The form allows Asghar space to write about deeply traumatic moments in small, contained spaces. Like Diaz and Smith, she leans into the fractalism of the film treatment to present a narrative that is, itself, incomplete. Against the backdrop of discussions around systemic racism and representation in Hollywood, co-opting the film treatment also grounds the speaker's experience as a counternarrative, challenging traditional treatments of the immigrant in film.

Asghar utilizes a sort of metric in "From" to address the question, "Where are you from" and the sentiments that often accompany the question. Formatted as a table, the top row is a header that sorts the poem into three categories: What They Say, How They Say It, and What They Actually Mean. Again, the form is not unfamiliar to most readers, but it is not regularly employed in poetry. Asghar makes expert use of the small space to address incredibly complex and nuanced prejudices across the cultural identities she inhabits. "Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan" combines Asghar's earlier connection to film with the blueprint for a home (Fig. 1).

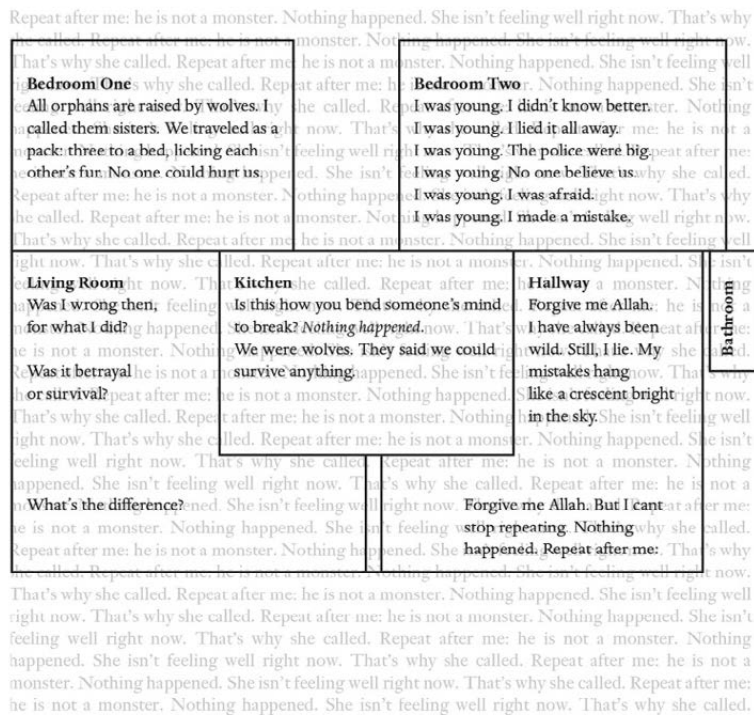**Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan**

Fig. 1 Script for Child Services - Asghar (Reprinted with Permission of the Author)

The image presented on the page is remarkably complex: the underlying script is faded and repeats on loop as a background, while the rooms of the home are outlined in bold black lines. Inside each room is a stanza of the poem. Here, the structure mirrors the home, while the content addresses the conflict between what occurs and what is presented to the outside world. Again, Asghar forces the reader to grapple with trauma and acknowledge the complexities of reporting abuse to child services by destabilizing their sense of normalcy. Readers may be primed to enter a traditional poem and discover hidden abuse, but few will have associated the blueprint with abuse. Readers must confront their perception of the word home and the ways in which a home does not always mirror their respective experiences.

Throughout the collection, Asghar titles numerous poems "Partition," effectively creating a narrative that spans the book as a whole. One such poem is written as a mad lib, inviting readers to fully engage with the poem by filling in the blanks. Asghar crafts the poem with nuance and intention, creating a piece that will inevitably read like nationalist propaganda regardless of the choices readers make in completing the mad lib. By co-opting this particular form, the poet requires the reader to become participatory in said propaganda, thereby shifting perspective and inviting readers to consider how they are complicit in the propaganda around them. "Microaggression Bingo" is, as one might guess, a Bingo card (Fig. 2).

Microaggression Bingo

White girl wearing a bindi at music festival	Friend defends drone strikes to play "devil's advocate"	Teacher still calls you "Fat-ma" on the last day of class	"But you are lucky you have something exotic to write about!"	Everyone turns to you as an expert on yoga even though you can't touch your toes
Strangers calls you a sexy samosa at the bus stop & still expects you to give them your number	"I went to India once, to find myself."	Casting call to audition for Terrorist #7	All the actors in a movie about Egypt are white	"Oh, But you don't really seem Muslim."
"You're from Kashmir? I have a <rug/ sweater/ scarf> from there!"	Someone misspells both your first and last name in an email	**Don't Leave Your House For a Day-Safe**	"Oh but I read a book by Jhumpa Lahiri once so I know all South Asians <insert stereotype>."	"I'm working on a story about Muslims but I'm not Muslim. Could you read it and tell me what you think? I'll take you out to coffee!"
Casting call to audition for Battered Hijabi Women #42	Editor recommends you add more white people to your story to be more relatable	"But America is so much safer for women."	"So what's Muslim food taste like?"	Get called a FOB and told you smell like curry
"You're from the same place that M.I.A is from, right?"	"I love hanging out with your family, it feels always feels so *authentic*!"	"Oh did your parents make you wear a Hijab?"	The villains are wearing headscarves in yet another fantasy series	In the 5th week of class on Bollywood a student still refers to South Asia as the Middle East

Fig. 2 Microaggression bingo - Asghar (Reprinted with Permission of the Author)

Asghar uses the form to highlight the frequency with which specific microaggressions occur in one's daily life. This form serves to engage the reader in a conversation about how deeply traumatizing daily life can be for certain identities. "Map Home" utilizes the crossword format, with clues serving as stanzas. The reader is left to pry at the clues, all of which are personal and abstract, to complete the puzzle. Like the speaker in the poem itself, readers come away confused and without answers. Clearly, Asghar is deliberately investigating form and the function that specific forms play in daily life. She disrupts the reader by juxtaposing traditional verse with word structures that, like the speaker in so many of the poems, feel at once familiar and remarkably out-of-place.

POETRY AS POLITICAL THEATER

Narrative has a long history in poetry, and authors have adopted countless forms to frame their respective tales over the centuries. Though epics are perhaps one of the oldest literary traditions, novels in verse are a relatively new form that is, more often than not, relegated to young adult fiction by American publishers. Though most readers would draw a distinction between drama and poetry, Greek tragedy adhered to strict

rules of form, and Shakespeare infused all of his plays with poetic elements from meter and rhyme scheme to sound device. Even T.S. Eliot is known to have written entire plays in verse. One could identify hundreds of plays that lean lyrical; more rare, though, are poetry collections which emulate drama. This is precisely how Ilya Kaminsky structures his second collection, *Deaf Republic*, a series of poems which tell the story of a fictional town occupied by foreign soldiers. Kaminsky draws on key elements of drama, such as the *dramatis personae* and the use of separate acts to contain parts of the narrative. Drawing on these elements to structure the collection, Kaminsky successfully communicates the theatrical nature of the American political climate under Donald Trump. *Deaf Republic* takes place in a fictional town and incorporates images of Kaminsky's native Ukraine; however, the author seems to actively invite a comparison to the contemporary American climate by framing the collection with poems that feature images of protest and civil rights violations similar to those associated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and police brutality.

The first poem in the collection, "We Lived Happily During the War," immediately situates the reader as a participant in the atrocities that follow. The collective "we" in the poem acknowledges that, while they opposed numerous acts of violence perpetrated by the state, their activism was limited and they ultimately became complacent in their resistance. Because this poem appears prior to the *dramatis personae*, it functions as a prologue to the play, contextualizing the reader's experience with the story that follows. Similarly, the final poem in the collection, "A Time of Peace," is placed outside the play, establishing it as an epilogue. By framing the dramatic narrative with poems that clearly allude to current events in America, Kaminsky suggests that the fictional town is not so different from American society. He further charges the readers, and himself, as observers willfully disengaging to preserve their individual comforts and privileges. This poem shifts from the collective "we" to the singular "I," evidence that the speaker in the poem has been affected by the play. While the first poem in the collection essentially shares responsibility with others, thereby allowing some level of distance and displacement of guilt, the last poem in the collection firmly acknowledges individual responsibility. The speakers in both poems ask forgiveness, but again readers will notice a clear evolution in thinking. The speaker in the first poem asks to be forgiven for living "happily during the war," while the speaker in the last poem pleads forgiveness for appreciating "how bright the sky [is]." Witnessing the occupation of the town, and their resistance, has shifted values away from living comfortably and toward noticing beautiful things even at the most traumatic of times.

Kaminsky further highlights political theater by having the townspeople resist occupation by feigning deafness and communicating through sign language. Prior to publishing *Deaf* Republic, Kaminsky partnered with *The New Yorker* to create a digital suite which includes poems from the manuscript alongside animated graphics that mirrored the signs used by townfolk throughout the poems. Kevin Young, introducing the suite of poems included in *The New Yorker*, notes that "Deafness, here, is an insurgency, a state of being, a rebellion against a world that sees deafness as 'a contagious disease.'" This digital suite imbues the townspeople with life and agency, granting them the ability to communicate directly with readers via the animated signs. Combining poetry with animation challenges traditional perceptions of poetry as static, strengthening Kaminsky's commentary on political theater and reimagining poetry as an interactive experience with readers. Ultimately, Kaminsky incorporates some of these gestures into the collection as images placed alongside the text (Fig. 3).
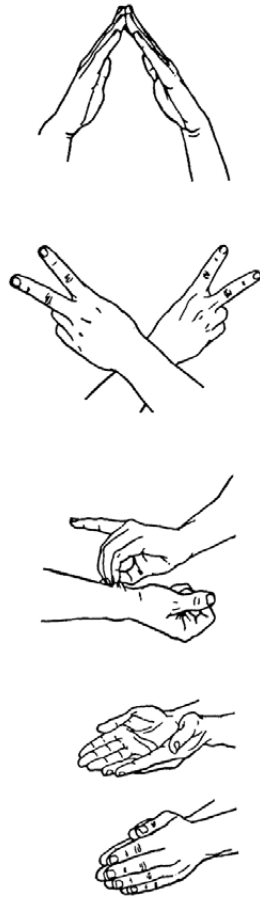
Fig. 3 Images along the text (Reprinted with Permission of the Author)

Kaminsky draws from his own experiences as someone hard of hearing to offer a layered and nuanced counternarrative that critiques both militarized police forces and common depictions of deafness in Western culture. Though deafness is often presented as a weakness, the townspeople in *Deaf Republic* are empowered by their decision to adopt sign and effectively mute the occupying force. If sound is synonymous with agency, they have reclaimed that agency by refusing to hear the soldiers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Numerous movements that speak to the need for reinventing the canon and increasing representation in the texts we teach have cropped up on social media over the past few years. Among the most notable and widely discussed are #DisruptTexts and #TeachLivingPoets. While the former is specifically geared toward upending the American literary canon, the latter primarily seeks to imbue syllabi with contemporaneous poetry of any sort. The founders of #DisruptTexts state that the movement is a "grass roots effort *by* teachers *for* teachers to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable

language arts curriculum that our students deserve." The founder of #TeachLivingPoets communicates similar sentiments in their seven core values, including a desire to "complicate the canon" and "provide students with poetry that reflects their identities." Both of these movements represent a widespread desire to decolonize the canon, and both have identified educators as those most able to quickly and thoroughly subvert the white supremacy perpetuated in the American literary canon. They recognize that the publishing industry, and the textbook industry especially, is too entrenched in the traditional canon to effect any significant change in the short term. Thus, educators must supplement required texts with options that expressly work against the themes and structures of the so-called "classics."

Further, most educators who teach literature will likely note a collective sigh of discontent when students hear that they will be analyzing poetry. This genre, more than any other in my experience, simultaneously terrifies and anesthetizes students specifically because so many students have been convinced, through bad teaching and a poor selection of "classic" poems, that they are incapable of understanding poetry. It becomes a fool's errand, so to speak, when students encounter again and again the poems of Shakespeare, Donne, Eliot, and even Frost. Though the parameters for formal poetry in the canon are static and rigid, they are about as accessible as the rules for proofs in mathematics or the Newtonian laws are for our students. This is because, like mathematical and scientific concepts, the forms in question were theorized and perfected generations ago.

Contemporary pedagogical theory may have its fair share of contentious debate, but most educators have internalized "rigor and relevance" as buzzwords that have permanently entered the conversation. Educators are increasingly tasked with teaching the standards through rigorous coursework that actively engages students with real-world, applicable examples. It may feel impossible to engage students in a deep analysis of a sonnet or villanelle, but introducing nontraditional poetic forms crafted by contemporary poets serves as an opportunity to do just that. Most poets actively and successfully co-opting text structures and/or writing in slight variations of traditional forms are living poets, making their work more relevant to students. These poets are also frequently not cisgendered heterosexual white males, which disrupts canonized texts and offers students an opportunity to experience perspectives outside the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) view of the world. Finally, pairing nontraditional forms with formal classics and asking students to speak to the differences between them requires higher level thinking, thus increasing rigor in the classroom. Students are also more likely to engage with texts that they do not recognize as poetry, and may even be more willing to attempt crafting poems that emulate these nontraditional forms than they are to attempt a traditional sonnet.

For too long, poetry has been governed by parameters established and upheld by critics and editors who prioritize one experience over all others. There is a clear and immediate need to reconsider definitions of poetry, to engage critically with the text structures and deviations of form in 21st-century American poetry, not just to better understand these deviations but to address the underlying presumption that the WASP aesthetic is superior to other approaches to the genre. Publishing is undergoing tremendous change, yet poetry remains relegated almost entirely to small presses. Critics devalue, if not outright ignore, many collections published by independent presses, and editors at larger publishing houses view poetry as a poor financial investment. While this gatekeeping does affect the exposure that new collections receive, it also empowers authors to experiment with form more readily than they might with mainstream publishers. All the titles cited herein, for instance, appear on presses or imprints that explicitly state a desire to disrupt traditional publishing and diversify American literature in their respective mission statements. Additionally, the influx of online literary journals allows authors even more space to play with and challenge traditional conceptions of poetry which, in turn, inspires still more poets to experiment. American poetry is long due for innovation, and it seems readers are primed to embrace collections that think far outside the box, that refuse to play it safe.

WORKS CITED

Asghar, Fatimah. *If They Come for Us*. One World. 2018.

Brown, Jericho. *The Tradition*, Copper Canyon Press. 2019.

Choi, Franny. "How I Wrote 'Turing Test.'" *The Adroit Journal*., https://theadroitjournal.org/2019/05/08/franny-choi-how-i-wrote-turing-test/. Accessed 2 Dec. 2020.

Choi, Franny. Interview. *The Paris Review*. May 2019.

Choi, Franny. Interview. *Iowa Review*. Mar 2019.

Choi, Franny. *Soft Science*. Alice James Books. 2019.

Choi, Franny. "We Used Our Words We Used What Words We Had," *Poetry*. Dec. 2019.

Devarajan, Kumari and Karen Grigsby Bates. "A Bouquet of Poets for National Poetry Month," *Code Sw!tch*. Apr. 2019.

Diaz, Natalie. "My American Crown." *IthacaLit*. summer 2018.

Diaz, Natalie. "Sonnet Crown Feature." *IthacaLit*. summer 2018. https://ithacalitarchives.com/sonnet-crowns.html. Accessed 7 Sept 2021.

#DisruptTexts, https://disrupttexts.org/.

Haraway, Donna. "Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*.Routledge, 1991, pp. 149-181.

Hayes, Terrance. "The Golden Shovel," *Poetry Foundation*, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55678/the-golden-shovel. Accessed 12 May 2021.

Jones, Ashley B. "Slurret." *NPR*, https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/04/28/700903340/a-bouquet-of-poets-for-national-poetry-month. Accessed 12 May 2021.

Kaminsky, Ilya. *Deaf Republic*. Graywolf Press. 2020.

Kaminsky, Ilya. "from *Deaf Republic*," *The New Yorker*. Feb. 2019.

Share, Don. "Introduction: The Golden Shovel," *Poetry Foundation*, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/92023/introduction-586e948ad9af8. Accessed 12 May 2021.

Smith, Danez. "crown," *Granta*. vol. 140. Aug. 2017.

Smith, Danez. Interview. *Literary Hub*. Sept. 2017.

#TeachLivingPoets, https://teachlivingpoets.com/.

Valiunas, Algis. "Turing and the Uncomputable." *The New Atlantis*, no. 61, 2020, pp. 44–75. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26898500. Accessed 11 May 2021.

Williams, Candace. "Gutting the Sonnet: A Conversation with Jericho Brown," *The Rumpus*, 21 Apr. 2019.

AUTHOR BIO

Ronnie K. Stephens is a proud father of six and college English instructor. He is the author of two poetry collections and one young adult novel. His second collection, They Rewrote Themselves Legendary, won Best in Show at the New England Book Show. Stephens writes a monthly column on the intersection of poetry and pedagogy for *The Poetry Question*. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Classical Studies, a Master of Arts in Creative Writing, and a Master of Fine Arts in Fiction. Currently, he is pursuing a PhD in English with an emphasis in diversifying the literary canon for the 21st century classroom.

SUGGESTED REFERENCES

APA

Stephens, R. (2021). Experimental forms and identity politics in 21st century American poetry. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, *8*(2). (link will be added by editors).

MLA

Stephens, Ronnie. "Experimental Forms and Identity Politics in 21st Century American Poetry". *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2021. (link will be added by editors).