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Streaming verse: Looking into the mirror

Abstract:

In this article, I investigate the way multiple contemporary poets incorporate the medium of television and its many genres into their poems. I take as a starting point the continuing centrality of television in the way contemporary culture seeks to both represent and understand itself and examine the way that poetry takes on the challenge of addressing this ubiquitous medium. By incorporating and responding to mass media, the poetry of television is likewise seeking to understand contemporary culture and the poet's place within it. In examining texts by Susan Stewart, Anne Carson, Claudia Rankine and Bianca Stone, I consider the appearance of television as both mythologising force and, in the age of 24-hour news and live streaming, ambient noise, while examining the ways that these poets move between description, critical observation and interpretation, and active mimesis. In the slippage between these approaches, we see the poets undertaking the act of 'audiencing' (Turnbull, 2020, p. 13), shifting between passive and active modes of engagement.

Biographical note:

Kate Middleton is the author of the poetry collections *Fire Season* (2009), *Ephemeral Waters* (2013), and *Passage* (2017). She was awarded the Western Australian Premier's Award for Poetry in 2009. In 2020 she was runner up for the *Australian Book Review's* Calibre Award. She holds degrees from the University of Melbourne, Georgetown University, the University of Michigan and Western Sydney University. She teaches creative writing.

Keywords:

Poetry, contemporary television, audience

Introduction

Television is everywhere. Even though in its classic form – that form attached to a television set and a set viewing schedule – it seems as if it is becoming obsolete, television governs much of how we see the world. While still the object of some fretting (*think of the children!*), television's imagined depravities have fallen second fiddle to the internet. A work like Neil Postman's 1985 classic *Amusing Ourselves to Death* now seems prescient, easy to read as engaged with an internet culture managed by attention engineers; nonetheless, television's impact is still the stuff of culture columns the world around, and columnists still take seriously Postman's claim that 'television is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself' (1985/2006, p. 92). This claim gains additional power in the present moment: as in-person life retreated during a global pandemic in 2020, the *New York Times* television critic James Poniewozik dubbed the Covid-19 era as the moment that 'everything became TV' (2020), as if seeing our own faces so frequently through apps like Zoom fulfilled the promise first made by reality TV. Another television critic's words felt like a challenge: Emily Nussbaum answered old elite disputes over whether television criticism was a worthwhile endeavour with her own thrown gauntlet: 'Critical contempt for television [is] like refusing to look into the mirror' (2019, p. 13). The mirror. Our mode of self-knowledge. *Everything*. Against the form of television, much maligned for its commerciality and seriality, stands poetry: in Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's estimation, poetry resists financialisation because its language 'escape[s] the order of exchangeability' (2012, p. 22). Perhaps those contemporary poets taking up the subject are working to destabilise the narratives that settle in mass media, to add excess to them. They are publicly investigating the usually private process of 'audiencing' (Turnbull, 2020, p. 13), shifting between passive and active modes of engagement by interrogating the presence and role of television as a poetic subject.

What interests me is the question of how contemporary poetry, an art form that often stands apart from mass culture (perhaps because of its resistance to exchangeability), responds to and assimilates the fact of television. Some work has been done in thinking about television's relationship to poetry by television scholars: Sean O'Sullivan adopts Rachel Blau DuPlessis's notion of the 'segmentivity' of poetry, a term she employs to discuss the implicit gaps created by the white space surrounding line and stanza breaks, to the way that episodes of scripted serial television likewise negotiate gaps marked by the scene cuts; O'Sullivan (2010) seeks to draw on poetic language (e.g. rhythm, meter, anaphora, caesura) to understand the patterns of episodic narrative television (p. 60). Amy Holdsworth (2013) looks particularly at the way a group of documentaries made in the collaboration between director Brian Hill and poet Simon Armitage distil the experiences of participants into poems that become the language these participants speak on screen, thus creating 'intermedial text[s]' (p. 2). This work seeks to understand how the language of poetry, an ancient artform, can be applied to the newer forms of television drama and documentary, and states that this 'one specific instance of television's intermediality' invites

further consideration of ‘poetry’s interaction with television and film’ (Holdsworth, 2013, p. 12). Can we consider these interactions with poetry at the centre? The question opens the way to too many possibilities: how many poets have written poems that include some reference to television, either as a generalised experience, or with regard to particular encounters? How does ekphrasis, the presumed mode of writing about another art form, operate in the realm of seriality? Yet, as I have found myself writing poems about television, I have found myself asking: what language do we have for these appearances – particularly as primary subject or framing device – of television in individual poems? And how do we lay this language against a suspicion of mass media?

In looking for a language for my own recent work, I have found myself cataloguing poems and poets of television. My interest lies in understanding the ways that poems *about* television – not just poems that include reference to television – can shift between critical observation and interpretation, descriptive ekphrasis and active mimesis. Some poems take on one mode of addressing the fact of television; others slip between modes. In that potential for slippage between these modes, I have come to think about this form of poetic endeavour as work that may be understood as streaming verse. What follows here is a brief consideration of certain works by Anne Carson, Susan Stewart, Claudia Rankine and Bianca Stone. This article cannot hope to be exhaustive; rather I hope, in its speculation and close reading, it is suggestive of an area for future study.

The myth will be televised

In his introduction to *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre*, Joshua Marie Wilkinson (2015) writes, ‘Most writers fit neatly into a genre or two; a few writers seem to *exemplify* the genres they work in; a small number really bend or blend genres in order to create new kinds of texts and performances; and still fewer seem to obliterate genre itself, from the inside out’ (p. 1); Wilkinson places Anne Carson in the latter category, the category of ‘obliterators’. Throughout her body of work, Carson has participated in a seeming dismantling of genre through the act of labelling her works in unusual ways – whether as a ‘fictional essay’ in the form of ‘tangos’ (*The Beauty of the Husband*, 2001), or as an ‘oratorio’ or ‘opera’ (respectively, ‘Lots of Guns’ and ‘Decreation’ in *Decreation*, 2005). This ‘obliteration’ of genre takes place not only in how she writes in the forms she proclaims, but arguably in her work as a reader of genre and form: when she offers a series of poems under the broader heading ‘TV Men’ (1995), Carson is raising a categorical question: what do we consider television to be?

Anne Carson recognises the link between the mythic and the televised. Her suite of poems titled ‘TV Men’ is unusual among her oeuvre in that the poems arrive across multiple volumes. However, unlike *Autobiography of Red* and its sequel *Red.doc*, the ‘TV Men’ poems are not ostensibly telling one ongoing story; instead, the series of poems represents an ongoing concern with a way of perceiving and framing lives, making the stars of serial dramas her poems’ subjects. Two out

of the five ‘TV Men’ poems that first appeared in *Glass, Irony and God* (‘TV Men: Artaud’ and ‘TV Men: Sappho’, 1995) reappear in the collection *Men in the Off Hours* (2005), which goes on to expand the series. With the inclusion of the mythic Trojan figure of Hektor and the historic figure of Sokrates, the poems of *Glass, Irony and God* cluster more fully around the classical world. With the revision of ‘TV Men: Artaud’, and the new considerations of Leon Tolstoy and Anna Akhmatova in *Men in the Off Hours*, figures of the early 20th century are again balanced by the ancient – here adding Antigone (mythic) and Thucydides (historic) from the Greek tradition, and Lazarus from the New Testament. Even as Carson’s ‘TV Men’ poems offer the possible reading that television is in fact one of the defining features of shared humanity, of the 20th-century figures whom Carson addresses, only Anna Akhmatova truly lived into the age of television. This suggests that our very idea of mass spectacle was formed before television was invented; television exists in part to mirror that spectacle, and a method of engagement with television is to imagine pre-television figures and texts in light of this new technology.

Carson’s poetics have been described as ‘errant’ (Stanton, 2003, pp. 28-43), and one favoured form of errancy throughout her work is the use of anachronism. Opening the ‘TV Men’ poems (as they appear in these two collections) is Hektor, the focus of my reading. Hektor is, of course, a character appearing in two classical epic poems: Homer’s *Iliad*, in which we see Hector’s feats as a warrior as well as his death and Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in which he plays his most important role as a ghost, urging Aeneas to flee Troy in order to found a new city. Recalling Hektor’s fate as imagined televised spectacle creates an explicit link of myth to television, as well as offering Carson’s first reading – rendering – of the Trojan war against modern technology. [1] Here Carson jumbles the chronology such that ‘Hektor’s family members found themselves engaged in exciting acts, / and using exciting language, which they knew derived from TV’ (1995, p. 55). At the same time that the language of television apparently inflects the speech of the ancient Trojans, Carson acknowledges ‘Hektor was born to be a prince of Troy not a man of TV’ (1995, p. 55): the ‘exciting acts’ and ‘exciting language’ are a reflection of television as mass spectacle – his status as prince makes Hektor a star. This reframing of Hektor as television celebrity transforms the reader into spectator.

As ‘TV Men: Hektor’ progresses, (here appearing to allow the frame to show; there appearing to dissolve into the story), Carson undertakes startling definitional work. Why startling? Because the characterisations and similes she employs are so unusual and disparate. The first section of the poem opens:

TV is hardhearted, like Lenin.
TV is rational, like mowing.
TV is wrong, often, a worry.
TV is ugly, like the future.
TV is a classic example. (1995, p. 55)

She goes on to further characterise the medium of television thus: ‘TV is inherently cynical’ (p. 56); ‘TV is dull, like the block of self in each of us’ (p. 57); ‘TV is loud, yet we do not awake’ (p. 57); ‘TV wastes nothing, like a wife’ (p. 58); ‘TV is made of light, like shame’ (p. 59); ‘TV is a condition of weightless balance, like a game. / But TV is not a game’ (p. 60); ‘TV has a glare to it, like Hektor’s prayer’ (p. 61); ‘TV uses for ‘grave’ the word ‘sign,’ like Homer’ (p. 62); and ‘TV is presocial, like Man’ (p. 62). Where, as we will see, Susan Stewart appears to perform an unravelling of the riddle of television, a Barthesian reading of the cultural ‘lesson’ we take from repeated television ‘tropes’, Carson instead riddles the form with assertions that appear to invite an answer, much as the Mad Hatter’s query to Alice, ‘Why is a raven like a writing desk?’ *appears* to invite an answer – but does not.

‘TV Men: Hektor’ appears to dissolve the line between reality and fiction: Hektor’s position as prince of Troy is acknowledged, and yet his story is being filmed in a ‘Death Valley shoot’ (p. 55) that suggests a scripted show with Hektor as star performer. Ahead of the shoot, he ‘lies / on the motel bed in his armour’ (p. 55) – as if this were not a costume, but his regular attire; at the same time, we see him ‘repeating his line. / *I have learned to be brave*’ (p. 57), becoming again a player in the story of the Trojan war. In a ‘DIARY FOR MYSELF ALONE’ he writes, ‘*Today Hektor fought like a boulder going downhill*’ (p. 61), recounting the action in the third person as if ‘Hektor’ is merely the character he plays. Reading this poem against contemporary celebrity offers as much as reading it against the Homeric and Virgilian tellings of the Trojan war in *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*: in Carson’s poem we do not see Hektor killing 31,000 Greeks, nor do we see him dragged through the streets by Achilles; rather Carson’s Hektor recognises in himself a public figure, one who is able to ‘step to the line’ and say, on cue, ‘*War has always interested me*’ (p. 64) on the final day of shooting, before, presumably, that war drags him to his death.

Some lessons: The myth unravelled

Susan Stewart includes the poem ‘From “Lessons from Television”’ in her 2003 collection *Columbarium* (2003a, pp. 85-87). The title of the poem itself draws attention to a seeming inexhaustibility of the subject of television: at the critical distance of drawing ‘the moral of the story’ – of characterising the tropes of television, the same way fans have continued to identify and define them in the pop culture wiki *TV Tropes* – Stewart cannot hope to reach the end. Rather, the lessons one might take from television will always be an open form, available to be added at a later time as more and more television programming is produced and aired. This critical distance, and the lack of a particular named televised program, means this mode of addressing television as subject seems to resist ekphrasis – Stewart does not describe television scenes at all, but leaves the reader to imagine them from the lessons they instil, thus depending upon the reader’s knowledge of television’s many recurrent forms. Or, put differently, if Stewart offers any ekphrasis in her poem it is a description of medium rather than a description of a particular art object. This

might be considered an extreme version of what Peter Barry, building upon John Hollander's work, has called the 'open' variant of Hollander's 'actual ekphrasis'. Barry states that in open ekphrasis, 'the ekphrastic element tends to be merely implicit, since, in effect, the act of making it explicit 'closes' the emphasis' (Barry, 2002, p. 156). Stewart's 'Lessons' rely on this open idea of television and, in defining the 'lessons learned' from television, imply the underlying content of what has been viewed. While Stewart never openly reveals genre, readers are presumed to be well-versed in TV culture and can infer genre from the observations Stewart includes.

The opening stanza of the poem is:

You must laugh at yourself, laugh and laugh.
 Music swells the emotions;
 music exists to punctuate seeing.
 Emotion, therefore, is punctuation. (Stewart, 2003a, p. 85)

The lesson that you must 'laugh at yourself' is one that is no doubt derived from many examples: whether it is the storylines of sitcoms and dramas, or the live presentation of the talk show or roast, the charm of the performer works by his or her good-humoured response to finding him or herself the butt of the joke; this opening lesson punctuates the poem as a whole, constituting a central motif of Stewart's observations on television. The laugh returns continually, itself mimicking the laugh track of sitcoms; sometimes Stewart replicates the opening line exactly, at other times varying the line considerably ('so laugh at yourself, laugh and laugh' [p. 85]; 'and change itself is a laugh' [p. 85]; 'though collapsing is good for a laugh' [p. 86]). Elsewhere the word 'class' appears instead, offering an assonant half-rhyme to 'laugh'. In this way, the work resembles a traditional form of recurrence, such as the villanelle, without being constrained by the absolute strictures of this inherited structure. The recurrent laughter becomes a rhythm in the poem, and in this it recalls the Levinasian notion that 'in the rhythm there is no longer oneself, but rather a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity' (as cited in Bruns 2015, p. 214). Within the laughter, one becomes not an individual reader and viewer but rather a member of an audience; a reader's act of audiencing becomes a matter of recognising tropes, whether or not they agree with the morals or 'lessons' these tropes instil. Stewart's 'open ekphrasis' doesn't rely on whatever was in the scenes that inspired that laughter, but rather on an audience/readership actively understanding the effect it *should* have.

Often in this poem Stewart addresses the broad strokes that convey essential information: each example stands as a kind of Barthesian myth; indeed, Stewart's ability to so succinctly extract a 'lesson' recalls Neil Postman's general observation that television itself 'has achieved the status of 'myth' as Roland Barthes uses the word,' defining the myth as 'a way of thinking so deeply embedded in our consciousness that it is invisible' (Postman, 1985/2006, 79). These invisible patterns of thinking are what Stewart uncovers – recovers – revealing the anti-progressive

vocabulary of images television's viewership has accumulated over many decades. Her observations cluster around class ('Hair and teeth are clues to class' [p. 85]; 'You're either awake or asleep / and that, too, is a clue to class' [p. 86]), womanhood, ('Women are small and want something' [p. 85]; 'mothers cannot do enough, / though there's always room for improvement' [p. 86]) and emotional despair, in contrast to the recurrent laughter ('Faces in close-up are always in anguish' [p. 85]; 'Something is bound to get better. / And there is a pill with your name on it' [p. 87]; 'Pity will turn to irony' [p. 87]). The distillation of these lessons allows us as readers to critique and complicate them.

It is worth reading Stewart's poem against her essay 'On the Art of the Future' (2005), in particular in relation to her desire to articulate in art a space for the relation between aesthetics and ethics to arise. Most television, an enterprise responsive to audience numbers and heavily influenced by advertising and advertisers, does not meet Stewart's criterion of 'purposelessness' (2005, p. 17); nonetheless, there has been increased talk over the last several decades of television as a site of artistic practice, first in the period following shows like David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), marking a new era of 'narrative complexity' (Mittell, 2007), and then following 1999's premiere of *The Sopranos* (Rothman & Overbey, 2017) and the age of prestige television. At the same time, most episodic, scripted television relies on repetition and forms of shorthand that viewers come to understand. Stewart notes that 'so long as those who make art have taken as their task the finer and finer articulation of pre-existing meanings, [such as] the meanings of social and perceptual habit, they have not been able truly to revise the possibilities of relations between persons' (2005, p. 22). In the reduction of the television to its 'lessons', Stewart shows readers (and viewers) the failure of television to engage in the true ethical possibilities of the Levinasian face-to-face encounter that she proposes for art, through its insistent repetition of *types*. In this way, Stewart anticipates many discussions of recent years that call for diversity of representation, and for a moratorium of socially damaging 'tropes' such as the 'Bury Your Gays' trope that has been cause for repeated outcry in the past decade in response to television's reliance on the trope as spectacle (Hulan, 2017, pp. 23-24).

'From "Lessons From Television"' stands out in Stewart's body of work as unusually engaged with a (solely) contemporary medium. Discussing the design of *Columbarium* (the book in which the poem appears), Stewart notes that the first and third sections are comprised of poems that address the elements (earth, air, fire, water), while the middle section comprises 'a nest of human voices speaking to and for each other' (Stewart, 2003b). The voices in this nest bear the label of 'georgics'; amid subjects such as apples, bees, night, roses and scarecrows – arguably all relevant to the farmer relying on the traditional, instructional qualities of a georgic – the contemporaneity of television as a subject stands out, even as Stewart keeps the didactic intent. While Stewart sees a weakness in this poem ('any forms of insight or beauty that it offers might already be so ironic that it's difficult to read the poem as a poem' [2003b]), the weakness (that is, that she is engaged in a process that may undermine the status of the work as *poem*) touches on the way that poems

about television can often bring the poet to the borderland of genre. The poem acts, in her estimation, as a form of ‘ethnograph[y]’, and it asks ‘what kinds of values television transmits through time and across generations’ (2003b); the literary, lyric effects of recurrence are met with the analytical discussion of what patterns of representation tell us about cultural beliefs. Stewart has pointed out that ‘in every culture there’s a relationship between riddles and proverbs and I try to turn my proverbs back into riddles’ (Stewart, 2018); rather than the ravelling of riddling, Stewart here achieves the crystalline unravelling of the ‘myths’ of television into proverbs. In this way, even as the poem proposes an open-endedness with the use of the preposition ‘from’ in its title, the poem seems at each stage to close shut interpretation by summing up the effects – and affects – of television. In this way, the poem seems to cut off the act of open ekphrasis in order to settle into hermeneutic intent.

Because it is uncharacteristic of Stewart’s writing – which engages more often with nature and ‘the nature of which human nature is part’ (Stewart, 2003b) – ‘From “Lessons from Television”’ stands out as a possible path suggested and not followed by Stewart herself. However, it is one that other poets have later explored – Stewart’s concern with the intergenerational values produced and propped up by television opens a space for poetry to address television through the lens of what Claudia Rankine, with Michael Dowdy, has named ‘the poetics of social engagement’ (2018), which can actively critique such long-transmitted values.

Surveillance / Ambience

If Stewart and Carson make television the subject or arena of their poems, Claudia Rankine recognises television’s continual ambient presence in our lives, and the way that, capturing aspects of modern life, television infuses its subjects with its influence. In *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, the first book in what the author has come to see as a trilogy of hybrid works [2], classified as both ‘lyric essay’ and ‘poetry’ (along with the later works *Citizen* and *Just Us*), Rankine’s ostensible subject is the human condition – human mortality and loneliness. The book’s opening line is ‘There was a time I could say no one I knew well had died’ (2004, p. 5); however, preceding this opening is the visual cue that operates throughout the book to demarcate sections – the repeated image of a television displaying static. However, that static is itself an overlay: George W. Bush is ‘hidden in the snow’, and as such is ‘subliminally present as surveillance’ (Robbins, 2014, p. 138). Rankine’s work represents a reading of the body (particularly the black body) acted upon by mass culture – most particularly by television – in the wake of 9/11. While I cannot hope to do justice to this book-length work in these brief remarks, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* includes some of the most direct meditations on television and its impacts upon the viewer in 21st-century poetry, and in particular I wish to draw attention to the way that television appears to ‘infect’ the speaker of Rankine’s work.

This repeating image of the television is a part of the book's overall form and, arguably, part of what makes the work in Rankine's estimation a lyric essay as well as a poem – a form that she agrees 'can abandon the strict logic of argument for something more intuitive or emotional' and that she states 'utilizes many of the techniques of poetry – [including] repetition, metaphor, elision' (2016, p. 145). The television image is also an inextricable part of the *subject* of the work overall; the repeated display of static on the screen reflects the emotionally hollowed out experience of loneliness at the work's core. In circling human mortality and human isolation, television emerges as an alternate subject of the work as a whole – the account of endless representation of experience (alongside corporate messaging) mimics the alienation from emotion that we see the interlocutors of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* express repeatedly.

Television is prevalent for the speaker of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* from childhood onward – and television is foregrounded for the reader from the beginning of the work. Within the book's first section (as demarcated by those images of the television set) Rankine's speaker notes, 'Every movie I watched in the third grade compelled me to ask, Is he dead? Is she dead?' (2004, p. 6). She states, 'You are, as usual, watching television' (p. 7). In the hospital room of a friend, 'We watch a lot of television the four days I sit at her bedside' (p. 9). Apparently at home, 'I leave the television on all the time' (p. 15). Visiting a friend with Alzheimer's she notes that he 'pointed to the television and with great effort and concentration finally said, I want to see the lady who deals in death' (p. 18); her friend is referring to the television show *Murder, She Wrote*. In this way, television plays many roles: it is (potentially) that which speaks from beyond the grave, it is ritual, it is company, and it is, at last, a shared medium, a common touchstone from which a personal language may emerge – a language in which Jessica Fletcher can become 'the lady who deals in death'.

Discussing her later work, *Citizen* (2014), Rankine states that the 'small moments' are 'what stabilize and destabilize us', noting that, when writing about Hurricane Katrina, she 'was interested in *what got said around* the event (Rankine, 2016, p. 149). This same interest in the stabilising and destabilising forces of the small moments, and of *what gets said*, likewise applies to her evocations of and investigations into television, and helps us understand what is at stake when the ambient noise of television is brought to the foreground of consciousness – particularly, what is at stake when it acts upon the black body. Arguably, it is this constant reference to mass media that produces within the constructed 'I' of the text the appeal to the 'generalities of existence' (Rankine, 2016, p. 159), which Rankine aspires to capture from an intimate vantagepoint, and which allows for the Levinasian 'passage from oneself to anonymity' (Levinas as cited in Bruns 2015, p. 214). In this way, the cumulative effect of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* resonates with Rankine's note toward the creation of her subsequent work: 'It's not about telling the story, it's about creating the feeling of *knowing* the story through the accumulation of the recurring moment' (Rankine, 2016, p. 139). In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, we are oriented toward feelings of loneliness and death, underpinned with the 'recurring moment' of television. While Rankine notes the ubiquity of television, it also

becomes evident that we are not always willing audiences. As such, the way she draws attention to the ‘recurring moment’ of television suggests the possible violence of the form.

That ‘recurring moment’ gains urgency in the wake of 9/11. Rankine seeks to find meaning not in the attack itself, but in the way the attack becomes part of the consciousness of Americans – of viewers. She writes:

It strikes me that what the attack on the World Trade Center stole from us is our willingness to be complex. Or what the attack on the World Trade Center revealed to us is that we were never complex. We might want to believe that we can condemn and we can love and we can condemn because we love our country, but that’s too complex. (Rankine, 2004, p. 91)

This new lack of complexity in the wake of 9/11 is reinforced by the images Rankine cites, and the versions of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ she encounters, whether it is in conversation with a taxi driver (Rankine, 2004, pp. 89-90) or, in the words of George Bush to the US Congress on 20 September 2001, ‘Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists’ (as cited in Kimberley, 2011, p. 778). Mass culture invades her life – infecting her with ‘Fear. Fear in phlegm. Fear airborne. Fear foreign’ (Rankine, 2004, p. 92) – and the new impossibility for complexity means the speaker – the reader – must choose a side. After reproducing an image of the United States Postal Service warning in the wake of the 2001 anthrax scare, Rankine’s speaker notes, ‘As the days pass I begin to watch myself closely. The America that I am is washing her hands closely’ (2004, p. 92). The moment, glimpsed by a ‘she’ at ‘2:47am’, when a voice proclaims about Saddam Hussein, “‘Ladies and Gentlemen, we got him’” (p. 123), seems to alleviate the body’s infection only by offering numbness. ‘One observes, one recognizes without being recognized. One opens the paper. One turns on the television. Nothing changes. My distress grows into nothing. Thou art nothing’ (p. 117) – the Americanness of this American lyric is one in which the live stream continues; at the same time, Rankine engages the ‘poethical thinking’ (Retallack as cited in Robbins, 2014, p. 124) that seeks to ‘dislodge us from reactionary allegiances and nostalgias’ (Retallack, 2003, p. 3). The fear and the numbness that Rankine reveals as a (sometimes unwilling) member of an audience are reactionary responses to be investigated and, through investigation, resisted.

Binge-watch this poem

Anne Jamison (2013) notes that many scholars of fan fiction refer to the ways that early viewers of *Star Trek: The Original Series* responded to that series by writing what would now be termed prose fan fiction (or ‘fan fic’); however, Jamison also points to a ‘prehistory of fanfiction’ (p. 26) in which writers looked to write *with* sources already available. This ‘prehistory’ features much poetry (as both source and ‘response’). Whether the sources are Homeric (as Virgil revisits in the *Aeneid*, and Tennyson does in *Ulysses*) or Shakespearean (as Charlotte Smith appropriates from his sonnet sequence for her own sonnets), Jamison points to the fact that writers keep returning to

the ‘sandboxes’ of the writers before them (2013, p. 27). In the *New Yorker*, Stephanie Burt argues that what fan fiction relies on – besides the ardency of being a fan – is a shared world of reference. Or, as Burt puts it, ‘first there was you, and your friends, age ten, making up adventures in which Chewbacca met Addy Walker, and writing them down’ (2017). Burt’s consideration of fan fiction looks beyond evaluations of quality to a consideration of the basic ways we tell stories, and offers the fact that often those stories we tell are stories that contain characters we’ve met before.

Bianca Stone, a versatile practitioner of both visual and poetic arts (and well-versed in classical myth, as evidenced by her collaboration with Anne Carson on the 2012 poetry comic *Antigonick*), understands the ways that mass culture, like myth, can be reinvigorated. What becomes apparent in her verse is that she is an avid television watcher and fan. In particular, *Star Trek* (a world that is core to our contemporary notion of fan fiction) appears in her poems and poetry comics – predominantly, the 1990s series *Star Trek: Voyager* and the character of Captain Katherine Janeway.

However, in invoking and responding to *Star Trek*, Stone does not reiterate the world in the form of ekphrasis, nor provide a mere spin off in which the characters are drawn into ardently wished for scenarios, as occurs in much fan fiction; rather, Stone attempts, through lyric, to explore the emotion entangled with a longstanding television franchise. *Voyager* and its characters are never named explicitly in the poem ‘You Were Lost in the Delta Quadrant’; instead, the writer relies on a reader knowing – or being able to find out – the significance of that faraway ‘delta quadrant’ and the ‘you’ who ‘entered at the badlands with your hair in a bun’ (Stone, 2014, p. 22). For a world richly catalogued by fan sites, references within the poem are only a google search away – a wiki such as *Memory Alpha*, ‘a collaborative project to create the most definitive, accurate, and accessible encyclopedia and reference for everything related to *Star Trek*’ (n.d.), allows the reader to learn or refresh their memory of a television show now decades old. Written more than a decade after the airing of the series finale, Stone’s poem jumps around the lore that built up over the seven seasons of *Voyager*; the poem is akin to the contemporary experience of binge-watching, distilled into a single lyric poem.

Stone’s opening line refers to the event of the Pilot episode of *Star Trek: Voyager*, ‘Caretaker’ (Berman & Kolbe, 1995), in which a Starfleet ship is suddenly whisked from its location by a ‘displacement wave’ to a section of the universe light years away from their original position – at maximum ‘warp’ it would take 75 years for the crew to return home. It is this displacement that forms the basis of this entry in the franchise: the USS Voyager finds itself now in space unexplored by the Federation of Star Trek’s universe. In this space of the unexplored, Stone finds rich possibilities for exploring emotion as itself an often-strange landscape.

‘You Were Lost in the Delta Quadrant’ acknowledges the way that the image-making inherent in television can be – and frequently is – divorced from its narrative. Katherine Janeway is known in

the series *Voyager* for her bun and her Katherine Hepburn-like speech cadence; in this poem, the ‘you’ that resembles Captain Janeway is placed in conversation with an ‘I’, a ‘me’, whose ‘head [is] stuck in a banister of longing’ (Stone, 2014, p. 24). The yearning for adventure and exploration – the yearning, in the tagline first introduced in the original series of *Star Trek* in 1966, ‘to boldly go where no man has gone before!’ (Johnson & Daniels, 1966, ‘The Man Trap’) – is the yearning for understanding and feeling. At the same time that Captain Janeway voyages into this beyond, she is a character born in the more easily knowable Bloomington, Indiana – a fact that Stone notes, and that can be learned in *Voyager* episodes ‘11:59’ and ‘Imperfection’. The quotidian, iterative details of the series – consuming replicated ‘vegetable bullion’ (Stone, 2014, p. 22) and ‘coffee’ (p. 24); playing at being ‘a governess’ (p. 22) on the Holodeck for leisure; the familiar ‘series of captain’s logs’ (p. 23) – are noted alongside the dramatic events that are anchors throughout the series – ‘We were in stasis for 17 days’ (p. 22) refers to Janeway and Chakotay’s infection by a fatal illness in the episode ‘Resolutions’ (Taylor & Singer, 1996); ‘Once, you woke up beside a God / and were furious at his presumptuousness’ (p. 24), refers to the episode ‘The Q and the Grey’ (Piller & Bole, 1996), when the recurring character Q (of the ‘Q continuum’, introduced in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* pilot episode ‘Encounter at Farpoint’ [Fontana & Allen et al., 1987]) announces to Janeway that he has chosen her to be the mother of his child. References within the poem draw from episodes across the series, but also from the *Star Trek* franchise as a whole.

In addition to these many references, the poem also contains the first-person experience of a television watcher: ‘I was in Brooklyn and you were with me the whole time, / internalizing sadness. Making scary situations sexy’ (Stone, 2014, p. 24). The poem, then, offers more than escapism, in which the viewer imagines herself into the world of *Star Trek*; rather, it acknowledges the ways in which television can be a guide or solace to the viewer when navigating real-world experiences and emotions. If, recalling Nussbaum, television is a ‘mirror’, it is potentially a mirror that offers the individual viewer a reflection of possibility, as well as the reflection of an existing cultural ethos.

Next season on ...

This brief study of poems by Carson, Stewart, Rankine and Stone, respectively, demonstrates a range of different approaches and intentions when writing about television through the poetic medium. As Anne Carson projects the deep past onto the television screen of the imagination, Susan Stewart distils lessons she expects to see repeated in forthcoming broadcasts, the predictable livestream endlessly revealing that new narratives follow old narrative patterns. Succumbing to the rhythms of television, these poets undertake ‘the passage from oneself’ to become a member of an audience. However, the active role these poets play in their ‘audiencing’ can also become a form of resistance to the seeming ease with which the world is reduced to the headlines of the day, or to the live crawl across the bottom of the screen. In this way, Claudia Rankine becomes an

interpreter of television's omnipresence; her meditations on death and loneliness ask us to consider the ways in which we can become unwilling audience members, and how we might counteract the cultural 'white noise' by engaging complexity. Bianca Stone addresses the stark contrast between the seriality of most fictional television shows and the single 'present' moment of the lyric poem; her poem blends the lyric moment with the ongoing experience of fandom. Each of these poets succeeds in offering new possibilities to reflect a technology deeply integrated into how we have come to know ourselves and to understand the spectacle that constantly unfolds around us.

Notes

[1] In *Decreation*'s oratio 'Lots of Guns,' the section titled 'Tender Guns' opens with the assertion that 'The archaeology of Troy is an archaeology of guns, for all the guns in the world have come to Troy, all the guns ever invented were invented for Troy' (Carson, 2005, p. 111); meanwhile, 'TV Men: Hektor' (Carson, 1995, pp. 55-64) suggests that the history of Troy is a history of television, of spectacle and image-making.

[2] In bearing both categories of 'lyric essay' and 'poetry', Rankine's verse participates in a discussion of hybridity that has, in the early 21st century, been a staging ground for discussions of avant-garde American poetics. This follows, in particular, the publication of the Norton Anthology *American Hybrid* (Swensen & St John, 2009) but may also be seen in the other proposed (and anthologised) categories such as 'Lyric Postmodernisms' (Shepherd, 2008). In the latest of her edited anthologies for Wesleyan Press, Rankine, with Michael Dowdy, proposes another form of hybridity with a 'poetics of social engagement' (Dowdy & Rankine, 2018); meanwhile, Tana Jean Welch links Rankine's work to the 'investigative poetry' in the tradition of Ed Sanders (Welch, 2018, p. 129). The genre of 'lyric essay' as proposed by Deborah Tall and John D'Agata ('The Lyric Essay', n.d.) is often treated separately to poetry; I read Rankine's claiming of the hybrid title as a desire to place their forms on a continuum.

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