

## The Poetry of the Future

BY VIRGINIA JACKSON AND MEREDITH MARTIN | JANUARY 29, 2021

On January 20, 2021, American poetry in public came back in style. We do not mean that poetry came back into fashion. We mean that its return was stylish, personified as it was by the young poet Amanda Gorman, wearing a bright yellow Prada coat that nobody can stop talking about. Gorman gave a performance of “The Hill We Climb,” the poem she composed for the occasion, and her performance rivaled those of Lady Gaga and Jennifer Lopez. More poetry performances by Amanda Gorman were circulated in the days after the Inauguration than were news and images of the former president—or even of the current one. This is good news for poetry. It is also surprising in a country in which poetry doesn’t get much attention, especially not poetry spoken out loud — in person, in public. As two scholars of poetics who have thought a lot about how and when and where poetry goes public, we began to wonder why Gorman’s performance struck such a chord.



IMAGE OF GORMAN'S COAT AND HANDS: ALEX WONG/GHETTY

We love the women’s culture aspect of this poetic event, and it matters for how the poetry happened. Gorman’s performance was a part of how the inauguration of another (much better than the last) White man was supported (as usual) by a network of women with an eye for fabrics and accessories with political significance. Some details: Oprah bought Gorman a ring symbolizing Maya Angelou’s singing caged bird, as she had bought Angelou’s coat and gloves for Clinton’s inaugural; J.Lo wore the suffragist white worn in the past by Shirley Chisholm and Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris; Harris wore purple for Chisholm, and so both Gorman and Harris invoked the suffragist associations of both yellow and purple; Gorman’s red headband turned her ensemble into a rhyme for Chisolm’s red and yellow campaign buttons, to which Harris’s campaign buttons also alluded. All of this styling served to frame Gorman as she emerged as a new representative of a very old set of genres more often honored in the breach than in the observance: the heretofore minor or obsolete genres of poetry as public speech. It is these genres that Gorman brought back into style —or really, that her performance remixed into a new genre.

### 1: The History of the Future of Poetry

Once upon a time, those genres included ballads, odes, elegies, poems for affairs of state, marching songs, anthems, and hymns. We don't tend to trust those communal genres anymore, since poetry scholars will also tell you that American verse has long wanted to breathe free of such traditional constraints. And yet Gorman's poem managed to do what those genres did without obeying their generic protocols. She adhered to the loose rules for an inauguration poem (talk about America, promise redemption, reiterate the word "we"), but her poem hewed closer to longstanding genres of public oratory than it did to earlier kinds of public poetry. Her performance thus successfully evoked the *idea* of a communal poetry without being any particular genre of communal poetry. This is the idea that made it seem, on social media at least, as if Americans listen to poetry all the time; the idea that made Gorman's audience feel like an imagined community of listeners, equally united in and by her address. And there is indeed something imaginary about that feeling of community and communal appeal: the truth is that when we are not celebrating occasions like this historic collective deep-breath-out presidential inauguration, we don't usually do poetry together in public in this country, especially *as a country*.

We were going to say that only a few times in each decade does a poem have a chance to hail "we the people" as not only an old idea but also as a future possibility. Actually, only six times in American history has such a poem been part of the inaugural ceremony: for the inauguration of John F. Kennedy in 1961, of Bill Clinton in 1993 and 1997, of Barack Obama in 2009 and 2013, and now of Joe Biden in 2021. What seems like an old custom turns out to be not quite so old or quite so customary. Even more remarkably, three of those six poets have been Black women: Maya Angelou, Elizabeth Alexander, and now, Amanda Gorman. We'll come back to that. First, let's pause to consider this remarkable occasion and Amanda Gorman's star turn in rising to it.



Perhaps her rise felt so right because the poetry of the future is itself such an old idea. "The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future," Karl Marx wrote in 1852. Or Walt Whitman in 1881: "The poetry of the future aims at the free expression of emotion, (which means far, far more than appears at first,) and to arouse and initiate, rather than to define or finish."

What does poetry mean to Marx and to Whitman, and why should that matter to us? Because for them, "poetry" might just make something happen, whereas today a poem is much more likely to be understood as a private way to think through and process what is already happening. If you are one of those people who does read poems, you probably do so alone and silently, unless you are listening to the poet in an audience, but even if you attend slams or poetry performance events (or did in the days when we left our houses), you probably have not had the experience of being part of the multi-mediated synchronic audience that Gorman had just after Joe Biden became the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Within the hour that he became our representative, she, too, became our representative: her

performance demanded that she interpellate us as what her poetry of the future aimed to arouse and initiate. “While we have our eyes on the future/ history has its eyes on us,” Gorman, citing Lin Manuel Miranda, proclaimed.

The title of the poem itself is an allusion to a very early moment in proto-American history, the moment in 1630 when John Winthrop called the not-yet-realized New England (the poem’s “windswept northeast”) of British immigrants’ shipboard dreams “a city on a hill.” This scriptural phrase was later appropriated by Presidents Kennedy and Reagan for the modern nation. Now 22, this slight woman reclaimed that phrase — and promised that the social revolution of the twenty-first century might just be something we were watching her perform in person.

Does that performance make poetry something very old or very new? What are — or were, or could be — poetry’s public occasions? Was this performance the beginning of something or was it an anachronism, a moment that charmed because it was so out of step with the actual history (not to mention the actual poetry) of the present? And here’s the real question: in what way is a young Black woman the perfect representative of such a poetry? If much of the poem (the lines from “Hamilton,” the lines from Whitman, the lines from scripture) sounded familiar, sounded, and rightly so, generic, it was actually a genre of poetry that has not yet existed. Gorman summoned a communal fantasy of a public poetry that is more familiar in fiction than in fact — as the idea of a Black woman as our representative has, until this very moment, always been.



## 2: Poetry and its Publics

It is important that Amanda Gorman was the inaugural Youth Poet Laureate (a position established in 2017). A seasoned performer of poems in front of audiences, she draws from several performance traditions. Her cadences were recognized by many listeners as deeply inflected by the spoken-word tradition, though the analogy is imperfect, since, as the poet Danez Smith pointed out, usually spoken-word poets “are talking *back* to the state, not speaking *for* the state.” Others compared her style to Manuel Miranda’s lyrics. Gorman also performs her poetry as an orator in a rather old-fashioned sense, though with new media in mind. It is safe to say that Gorman’s poetry is designed for performance in front of large mass-mediated audiences, and is therefore a poetry categorically unlike the kind of poetry that usually comes to mind when scholars of poetics like us are presented with the age-old (and frankly boring) questions, “What is poetry?” or “What is a poem?”

And in some ways, that is the point. Gorman's performance is poetry, but it also bears comparison to the 2016 Women's March and the 2020 BLM protests — it's hybrid, pastiche; a patchwork, made of something borrowed and something blue; a response that engaged the many dissonances of the past year (and of course, of many years before). Her poem did not make sense of the occasion or the history that led up to it; instead, it emphasized the incoherence of "the past we step into," while asking us to imagine "how we repair it." Gorman's career has been shaped by her participation in a program that joins poetry to social justice for youth across the country. This is poetry made out of *dwelling* in the history of the present, not poetry that tries to aesthetically resolve it.

This is all to say that, the more we thought about it, the more we saw that Gorman's poetry represents *exactly* what a lot of poetry is now: Instagram poetry, TikTok poetry, poetry shouted at protests, poetry as social media and social fabric, poetry intended to be read aloud, poetry that is about refusing to read (or speak) silently. In this way, Gorman's poetry rejects the concerns of another (White male) nineteenth-century thinker about the ideal poetry of the future: John Stuart Mill. Mill famously and influentially wrote almost two hundred years ago that "eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*," that "eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude." The eloquence Mill dismisses is what Gorman's poetry is all about.



We mention Mill because his view has, unfortunately, become the view of the default-White poetic legacy Gorman seeks to revise, and because his concerns help illuminate what Gorman actually did. Mill sought to define poetry against eloquence in 1833, as mass print exploded and poetry was published in newspapers, broadsides, chapbooks, fancy volumes, political tracts, and ladies' magazines. Like Marx and Whitman (though Whitman had much more tolerance for the messiness of print), Mill wanted to imagine a poetry that could remain unscathed by its conditions of production and reception, since, as Andrew Parker has brilliantly written, these Romantics all seem to have had "an advanced case of genre trouble: what future can poetry have when its medium is its own corrosive?" Marx's answer was that when the conditions of production and reception were harmoniously aligned, that future would finally come into view; Whitman's answer was that the poet could be the one to produce that future by sheer force of will; Mill's answer was that each of us communing privately with poetry in our solitary cells could afford to let the future take care of itself.

What these various shades of White nineteenth-century idealism share is an anxiety that the public poetry can create are contingent on the media that address those publics. And that anxiety did not die out in the nineteenth century.

We would say that this worry also informs modern and postmodern poetics: think *The Waste Land's* fragments, the Confessional poets' printed stage whispers; think about the focus on media in Language and Conceptual poetics and think especially about the ongoing media experiments of Black poetics—for example, Douglas Kearney's use of the page as performance space or the collage of image and text in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, to which we shall return. But this long-standing problem doesn't trouble Gorman's performance poetics: there does not seem to be any residual trace of social antagonism in the seamless extension of her social media into the social fabric, or of the social fabric into her social media. Her poetry is all eloquence. And her eloquence is also all poetry.

The distinction between what is and what is not poetry, the very old worry about how poetry is and isn't supposed to circulate in the world, about how it does or might make social change happen is, in fact, a distraction from the real issues at stake. That's what Gorman made us see.

### 3: The Speaker / I'm Speaking

By distinguishing between poetry and eloquence, and by not-so-subtly dissing poetry that can be *heard*, Mill set up a strategy for co-opting anyone's actual voice by an imagined universal voice, thus establishing a tic of literary criticism, a way of talking about an anonymous person designated by a definite article. Mill's overheard poetry became an overheard "voice" and that "voice" required an abstract "speaker." "The speaker" may or may not be the poet, but students of poetry are regularly taught that this speaker should not be identified with the poet. Significantly, then, the speaker's "I" can become your (or my) "I," so that you (or I) can feel as if we are (individually and communally) the subject of the poem ("I celebrate myself, and sing myself," "I wandered lonely as a cloud," "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun"). But also, the "speaker" is understood to be co-constitutive of the "reader," since both are animated by the process of literary interpretation, or literary reading.

If this seems like a point made in the poetical weeds, it's worth following it there, since the political stakes of this way of reading poetry have been buried in those weeds for over two hundred years. By resisting poetry's politics, thinkers about poetry have rendered the poem as an utterance addressed to an intimate, invisible, implicitly White and male (because unmarked) listener. The reason that listener was imagined as invisible was because *visible* listeners tend to have their own affiliations, genders, races, anti-races, transgenders, and ideas. By reading for "the speaker," we forget to read for poetry's actually populous and visible audiences. "The speaker" is an abstraction with a definite article rather than a real person; it connotes a private exchange on which we are listening in; or, to put it another way, lyric reading ignores the eloquence of poetry—which is to say that lyric reading ignores how real poets are people actually talking to other people in a located space at a particular time.

Black poets have always had to invent alternatives to that phenomenology of invisible lyric pronominal appropriation, since, if "the speaker" does not "speak" to the imagined universal (that is, White) overhearer, then this mode of lyric reading does not work ("She came home running/ back to the mothering blackness"; "I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,/Part panic closet"). Many gorgeous lines have been born of alternatives to default-White lyric address, but it's worth noting that the readerly appropriation they entangle can only work in print: if "the speaker" is actually present, then, well, appropriating that presence is a different collective project altogether.

By showing up to deliver her poems in person, Gorman is both a speaker and a poet, an orator who uses her own voice. You cannot read her poem and say "the speaker" this or that. It is virtually impossible to detach "The Hill We Climb" from the person of Amanda Gorman, despite the fact that the poem is now readily available to be read by anyone, and despite the invocation of the first-person plural.

Or let us put this differently: we began this piece by comparing Gorman to the women with whom she appeared on the inaugural stage. Gorman was already a recognizable person and personality when she took the stage, and her public delivery of her poetry burned through the expectation that a listener would detach the poem from its occasion of its performance. It is because of what Joseph Roach might call the "secular magic" of her recognizable personhood that Gorman can so expertly blur the line between the often counter-posed traditions of poetry on the page and poetry on the (broadcast) stage. This is a blurring that Black artists have been practicing for a very long time.

We could see that blurring, too, in the moments after her performance, as media outlets scrambled to put a hastily published unlineated version online, and readers tried and failed to recreate the poem themselves, and then when it was published as lineated. Unlineated, Gorman's words look like paragraphs, like prose, and it is harder to recreate

the experience of hearing *her* voice (not to mention her use of her eyes and hands). Without the image of the lineated poem on the page, we might miss entirely all of the necessary eloquence of the poem.

But really the eloquence of the poem was inseparable from the eloquence of the person, and that identification might explain why three of the six inaugural poets since 1961 have been Black women. This is not to say that anyone else would have been a better inaugural poet — indeed, to the extent that inaugurations have listened to Black women, that is one of the most encouraging things about them, and each of the Black women chosen as the inaugural poet has seized the moment to offer a visionary version of the country and the occasion. But it is to say that post-civil-rights White America has tolerated and even enjoyed a fantasy of a Black woman as its representative only as long as that fantasy has remained poetic.

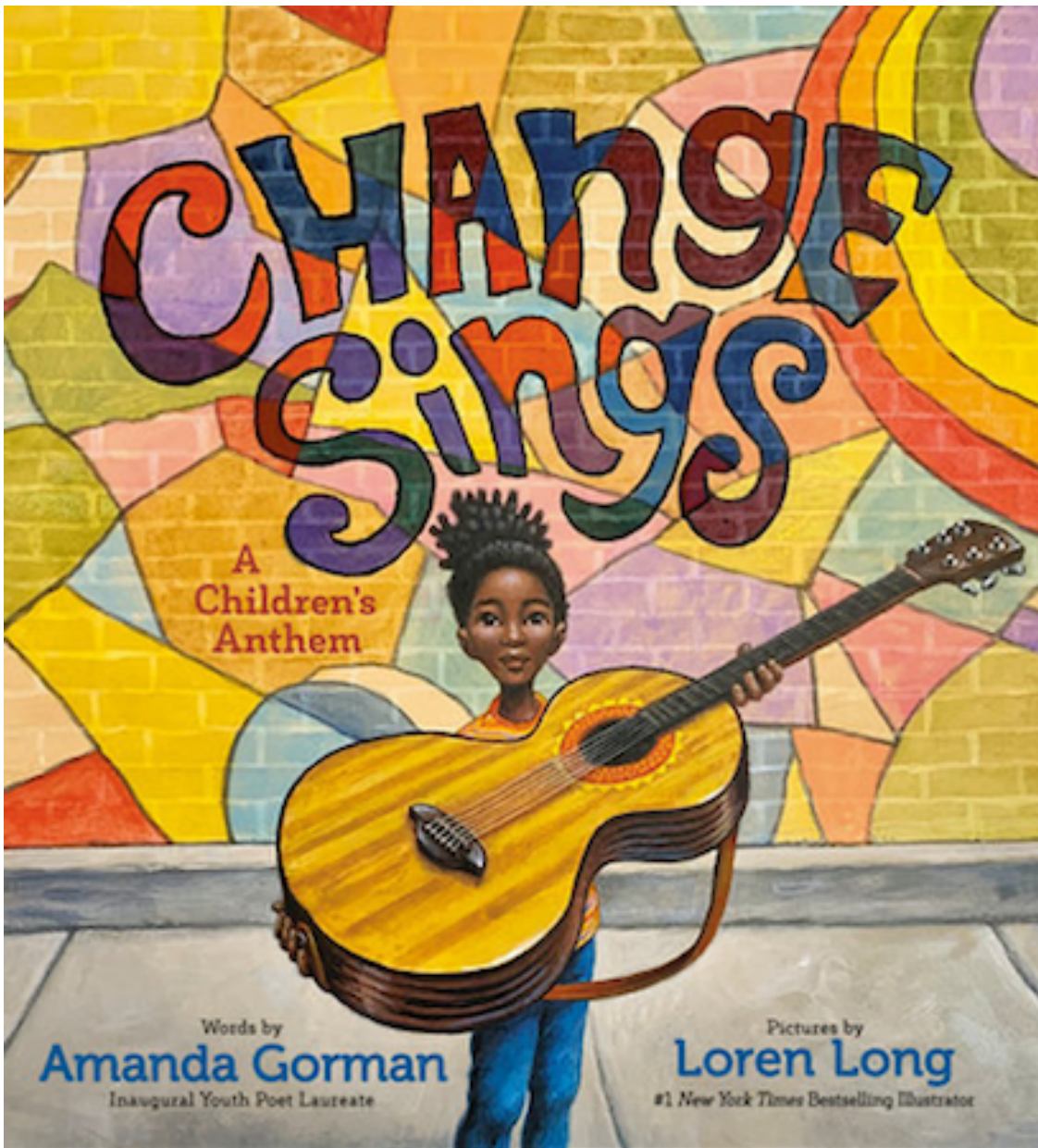
Kamala Harris has begun to turn fantasy into fact. Part of what distinguishes Gorman from Harris, and what makes Gorman (at least until 2036) less controversial than Harris is the way in which the public intimacy she made available to us signaled itself as an occasional performance. She and/as her poem may have spoken for an imagined community, but that communal intimacy was fugitive, and this ephemerality seems to have given many people the illusion that Gorman's poem was easily accessible and unchallenging. As the poet and critic Nathaniel Mackey has written, the assumption that Black poets intend to write “accessible” poetry leads to “shallow, simplistic readings that belabor the most obvious aspects of the writer's work and situation.” Black women have been writing back to such readings for centuries. Gorman's public poetics succeeded despite the fact that neither her person nor her poem was as easy to read as it seemed at the time.

#### 4: The Occasion of the Future

We might also say that occasional poetry (poetry with a punctual purpose) is the poetry Mill and his many Anglo-American successors most objected to. It was also, not incidentally, a poetry that Black nineteenth-century poets like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and James Monroe Whitfield and occasionally even Frederick Douglass were really good at (they are not Mill's referent, though they may be an unnamed aversive source for some of his Anglo-American successors). What appeals to the (especially mass-mediated) public has not, for the most part, been considered by elites to be good for culture. Despite contemporary rejection of such classed ideologies, we know that many remain suspicious of rhymed verse, of highly metrical or highly rhythmical poems. What are these poems trying to do to us, we wonder? What are their marching orders? Those who think that rhymed verse means “light verse” are the same people who think that hip hop is our “**light verse**.” Those suspicious of poetry that is too much like *verse*, or of poems that have rhymes that render it “light,” might need to be taught how to read and hear anew.

We might also hear Gorman's rhymes and rhythms as part of another genre entirely: poetry meant to be read out loud to children. Gorman speaks in many ways and at many levels to the hundreds of thousands of children who began their day on January 21st, 2021 reading this poem aloud with one another, or watching Gorman read it again.

This is, in fact, the explicit theme of Gorman's “The Hill We Climb”: democracy and poetry both happen in the future. It is wrong to think that both — or either — will heal America, but by speaking in ways that children can hear and understand, Gorman moves away from the persistent figuration of America as innocent, as a great blank slate on which democracy is always in the process of being written, and toward a more nuanced understanding of both the future (the children to whom, in many ways, this poem is addressed) and democracy, as not yet accomplished (in both Marx's sense of a social revolution that has yet to be realized and in Whitman's sense of arousing and initiating rather than defining and finishing). But Gorman's is a poetry of the future in a very twenty-first century pedagogically practical sense: already in a [lesson plan from PBS](#) (“*How might the audience impact the message of this poem? How might the moment in time frame it? What poem would you write with this title? Who is the ‘we’ and what is the ‘hill’? Write your own poem to this message and metaphor*”) as well as a [picture book forthcoming with Penguin](#). And she, herself, stood as the “youth” champion of that kind of becoming, performing her own process and using poetry to convince us to perform ours. The reason that Gorman's poetry of the future is not worried about the corrosion of its medium is that Gorman herself is its medium, and that medium is the message.



Because (to borrow an idiom from Biden) here's the deal: for over two hundred years, the relation of the poem to the person writing or speaking or expressing herself in the poem as well as the relation of the poet to the people she writes or speaks for and to have been Big Problems. To ask Gorman, in the performance of her poems, to solve those problems — to represent the personal resolution of the racial capitalism that structures everything about this country — only perpetuates them. There is a risk that listeners would let her ray-of-sunshine yellow Prada jacket simply make us all feel good, would lean into her youth without attending to her cognizance of its mass-mediated frame, would allow that momentary illusion of public intimacy to be enough. If the synthetic effect of her presence was to give us all the crazy and unfair to her idea that a young Black woman really might be the vicarious vehicle of our communal free expression of emotion — well, the history of those possibilities is a very long and very troubled story of appropriation.

But we do not think that is what happened that day. *The New York Times's* transcription of "The Hill We Climb" begins,

Mr. President, Madam Vice President, Americans, and the World:

When day comes, we ask ourselves:

Where can we find light

In this never-ending shade?

The loss we carry, the sea we must wade.

We do not know if the opening address was a remnant of the occasion or if it will become part of the poem, but it makes explicit the ambitions of Gorman's genre: she was not just speaking to the newly elected President and Vice President, or even just to the national television and online audience, but to "the world."

The four lines that follow this opening address include four instances of the first-person plural pronoun, and, at first, we assume that this reiterated "we" includes all of us. But does it? There may or may not be allusions to Nico & Vinz or to Nas in that first line, and if the other lines sound familiar, that is because their figuration borrows from a long history of Black poetry and song that invokes the afterlife of slavery. In that tradition, finding the light, carrying the burden, wading across the sea are all keyed to both the Christian rhetoric of redemption and to the experience of slavery and the Middle Passage.

Now, Amanda Gorman was born in 1998, and might very well agree with the critic Stephen Best that such invocations of a coherently and continuously raced historical sociality ask her generation to share in something she never experienced. But the couplet that rhymes "shade" with "wade" skews the relation of tradition to individual talent here, since if many of these phrases are in the key of the Black tradition, the association of "shade" with evil, darkness, and Black people is keyed to the White supremacist literary tradition (usually just called "the tradition"). When she was at Harvard, Gorman told the *Crimson* that "saying that the type of writing that interrogates the very real issues of gender, of race, of the economy, isn't real or is not poetry is actually a way to safeguard the European and Western clutch over poetry." Gorman knows how to throw shade where she wants it.



Why are we ending by beginning a close reading of Gorman's poem? We began this response as a series of text messages just after Gorman appeared on stage. She inspired us to think about issues in poetics we have been thinking about for a long time. She also invited us to think about poetry we have only been thinking about for a short time, like Claudia Rankine's 2020 *Just Us: An American Conversation*, which is prefaced by a line from Richard Pryor: "You go down there looking for justice, that's what you find, just us." The second stanza of "The Hill We Climb" reads,

We've braved the belly of the beast.

We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,

And the norms and notions of what "just is"

Isn't always justice.



These lines are trying to do something really difficult. Gorman is well aware of Rankine's work—her poem "In This Place" directly borrows and intentionally signifies on the subtitle of Rankine's two books before *Just Us*: "An American Lyric." Rankine's extraordinary trilogy complicates that subtitle in every way it can, changing it in the last book to "An American Conversation." For Rankine, the idea that any single "one," any "speaker," can represent the many in this White supremacist country is an idea that is just too "historied out," in her phrase, to work anymore. If almost all poetry has become lyric over the last two hundred years, then we need a new genre for the next two hundred.

But Amanda Gorman is asking us to participate in the poetry of the future in view of the democracy of the future, as many poets before her have tried and failed to do. She cannot call the democracy-as-process anything other than America; she can only try to reclaim the word's meaning. She cannot call her performances and her poetry anything but American lyrics, reclaiming both the adjective and the noun, as so many poets before her, from Harper to Whitfield to Wanda Coleman to Terrance Hayes have done, because American lyric is her side of a conversation with those poets. In an interview after the inauguration, Gorman told [Anderson Cooper on CNN](#) that her mantra, before every performance, is to repeat: "I am the daughter of Black writers. We are descended from freedom fighters who broke through chains and changed the world. They call me." She also told Cooper that "we've seen over the past few years how the power of words has been violated and misappropriated. What I wanted to do is to kind of reclaim poetry as that site in which we can re-purify and re-sanctify." Secular magic indeed. Gorman's 2017 "In This Place: An American Lyric" ends,

There's a place where this poem dwells—

it is here, it is now, in the yellow song of dawn's bell

where we write an American lyric

we are just beginning to tell.

Dressed as that yellow song, Amanda Gorman took the stage as American lyric up close and in person. Maybe this is the poetry of the future — a poetry in process and in conversation, and in anticipation of more conversations (of which ours is only one), a poetry embedded, mediated, saturated, circulated, followed, shared. A poetry many of us didn't know we needed until it just happened.

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