

# Front Matter

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# criticism

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149 LYRIC WITHOUT SUBJECTS AND LAW WITHOUT PERSONS: VAGRANCY, POLICE POWER, AND THE *LYRICAL TALES*

Sal Nicolazzo

Scholars have long noted the astonishing ubiquity of vagrancy in early Romantic poetry, and have—particularly in the case of Wordsworth—understood vagrancy as a key site for the articulation of poetic form, poetic labor, and poetic consciousness. Understandings of poetic vagrancy have long been dominated by attention to lyric subjectivity, and as Barbara Johnson has influentially argued, law and lyric are indeed startlingly convergent in their concerns with the figurative grounding of personhood. Vagrancy law, however, was not historically concerned with subjectivity or personhood. Vagrancy law allowed for the highly discretionary criminalization of a wide, miscellaneous array of people and required neither a trial nor proof of criminal intent or the commission of a criminal act. This places vagrancy less in the realm of penal law than that of police, which referred not to a uniformed law-enforcement agency but to the general maintenance of the peace and protection of the community against threat. By reading the poetry of Mary Robinson against the backdrop of police reform and vagrancy law at the end of the eighteenth century, I propose that we turn away from lyric or legal subjectivity in order to see other crucial poetic valences of what Celeste Langan has influentially termed “Romantic vagrancy.” Mary Robinson, in her final collection of poetry, the *Lyrical Tales* (1800), performs astonishing experiments with lyric form in a book dominated by the dispossessed, impoverished, stateless, and fugitive. Robinson not only pushes us to reconsider a literary-historical narrative that has long been dominated by Wordsworth but also offers an engagement with vagrancy that theorizes law and lyric as intersecting precisely where legal persons and lyric subjects disappear.

171 PROSTHETIC MATTERS: ON BLINDNESS, MACHINES, AND KNOWLEDGE IN DIDEROT’S *LETTER ON THE BLIND*

Tracy L. Rutler

Denis Diderot’s 1749 essay *La Lettre sur les aveugles à l’usage de ceux qui voient* (*Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who Can See*) examines three blind figures, in the process laying the foundation for his materialist hermeneutic.

Although many academic works of recent decades have focused on skepticism and materialism in Diderot's oeuvre broadly—and in the *Lettre* specifically—to date, few have reckoned with the materiality of machines and their role in the production of this new form of knowledge. The *Lettre* examines not only the ways in which language expresses itself through the human body but also the ways in which the body engages with tools and machines in order to liberate expression and knowledge from the body itself. These machines exist in prosthetic relation to the body, and this intra-corporeal relation posits a view of disability that is enabling. In this essay, I examine *Lettre sur les aveugles*, arguing that in form and in content, Diderot proposes a prosthetic ethos that breaks down distinctions between organic and inorganic matter. Placing Diderot into dialogue with Bernard Stiegler, particularly regarding the latter's work on mnemotechnics, I demonstrate how in Diderot's *Lettre*, materialist knowledge emanates from a delicate and intense relation between disabled bodies and machines.

195 THE DOLLAR AT THE END OF THE BOOK: VANESSA PLACE, INC., AND ALLEGORY IN CONCEPTUAL POETRY

Trevor A. Strunk

This article engages the poet Vanessa Place's recent "corporate" venture, Vanessa Place, Inc., in order to ask in what ways conceptual poetry can be understood as a conflation between art object and commodity. What becomes clear through a reading of not only Vanessa Place, Inc., but also Place's critical poetics in *Notes on Conceptualisms* as well as her long-form conceptual poem *Dies: A Sentence*, is that the relationship between the conceptual poem and the commodity form is by no means simply antagonistic or complementary. Ultimately, this essay argues, it is Vanessa Place, Inc.'s precarious but dialectical nature as a commodified poetics that allows it to successfully and critically, if provisionally, embody the complexities and contradictions of late capitalist culture itself.

221 LYRIC REDRESS: THE RACIAL POLITICS OF VOICE AND AMERICAN PERSONHOOD

José Felipe Alvergue

Lyric poetry, in its most accessible description as a genre, is experienced between the recognizable formal attributes of a speaker and the social structures wherein speaking elicits meaning. In this essay, I focus on Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and the intimate-public speech acts through which a lyric demonstration and critical function emerge. Principally, this essay interrogates the "character" and "event" of American personhood and seeks to understand Rankine's work between the pessimism of alienation and the shared care articulated in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's

theorization of an “undercommons.” Looking at how lyric practice encompasses address as redress, however, requires more of an explanation than the referential narratives of who “we” are or the singular contact of interpellative experiences with lived life. Therefore, this article also draws on the work of Calvin Warren and other contemporary critics in interrogating lyric redress as multiscalar and figurative speech acts in this regard of an American chiasmus, America as a unified voice.

247 FROM FLOAT TO FLICKER: INFORMATION PROCESSING, RACIAL SEMIOTICS, AND ANTI-RACIST PROTEST, FROM “I AM A MAN” TO “BLACK LIVES MATTER”

Sarah Whitcomb Laiola

This article engages the relationships between information systems, antiracist protest, and race today. Building on the body of work that describes the ways institutional racism has shifted from an overt system during the (pre-) civil rights era, to a covert, color-blind system today, this article argues, first, that this shift mirrors the cultural change in information processing from analog systems to digital systems and, second, that signs of race articulated as racial protest have similarly changed over this historical period. Using the Black Lives Matter movement as a contemporary frame, the article focuses on three cultural objects that recall and revise civil rights protests to articulate this change: Ernest Withers’s 1968 photograph of the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike, Glenn Ligon’s 1988 untitled painting (“I Am a Man”), and the 2000 condition report of Ligon’s painting. Forming a historical network of racial protest, these images perform the changing semiotics of race and racial protest from signs that float as in an analog system to those that flicker as in a digital system. It is as a “digital,” flickering signifier of protest that blackness is rematerialized as visible matter to operate against color-blind systems today.

*Reviews*

269 Roy Pérez on *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* by Dagmawi Woubshet

275 Barrett Watten on *The Poetics of Information Overload: From Gertrude Stein to Conceptual Writing* by Paul Stephens

285 M. C. Armstrong on *This Thing Called the World* by Debjani Ganguly

289 Joe Rollins on *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* by Rachel Greenwald Smith