include Zsuzsanna Lénárt-Muszka's "The Weather and the Wake: Maternal Embodiment and Peril in Jesmyn Ward's Salvage the Bones," which explores the protagonist's pregnancy and motherhood, and Michelle Stork's "Experiencing the Environment from the Car: Human and More-than-Human Road Trippers in Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing," which offers an ecocritical and social evaluation of Ward's third novel. Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo's essay, "'Life had promised me something when I was younger': Biopolitics and the Rags to Riches Narrative in Jesmyn Ward's Men We Reaped," is one of many essays in this volume which focus on Ward's memoir. It puts forth the argument that Ward challenges the typical pattern found in US-American autobiographies where the author is seen as an independent entity. Instead, as Torres-Quevedo discusses in her essay, Ward introduces a biopolitical subject that is posthumanist in nature.

Overall, *Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays* greatly expands the field of literary criticism as well as the existing scholarship on Ward's works, both fictional and non-fictional. The essays are meticulously researched, thoughtfully written, and provide readers with a deeper understanding of Ward's work, offering unique insights into the complexity of Ward's writing and exploring both the already uncovered and for the first time unearthed meanings that emerge from it.

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Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric. By Virginia Jackson. Princeton UP, 2023, 304 pp.

Virginia Jackson's most recently published book, *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric* (2023), is widely praised as a vital re-examination of American poetics' origins and development. This appraisal is based on the fact that the author, the Endowed Chair of Rhetoric at the University of California, Irving, argues for the visibility of female Black US poets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More precisely, Jackson discusses how Phillis Wheatley Peters significantly shaped the development of modern American poetics by inventing so-called *deep design*. Besides intentionally including several lesser-known poets in her book, another important Black

female writer Jackson focuses on is Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. By selecting these two Black poets, whose names were dictated by slavery and patriarchy alike, she highlights their significance in the invention of the American lyric.

Jackson's primary focus on Black poets in North America is a rather innovative one, because she also suggests that poetry developed independently of a transatlantic influence at that time. Indeed, what makes Harper and Wheatley exceptional are the socio-political circumstances in which they pursued a writing career, since Black people (or, more precisely, mostly slaves) were prohibited by law from obtaining literacy skills in a great number of US states. Yet, by aspiring to be recognized as poets, Watkins Harper and especially the enslaved Wheatley reclaimed their agency and raised their voice in a world dominated by men and governed by principles of white supremacy. In addition, by specifically focusing on Black US poetics in her third project on lyrical theory, Jackson argues decidedly against the narrative of white poetics from the eighteenth century onward and, thus, critically examines this very white idea of lyric that is a raced illusion.

Before Modernism is also a book-length response to John Keene's criticism, which he raised after reading Jackson and Yopie Prins's *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (2014): Why "is the academic version of modern lyric theory represented by that anthology so White?" (qtd. in "Virginia Jackson"). According to Jackson, she considered this substantial criticism that in turn resulted in a rethinking process. In fact, what Jackson had originally intended to be a book about almost all-white nineteenth-century American poetry became one about Black poets' interventions in public American poetry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (8).

Before Modernism has a tripartite structure. Jackson begins to trace the dialectical process by initially concentrating on the work by Black poets in the aforementioned centuries. Afterwards, she focuses on the early nineteenth-century poetics of whiteness. Lastly, the racialization of Black and white poetics in the middle of the nineteenth century is discussed by intertwining them. According to Jackson, "[t]his structure places the poetics of whiteness in a secondary rather than primary position, emphasizing the ways in which lyricization of early American poetics was an uneven and unfinished process" (9). It is not so much the intentional marginalization of white poets that represents a strength of *Before Modernism* but the discussion of both Black and white poets in the context of white supremacy and white fragility. By opting for this focus, Jackson aims "to retell the history of American poetics as the history of gendered and racialized lyricization" (54).

Before Modernism provides an answer to Keene's legitimate and thought-provoking criticism, which is echoed by Dorothy Wang and Sonya Posmentier (qtd. in "Virginia Jackson"), regarding the white canon of poetry, a criticism voiced in the earlier

question that Jackson also explicitly addresses in chapter one (52-53). She also explains that she capitalizes the terms *Black* and *White* in order to show her awareness of how systemic racism and white supremacy has affected US-American poetry. Even though capitalizations certainly do not solve these problems, they aim to emphasize "the intransigent mess of the discourses attached to race in America" (18).

A vital aspect in this context is another consideration put forward by Jackson: the use of names. As a scholar of historical poetics, she emphasizes that "these Black women poets [, e.g., Wheatley and Watkins Harper] will *never have names of their own*" (xiii, my emphasis). Here, Jackson hints at the phenomenon of Black people not knowing their ancestors' names because they were robbed of them when enslaved. Thus, being given names dictated by slavery (e.g., the name of slave ships that brought them to the 'New World' or their master's name) is a fate not only Wheatley and Watkins had to bear, but it also negatively affected generations after them. Jackson suggests that, although Wheatley and Watkins Harper "invented American lyric, the genres of their proper names have not yet been invented" (xiii).

In the preface of *Before Modernism*, Jackson links Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory and mother of the nine muses, to the invention of American lyric by discussing Wheatley's lyric poem "On Recollection," which was published in her collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) and she wrote while in her teens as a slave. In "On Recollection," the poet, who informally addresses the muse with the nickname "Mneme," does not ask her to stand in her place as, for instance, white male British Romantic authors typically did. On the contrary, Wheatley asks "memory to tell a story that has yet to be told: the story of the invention of American lyric" (2). Jackson describes a time in the history of American poetics that has not been so thoroughly discussed when compared to the history of British or French poetry at that time. The aim of *Before Modernism* is "to give an alternative account of the ways in which early Black poets inspired the direction that American poetics has taken over the past two and a half centuries" (3). This motivation explicitly questions the narrative of the unidirectional influence of European poetry on American poetry and also corrects the narrative that American poetry began with Whitman's poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Black poets, who followed in Wheatley's footsteps, from Watkins Harper to Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Audrey Lorde to Amanda Gorman inspired and continue to inspire the direction of American poetics.

To analyze poems such as "On Recollection," Jackson applies what she calls a "slow reading practice." This formal technique derives from historical prosody and historical poetics and "focuses on unspoken incidental or eccentric details that tend to emerge from poems when you linger with them long enough" (8). By resorting to this

technique, the author intends to answer the subsequent question: "How did the poetry of the many become the poetry of the one over the course of the late eighteenth and first decade of the nineteenth centuries?" (59).

In chapter one, "What History Does to Us," Jackson introduces another and, when compared to Wheatley, significantly less-recognized poet: Ann Plato. At the center of attention in this section is her abolitionist poem "To the First of August," which was included in her only publication *Essays; Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Poetry* (date unknown). According to Jackson, Plato's poem is rather challenging to read and analyze, since it poses only few interpretive challenges for readers and does not express or arouse much emotion (16). Against the background of the previously mentioned poem, Jackson investigates the role of personal abstraction within historical poetics and lyrical theory.

After discussing the mother of the nine muses, Mnemosyne, in the preface and examining Britannia, "a giant feminized White supremacist being" (30–31) in chapter one, Jackson focuses in chapter two, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Racism: Pierpont, Douglas, Whitfield – and Horton," on Apostrophe. The latter is a key Romantic figure of address in modern lyric theory that has been central in the literary oeuvre of Plato's fellow American Romantics. Here, Jackson examines the use and meaning of apostrophic poetic address in greater detail.

Chapter three, "Personification: On Phillis Wheatley's Memory," returns to Wheatley's poem that she introduced in the preface of *Before Modernism*. By reverting to the poem that became "On Recollection," Jackson aims "to consider the many ways in which her [Wheatley's] poetics saw the threat of Romantic apostrophe coming in the privileged eighteenth-century figure of personification" (60).

Chapter four, "Prosody: William Cullen Bryant and the White Romantic Lyric," deals with the poetry of "the American Wordsworth," William Cullen Bryant, and the Romantic prosody this poet borrowed from his transatlantic fellow writers, the British Romantics. Besides influencing the development of American cultural institutions, e.g., the New York Public Library, the creation of the transatlantic white Romantic lyric in the early nineteenth century was one of his most important ideas (61).

Jackson's surprising comparison of the use of the nineteenth-century figure of the Poetess in the works of the Black poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in chapter five, "The Poetess: Frances Ellen Watkins, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper," is innovative. Even though both deployed the trope of the Poetess in their poetry, what clearly distinguishes them is how they adopt it differently, which is carefully outlined and examined.

The closing chapter, "Coda: The Prophecy," offers a final lesson to the reader when discussing Watkins Harper's third poem "Ethiopia" in her first collection of poetry, *Forest Leaves* (c. 1845), which was considered to be lost for more than a hundred years. Jackson's decision to end *Before Modernism* with a slow reading of this poem is quite significant. This is because her main line of argumentation in this book is the following:

> [W]e do *not* know how to read a work like *Forest Leaves*, since the norms of lyric reading that Watkins and other early Black poets saw coming now make the work hard to see, even when the evidence of very different special practices, very different relational aesthetics, is staring right at us. (237)

Yet, at the same time, poets like Watkins and their oeuvre can also educate the reader to understand and interpret those social practices and relational aesthetics (238). Finally, Jackson returns to the beginning of her book. While "On Recollection" asks Mnemosyne to tell the story of the invention of American lyric that has yet to be told, "Ethiopia" represents a redress. It "stretches towards a rearranged future in which genres of poems and genres of persons could disappear or be changed at any moment by a muse, by a goddess, . . . by an American Lyric" (241).

Before Modernism re-embeds late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American poetics in the transatlantic history and theory of poetics and examines how especially Black poetics, as opposed to white poetics, provided the conditions for the development of the American lyric (17). Not only does Jackson argue for highlighting nineteenth-century American poetics, but she also comes to terms with the fact that the idea of American lyric is essentially a racialized and gendered illusion (19). A great strength of this book is that the author reflects on her past work and the criticism it has received and indeed tries to address the latter in *Before Modernism* by using it as a starting point for her own anti-racism journey. By examining primarily female Black poets, like Wheatley and Watkins, she outlines how Black poets inspired the direction of the modern American lyric. Moreover, well-known past and present representatives of Black writing in the USA and Great Britain, such as James Baldwin, Kara Walker, Zadie Smith, Ibram X. Kendi, Saidiya Hartman, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, are continuously referenced in order to integrate their voices and perspectives in *Before Modernism* as well as to support Jackson's line of argumentation. For instance, she incorporates phrases from Kendi and Hartman so as to use terminology explicitly defined by members of Black communities.

If there are limitations of this book, one can criticize that Jackson only discusses a very specific period in American poetry history and does not include enough poems from each poet. This is because of the method Jackson employs, i.e., slow reading, when examining the selected poems. This technique, on the one hand, encourages a

thorough analysis of individual literary texts, but, on the other, prevents a discussion of a larger corpus of poems per poet. Nonetheless, these reservations cannot or can only minimally eclipse the considerable benefits of this book on the invention of modern American poetics in which Black poets took a pioneering role.

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