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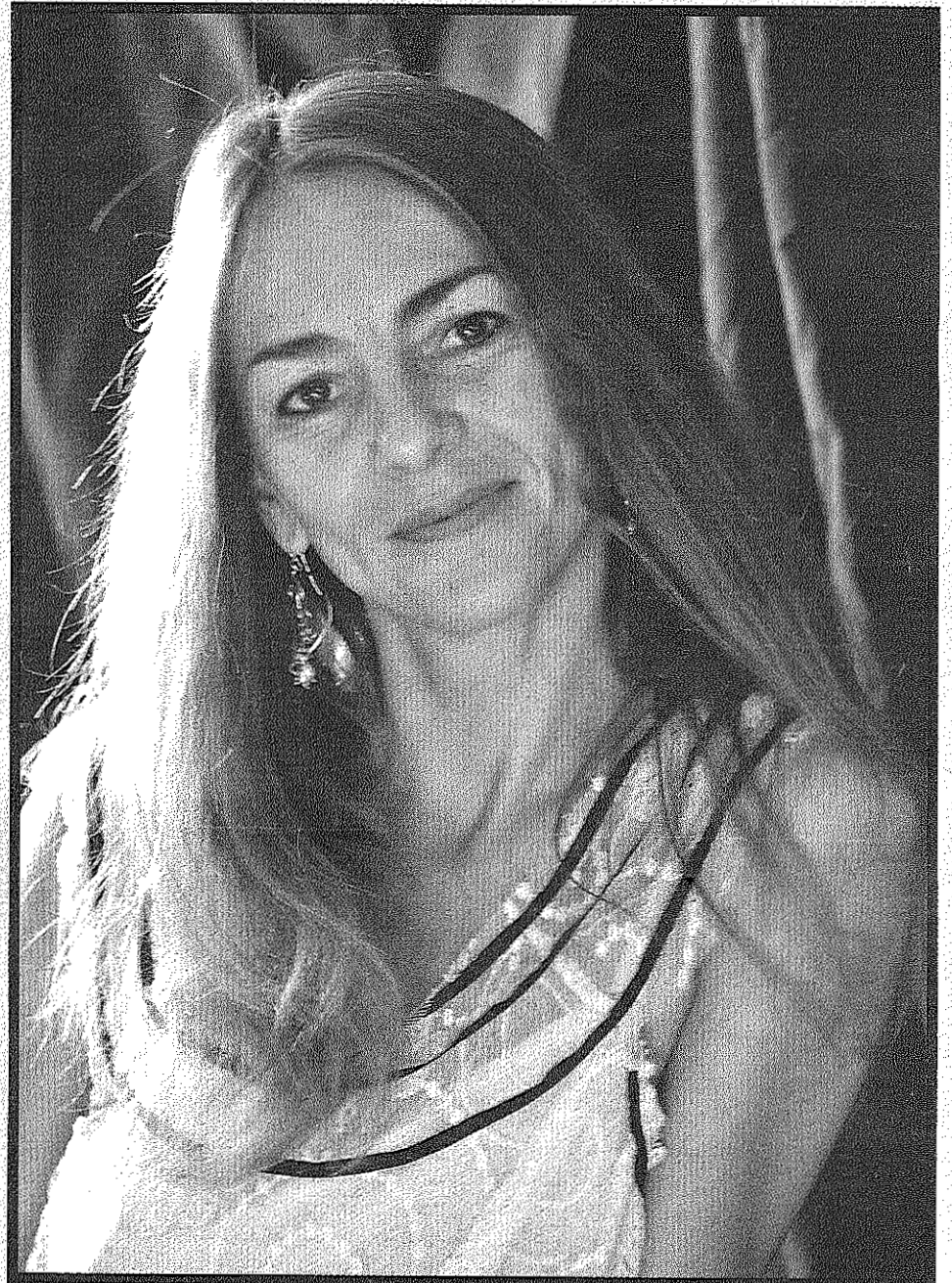
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Writing White, an Introduction

MAJOR JACKSON'S 2007 ESSAY "A MYSTIFYING Silence: Big and Black" did American poetry a great service by asking why there should be a "dearth of poems written by white poets that address racial issues."¹ Four years later, Claudia Rankine's open invitation to share "some thoughts on writing about race" echoed Jackson's question by asking writers (of all races) to consider (among other possible subjects) why, if they hadn't written "consciously about race," they had "never felt compelled to do so," and whether, if fear was involved in their reluctance, they would address that.² Of the nearly 100 responses that were ultimately posted on Rankine's website,³ over half came from white writers, a number of whom did indeed address those questions, which I'd like to consider in a general way here, occasionally referencing Jackson's essay.

A couple of years ago I heard Natasha Trethewey make a distinction between writing about race and writing from racialized experience. I think we go a long way toward understanding why white poets don't address racial issues more often when we acknowledge that it's almost impossible for poets of color *not* to write from racialized experience—whereas it at least *seems* to be very easy for white poets not to do so. "Seems," because of course we're all writing race whether we realize it or not: a writer of color will see the whiteness in my poems even if I don't. And for many years I did not. For me, as for many white people, race was—whether I would have phrased it this way or not—something others had: white was default, was *no* race. For many white poets, and certainly for myself for some time, to write race was to write "about" race: to consciously take on a "subject" which, like war or the environment or love or divorce, I could approach and then abandon until the next time. And it was not something I did very often—precisely, or at least partly, because it was not "my" subject.

But if there are internal reasons for this avoidance (which I will return to), there are also external ones. Some years ago, race—along with culture, gender, and sexual preference—came to the fore as an "identity" issue. During that period, I recall putting together a panel of writers for PEN New England called "Writing Across the Borders of Race, Gender, and Culture." Most of the participants were novelists (white and of color) writing in the voice of an "other"; the one poet, Suzanne Gardinier, whose then-recent book *The New World* (1993) included sections in the voices of Harriet Jacobs and immigrants, spoke eloquently of the way that love can and must be the vehicle for such "border crossings." But the panel was quite controversial, with more audience resistance than I had anticipated. If "identity" had established the right of all voices to be heard, it had also brought to the fore the related idea of "appropriation." I remember teaching a literary translation workshop at Oberlin College in the late 1990s and having some students voice doubts about whether such translation was legitimate at all, since it was clearly an appropriative activity.

When race finally became central to my own writing in the book-length poem *Blue Front*, which focused on a lynching my father had witnessed as a child, the issue of appropriation came up in the responses of some readers and listeners who would ask, for instance, "How does it feel to be writing African American history as a white

person?" That the question arose at all has a great deal to do with the reluctance of white poets to write about race, I think. In a wonderfully perceptive review of *Blue Front*, the African American poet Lynne Thompson notes that "white America has to come to grips with the same legacy as do African Americans"; but she recognizes that the "subject of lynching is one over which some African American writers, artists, and musicians have exerted a proprietary claim by virtue of having been the historical victims of this most brutal of injustices."⁴ Among the several answers that Major Jackson reports having received in answer to the question of "why the dearth . . . ?" is the belief that "writing about race . . . is not a white issue, but an issue for black people and other people of color." That has no doubt been true, for many of us; but there is external pressure as well.

Deeper than the fear of appropriation, though, is another fear. If the culture creates a sense that race is somehow not white people's territory, that sense is reinforced by a fear of "getting it wrong" if we *do* enter the territory. On the external level, this may be due to what Jackson calls "the presence of a perceived hypercritical audience." While praising the "few contemporary white poets" who "even at the risk of criticism from contrarian black poet-critics such as myself . . . are willing to take the risk of censure and disapproval," Jackson provides exactly the criticism he mentions when he discusses those poets, and in the process puts a lot of ways of "getting it wrong" on the table. This is extremely useful: if white poets are to deal with race, we need to know our limitations and mistakes. But the fact that they may well be noted—whereas silence will not—is surely an important factor here.

Still deeper than the fear of external censure, though, is an internal fear of getting it wrong. Several poets on the Rankine website speak of this. Jan Clausen mentions, in passing, her "own uncomfortable awareness that I'm not 'right' on race in all the ways I'd like to be";⁵ Sally Keith writes: "I can confess a fear of error. I can say that I want to be right. I also do not want to be spoken for, or to be misunderstood. All of this makes me pretty nervous."⁶ Rachel Zucker goes deeper: "I feel un-

In subsequent poems Cooper explores "this complex shame" and the legacy of her ancestors and their descendants, often using questions, as in "Being Southern": "Can any white person write this, whose ancestors once kept slaves?"⁸

In her "open letter," another possible topic Claudia Rankine poses is: "Do you believe race can be decontextualized, or in other words, can ideas of race be constructed separate from their history?" The implied "right" answer is of course No, and it seems telling, to me, that many of the white poets who have most explicitly and extensively racialized their writing have been ones (often women, it seems) who are able to call upon the racism in their family histories. Michelle Boisseau's *A Sunday in God-Years* (2009), Catherine Sasanov's *Had Slaves* (2010), Tess Taylor's *The Forage House* (2013), and Susan Tichy's work-in-progress *Trafficker: An Autobiography* all have as their starting and continuing points their ancestors' involvement with slavery. White people do not all have that background, of course—as I do not, at least to my knowledge. But my first big shift away from the "occasional" poem about race to a central focus occurred when, prior to writing *Blue Front*, I saw an exhibit of lynching postcards and discovered that the "hanging" my father told me he'd witnessed as a boy was actually a lynching attended by 10,000 people, and that the primary victim was an African American man. It took me a year to begin delving into that powerful intersection of racist history with my own family: I too was afraid of "getting it wrong," and perhaps of "appropriation" as well. But if I hadn't written about that lynching, I don't think I could have gone on writing.

For some poets for whom race has become an important subject, more recent personal experience has been a factor. Growing up in the South has often been part of this, as in the important explorations of the civil rights movement in books by the late Jake Adam York, or in poems in Kate Daniels' *A Walk in Victoria's Secret* (2010). Similarly, memories of the DC and LA race riots figure in the poems of Ailish Hopper, and Margaret Rozga's involvement in the Milwaukee civil rights movement is at the center of her *200 Nights and*

... we're all writing race whether we realize it or not.

able to speak about race, afraid of making mistakes. How horrible to be called out as racist, to seem racist, to be racist."⁷ To be racist: because of course, on some level, we all are.

How, then, do white poets get past these difficulties and enter the mine-filled territory of race? Recently and currently, a number of white poets have delved into the place where personal and public history converge. In a section of her 1994 book called "Family Stories" (which I later realized had given me a kind of license to explore my own family history), Jane Cooper ponders

... how to redress the past
how to relish yet redress
my sensuous, precious, upper-class,
unjust white child's past.

One Day (2009). Particularly stunning in York's work are the implicating ways he inserts himself into his poems, noting in one, for example, a "moment" when "I can mistake myself/for the redneck at the end of a joke."⁹

Not every white poet can easily find such connections, but almost everyone has stories. One of the things that most impressed me in reading through the "Open Letter Responses" was the number of white writers, some of whom had never written about race, who felt compelled to relate their own experiences. These accounts suggest that race weighs heavily on many white Americans, whether we have written about it before or not, and are themselves an important reason for us to be grateful to Claudia Rankine for her invitation.

Another connecting factor, also prominent in York's work, is black music. Jackson notes that white poets' "most popular strategy of representing blackness is to write about black music or some popular musician, entertainer, or sports figure"; "rarely," he says, do such poems "feature black lawyers, political leaders, and eminent scientists." True enough. But I would note that the connection with black music is often not a simple one for the (mostly male) white poets who explore it, including York, Kevin Coval, Bruce Smith, and Ira Sadoff: the poets' deep emotional involvement allows them to metaphorically and literally (though complexly and incompletely) cross (as Coval says) to the other "side of the city." That Coval's composite character "L-vis" "is someone who uses *and misuses* black cultural production, who is at times appropriate and *who appropriates*, who blurs the line and crosses it *carelessly*"¹⁰ (italics mine) reflects a deeply important awareness that race is not just something that happens "out there"; it's deeply imbedded in all of us, for good and for ill.

Coval's composite character suggests the depth of this; an earlier example is the more controversial minstrel figure who appears as a kind of alter ego in John Berryman's *Dream Songs*. Another earlier instance occurs in, and between, two poems in Denise Levertov's in *Relearning the Alphabet*, "The Gulf" and "The Gulf (II)." The first, written during the 1967 Detroit riots, depicts and then imagines a boy grabbing gladioli from a flower shop; the second begins with the first of two speakers saying: "My soul's a black boy with a long way to go, / a long way to know if black is beautiful."¹¹ The first poem is the sort that Jackson focuses on in his essay and that most people probably think of when they think of white poets writing about race: it depicts a person of color. In

this case it does so with indisputably fine intentions, and it is not content simply to describe; by imagining, it attempts to understand. The second is a more difficult poem, incorporating the introjection that I think is one of the deeper ways in which race is a part of white American experience: somewhere in most of us white folk is very likely a figure that corresponds to that "black boy." A more conscious version of this "other" appears in Kate Daniels' "Autobiography of a White Girl Raised in the South": "In any self-portrait from the 1950s, you'd have to see the me / that was not me: the black girl trudging along the side of the road / while I whizzed past in my daddy's car."¹²

But of course there was *not* such a literal figure for many of us white poets—and there may not be, either, in our poems. Major Jackson states that "Many white contemporary poets do not have black friends," or if they do, "those poems are not being written." I remember reading this and thinking that yowsie, by those standards I have no friends at all: how many times have my friends appeared in my poems?

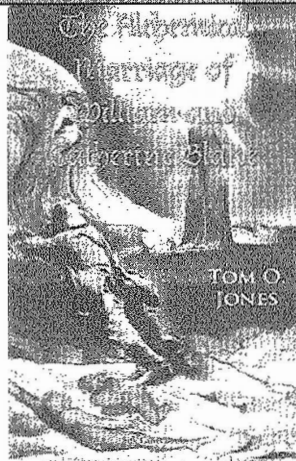
But he has a point. There are of course white poets whose families include and whose other intimates are persons of color, and who have accessed these relationships in their work, as Fanny Howe has done in both poetry and prose.¹³ But for the rest of us, the absence of non-white people may be telling in other ways. In her "open letter" response, Joy Katz acknowledges that, prior to adopting a Vietnamese child, "I was nothing, no-race, neutral," and recalls how the adoption made her aware of her whiteness; still later, she realized that "my poem-people were white" and couldn't be revised to be anything else.¹⁴ Rachel Zucker's response begins with a similar statement: "All the people in my poems are white"—though Zucker goes on to say that "that's not true," that

she "never say[s] otherwise" for "fear of seeming racist." Recovering from my "no-friends-at-all-in-my-poems" defense, I consider these statements and realize that my "poem-people"—who until recently were often third-person stand-ins for myself or someone like me, "a woman" or "a man"—are also mostly white, or at least not recognizably anything else.

In fact, I have realized in the years since I published *Blue Front*, my life itself has been extremely white. While I was writing that book, I was thinking mostly about my father, who became the imagined or questioned figure through whom I tried to observe the lynching. But at some point I began to consider what all of this had to do with me, a white woman living nearly 100 years later. Then the term "white papers" came into my consciousness and provided a title for what ultimately became a book of numbered but untitled poems that deal with race, particularly the issue of what it means to be white in a multi-racial society still haunted by its deeply racist past. A number of the poems focus on my very white Midwestern childhood; others involve historical explorations of the racial history of several places (all Northern) where I have lived; still others examine the uses we make of the words we so inaccurately call ourselves, particularly "white." Ten years ago I would have said that I had very little "racial" history. In writing this recent book, I learned a great deal about the history of race, including the history of whiteness, and a great deal about myself. My own experience has become racialized, in a conscious way, and whether that awareness is apparent in my poems or not, it has changed the way I live my life and see the world.

As I've said more than once, in talking about this subject, "I know that I still miss the obvious, avoid the difficult, speak from ignorance." That

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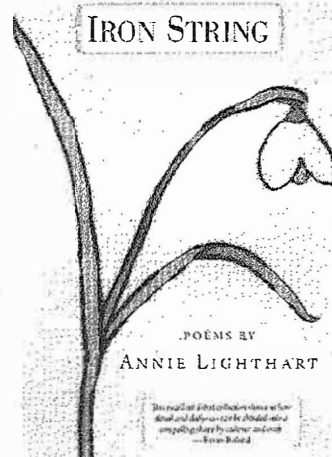
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will continue to be true, I am sure. But with every opportunity I have to explore this subject, I am drawn more deeply into it, and a little further away from the factual, tonal, and psychological errors and limitations that continue to be a significant part of who I am. As Ira Sadoff writes in response to the "open letter": "I'm not sure I've succeeded in writing a really good poem about race yet. I see holes in the vision and I learn from them."¹⁵ Or as Rachel Zucker says at the end of her deeply moving response: "This essay is one of the most uncomfortable things I've ever written. . . . I'm getting nowhere, I feel. Only making a spectacle of myself. Implicating myself, at least, for a start."

Perhaps that is the place where all white poets need to start, and to keep starting, over and over, until we get it, if not right, at least a little less wrong. ◀

MARTHA COLLINS is the author of *Day Unto Day* (Milkweed, 2014), *White Papers* (Pittsburgh, 2012), *Blue Front* (Graywolf, 2006), and four earlier collections of poems. This essay will appear in *A Sense of Regard: Essays on Poetry and Race*, ed. Laura McCullough, University of Georgia Press.

NOTES

1. Major Jackson, "A Mystifying Silence: Big and Black," 2007, *Poetry Daily*, http://poems.com/special_features/prose/essay_jackson.php. First published in *The American Poetry Review* (September/October 2007). Subsequent quotations from Jackson also refer to this source.
2. Claudia Rankine, open letter addressed to "friends," widely distributed on the Internet.
3. Claudia Rankine, "Open Letter Responses," 2012, Claudia Rankine website, http://www.newmediapoets.com/claudia_rankine/home.html.
4. Lynne Thompson, untitled review, *Poetry International* no. 12 (2008): 13, 12.

5. Jan Clausen, [untitled], Rankine website.
6. Sally Keith, "Open Letter," Rankine website.
7. Rachel Zucker, "Exempt, implicated," Rankine website. Subsequent quotations from Zucker also refer to this source.
8. Jane Cooper, *The Flashboat: Poems Collected and Reclaimed* (New York: Norton, 2000), 190, 208, 203.
9. Jake Adam York, *Persons Unknown* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois U., 2010), 13. See also York's *A Murmur of Starlings* (Southern Illinois U., 2008).
10. Kevin Coval, *L-vis Lives* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 12, xi.
11. Denise Levertov, *Relearning the Alphabet* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 15, 50.
12. Kate Daniels, *A Walk in Victoria's Secret* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U., 2010), 7.
13. See, for instance, "Introduction" to *The Wedding Dress* (Berkeley: U. of California, 2003) and *Tis of Thee* (Atelos, 2003). Thanks to Susan Tichy for directing me to these texts.
14. Joy Katz, [untitled], Rankine website.
15. Ira Sadoff, [untitled], Rankine website.

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