Towards a Theory of Lyric Curriculum

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> Look at the red throat
> Of the hummingbird, and tell
> Your story again.
>
> —Ronald Baantz

"WE WILL RAISE THIS WOUNDED WORLD into a wondrous one." At 23 years old, Amanda Gorman (2021b) read her poem, "The Hill We Climb," at President Joe Biden's January 2021 inauguration, with more than thirty million tuning into the broadcast. The event catapulted Gorman to national stardom, as St. Felix (2021) recounts in the *Vogue* profile, "The Rise and Rise of Amanda Gorman:"

> Gorman, or radiations of Gorman, were everywhere: on a February cover of *Time,* posed in her yellow, and inside the magazine, holding a caged bird, invoking Maya Angelou, interviewed by Michelle Obama; performing virtually at "Ham4Progress Presents: The Joy in Our Voices," a Black History Month celebration from the people behind the *Hamilton* phenomenon; on an International Women's Day panel with Clinton, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and Chrissy Teigen; in media headlines, nearly every time she tweeted her opinion on a current event; memorialized on vibrant murals in D.C. and Palm Springs. (para. 6)

In the early 21st century, it's not often a poet becomes a star. Yet Gorman's words resonated beyond the cloistered realms of contemporary poets, humanities classrooms, and off-beat coffee shops to reach American masses who otherwise do not "hear the planet-like music of poetry" (Sidney, 1595/2009, para. 123). Following the inauguration, Gorman would go on to read another of her poems during the broadcast of the 2021 Super Bowl, and her subsequent poetry collection, also titled *The Hill We Climb*, debuted at number one on *The New York Times* bestsellers list, a historic first for a collection of poetry.

In addition to Gorman herself, radiations of "The Hill We Climbed" popped up everywhere. Before inauguration day had ended, lines from her poem surfaced across numerous social media (e.g., Campos, 2021). And in the days that followed, journalists published enthusiastic

think pieces, and educators shared guides for teaching the poem in classrooms. *PBS*, for example, developed a 50-minute lesson for grades 6-12 that invited students to analyze and respond to the poem (Stevens, 2021); while the organization 826 Digital (n.d.) created a lesson inviting students to use the poem as a model for their own poetry. One can even buy tee shirts and canvas bags embroidered with lines from the poems from independent vendors on Etsy or from corporations on Amazon.

Like many people, we saw the Instagram and Facebook posts that quoted the poem, but we also had other encounters with it. Scott noticed that an email sent from the president of his institution quoted the poem and cited the poem's outsized impact:

> "The Hill We Climb" … is a wonderful, modern example of the beauty and power of poetry. Though [Gorman] deservedly received great praise and personal attention afterward, the poem itself was not *about* her. Instead, she made it about much larger and timely issues, ultimately crafting a work for the ages that touched and inspired millions.

In Cori's college-level Young Adult literature course, a student quoted the poem the day after the inauguration, connecting its ethics to the final chapter of Angie Thomas's (2017) novel, *The Hate U Give*. Later in the spring, Cori was riding her bike in a Minneapolis neighborhood when she realized that each home along the east side of a city block had written lines from the poem on large posters and placed them facing outwards toward the street. Moving north to south, a pedestrian could read the final ten lines of Gorman's (2021a) poem.

As scholars of curriculum and English Education, as well as former English teachers and enthusiastic readers, the circulation of Gorman's poem excites us. What we see in the phenomenon is a manifestation of our wildest dreams about what poems and other texts might do in classrooms. People are *talking* about the poem. They are responding to its imagery and aspirational claims; they're close reading Gorman's use of repetition and critiquing her use of the pronoun "we." The poem has thrust people into conversations about language, the nature of unity and justice, and the function of poetry, literature, and art. It has made students of us all.

This swirl of activity surrounding "The Hill We Climb" suggests that poetry has a social function. Poems are not inert words on a page: they *do* things in the world. They act on people, and people act on them. This conception of poetry as a social actor is not merely a post-humanist hunch of ours; it is a perspective articulated by literary theorist Jonathan Culler (2015), whose *Theory of the Lyric* delineates the formal properties of lyric poetry and theorizes the social function of lyrics. Through an examination of poetry from antiquity through today, Cullers argues that the lyric's special formal qualities make it possible for poetry to generate social change.

The uptake of Gorman's poem also calls to mind Aparna Mishra Tarc's (2020) stirring call in this Journal for curriculum theorists to use finely tuned reading practices to theorize how a poem like Gorman's moves us to see ourselves and the world anew. Mishra Tarc points out that discourses of hate and violence circulate widely and freely today, and she argues that, if we do not see words as the powerful weapons they are, these discourses will "lead to our collective death and destruction" (p. 34). We must attend closely to texts, she continues, because understanding how texts move us—"how it is they pedagogically seduce us, lead us on our thinking, insinuate in our skin" (p. 34)—will help us to theorize how we might use texts and words as bulwarks against discourses of hate. She argues that such closely felt textual readings may help illuminate how literature sustains us, how it supports us in bearing witness to the times, and how it offers hopeful paths forward.

Inspired by Mishra Tarc's call, this essay attends closely to lyric poetry in order to understand how a poem like Gorman's (2021a, 2021b), "The Hill We Climb," comes to sustain and move us. Mobilizing Culler's theory of the lyric as a framework, we read lyric poems like Gorman's to consider how the formal qualities of lyric allow it to get under our skin and to see the world anew; in doing so, we imagine how lyric poetry "can help us theorize curriculum anew" (Mishra Tarc, 2020, p. 39).

Lyric Theory

"Lyric" has become a loosely-used catch-all term for poetic writing today, most often signaling a particular kind of poetry: an intense expression of subjective experience, the kind that can be traced canonically in the Western literary tradition from Antiquity (e.g., Sappho, Horace) through the Renaissance (Petrarch, Shakespeare) and Romanticism (Wordsworth, Whitman) into modernity (Lorca, Ashbery) and beyond. Culler (2015), for his part, distinguishes the popular sense of such poetic expression (the kind that saturates the screen in *Dead Poets Society*, for example) from the formal properties of lyric poems across space and time. *Theory of the Lyric* reads across the history of lyric theory, parsing poems along the way as the author assesses "the inadequacies of current models and … explore[s] alternatives by examining possibilities in the lyric tradition" (p. 3).

Features of the Lyric

In laying out his theory, Culler (2015) identifies major features common across lyric poems. He begins by asserting that lyric poems are distinctive because of the indirect way they address the audience. "The Hill We Climb" (Gorman, 2021a) nicely illustrates this feature. At first glance, the poem seems to straightforwardly address the audience through the repeated use of the pronoun "we." The fact that the poem was recited mere weeks after the Capitol insurrection of January 6th, 2021, however, complicates the "we" of the poem's address. Against the backdrop of the riot, the poem's audience may have questioned who, exactly, is included within, and excluded from, the poem's "we." Commentators might ask (and indeed did ask) if there really is a unified "we" that is climbing the Gorman's titular hill, and they might instinctively feel that insurrectionists are not included in the "we" that strives "to forge a union with purpose" (p. 207). Thus, the poem and its performance engaged in indirection, addressing readers through a "we" that breaks down almost as soon as it's uttered.

Second, Culler (2015) describes the way the lyric diverges from other types of fictive writing in that such poetry attempts "to be itself an event" as opposed to a mere representation of an event (p. 35). Often the event created by the reading or recitation of lyric is a call to arms, a celebration, or a request for intercession. For example, when read or heard, Gorman's poem functions as a call to unity, one intended to rally those who wish to be part of the "we" the poem addresses. Although the poem occasionally dips into narration—"we've braved the belly of the beast" (p. 206)—those narrative moments are presented in service of the poem's call to unity, which is reproduced each time the poem is read.

Third, the lyric is marked by its ritualistic aspects. A ritual feel is created by the poem's formal dimensions, such as "the patterning of rhythm and rhyme, the repetition of stanza forms,

and generally everything that recalls song or lacks a mimetic or representational function" (Culler, 2015, p. 37). As we discuss at length below, Gorman's poem is replete with these formal qualities—its compelling metric patterns, for example—that lend the poem a ritualistic texture. This feature of lyric renders these poems ripe for repetition, inviting the event of the lyric to occur again and again through repeated performance.

Finally, lyrics typically have a hyperbolic quality that inflates the importance and intensity of the images, actions, or other content described. Some lyrics deploy obvious hyperbole, as with elaborately exaggerated expressions of romantic sentiment. At other times, the ritualistic feel of the lyric renders any "homely observation" an "accessory into an epiphany" (p. 38). This is the case throughout "The Hill We Climb," as in the moment at the end when the speaker cries, "And so we lift our gazes not to what stands / between us, / but what stands before us" (p. 207). The image of people lifting their gaze may not be an obvious hyperbole, but given the poem's ritualistic tone and the complicated "we" being addressed, the line takes on a hyperbolic quality, calling to mind an entire nation lifting its gaze in concert.

Social Functions of the Lyric

These features of lyric poems work together, Culler (2015) argues, to fulfill several social functions. The repetitive form of lyrics allows audiences to return to them again and again as a source of sociopolitical insight. Though Gorman's (2021a) poem is tied to the historical context of its creation, generations of Americans will likely encounter this poem, reading it for insight into how the nation might "forge a union with purpose" (p. 207) in the face of new (or old) divisions.

Socially, lyrics can also free readers from prosaic perceptions of the world. Culler demonstrates the ways such poems help readers see our sociopolitical world anew. As we discuss in detail below, we suspect that the "Hill We Climb" was taken up with such fervor because, in the face of the cold hard facts of our nation— including white supremacist violence before, during, and after the racial uprisings of 2021; dangerous divisions sowed by insurrectionists; climate disasters that disproportionately affect marginalized communities—the prayer-like feel of Gorman's poem provided the audience with the opportunity to feel hope.

Lyrics also function to engender shared values and structures of feeling among an audience, thus, contributing to the creation of distinct communities. In its repetition of words like "rise up" and "climb" and in its repetition of a complicated "we," "The Hill We Climb" invites readers to take up space in a community of citizens who will be "brave enough" to see and be the light the nation needs to "forge unity with purpose." Such a community, the poem declares, must be "aflame" with a passion for "freeing" a new dawn. Incredibly, in its use of ritualistic language, the poem generates the feelings of passion, dedication, hope, and excitement that it declares necessary. As such, readers can leave the poem feeling hopeful and energized and part of a larger "we" dedicated to climbing the titular hill.

Below we take up Culler's theory, focusing specifically on these latter two social functions, as we wonder and worry about the questions: What would a lyric curriculum look like? And, how might we think about curriculum anew with/through the lyric? Specifically, what might Culler's articulation of the social functions of lyric offer a theory of curriculum? What happens if we imagine that curriculum might be good for freeing students (and teachers!) from prosaic perceptions of the world? And how might curricula, like lyric texts, create communities of care and attention?

Freeing Curriculum from Prosaic Perceptions

The day after Gorman read “The Hill we Climb” at the inauguration, Karen Attiah (2021) of *The Washington Post* reflected on the young poet’s performance. Drawing from Audre Lorde’s (1977/1984) foundational essay, Attiah wrote that Gorman’s poem reminds us that “poetry is not a luxury” (para. 1). Instead, Gorman’s words were an “elixir to a nation in critical condition, pure truth poured into an ocean of lies and division” (para. 12). Whereas Biden’s remarks were “good and helpful and presidential,” the truth articulated by Gorman “was the necessary one” (para. 7).

Attiah’s commentary on “The Hill We Climb” highlights what so much of the inauguration audience sensed about poetry that day: Gorman’s poem did something different than Biden’s prose. According to Culler (2015), the difference between Gorman’s poem and Biden’s prose lies in its use of evocative language, which encourages the audience to see the world anew. Poetry, claims Cullers (2015), has the potential to free readers from a “prosaic perception of the world” (p. 304). Gorman herself uses similar language to differentiate between poetry and prose. In an interview with Michelle Obama (2021), Gorman points out that it is human instinct “to turn to poetry when we’re looking to communicate a spirit that is larger than ourselves” (para. 7). In concert with this point, she notes that “poetry and language are often the heartbeat of movements for change” (para. 3).

What is it about lyric in general and “The Hill We Climb” in particular that allows audience members to see the world anew? Culler argues that lyric’s capacity to free us from a prosaic perception of the world lies in its four parameters—its enunciative apparatus, its event-ness, its ritualistic language, and its use of hyperbole. Here, we build off Culler and consider how Gorman deploys sound as a way to reorient audiences to the world.

“The Hill We Climb” is replete with sound play. Lines sometimes end in rhyming couplets, but at other times the rhyme is internal. Some lines follow a similar metric pattern, musically arranging the language’s emphases; other times the lines resist these patterns. Lines often burst with alliteration, but a few hang heavy with dissonance. One particularly salient sonic moment occurs early in the text, when Gorman reflects on the social and political upheaval preceding Biden’s inauguration and articulates the hope that one day the world will be able to see and remark upon the resilience of Americans:

> Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true.
> That even as we grieved, we grew.
> That even as we hurt, we hoped.
> That even as we tired, we tried. (p. 208)

The rhythm here is noteworthy. Each of the final three lines is written in eight syllables comprised of four metric feet, and each follows the same pattern of stress: one iambic foot (an unstressed syllable succeeded by a stressed one) followed by a dibrach foot (two unstressed syllables), followed by two more iambic feet. Listening to the beginning of each line, a listener might feel as though they are going to hear the comforting sounds of iambic feet placed one after another: a dance from unstressed to stressed sounds as regular and predictable as a heartbeat. When the next metric foot is a dibrach—two unstressed syllables—we may suddenly feel awkward, as though we’ve missed a beat in a dance. But after that momentary discomfort, each line provides two consoling iambic feet: “we grieved, we grew;” “we hurt, we hoped;” “we tired, we tried.” With these final feet, we recover the rhythm, and feel the poem in step with the pulse of our heartbeat.

It is significant that this moment of noteworthy rhythmic work is also a moment that feels ritualistic. The verb "let" that precedes these three lines pulls us into the imperative and calls to mind the opening of a prayer (as in this passage from the *King James Bible* [1769/2024]: "Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad" [Psalm 96:11]). This nod to prayer coupled with three lines of symmetrical rhythm allows the poem to move our bodies and spirits. After this portion of the poem, we might feel newly able to believe that as a nation we have the capacity to be resilient: to grow even as we grieve; to hope even as we hurt; to try even as we tire.

This *feels* different than a think piece or essay calling on Americans to be resilient. We know, for example, that our critical hackles would be raised if an essay called for us to be so resilient that people around the world would note our efforts. *Who is the "we" you speak of?,* we'd ask the author. *Are you aware of how much harm "we" have done in the world and how problematic it is that you expect the global community to look to Americans with awe*? And yet this moment in the lyric—with its prayer-like opening, and a rhythm that initially destabilizes us and then comforts us with iambic feet—moves us. As Cohen (2021) argues, it is an incantation. Given the ritualistic texture of this moment, we do not feel compelled to critique the signifiers at play here; we feel justified in letting these lines make us feel as though such collective resilience might be possible (but only if we are brave enough).

This section began with a reference to Audre Lorde's (1977/1984) essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," but it is her later (1978/1984) text "Uses of the Erotic" that gives us language to theorize the curricular implications of lyric's capacity to act on bodies and minds. In "Uses of the Erotic," Lorde conceptualizes the erotic as a source of power. To do so, she "expands the function of the erotic" (Ferguson, 2012, p. 298), treating it as both a "social practice and a technique of the self" (p. 297). The essay is not explicitly about poetry: it was written to encourage "women-identified women" to recognize that attending to the force of the erotic can provide "energy to pursue genuine change within our world" (Lorde, 1977/1984, p. 54). Still, we believe that Lorde's insights about the power of eros has implications for how we understand why lyric can "pedagogically seduce us, lead us on our thinking, insinuate in our skin" (Mishra-Tarc, 2020, p. 34).

In Lorde's (1978/1984) essay, the word "erotic" does not signify the "plasticized sensation" (p. 49) it is so often associated with. Instead, the word "erotic" refers to *eros*, "born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony" (p. 50). Though it is inclusive of sexual pleasure, in Lorde's hands, "erotic" is more precisely about our embodied, sensual responses to the world around us. Indeed, Lorde writes that, for her, there exists "no difference between writing a good poem and moving into the sunlight against the body of a woman [she] love[s]" (p. 53). The felt experience of eros, Lorde argues, can illuminate the distance between our internal needs and the life we lead. When we attend to our embodied and sensual experience of the world, it can attune us to the ways in which the structures of our white supremacist, cis-heteropatriarchy prevent us from fulfilling our internal needs. Our awareness of this gap can then encourage us to push against those structures. "In touch with the erotic," Lorde explains, "I become less willing to accept powerlessness" (p. 53).

This power of the erotic becomes particularly relevant to our exploration of the lyric when we consider lyric's capacity to "insinuate in our skin" through the use of sound and ritual (Mishra-Tarc, 2020, p. 34). We may wish to swing our fingers when a poem falls into a satisfying iambic meter, or we may feel emotionally moved when the poem deploys ritualistic syntax. When these moments of embodied sensation are experienced in the context of a poem like "The Hill we Climb," the erotic experience of the poem can become linked with the poem's political message. Ideally, the sensations of feeling moved by a message of unity and hope draw our attention to the

gap between the unity we wish for and the entrenched patterns of oppression that mark our everyday lives. Such a gap could point us towards changing the systems and structures that reproduce systems of oppression and division.

We realize that this articulation of the potential power of the lyric is an optimistic one. We know that it ignores some of the obstacles—personal, institutional, and structural—that prevent the enactment of the kind of change that "The Hill We Climb" points us toward. Still, we believe this optimistic view of lyric poetry provides us a model for a curriculum that privileges embodied knowledge as a precursor to change. In the essay, "Uses of the Erotic for Teaching Queer Studies," Thelathia "Nikki" Young (2012) provides a situated example of this erotic property of the lyric in a particular curricular context. Using Lorde's (1978/1984) essay as a foundational text in a Queer Studies course, Young finds that such embodiment becomes a "legitimate lens through which one can gain a deeper understanding" (pp. 304–305); further, she argues that Lorde's essay invites teachers to consider how the embodied knowledge of our classrooms can be used to help students identify the gaps between their inner desires and the external directives of oppressive social structures. A lyric curriculum asks us to consider the kinds of texts and contexts most likely to generate such embodied knowledge. A lyric curriculum asks us to consider what it means to engage with these texts so that they illuminate the gaps between our embodied desires and the ways we actually live. In doing so, the lyric encourages us to consider how we might point our awareness of these gaps towards material change.

Making of Curriculum a People: Lyric Communities

Anyone watching? Casey texted the group. *That poem, holy shit.* These texts arrived in the seconds after Gorman's inaugural reading rapturously concluded. That particular group chat, comprised of past and present teachers, discussed many things—Chicago schooling, college football, the rise and fall of Kanye West—but never poetry. And yet, Gorman's reading captured the attention of the group and did something surprising: it joined us together as readers.

Culler (2015) identifies this as a "fundamental social role" of lyric poetry: "it works to constitute groups of listeners as social groups" (p. 307). The wide performance of lyrics in Ancient Greece, for example, established an early audience for poetry. The form proved so popular that Plato famously banned poets from his republic, fearing the tyranny of passion over reason. Centuries later, European troubadours established intellectual and affective communities through shared "structures of feeling" (p. 305) engendered through the proliferation of the sonnet form in the work of authors like Petrarch and Shakespeare. In addition to establishing a community of readers, fans, and aficionados, the lyric also constituted

> a potent form of social action: positing a conception of an intense, often divided inner affective life; promoting literate culture through their success as a socially-valued virtuoso display in courtly or aristocratic settings; and advancing the prestige of national languages. (pp. 320–321)

Writing in the wake of the Renaissance poets, the Romantics—Culler singles out Wordsworth in particular—carried forth the lyric tradition through popular ballads, further democratizing poetry's appeal and "establishing a national middle class readership" (p. 305).

The quintessential American example of this is the work of Walt Whitman (1892), whose *Leaves of Grass* attempts to be, as poet and critic Ben Lerner (2017) puts it, a kind of "secular Bible" for the nascent American nation (p. 45). The adolescence of an unprecedented political project, unifying an immense and diverse geography of peoples under a (purportedly) democratic dream, required, Lerner (2017) writes, "a poet who could celebrate the American people into existence, who could help hold the nation together, in all its internal difference, through his singing. (p. 45). *Leaves of Grass*'s most famous lyric, "Song of Myself," proves exemplary in this regard, demonstrating the formal hallmarks that critics cite as the American-ness of Whitman's work: (1) the freedom and extensiveness of poetic lines, often overflowing via enjambment (e.g., "I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not contain'd between my hat and boots / and peruse manifold objects" [Whitman, 1892, 153–4]); and (2) his expansive use of pronouns, as demonstrated in the poem's title, its reception, and established with Whitman's opening lines: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (1–3). These lyric qualities, Lerner argues, allow "Whitman's famous catalogue … to model federalism in its very structure, uniting in a single syntactical unit all the differences (of class, race, gender, geography, etc.) that threaten the coherence of the people" (Lerner, 2017, p. 46). (This is a project of which we ought to be skeptical—Whitman claimed to write the poetry of the slave and slaveowner—and we will do so below.) For better and worse, in the story of American literature told by teachers and scholars, Whitman came to poetically constitute the nation.

Across these examples, lyric form, marked by its brevity, intense subjectivity, mode of address, and use of hyperbole, proved capable of forming communities of readers participating in shared experience. "Form grounds us in a community," writes Michael Robbins (2017), "however attenuated or virtual" (para. 15). This extends even into the various lyrics of today: Robbins reminds us that a "pop song is a *popular* song, one that some ideal 'everybody' knows or could know. Its form lends itself to communal participation. Or, stronger, it depends upon the possibility of communal participation for its full effect" (para. 14). Robbins cites the potential of popular music to galvanize and gather, as it did for his friend, Jen, who spoke of a particularly eventful moment when she found herself suddenly singing an impromptu duet of Miley Cyrus' (2013) "We Can't Stop" with a stranger outside a Brooklyn club. The pivotal scene from the film *Almost Famous*, Cameron Crowe's (2000) autobiographical love letter to the classic rock era, serves as Robbins' most developed example:

> Elton John's "Tiny Dancer" comes on the bus stereo, and for a while the band members continue to glower, but finally the bassist starts singing along: "Handing tickets out for *Gah*-awd." Kate Hudson joins in on the next line—"Turning back, she just laughs"— and most of the bus is smiling and singing by the time Elton gets to "The boulevard is not that bad." It's corny, but it's true: everyone knows the lines by heart, everyone throws their head back and closes their eyes and belts out the chorus … "Tiny Dancer," on that bus, is a spell, an incantation, but a public one, one that also connects the particular congregation to the thousands of like-minded others at diverse sites across the globe. (para. 12)

We share this to point to the ways lyrics construct communities where people are bound together by different things: literacy, shared values, affections, and by the very act of participation itself: singing along with friends or reading aloud to them, passing along poems, teaching texts and writing about them. We build circles of shared passions this way. "The Hill We Climb" did this

too; we can see in our introductory example that Scott's university administration participated in the community called together by Gorman when they centered the poem in an email to faculty, while Cori's Minneapolis neighborhood's window displays of the poem's final lines drew passers-by into the community forged by Gorman's text.

This happens in classrooms of course, as engagement with curriculum attempts to gather students as a community with a shared epistemic foundation. It's a practice so common as to seem obvious: students read the same book at the same time. Simultaneous, collective focus on a single text is a hallmark of the university seminar and K-12 literacy curriculum. In some sense, the practice is what makes the class *a class:* an explicitly curricular experience. The point, of course, is talk. At its best, such focused conversation around a shared text facilitates dialogically co-constructed learning. More pragmatically, reading one book at a time allows teachers a measure of control over students' learning and facilitates the evaluation of their academic progress against each other.

Taking a longer view, the practice of assigning specific texts for all students to read *within* a course and *across* iterations of it, returning to Homer and Dante and Dickens year after year, fuels the project of cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1988), in which sharing texts inducts students into a cultural heritage. In the South Bay area of California where Scott teaches, for example, the Depression-era works of John Steinbeck loom large, many of which are set in nearby Salinas. The teaching of Steinbeck's novels invites students to participate as members of a particular community: one which prides itself, and roots its identity, in narratives of agrarian struggle and family tragedy. Yet the worldviews undergirding communities formed by reading Steinbeck are not always benign: a reading of *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1937/1994) might justify the colonization and displacement of indigenous populations to make way for settler fantasy, or contribute to the historic erasure of Filipinx, Latine, and Japanese peoples in racializing the California farmer as (exclusively) white (Wald, 2016).

For our purposes, what intrigues us about this conversation is how the particular aspects of lyrics help form communities and what this might mean for how teachers and scholars consider curriculum. Lyric communities depend on the magnetizing qualities of poetry to constitute them. The somatic properties of rhythm, for example, the way a song moves us to sing it, literally moves us to move to it, or the way a poetic phrase worms its way into our memories to reside, unforgotten—these, we think, are promising affects for curriculum theorizing. How might curriculum be more like song? A lyric curriculum understands rhythm as a crucial yet under-considered part of educational experience. Guillory (2021; see also work by Huckaby, 2016, and Edwards & Taliaferro-Baszile, 2016, in this vein) writes of the formation of one such lyrico-curricular space, wherein the poetry of Audre Lorde facilitated the formation and sustenance of a community of Black women scholars in the academy. Importantly, Guillory asserts that what she learned from her experience reading Lorde's poetry is that "Black women's survival is inextricably linked to our speaking" (p. 304). Thus, a curricular community comes into being through participation: persons read a text, giving their voice to it, and so enter into a kind of educational community initiated through shared experience and sustained through the energy generated by that experience.

The Romanticism of this project reflects the Whitmanian hope for lyric as constituting a people *across* difference. Yet Lerner (2017) aptly reminds, in his analysis of *Leaves of Grass*, that our world exists otherwise: "The capacity to transcend history has historically been ascribed to white men of a certain class while denied to individuals marked by difference" (p. 63). Poet Claudia Rankine's (2014) *Citizen: An American Lyric* employs ambiguous pronouns to a very

different end. Reading *Citizen* as I (Scott) did, a white man and academic, made for an uncomfortable experience. Early in the book Rankine writes:

> You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed; he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there.
>
> You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having.
>
> Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me? (p. 10)

Instead of flattening racial difference through pronouns, Rankine employs "you" lyrically to discomfiting effect. "*Citizen's* concern," Lerner (2017) argues,

> with how race determines when and how we have access to pronouns is, among other things, a direct response to the Whitmanic (and nostalgist) notion of a perfectly exchangeable "I" and "you" that can suspend all difference. Whoever you are, while reading *Citizen*, you are forced to situate yourself relative to the pronouns as opposed to assuming you fit within them. There is both critique and desire here—a confrontation with false universality and a testing of the possibilities of a second person that won't let me, whoever I am, be lonely, "to call you out, to call out you." (p. 71)

Citizen forms a different kind of community, then, one in which internal difference contradicts and conflicts, in which the formation of community (through lyric) constitutes an encounter with conflicting difference, inequity, injustice. How might curriculum, we wonder, form such communities of productively conflicting difference? Apologizing for poetry and waxing, well, poetic, about its promise (as we are here), Scott (1998) suggests that "What we need as readers is a reason for reading the same thing over" (p. 93). We suggest something of the same for persons in schools: that we need a reason for being together in classrooms, over and over again. How might lyricality provide such a reason to curriculum, establishing in the classroom a "We," but do so *with* Rankine, who cuttingly observes "the pronoun barely holding the person together" (p. 71)?

Two examples of recent curricular scholarship explore this contradiction, speaking to the potential of poetry to do such critical curricular work. Drawing on the *testimonios* tradition of narrative inquiry in Latin American history, Espinosa-Dulanto and Calderon-Berumen (2020) engage in lyrical play with pronouns. The authors theorize curriculum by creating poems that "subvert the Western 'I' for a community shared, social 'I/We' and advance the poetics aesthetics of testimonios" (p. 242). In doing so the community they aim to form is one grounded in a "politicized understanding of identity and community" (p. 245). Their poetry-as-curriculum provides not only a curricular space for this to happen on the page but, by gathering marginalized voices and sounding them, actually *makes* it happen. As such, a lyric curriculum embodies the notion of *curriculum* as a verb, an action that brings communities—even contradictory ones—into being.

As a second example, Mishra Tarc (2020) writes of the lyrico-curricular power of Toni Morrison, expressing the way the novelist's:

> luminous vocabulary takes over the lexicon, initiates a counter-culture, becomes part of a new way of inhabiting yourself and being with others. From this quality of being altered by curriculum, we speak, see, hear, relearn our minds, again in a community of others with nothing and everything in common, and we are not the same. (p. 26)

As with the work of Espinosa-Dulanto and Calderon-Berumen (2020) and Guillory (2021), this example proves useful in contrast to the canonical lyric communities formed above. Instead of advancing Hirsch's fundamentally conservative project of preserving (white) literary heritage and, thus, culture, Morrison, in Mishra Tarc's experience, instantiates a culture that runs counter to that. The lyrical community is one with the power to alter being—the essence of the critical project—rather than merely protect and further entrench it. Morrison's curricular community operates on a fundamental contradiction rooted in difference; in gathering "others with nothing and everything in common," the lyric instantiates an impossible community wherein members might learn to be in the world—together, better—with others (Garrett, 2017).

Conclusions & Cautions

This study implicates the lyric potential of curriculum. Taking as exemplary the uses of lyricality noted in our analysis of the texts above, educators and curricularists might turn their attention to the rhythms of curriculum, attending to and animating the poetic rather than prosaic qualities of educational experience. In lyric theory, rhythm accounts for the ways texts come to move people: how they seduce, insinuate, and stick, but also how they actually *move* people, activating the body through somatic response. For those of us interested in activating students and colleagues towards activism, Culler (2015) and Gorman (2021a, 2021b), among the many poets and theorists of the lyric tradition, provide language and conceptual basis for how such work might be done. Further, our inquiry into the gathering potential of lyric, its capacity for forming communities through address and affinity, offers educators a basis for how they might do so among students—and a model particularly useful for curricula beyond the schoolroom, in disparate yet still educational spaces where people are dispersed, persons not subjected to the subjectification of schooling as *students* but who might yet be gathered together for study. There is promise in that. But at the same time, our engagement with lyric theory, following Rankine (2014) and Lerner (2017), points to the harmful potential of such a project, challenging educators to teach with/in and across difference, rather than eliding it. Beyond those lyric affordances of curriculum, it may be that what this inquiry suggests is a need for educators to get out of the way: to share lyric texts and bring forth their poetry with students, but not to schoolify (Whitney, 2011) them in the process: transforming them into curricula stripped of the wild and wondrous qualities that made them compelling in the first place.

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