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1

What History Does to Us

“We do view”

“As Greece had a Plato why may we not have a Platoess?” So James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of the Colored Congregational Church in Hartford, Connecticut, artfully introduces Ann Plato’s *Essays; Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Poetry*, printed for the author in June, 1841.¹ By “we,” Pennington means that “our young authoress justly appeals to *us*, her own people, (though not exclusively,) to give her success” (xix). Why “not exclusively”? “I am not in the habit of introducing myself or others to notice by the adjective ‘colored,’ &c.,” Pennington writes, “but it seems proper that I should just say here that my authoress is a colored lady” (xvii). Because Pennington launches in print the print debut of “*our* young authoress,” he acknowledges that the signature anonymity of publication, the fact that the objects of his and her address are by definition indeterminate, may not work in their favor: *we* may know who we are, but *you* could be anyone.² Simultaneously avowing and disavowing the genres of personal and impersonal address that Pennington understands the book’s readers will attribute to both of them, he also introduces the enduring problem of racialized and sexualized reading: whoever you are opening Plato’s book in the nineteenth century or inside this book in the twenty-first, you may or may not be one of *us*. Despite the fact that, as Frances Smith Foster writes, Plato probably “wrote for, and her book was marketed to, black people, especially young black girls,” what Pennington’s introductory remarks (and my introductory remarks) emphasize is not only the wayward address of print publication but the grammar of unremitting predication that Fred Moten describes as the “particular kind of failure” associated with blackness: “a constant economy and mechanics of fugitive making where the subject is hopelessly troubled by, in being emphatically detached

from, the action whose agent it is supposed to be.”³ That predication and alienation of personal agency is also, of course, a classic description of the particular kind of failure associated with being a woman. Prefacing a book full of prefaces, Pennington imagines his subject as a new female philosopher of color who might be able to imagine in turn what no one else yet has: a scene of reading that would not be a scene of subjection, a way to suspend the economy and mechanics instantiated in fictions of race and gender, a genre of address or even a pronoun that could include all of us, a world in which things would be different.⁴

But that imaginary, intimately common world is not this one, and not even poetry—*especially* not poetry—can make it so.⁵ As Pennington writes, warming to his subject, “the opinion has too far prevailed, that the talent for poetry is *exclusively* the legacy of nature” (xviii). Again, whatever is posited “*exclusively*”—race, tradition, individual talent, nature, sex, publicity—necessitates further qualification, and that necessity is infuriating. According to Pennington (echoing Wordsworth, Mill, Hegel, and a host of other theorists of Romantic poetics), “there is no doubt that the talent for poetry is in a high degree *attainable*,” but the balance between nature and art is tricky: while Plato “has done well by what nature has done for her, in trying what art will add . . . the fact is, this is the only way to show the fallacy of that stupid theory, that *nature has done nothing but fit us for slaves, and that art cannot unfit us for slavery!*” (xviii). This *us* is not an *us* like the others. This *us* is the subject and object of stupid theories of poetics (and of nature and of personhood of everything else) that your misreading of *us* makes possible. This *us* is not something even a Platoess can redeem. Can any poet escape the perils of lyric reading?

If to read lyrically is to confuse the poem with the person, then what Pennington is saying—and what Plato will exemplify—is that we have a problem. Whatever we think of the then teenaged Ann Plato (whoever *we* are) will determine what we think of her poems. Yet few of us now think about Ann Plato or her poems at all, and few of us ever have. As Kenny J. Williams writes, Plato’s poems are hard to recover (though the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers 1988 edition of Plato’s book that Williams introduces is evidence of the attempt to do so) because “to some readers they might seem to be simply exercises in versification” (xlvi).⁶ On this view, Plato was too young and too early and too undeveloped to make the transition that Mary Loeffelholz has described as the signature move of nineteenth-century women poets “from school to salon”: “a shift from reading, reciting, writing, and publishing poetry in the didactic context of primary and secondary

schooling to reading, reciting, and publishing poetry in the emergent later nineteenth-century venues of autonomous high culture.”⁷ Unlike the even earlier teenaged “‘colored,’ &c” Wheatley, whose poetry she read and rehearsed, Plato did not become an international or national or even local sensation on the basis of her first and only published book. As far as we know, she became a schoolteacher, at least for a while, and never published anything again. In any case, the book she did publish was slight (about six by four inches), cost about twenty-five cents, seems not to have been advertised, and it is unlikely that many of the limited number of copies “printed for the author” in Hartford were ever sold.⁸

There are definitely limitations to reading nineteenth-century American poems—especially abolitionist poems—“as if they were written or somehow destined for the readers of a *book*,” as McGill has stressed.⁹ There are also limitations to reading all books of poems as if they were written or somehow destined to be the same kind of thing, not least because, as Joanna Brooks has written, nineteenth-century books were not created equal, since “conditions of chronic discontinuity and disruption endemic to communities of color by reason of political and economic exploitation affect books and book cultures as well.”¹⁰ Plato’s local publication for her community cannot be compared to the fancy London publication and transatlantic circulation of Wheatley’s volume or, on the other hand, to the pamphlets, newspaper pages, broadsides, speeches, and manuscripts that, as McGill also emphasizes, were the popular media of poetry’s nineteenth-century circulation. Yet part of the reason that Plato’s poems may have failed to achieve the success for which Pennington prepared them is also that they are so generically impersonal, so tailor-made for the print public sphere. If Plato was a practitioner of “black aesthetics” in Evie Shockley’s sense of a poet “whose subjectivity is produced by the experience of identifying or being interpellated as ‘black’ in the U.S.,” a poet “actively working out a poetics in the context of a racist society” (and she was), the invisibility of that subjectivity within the aesthetically conventional, often feminized nineteenth-century genres of her work has made that practice hard to see.¹¹ Pennington may have been anxious that readers would judge Plato’s book by the age, race, and sex of its “authoress,” but later readers have worried that the book makes Ann Plato impossible to find. In Plato’s twenty poems, the subject is so emphatically detached from the action whose agent it is supposed to be that she hardly seems to be there at all.

Consider the first stanza of “To the First of August,” a poem so generic that one of the few critics who has commented on it is reduced to saying that Plato

“certainly exhibits no passionate or elated response in writing about the end of slavery in the British Caribbean,” the event that is the poem’s occasion:¹²

Britannia’s isles proclaim,
That freedom is their theme;
And we do view those honor’d lands
With soul-delighting mien.¹³

One reason that this is such a difficult poem to read is that it looks so easy. Its difficulty is nothing like the difficulty associated with British Romantic lyric (say, with Keats’s great odes), since Plato’s poem is difficult because it poses little hermeneutic challenge and neither expresses nor solicits much emotion. Whoever *we* are in the quatrain’s third line, the reason that our identity is confusing is neither interpretive nor affective, exactly. This difficulty feels historical, but not Romantic. The common meter lines appear so metrically facile that their very facility becomes their difficulty, and if the assonance, or off-rhyme between “theme” and “mien” is hard to read, that is not because one is moved by it or wonders what it means. (Even Britannia seems to be doing a school assignment here.) That difficult facility is thus also nothing like the exacting and fragmented modern poems that Charles Bernstein jokingly ascribes to “the early years of the last century, when a great deal of social dislocation precipitated the outbreak of 1912, one of the best known epidemics of difficult poetry.”¹⁴ As literary critics became professional interpreters of sophisticated Romantic bafflement and doctors tending to the modern outbreak of broken form, they left everyday poems like Plato’s behind in the American nineteenth century where they belonged.¹⁵ The British-Romanticism-to-American-modernism-to-post-modernism, Shelley-to-Stevens-to-Ashbery narrative of the history of American poetry is still so common that not only relatively obscure poets like Plato but also famous poets like Wheatley, Sigourney, Bryant, Horton, Longfellow, Jackson, Harper, and Dunbar have been left out of it.

Of course, all-White-mostly-male histories of American poetry that pretty much skip the nineteenth century have been and are still being written, and when Terrance Hayes begins one of his *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* with the lines, “The black poet would love to say his century began / With Hughes, or God forbid, Wheatley,” he invokes a century of histories of African American poetry that struggle to incorporate Black poets writing before 1900.¹⁶ Almost half a century ago, Sherman wrote that, despite the foundational histories of Black poetry written in the twentieth century by Benjamin Brawley, James Weldon Johnson, Redding, Sterling Brown, Jean

Wagner, and others, “Afro-Americans of the nineteenth century are the invisible poets of our national literature”—and, as I began this book by suggesting, as far as the stories we tell about the history and theory of American poetics go, this is still very much the case.¹⁷ Rarely if ever is the intricate relation between the poetics of the nineteenth century and the poetics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries narrated in its raced and gendered complexity. This book puts late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American poetics back into the transatlantic history and theory of poetics, but not by nationalizing that poetics or by aligning it with Romantic lyric theory or by making nineteenth-century American poets harbingers of modern “social dislocation,” and not by separating poets into raced and gendered traditions. Transatlanticism, nationalism, Romanticism, modernism, the Black radical poetic tradition, the apparently dominant tradition of American poetic whiteness, the emergence of the category of World Poetry, and feminized and masculinized poetics are intertwined in this book, difficult to extricate from one another because their development was so mutually informing, so collaterally formed.

And *that* is because Ann Plato and the poets who preceded and succeeded her in the United States in the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries made retroactive ideas of national poetics and Anglophilic Romantic poetics and comparative modern poetics and definitely raced and gendered poetics possible in the first place by inventing the modern poetic genre we now think of as lyric—or, since almost all poetry is now understood as lyric, by inventing the genre we now think of as poetry by inventing the idea that poetry (unlike prose) could *be* a single genre.¹⁸ Not incidentally, the American nineteenth century also witnessed the invention of the idea that White, Black, Indigenous, Spanish American, Asian American, and many other people could be single genres (or kinds, or races, or cultures, or ethnicities), which is why those terms are capitalized throughout this book. As Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, the point of such capitalization is to emphasize that race is a social rather than a natural entity: “White people don’t deserve a lower-case *w* and shouldn’t be allowed to claim it,” Appiah quotes the philosopher Sally Haslanger as arguing; since “racial identities were not discovered but created . . . we must all take responsibility for them. Don’t let them disguise themselves as common nouns and adjectives.” While capitalizing White risks echoing the practice of White supremacists, Appiah argues that “you could argue that it’s the other way around: If the capitalization of *White* became standard among anti-racists, . . . Supremacists would have to find another way to enoble themselves.”¹⁹ This is not to say that capitalization solves the problem.

Far from it! Capitalization emphasizes the intransigent mess of the discourses attached to race in America. It is also not to say that there were not lyric poems before the nineteenth century or before America or before modern racialization—of course there were. It is only to say that as all racial designations have been historically constructed in relation to the discourse of White supremacy, so all poetic designations have been historically constructed in relation to a lyricized idea of what poetry is and was. Neither whiteness nor lyric naturally or inevitably became a transcendent idea about people or poems.

On the contrary, while most poetry is now thought of as lyric, not all poetry has always been understood as lyric, and lyric has not always been understood exclusively (as Pennington might say) as *our* personal expression. As I wrote in my definition of lyric for the most recent edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012),

In Western poetics, almost all poetry is now characterized as *lyric*, but this has not always been the case. Over the last three centuries, *lyric* has shifted its meaning from adjective to noun, from a quality in poetry to a category that can seem to include nearly all verse. The ancient, medieval, and early modern verse we now think of as lyric was made up of a variety of songs or short occasional poems. Since the eighteenth century, brevity, subjectivity, passion, and sensuality have been the qualities associated with poems called *lyric*; thus, in modernity the term is used for a kind of poetry that expresses personal feeling (G.W.F. Hegel) in a concentrated and harmoniously arranged form (E. A. Poe, S. T. Coleridge) and that is indirectly addressed to the private reader (William Wordsworth, John Stuart Mill). A modern invention, this idea of lyric has profoundly influenced how we understand all poetic genres.²⁰

The encyclopedia entry calls for such general claims, though these claims may seem to have more to do with the long and uneven process of lyricization than with *the lyric* as such. I do think that ideas of lyric are differential and historically contingent, made rather than given, and in the entry I pointed to some of the complexity of those differences and contingencies in various European and especially anglocentric periods and places. I now realize that since the *Princeton Encyclopedia* is an American publication devoted to a comparative perspective, my definition also inherited a racist idea of lyric from the nineteenth-century American poetics that definition said nothing about.

This is partially because, as you will have noticed from the smattering of men's names in the definition's first paragraph, part of that inheritance means

thinking of *the* lyric (especially “in Western poetics”) as White, or really on not acknowledging that such thinking is racialized (which comes to the same thing), even when one is trying to complicate the definite article. In this book, I will show that this very White idea of lyric is in fact a raced illusion that was composed in response to Black and Indigenous figures in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American poetics, but it was also an illusion firmly grounded in a history of American lyricization in which Black poets framed it as a raced and gendered imaginary. Indigenous poets did, too, especially by the end of the nineteenth century, as did Spanish American and, later, Asian American poets, but I focus here on the dialectical relation between Black and White poetics because that dialectic was so foundational to the poetry of the early nineteenth century—and because I cannot claim to make this book comprehensive. As Kirsten Silva Gruesz has shown, nineteenth-century Latinx poetic identities were “grounded in a larger web of transamerican perceptions and contacts” rather than in “lost texts from the Spanish borderlands,” and in this book I also hope to show that many versions of Black poetics were internal rather than marginal to the larger web of American poetics.²¹ As we shall see in chapters 4 and 5, Hispanophiles William Cullen Bryant and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow laid much of the institutional groundwork for nineteenth-century White American poetics, and transamerican, Indigenous, and Black “perceptions and contacts” were entwined with one another from the beginning. Manu Samitri Chander has called the nineteenth-century colonial poets writing as subjects of the British Empire “Brown Romantics,” and has suggested that “the formal characteristics of Brown Romanticism that initially struck the critics as derivative and imitative actually served to expose the Eurocentric racism informing the very tradition in which they wrote.”²² I would like to suggest something similar here about BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) American Romanticism, but especially about the poets involved in what Matt Sandler has called “the Black Romantic revolution” in the nineteenth century. While the history of American racialization certainly cannot be reduced to an image in black and white, in this book I am concerned with the ways in which “the afterlife of slavery” (to use Saidiya Hartman’s phrase) emerged from and in and as the history of American poetics that began when slavery was still very much alive.

I take Stephen Best’s point that while “attempts to root blackness in the horror of slavery” may feel “intuitively correct,” they also invite us “to long for the return of a sociality” most modern readers may never have experienced, especially not as a collective that can be designated in and as the first-person plural.²³ But late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Black poets were

often even more skeptical of the communal identity assumed by that first-person plural than later readers may be. Because they participated in a history in which collective identities and the poetic genres attached to them were in the process of being formed, poets were the architects as well as the critics of raced versions of collective representation—and those versions often responded to and included writers composing in Spanish and French or were racialized by way of Indigenous and Orientalized figures. Racialization and lyricization worked hand in hand to become Black and White, but neither the history of poetics nor the history of race began as a coherent genre of either poems or persons.

That is because in the first half of the nineteenth century, when slavery was not yet in its afterlife, many poets gradually and unevenly, at different times and in different places and for a variety of reasons, modified popular verse genres that addressed a wide range of real and imaginary publics (ballads that invoked and addressed a “folk”; hymns that addressed a congregation; “sorrow songs” that addressed the enslaved; national anthems that addressed White male citizens; elegies that addressed mourners; odes that addressed monuments, occasions, parks, stars, or the wind; gallows confessions that addressed witnesses to the execution; drinking songs that addressed drunkards or antidrunkards; epistles that addressed real or fictive correspondents, and so on and on), collapsing (or blurring, or combining, or abstracting) them into a literary, lyricized idea of poetry as the expression of a fictive speaker addressing him/her/their/itself to everyone and no one, that replaced the genre of the poem with the genre of the person (or, as in the case of birds or stars, with personified nonpersons). Black poets and women poets saw early and often that lyric’s abstract communal subjective tendencies came at their expense. They pushed back by demonstrating the alienation of that abstraction from historical persons, and it is this response that has shaped modern ideas of lyric as what Adorno would call “the expression of a social antagonism.” Of course, though this is the second time I have invoked Adorno’s useful idea, a German Marxist philosopher did not sum up the poetics of the American nineteenth century. Actually, the social antagonisms that informed nineteenth-century American poetics made the modern lyric Adorno had in mind pale in comparison, which is why we need a Plato to show us the way back to them. The invention of American lyric may have begun as a White supremacist project, as White poets in the nineteenth century constructed a lyricized poetics of universal personal representation, but American lyric was actually shaped and delivered to modernism by poets who had more in common with Ann Plato than with, say, Ralph Waldo Emer-

son. This is because it was the inherent conflict, the dialectical relation between Black and White poetics in the nineteenth century that came to shape the history and theory of American poetry for the next two hundred years. As that conflict eventuated in the transformation of many genres of verse address into one speaking genre, Black poets like Plato transformed the default whiteness of that genre's capacious speech.

"The rising race"

The genres of Plato's address in "To the First of August"—hymn, ode, anthem, "First of August" abolitionist poem, transatlantic Romantic poem—don't merge into a song of herself, into the utterance of a single speaker or a singular collective. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's theory that Black women writers "speak in tongues" in the sense that they "speak in a plurality of voices as well as in a multiplicity of discourses" helps to explain why not, but it is also not clear that Plato is the one speaking here at all.²⁴ Unlike Frederick Douglass's fierce abolitionist Fourth of July address marking the date to which the popular genre of "First of August" poems were an antithetical response, Plato's poem never explicitly says, "The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common."²⁵ Instead, the poem makes what is common more difficult to locate. In the first stanza, it seems safe to assume that this quasi-Pindaric ode commemorating a public occasion addresses a public the poet also represents: as people considered "'colored' &c.," we know that while some of us (members of the Talcott Street, or Colored Congregational Church in Hartford, for instance) may be free, most of us in the United States in 1841 were not. But as the poem goes on, the stability of this *we* begins to waver:

And unto those they held in gloom,
Gave ev'ry one their right;
They did disdain fell slavery's shade,
And trust in freedom's light.

Then unto ev'ry British blood,
Their noble worth revere,
And think them ever noble men,
And like them, hence appear.

The possible allusion to Wheatley in Plato's use of "gloom" to characterize the state of enslavement makes that state seem bygone and poetic (since in Wheatley's "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England," "The land of error, and *Egyptian* gloom" describes the poet's free life in Africa rather than her enslaved life in America), but the cancelled rhyme between "gloom" and "shade" is enough to let us know that this history is unfinished (and in any case, in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "gloom" was common poetic parlance for enslavement). As "they" have the power to issue proclamations that "give ev'ry one" the right everyone should already have had, "we" seem to have no such power.

Or no such personhood. The personification of "Britannia's isles" means that not only can they "proclaim" their "theme," but they can also change their collective mind. And what can *we* do? "Fell slavery" shamefully possesses "shade," freedom redemptively possesses "light," but what do *we* possess? We are asked to pay tribute to "ev'ry British blood" (to every Anglo person?), but how could we "like them, hence appear"? Perhaps this is an instance of what Ivy Wilson calls Plato's "latent concern with tone"; perhaps it is an instance of what Frank Wilderson III calls (after Orlando Patterson) "social death," the in-between state that Claudia Rankine describes as a way of being "there-but-not-there . . . in a historically antiblack society"; perhaps it is a symptom of what Joseph Rezek calls "the racialization of print."²⁶ Perhaps what Sylvia Wynter would have called "this referent-*we*" has shifted from naturally to poetically marked (though "blood" blurs such literal/figural distinctions), since to be like these White British men, White American men would need to abolish slavery.²⁷ Yet "hence appear" stops short of action, and in the next two stanzas our collective agency leaps across the Atlantic in a single bound:

And when on Britain's isles remote,
We're then in freedom's bounds,
And while we stand on British ground,
You're free,—you're free,—resounds.

Lift ye that country's banner high,
And may it nobly wave,
Until beneath the azure sky,
Man shall be no more a slave.

This *we* appears continuous with the *we* of the first stanza, so rather than viewing British emancipation from afar, either we have emigrated to the British

West Indies or we can fancy ourselves there. But even in this fantasy future, it is not our voice but someone else's (Britannia's? the voice of the islands themselves? a sound emanating from "British ground"?) that says we are free. All we can do in response is to become British citizens of the mind, since this speech act only works within those "bounds," as if "that country's banner" did not signify an empire but an "azure," impersonal human condition in which "Man shall be no more a slave."

This line is jarring because of the ontological shift entailed in its exchange of personal pronouns. "It must be seen that the ordinary definition of the personal pronouns as containing the three terms *I*, *you*, and *he*, simply destroys the notion of 'person,'" the linguist Emile Benveniste avers, since "'person' belongs only to *I/you* and is lacking in *he*."²⁸ The address that enacts emancipation ("*You're free—you're free—*") happens a world away from the categorical statement about what "Man shall be." Can a man be "a slave" and a person? What about a woman who, like Ann Plato, was not enslaved but was also not a legally recognized person? And what about the first-person plural? If emancipation is enacted only in "that country," then are *we* persons, or are we like *he*, some version of pronoun that "simply destroys the notion of 'person'"? Or is Plato suggesting that what Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (after Sylvia Wynter) has called "the violence of humanization or the burden of inclusion into a racially hierarchized universal humanity" is too great an imposition, that the land of "the azure sky" may be preferable to being rendered such a legally designated emancipated person?²⁹ The least we can say is that whoever or whatever utters this categorical universal proclamation, it is not the voice that speaks in the poem's last two stanzas:

And oh! When youth's extatic hour,
When winds and torrents foam,
And passion's flowing noon are past,
To bless that free born home;

Then let us celebrate the day,
And lay the thought to heart,
And teach the rising race the way,
That they may not depart.

If we have no voice to "proclaim" our own freedom, then perhaps in a generation we will be able to "celebrate the day" that slavery ended an ocean and a lifetime away, in turn "teaching" the next generation—what, exactly?

Katherine Clay Bassard suggests that “as a member of a truly autonomous community of free blacks, Plato envisions the transformation of society as a function of time.”³⁰ “The way” certainly sounds promising, and given the hymnal meter, decidedly Congregationalist. But are *we* “the rising race”? If so, why and how have we become “they”? There is something stranger than history in this further pronominal shift, especially because the reason we are teaching them the way is so “they may not depart.” Depart from where? Where to? Again, we are caught between pronouns that personalize and depersonalize at the same time. Are “they” now in the British Empire or in America? Has emancipation leaped back across the ocean in this speculative future? If the “us” in the first line of the final stanza is held at a temporal arm’s-length distance by that line’s “Then . . .,” the “they” of that stanza’s last line is held at a much greater epistemic distance from “us.” Are *we* or *they* “the rising race”? Both our pedagogical position and the definite article disidentify *us* from this abstraction, though the introduction of “race” into what has so far been a discourse of nationalism, slavery, unnamed whiteness, and freedom is enough to shake us up. “Race” is a term that Pennington went out of his way not to use, and for good reason: his invocation of the surplus adjective “colored &c.” emphasizes the arbitrary imposition of racialization and its proliferating definitional qualifications, while “race” was a term newly essentialized by all kinds of theories by 1841. As Nicholas Hudson writes, over the long eighteenth century, “‘race’ gradually mutated from its original sense of a people or single nation, linked by origin, to its later sense of a biological subdivision of the human species.” By the mid-nineteenth century, according to Hudson, “‘race’ meant more than just a ‘lineage’ or even a variation of the human species induced by climate or custom. It meant a fixed disparity in the physical and intellectual make-up of different peoples.”³¹ In other words, by 1841 “race” was a racist term, a symptom of what James Brewer Stewart calls the “harsh new spirit of modern racial essentialism.”³²

That point has been made many times in many ways, but as history would have it, James Pennington was one of the first Black intellectuals to make it in print. Pennington escaped from enslavement at nineteen, was active in abolitionist circles in Brooklyn, New York, was the first Black student to attend Yale, was involved in the *Amistad* case, performed the marriage between Frederick Douglass and Anna Murray shortly after Douglass’s escape, and, like William Wells Brown, later took refuge from the consequences of the Fugitive Slave Law in Scotland, England, and Europe, lecturing widely (and thus enacting the transatlantic divide that was the subject of Plato’s poem). In 1841, the same year that he introduced Plato’s writings, Pennington published *A Text Book of*

the Origin and History, &c. &c. of the Colored People, in which he is at pains to disprove what Ibram Kendi calls “the curse theory” that claimed that Africans were descendants of Hamm or Cain, and thus “stamped from the beginning.”³³ Then, as Britt Rusert has shown, Pennington moves from the older biblical defense of slavery and monogenesis to the new theories of polygenesis, crafting “an ethnology” of Africanness that runs counter to the racial science that emerged in the 1830s.³⁴ Though it begins as a biblical refutation and scientific critique, Pennington’s book ultimately becomes an ambitious challenge to the idea of race itself. But that did not make Pennington an advocate for what might now be called the category of the post-racial—far from it. Pennington would agree with Ta-Nehisi Coates that “race is the child of racism, not the father,” but one hundred and seventy-five years before Coates wrote that sentence, Pennington was worried about the implications of such genealogical metaphors for critical race theory.³⁵ The book joined a growing chorus of responses by Black thinkers to the antiblack theories embedded in Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, but as Rusert suggests, the most striking thing about Pennington’s book is its “highly imaginative and speculative act of reconstructing kinship,” its pitched refusal of the tenets of racialization and at the same time its construction of a web of intimate social relations for the collective vulnerability of people whose lived experience was structured by those theories.³⁶ We will return to responses to Jefferson’s racism and to those theories in chapter 3 of this book, but for now the important point is that for his part, Pennington was devoted to defining a *we* that our Platoes could represent between or in spite of them.

So why does the last line of Plato’s poem embrace the “fixed disparity” of the racial concept Pennington so strenuously argued against? I don’t think it does, exactly, but this line does tell us a lot about the desire for such categories, for the poetic voice of “a people” represented by an exemplary person, for variations on what Katie Trumpener has called a “bardic nationalism.”³⁷ As Best has written, “a communitarian impulse runs deep within black studies,” and a communitarian impulse certainly runs deep within the history of poetics.³⁸ But that impulse should not lead us to think that the *we* of Plato’s poem is racially or poetically continuous with, well, with *us*. Since as Hortense Spillers writes, “the personal pronouns are offered in the service of a collective function,” the trick is to understand the collective they represent.³⁹ Because in 1841 the twinned processes of lyricization and racialization were taking their mutually informed shapes but were not yet fully accomplished, Plato’s poem was not a bardic performance of what everyone with whom she identified or

whom she represented felt or believed, nor was it made of a set of strategies the poet adopted in order to express her personal objection to and departure from received ideas. While Pennington and others were trying to unravel the new scientific racial essentialism in their speculative versions of what Rusert calls “fugitive science,” Plato and others were subtly making the racist discourses embedded in poetic genres themselves more fugitive.

Common meter was itself a discourse that divided popular from elite verse, folk from literary composition in 1841.⁴⁰ By Plato’s time, it was associated with both Black and White psalmody. As her poem took the meter of congregational song, so Plato’s discourse addressed the shifting collective identities that metrical discourse itself made manifest. “They may not depart” because the plural third person in that discourse could not be aligned with the plural first person, at least not securely. The lines echo the language of Proverbs 22:6, which in the King James reads, “Train up a child in the way he should go / And when he is old he will not depart from it.” This biblical echo takes over the sense of the lines, making them seem obedient to scripture, but again, that echo comes at the expense of any sense of definite agency. If “the rising race” is in its infancy and “we” have grown old, then has the abolition of slavery in the British colonies made race something it was not before? Over the course of the poem as a whole, nation, colony, country, liberty and slavery give way to the newly coined idea of a “rising race,” but that race is divided from *us*, divided from “the notion of ‘person.’” This may be because, as Hartman writes, “The slave is neither civic man nor free worker but excluded from the narrative of ‘we the people’ that effects the linkage of the modern individual and the state,” but it is also because the individual was never what was at stake in this poem.⁴¹ The fifth stanza’s categorical trimeter assertion that “Man shall be no more a slave” is not only an experiment in what freedom will “then” feel like “on Britain’s isles remote,” but an experiment in the category best matched to this new category of person: “Man”? “British blood”? “Azure sky”? “Rising race”? Whoever we are, our collective identity can only be named as what we are not.

As it happened, the representation of the First of August as what *we* were not was on spectacular display in two issues of *The Colored American* where we do view the scene that seems to have inspired Plato’s poem. In the summer of 1840, when Plato was preparing her book for publication, that newspaper (in which she would publish her first poem in September of that year) printed two announcements of the “Emancipation of the Slaves in the British West-India Islands,” accompanied by illustrations of Britannia’s personified power (figures 1.1 and 1.2).



BRITANNIA GIVING FREEDOM TO HER SLAVES.

FIGURE 1.1. "Britannia Giving Freedom to Her Slaves," from *The Colored American*, May 9, 1840.



FIRST OF AUGUST.

FIGURE 1.2. "First of August," from *The Colored American*, August 1, 1840.

In the May announcement (figure 1.1), “Britannia Giving Freedom to Her Slaves,” a White goddess (a latter-day Mnemosyne) reminiscent of second-century Roman rule in ancient Britain, complete with Corinthian helmet (a figure for Western empire popularized in eighteenth-century British land-grabs) hands a small book to a shirtless Black man while cradling a long spear. With her other hand, the goddess points to the sky, and with his other hand, the man holds the scythe of a field laborer. Behind the man is a woman holding a baby and at least one other child. The woman looks at the viewer/reader sideways, and behind her another man and woman raise their hands in gratitude or prayer. Beneath Britannia’s feet, remnants of whips and chains lie next to her cornucopia and her shield. In the later issue, titled “First of August” (figure 1.2), a gigantic White figure of a more modern unarmed woman, her now unhelmeted hair flowing, gestures toward a group of people while she holds her book aloft; to her left (our right), an American flag stands behind another group, including a White man who may be preaching, a man carrying a whip, and a young White woman surrounded by Black children learning their ABCs. Both illustrations feature a singular, luminously white, finely etched, larger-than-life feminized figure of Anglo power set against complicated groups of multiple darkly shaded, practically featureless human-shaped figures variously gendered and aged. Both Britannias personify and ventriloquize a long multiply populated gloomy juridico-political history as a supremely singular White divine gift.

The May announcement tells some of that history, stating that “by an act of the British Parliament passed in 1833, slavery was to cease in all British West India Islands on the 1st of August, 1834, and a system of apprenticeship to be substituted in its place till the 1st of August, 1840; when that system was to terminate, and entire freedom to be consummated.” So despite its portrayal in Plato’s poem and in the illustrations addressed to readers of *The Colored American*, emancipation in the British West Indies was not a punctual event, and it was certainly not an act performed by a supernatural woman. Or maybe it was: as the May issue goes on to explain, “twenty millions sterling, or about ninety millions dollars” (money that bore the imprint of the goddess Britannia) was paid by Parliament “to the masters” in exchange for the people they claimed to own. The “masters” in Antigua and Bermuda took the money and released enslaved people in 1834, but “in the other Islands, the apprenticeship system was adopted.” Yet

contrary to general expectation, entire abolition was found to operate far better than the other plan; insomuch that there began ere long to be no

little stir in relation to the subject. The cry for complete emancipation in all the Islands arose from all quarters; the tables of the British Parliament were heaped with petitions; the country was agitated from end to end. In this state of things, when all was commotion, uncertainty, anxiety, and suspense, the Colonial Governments put an end to the matter of abolishing the apprenticeship themselves, to take effect on the 1st of August, 1838. To give the finishing touch to this work of emancipation, the British Government, on learning these movements of the Colonial Legislatures, proceeded to abolish the system in the remaining Colonies that had no Legislatures. (vol 1, no. 10, 4)

What really happened between 1833 and 1840 was that Britain purchased enslaved Africans in the West Indies from the men who thought they owned them, thus upholding these men's legal claim. The British Parliament then devised its own version of temporary enslavement in the form of indentured servitude. When there was a "cry . . . from all quarters" and several instances of violent resistance objecting to such continued violation of natural rights, some colonies took matters into their own hands. After much "commotion, uncertainty, anxiety, and suspense"—that is, on the brink of another colonial revolution—"the British Government . . . proceeded to abolish the system" several years after it first promised to do so.

In fact, as the writers of this article in *The Colored American* and Ann Plato and everyone else knew, the First of August had been trying to happen for a long time. After the Haitian Revolution of 1789–1804, which C.L.R. James succinctly and memorably dubbed "the only successful slave revolt in history," the British Empire knew its days in "the sugar islands" were numbered.⁴² That knowledge was an open secret, since as Marlene Daut has argued, the "transatlantic print culture of the Haitian Revolution" broadcast it far and wide in "hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of written texts that took the form of eye-witness accounts, letters, memoirs, history, novels, poetry, plays, and newspaper articles."⁴³ Actually, as Cedric Robinson has shown, African resistance to the Slave Registry had already destabilized British colonial power by the early nineteenth century, and the sugar plantations had been losing money for a long time.⁴⁴ And as Julius S. Scott has made clear, "by 1793, the continuing rebellion of blacks and people of color in Saint-Domingue provided a rallying point for would-be revolutionaries in other areas, and curtailing the movement of people and ideas had become a paramount issue for the rulers in English- and Spanish-speaking territories."⁴⁵

This is all to say (or to let the experts say) that the most visible historical events in the late eighteenth-century Black Atlantic—the obscene mass murder on board the *Zong* in 1781 and before that what the historian David Waldstreicher has called “the Mansfieldian moment” of the 1770s, when Lord Mansfield, the chief justice of the Court of the King’s Bench, decided in favor of James Somerset’s right not to be returned from England to enslavement in the West Indies, and after that, the Haitian Revolution—all punctuated an ongoing and unsustainable extractive racial capitalism that underwrote repeated proclamations of British enlightenment.⁴⁶ The Mansfield decision in particular “immediately set off a wave of speculation about the end of slavery in England that was framed by the black community there,” Waldstreicher writes, “because it politicized slavery and slavery-ized politics” (534). We will return to the slavery-izing of late eighteenth-century colonial politics and poetics in chapter 3, but it’s important to note here that after the supposedly revolutionary Mansfield decision and even after the spectacularly violent *Zong* case, it took Parliament seven decades to abolish slavery in its colonies and it took ninety-five more years for its former North American colony to do so. History is violent and unjust and messy and uneven and populous and racist and misogynist and compromised and everyone celebrating the First of August in 1840 knew that. As J. R. Kerr-Ritchie has written, “public celebrations of West Indian emancipation in the Atlantic World” drew attention to the way in which “between 1834 and 1861, slavery became abolished in the British Empire but expanded in the United States.”⁴⁷ Ann Plato lived and wrote in a former British colony in which the disarray of history had eventuated in slavery’s expansion rather than even a piecemeal form of abolition, so why did her poem embrace the White Goddess fantasy version of events?

An Imaginary Person

I wish I could urge us to read Plato’s poem as an instance of what Lauren Berlant dubbed “Diva Citizenship,” which they described as “a moment of emergence that marks unrealized potentials for subaltern political activity.”⁴⁸ Berlant wrote that these glimpses of unrealized potential tend to emerge when “acts of language can feel like explosives that shake the ground of political existence. . . . In remaking the scene of collective life into a spectacle of subjectivity,” such moments “can lead to a confusion of willful and memorable rhetorical performance with sustained social change itself” (223). But Plato’s poem was not such a performance, since the only diva in it is a giant feminized White su-

premacist being. Plato's poem does not remake the scene of blurred and silenced collective life into a scene of subjectivity (as, for example, M. NourbeSe Philip did in her 2008 *Zong!*); instead, Britannia bestows social change on a scene of collective life that Britannia cannot represent.⁴⁹ How could she? Since personifications by definition have no subjectivity, this White Britannia is a perfect foil for the individual and distributed subjectivities the poem evokes by not being able to articulate: not national, not colonial, not racial, not grammatical, not gendered or sexualized, not even Christian discourse can constitute a first-person plural pronoun—an *us*—that will stick, let alone achieve imaginary citizenship or construct a national fantasy of spectacular subjectivity—except, again, as what *we* do not have, as what looms over and withholds in order to pretend to bestow ourselves to *us*.

Yet I have been suggesting that Plato's poem (like Wheatley's "Recollection") is for that very reason both a corrective to and an exemplary instance of a history in which poetry has embraced such fantasies so intimately that poetry has become another name for them. Just as one epistemic beginning of transatlantic concepts and histories of race emerged over the nineteenth century, so one epistemic beginning of transatlantic concepts and histories of poetics emerged then, too. As McGill has written, "slavery is not just one theme among others in a poetic tradition that remained stable across the centuries it took to abolish the trade, emancipate the enslaved, and petition for some measure of acknowledgement and redress. The history of Anglo-American poetry was itself transformed by its encounter with the slave system."⁵⁰ As we shall see in chapter 3, as early as the 1770s, Wheatley (in what Waldstreicher has called "the Wheatleyan moment") was attributing "silken fetters" and "soft captivity" to acts of a feminized poetic imagination: ideas about collective identity and ideas about poetry emerged together in and as ideas about race, slavery, settler colonialism, the Atlantic world, gender, and sexuality over the long nineteenth century, and in this book I try to show you how that happened, poem by poem.⁵¹ Since, as Simon Gikandi has written, "in the American and West Indian colonies . . . ideals of taste could not be imagined or secured except in opposition to a negative sensorium associated with slavery," we will see how American poetics came to depend on an ideal of individual poetic freedom from "slavish" meter's "silken fetters" (which is one reason you may not like poems like Plato's, or indeed, why you may not like most of the poems in this book).⁵² As Meredith Martin writes, "the conventional narrative of English meter's evolution from 'regular' to 'free' maps usefully onto ideas of progress and expansion, of empire as well as of

social democracy” as well as onto the sophistication of aesthetic sensibility, but the very language we use for the origin and aim of this conventional narrative also maps onto the “sensorium associated with slavery.”⁵³ As Cavitch puts it, “it should come as no surprise that nineteenth-century prosodic discourse is broadly inflected by the language of slavery.”⁵⁴ Yet that obvious inflection does continue to surprise literary historians, since it has not been understood as the racialization of the structure of American poetics itself.

Like McGill and Cavitch and Martin, I am a scholar of historical poetics, and, as I have already suggested, I consider prosodic and rhetorical genres part and parcel of the long process of lyricization that began in the eighteenth century and continues into the twenty-first. In that process, those genres have become increasingly abstract and at the same time increasingly identified with an imaginary rather than a historical person. In the figure of that imaginary person, we can see the economy and mechanics of racialization writ large. If by the 1930s, that imaginary person would come to be called “the speaker” of the poem, that may be because the definite article tells you all you really need to know about just how abstract (literally, removed, or taken out of place) that speaker came to be. When we read a poem as an address on the part of “the speaker” to any and all of us who can put ourselves in his/her/their place (since the definite article makes sure that speaker has no definite pronoun), we make ourselves into a choral *we* performing a readerly karaoke that solves the problems of collective identity that Plato’s poem so eloquently poses. This is to say that the figure of the speaker allows us to make ourselves into a public, a notion that, as Michael Warner writes, “enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity.”⁵⁵ The lyric speaker functions as a metadiscursive phenomenon, doing all the things a person does (including addressing us as if that address were personal) without actually being one, thus organizing *us* around that abstraction.

But Plato’s poem was addressed to a public that was still in the process of forming itself around such figurative persons, that more often formed itself as a social entity on the basis of the genre of the poem rather than the genre of the person. We know from the title that the poem joins a long eighteenth-century tradition of “Pindaricks,” of variations on choral song for public occasions, and as have seen, we know from the meter that this choral ode is also a choral hymn. The last line of the penultimate stanza locates our “free born home” in a particular hymn that may well have been sung in Hartford’s Talcott Street Congregational Church but that later became a Confederate marching

song (and even later, a “free trade” labor-organizing song). That slide from Black spiritual to White Christian national anthem to portable secular song is also evident in Plato’s poem, but the diva meta-citizenship of Britannia is just what the choral performance of “To the First of August” cannot claim. Pindaric ode, Black hymn, White hymn, “sorrow song,” “spiritual,” abolitionist poem, First of August poem, ekphrastic response, newspaper poem, workers’ song, proverb poem, Bible lesson all blur into a genre that merges these dissonant parts, if it does, under the aegis of a hovering figure of a very abstract person that bears a striking resemblance to Britannia and that provided the rhyming template for Pennington’s “Platoess.”

In the nineteenth century, that figure would have been recognizable as the *Poetess*, a “generic figure,” as Yopie Prins writes, “with a long and various history, often connected to popular poetry with broad national and international circulation.”⁵⁶ In several parts of this book, but especially in chapter 5, I elaborate some of the ways in which that generic figure was adopted by various poets, but first it’s important to note that the *Poetess* is capitalized because it is a fabricated abstraction, and in the nineteenth century especially, it was acknowledged as a larger-than-life fictional public person, a cartoon “author-ess,” an imaginary performance rather than a particular woman poet, which is why women and men, straight poets and queer poets and trans poets could all inhabit the figure. Eliza Richards has written of Edgar Allan Poe’s *Poetess* performances, of “a male genius figure who impersonates women poets, and women poets who personify mimesis,” and we could extend Richards’s insight to consider the construction of the figure of the *Poetess* as well as Longfellow’s learnedly capacious and Walt Whitman’s capaciously queer embrace of the *Poetess* pose.⁵⁷ “As a detachable figure that exceeded the work of any actual woman poet,” Prins explains, “the *Poetess* became a repeatable trope, a personification” (1052), and that personification became another genre that could contain (or, like Britannia, overwhelm) popular genres of address that were often in conflict with one another. As Pennington’s rhyming pun indicates, Plato’s poem would be associated with this figure (as indeed, all poems by women poets tended to be), but it also keeps its distance from it. Just as Plato’s poem is almost but not quite an ode or a hymn, it is almost but not quite *Poetess* verse.

Indeed, because nineteenth-century American poetics turned the genre of the poem into the genre of the person, the fact that the *Poetess* was already a genericized person means that *Poetess* verse gives us a view into the economy and mechanics of lyricization, the process under way but not yet realized in

Plato's poem. As a figure made to order for the poetics of vicarious feeling, the Poetess herself was often depicted as silenced, wounded, or dead, and even her themes tended toward self-sacrifice (picture the nightingale with her breast upon a thorn, the boy on the burning deck, the tribe driven from its land, the enslaved mother whose baby is sold, the angelic child who dies very young). As Alexandra Socarides has written, self-cancellation rather than self-promotion was the secret strategy that made Poetess verse so popular, since "erasure . . . was not just something done to women poets, but the result of a set of conventions that once made the circulation of their poetry possible in the first place."⁵⁸ When Pennington introduced Plato's book as the work of "a colored lady, a member of my church, of pleasing piety and modest worth" (xvii), he was making sure that Plato fit those conventions. Prins and I have written that the figure of the nineteenth-century Anglo-American Poetess was so modestly self-effacing that she was "not the content of her own generic representation . . . not a speaker, not an 'I,' not a consciousness, not a subjectivity, not a self."⁵⁹ I still think that's true, but in this book I am interested in how and why the racialized figure of the Poetess became a flashpoint for such negation, thus paving the way for the figure of the inherently negated, generic lyric speaker.

"Who made the Poetess white? No one, not ever," Tricia Lootens has passionately insisted, invoking a long history of Black Poetess performance, from Wheatley to Felicia Morris.⁶⁰ As Lootens has so eloquently demonstrated, it's true that because the figure was made (especially in the United States) on the work of poets of color, the Poetess does not always look like Britannia. But the figure of the Poetess as empty vehicle of cultural transmission was made to represent so many things and absorb so many genres that it did tend to become as White as Britannia by default, even or perhaps especially when it was represented by Black poets. While the figure that Lootens calls "the Political Poetess" allowed many Black and Indigenous poets to write deeply committed, even revolutionary poems that made their Diva performances seem like social change, the Poetess was always a multiply divided, ventriloquized figure, at once the modest, almost invisible woman poet and the candid personification that hovered over her. "To the First of August" stops short of bringing the young woman poet of color and the macro-personification of the Poetess together—in fact, the poem pushes the person and the personification toward opposite poles of representation. The "detachable figure that exceeded the work of any particular woman poet" is so detached in "To the First of August"

that she is in the background rather than the foreground of the poem, a mass print illustration rather than a voice or a subject. The public detachability of the Poetess was a forerunner of the trans-racialized, trans-gendered modern lyric speaker. We have already begun to see how Wheatley became an early template for this figure, and we will go on to see how later Black practitioners of Poetess poetics like Plato and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper framed the Poetess as White, distancing their verse from the whiteness of the feminized figure that they, like most nineteenth-century American poets, also appropriated. If the nineteenth-century Poetess seems as dated as the horsehair sofa, that is because it is that multiply ventriloquized, distanced version of the Poetess that remains.

That may seem like an elaborate way to come to terms with the pronominal confusion, alienated figuration, and impersonal feminized passivity that characterizes Plato's "To the First of August," and it may take me the rest of this book to convince you that such elaboration is warranted—indeed, that it is central to the history of American poetics. Plato's biographer Ron Welburn offers a much more straightforward rationale for the poem's flat affect when he suggests that the reason that "To the First of August" appears so "dispassionate" is that Plato was not actually African American and thus was simply not personally invested in the event the poem celebrates. Welburn nominates "The Natives of America," another Plato poem very much in the Poetess genre, as the poem that gives us the "real" Ann Plato, "a Native American within a black community."⁶¹ "On 'The Natives of America' rests the hypothesis of Plato's Native ancestry and the foundation of her voice as a young female leader of her city's urban Indian community," Welburn writes (34). While I have suggested that the Poetess is a generic figure, Welburn reads this figuration quite literally. Welburn gives the writer her first and only book-length consideration, and much of the book makes a fascinating case for *Ninni-missinuok* (Algonquian) survivance in Northeastern US urban communities and specifically in the Talcott Street Congregational community. Yet his case for what he calls Ann Plato's "Native identity" depends on a reading of a single poem as "voiced" by Ann Plato (and to support that reading, on a detail in the 1870 Iowa census and some indications that the four biographies in Plato's book are of young women who were also "part of the fluctuating *Missinuok* world" [184]). Plato may very well have shared Indigenous ancestry with other diasporic people considered "'colored' &c." in Hartford in 1840 (as indeed, many BIPOC people in the nineteenth century did), but what is remarkable about her biographer's conviction is that he understands

the two “speakers” in “The Natives of America” as historical persons rather than as fictional poetic *personae*, and he thinks that the story they tell is the history of a single “race.”

Because “To the First of August” and this poem are “her only two poems concerned directly with racial and historical themes,” according to Welburn, the “contrasts in cultural investment” between the two poems prove that Plato was “Native” and not “Black” (33). All of the problems with the communal *we* that we noticed in “To the First of August” (that is, all of the problems inherent in the history and theory of gendered and racialized lyric reading) appear to this reader to be solved by “The Natives of America,” a poem that restores the agency of singular and plural subjects, that doubles down on the race concept, that makes a clear distinction between us and them, Black and Indigenous, she and he, then and now:

Tell me a story, father please,
Then I sat upon his knees.
Then answer'd he—“what speech make known
Or tell the words of native tone,
Of how my Indian fathers dwelt,
And, of sore oppression felt
And how they mourned a land serene,
It was an ever mournful theme.” (Plato (1841/1988), 110.)

After this beginning, the daughter implores her father to tell her their family’s “history,” and the father recounts the ravages of settler colonialism. “We were a happy race,” he begins, emphasizing that “when we no tongue but ours did trace,” this race’s sense of communal identity was intact. Yet English rhymed couplet by English rhymed couplet and stanza by stanza, that monocultural, monolingual identity is dismantled, until “My daughter, we are now diminish’d, unknown, / Unfelt.” That last word is the Poetess’s signature sentimental appeal, but just as we begin to share the intimate pathos of this vanishing people, the father affirms that, after all,

I love my country, and shall, until death
Shall cease my breath.

What can this singular personal possessive pronoun possibly mean after the (by 1841, generic) tale of genocidal destruction? This Indian father’s words echo Sir Walter Scott’s *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), in which the exiled bard returns to “the vile dust, from which he sprung, / Unwept, unhonored,

and unsung.” Is the father in Plato’s poem a spokesman for his race or for nineteenth-century Anglophone poetry? The question is left hanging fire in Plato’s poem in the only stanza that contains a single couplet, yet Welburn concludes that the poem is “Ann Plato’s most incisive political and historical statement. Its speaker oratorically sustains its tone by impressing his daughter with the wisdom of his pride in all its wounded passion and the rightful history he relates to her; these speak for themselves” (43).

But history is not what speaks in Plato’s poems. History is the mute, messy, racist, brutal, banal, sentimental, accidental, incidental, monumental, state-sponsored, national, everyday, revolutionary, colonial, global, economically driven, sexualized, and gendered substrate that poems and people make their ways in and through. “History, as no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read,” James Baldwin wrote in 1965, over a century after Plato’s poetry suggested something similar. “On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.”⁶² From Baldwin’s (and, I am suggesting, Plato’s) perspective, history cannot eventuate in a totality because *we* are inseparable from “the frames of reference” that determine what history has made of us. While “The Natives of America” does not convince me that history made Ann Plato the daughter of a proud Indigenous father, Welburn’s deeply invested lyric reading of the poem does speak volumes about the racializing of poetics and the poetics of racialization, about the desire for a racially representative poetic speaker, for a singular identifiable figure who can dissolve the difficulty of poems like “To the First of August.”

As we shall continue to see in every part of this book, the frames of reference that conferred Indigenous and Black identities were intimately entwined in nineteenth-century history and poetics, so the fact that a modern lyric reader of Plato has belatedly discovered that she represents both at once makes a lot of sense. Such analogy and displacement tell an old and period-appropriate story, since, as Ezra Tawil has shown, the antebellum American attachment to the literature of “racial sentiment” tended to confuse and align “New World Indians” with African Americans.⁶³ As Tiffany Lethabo King has argued, “at the stress points and instantiations of Black fungibility and Native genocide, the violence moves as one,” and in the nineteenth-century literary imaginary, as we shall see especially in chapter 4, the one-ness of that violence served White supremacist poetic ends.⁶⁴ While Welburn knows that what he

calls “dying Indian-theme poems” constituted one of the most popular American genres of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and that White Poetesses like Plato’s famous Hartford predecessor Lydia Huntley Sigourney specialized in such poems, and while he does not seem to know that the New York City White celebrity poet William Cullen Bryant famously made such poems all about the genealogical claims of vanishing fathers, it is the oratorical performance of Plato’s “speaker” that he takes to separate her poem from that early genre. This book will consider many poems like “The Natives of America” because, as in the case of Poetess verse, so many nineteenth-century poets used the genre for their own purposes. But the great force of these and other genres common to the nineteenth-century poetic commons is the fact that our ways of reading poetry (since Welburn is far from alone here)—our *poetics*—tend to attribute to them the desire for “the speaker”: for an abstract, ahistorical, singular, publicly shared, and structurally feminized voice that can deliver the poetry of the future to us in order to make history disappear.

An American Lyric

I hope that by this point in this book I have made you reasonably suspicious of that shared pronoun and of such a sweeping claim about our shared poetics. By *us*, I mean readers who have been shaped by modern literary criticism, by the tendency to think of a poem as the utterance of a fictional persona called “the speaker,” and that probably means most of us who learned to read poetry in high school and college in the United States over the past century or so. “The pedagogy of lyric poetry is constantly insisting (and readers are constantly forgetting) that the ‘I’ in a poem should be called the ‘speaker,’ or the ‘persona,’ and should not be conflated with the biographical author,” Barbara Johnson writes, adding that “many poets have made a point of considering this ‘speaker’ as a function of the poem, and not the other way around.”⁶⁵ On the view that Johnson takes to be normative, “the speaker” is a fiction (as both the definite article and quotation marks tell us) on which not only “the pedagogy of lyric poetry” came to depend by the middle decades of the twentieth century, but also a fiction born of the nineteenth-century poems on which that pedagogy itself was built and which it shaped in turn.

This is to say that the fiction of the speaker was not invented one day over breakfast in 1937 by Cleanth Brooks or another day over dinner in 1941 by John Crowe Ransom or another day in 1951 by Reuben Brower—nor was it dis-

solved one day in 1914 by Gertrude Stein or another day in the 1960s by the Black Arts Movement or another day in the 1970s by a group of White mostly male Language poets. Herbert Tucker has made the case that “the thirst for intersubjective confirmation of the self, which has made the overhearing of a persona our principal means of understanding a poem,” emerged from “an anxiety of textuality” that twentieth-century literary criticism inherited from the nineteenth-century Victorian dramatic monologue’s framing of “overheard” Romantic lyric, an “anxiety over the tendency of texts to come loose from their origins . . . that the New Critics half acknowledged and half tried to curb under the regime of a now avowedly fictive self.”⁶⁶ The nineteenth-century American chapter of those origins was even more important to Southern Agrarian critics like Brooks and Ransom and to Black critics like James Weldon Johnson and Sterling Brown than were the British origins Tucker traces, since, as Caroline Gelmi has written and we have begun to see, in the United States, the idea of a poetic speaker was “a racial and ideological formation, an invention of particular reading practices” that emerged from late-eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century American poems like the ones considered in this book.⁶⁷ Sonya Posmentier has suggested that there was a specifically Black history of lyric reading and lyricization (institutionalized by Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and Brown, among others) that ran parallel to and challenges my theory of lyricization as the “transformation of multiple folk materials into a singular poetic voice” in American literary criticism.⁶⁸ I think she is right, and this book will show that what happened in the nineteenth century was that many different verse genres, only some of them identified with a “folk,” were transformed into an imaginary lyric voice detached from those genres. The retro-projection of those genres as “folk materials” began in the nineteenth century and continued well into the twentieth, and like all nostalgic fantasies, the racialization of that backward glance was part of its ideological formation. We have also begun to see how that formation was shaped by particular modes of impersonally personal address in many different varieties of print. Modernism’s inheritance of the highly mediated racial and ideological folk fantasy—the ways in which print was accompanied by fictions of poetry before or after or to the side of print—was surprisingly direct. But a century earlier, it is already clear that the figure of the speaker that is nowhere in evidence in “To the First of August” is nascent in it—and by extension in nineteenth-century American poetics more generally—as a racialized abstraction that in turn produces the abstraction of lyric reading. As Phillip Brian Harper has argued, if we think of abstraction as “the cognitive

mechanism by which persons of African descent were conceived as enslavable entities and commodity objects,” we might also think of abstraction as the generic mechanism by which kinds of poems were reified into kinds of people.⁶⁹ I have begun to describe and will have a lot more to say about the complicated logic of that double abstraction in the pages that follow, but first I should say more about what I mean by “lyric reading,” an idea that has led to a lot of confusion since it appeared in my first book, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* in 2005 and was extended in the small book I wrote with Yopie Prins inside *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, the large book we co-edited in 2014.

In *Dickinson’s Misery*, I took up the example of Emily Dickinson, another nineteenth-century American poet who sometimes posed as a Poetess and who, like Ann Plato, favored hymnal meter, and I used this example to demonstrate the distance that separated Dickinson’s verse practices and circumstances of address from later editorial, popular, and critical readings of her poems as “feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude.” You will recognize that last phrase as John Stuart Mill’s: Mill uses it to distinguish interested public address from sincere poetic self-address; as he wrote in 1833, “eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener.”⁷⁰ As a reclusive woman who published very few of her poems while she was alive, Dickinson literalized Mill’s ideal of lyric address as the antithesis of public speech. Yet as Warner writes, this ideal was always a fiction, since “poetry is not actually overheard; it is read as overheard. And similarly, public speech is not just heard; it is heard (or read) *as* heard, not just by oneself but by others” (81). So why have readers adopted the fiction of this false opposition for the past two hundred years?

As Tucker argues, something like Mill’s nineteenth-century distinction has prejudiced twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetics against explicitly political poems like Plato’s “To the First of August” (which definitely supposes an audience, even if it may not have had much of one) in favor of poems like

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—⁷¹

Dickinson’s poem, perhaps composed toward the beginning of the Civil War, found with her manuscripts after her death in 1886 and never (as far as we

know) sent to anyone or published during her lifetime, shares the abcb common meter quatrain structure of “To the First of August,” but although its subject is also hopelessly troubled by, in being emphatically detached from the action whose agent it is supposed to be with a vengeance, that pathos of uncertain agency is individualized, is itself the subject of the poem, a subject announced in the poem’s first word as a singular possessive pronoun. While few critics have bothered with Plato’s poem, “My Life had stood” became, as I wrote in *Dickinson’s Misery*, “the *ars poetica*, the zero-sum game of interpretation, for nearly all accounts of Dickinson’s poems as *lyrics*” in the late twentieth century.⁷² While Plato’s use of common meter contributes to our sense of her poem as generic and impersonal, for the critic Susan Stewart, writing in 1995, Dickinson’s “use of hymn meters makes us hear the individuality of her voice and the specificity of her words because of their dissonance from the habits of tradition.”⁷³ This is a better example than Welburn’s reading of Plato for what I mean by “lyric reading”: whenever a “speaker” or a “voice” can be distinguished from “the habits of tradition,” whenever we can discover “dissonance” between individual form and communal content, what Tucker felicitously calls “the intersubjective confirmation of the self,” the desire to substitute the intimate address of the private person for the public address of the poem, is fulfilled. But where does this desire come from, and why has modern poetics been constructed in response to it?

It will take me the rest of this book to answer that question. The short version of an answer is the one I gave in *Dickinson’s Misery*: “While it is beyond the scope of this book to trace the lyricization of poetry that began in the eighteenth century,” I wrote, “the exemplary story of the composition, recovery, and publication of Dickinson’s writing begins one chapter, at least, in what is so far a largely unwritten history” (6). This book is my attempt to fill in more chapters in that still largely unwritten history, but those chapters are not the ones I thought I would write when I wrote that sentence about Dickinson. Dickinson became a privileged subject of lyric reading and Plato did not, not only because Dickinson was a rich White woman shut up in a big house who published very few of the poems that continue to be made into the lyrics that editors and critics want them to be, not only because Dickinson knew important people who connected that editorial and critical history to powerful institutional homes at Amherst and Harvard, not only because those institutions fostered and continue to foster Dickinson’s distribution as popular poet in addition to maintaining rights to scholarly editions of her work, not only because Dickinson, like Plato, composed in a meter that was one of the toggle

switches between elite and popular reading practices in the nineteenth century, not only because Plato was a Black and/or Indigenous “‘colored’ &c.” school-teacher whose institutional access (at least in her lifetime) was limited to Pennington and the Talcott Street Congregational Church, not only because what “Britannia’s isles proclaim” in Plato’s poem is transatlantic history and the time and place when and where “My Life had stood” remains indeterminate and portable, not only because the collective personal pronoun is so hard to pin down in Plato and the definite singular possessive is so easy to appropriate in Dickinson, but because by 1890 (when the first volume of Dickinson’s poems was posthumously published), the subject hopelessly troubled by, in being emphatically detached from, the action whose agent it is supposed to be was the subject of racialized reading that Plato’s poem prefigures. Mill’s “feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude,” British Romantic poetics more generally, Dickinson, modern Anglophone poetics, modern American literary criticism, modern American comparative literature, and postmodern, post-lyric American avant-garde poetics all owe their prized versions of the genre of the radically abstracted solitary subject to the predicament of the colonized, enslaved, feminized, free, compromised, “‘colored’ &c.” figures with whom the nineteenth century—well, with whom the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—could not and still cannot come to terms.

In *Dickinson’s Misery*, I defined lyric reading in relation to Mill, but located it in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary criticism that made Dickinson into an exemplary lyric poet. While I did invoke Emerson and I did associate Dickinson with the nineteenth-century Poetess, the Mill-to-New-Criticism-to-feminism-to-post-structuralism-to-historical poetics trajectory of my critical argument there omitted (as all literary critics are trained to omit) the mid-nineteenth-century American poetics of which Plato’s poems are such common examples. This is to say that my definition of lyric reading and my version of American poetics in that book were (like Dickinson, Mill, New Criticism, post-structuralism, a lot of feminism, and most American academic versions of poetics, even the historical kind) very White. But nineteenth-century American poetics and the history of literary criticism built on that poetics did not emerge like a White goddess out of the head of Emerson—or out of the heads of Dickinson or Whitman, for that matter. They came out of the crucible of racialized reading I have invoked by beginning this book with Phillis Wheatley and Ann Plato, the latter a forgotten woman poet of color who was in fact a Platoess, if we read her dialectically. If Dickinson was the perfect fit for lyric reading, it is Plato’s bad fit that makes her work so symp-

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