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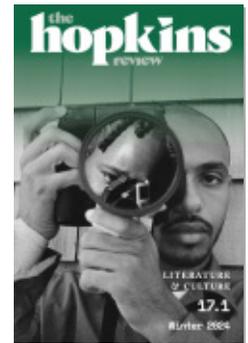
Introduction: Locating a Collective Lyric "I"

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Leila Easa and Jennifer Stager**Introduction: Locating a Collective Lyric “I”**

Who is the subject of the lyric?

The lyric, that genre of poetry we may associate with the personal, the confessional, the intimate, the autobiographical, seems to produce its subject so directly and naturally that we hardly even notice the shifting of its gears. Yet when we hear or read a line from a poet considered quintessentially lyric—for example, Sappho’s “because I prayed this word: / I want” (as translated by Anne Carson) or Dickinson’s “I cannot live with You”—who is represented by that “I”? Equally important, whom does Dickinson address as “You”—or whom does Sappho, earlier in the same translated fragment, call with the line “I bid you sing”? To ask such questions about “I”s and “you”s is also to ask about representation and identification in literature and art more broadly. What happens to readers, listeners, and viewers as they encounter a work? Does a reader of lyric poetry, for example, find themselves invited into or already inhabiting the world of the “I”—or of the “you”? Or are they distanced from those worlds, restricted from any fantasy of a universal such poems might aspire to construct? And can a reader bring themselves—the material, situated self of the body—with them in such encounters, or is the goal to imagine the shaking off of a self, sloughing off the material?

As Virginia Jackson points out while raising similar questions in this folio, “The answers to these questions seem so obvious that few have asked them.” Among other possibilities, we might variously imagine the “I” as a manifestation of an author, the hyperlocal “speaker” of a poem, or a kind of generalized, überpoetic lyric authority. Similarly, the “you” might evoke a specific beloved, an imagined reader, a muse or spiritual guide, or something else entirely. But how accurate are these assumptions? And just how stable are these categories anyway? Confounding matters is the fact that lyric, in its most literal sense and certainly in Sappho’s time, is poetry accompanied by a lyre, and thus in that ancient formation, the lyric already constructs a plurality between the music and the singing poet—a collective in performance. Notions held in modernity of lyric subjectivity have long been contested; as Leslie Kurke writes in the *Cambridge Companion to Archaic Greece*, “The pervasive, self-assertive ‘I’ is not merely a historical and generic mirage: it is rather an epiphenomenon of political and social contestation and resistance.” In short, as

far as tracing these “I”s, “you”s, and “we”s? It’s complicated.

While this idea of a plural “I” has a deep history, its collectivity has always stood in some tension with the singular “I” of an individual speaking subject. Over time, its pluralities have been de-emphasized in favor of a singular “I” that has been a primary mode of patriarchal culture and therefore foundational to understandings of subjectivity in modernity. Yet even that singular or patriarchal “I” has been variously understood, especially in the context of shifting notions of the human that arise from contemporary catastrophes like that of climate change, which, as Margaret Ronda explains in this folio, “fragments individual personhood into a disoriented and multivalent presence” in an “emergent awareness of shared—if unevenly registered—finitude.” This folio begins, then, with a challenge: to consider questions of the “I” and “you” in both the singular and plural cases in order to better glimpse such contestations and perhaps better find opportunities for resistance.

Yet such conversations cannot be had outside the framework of racial accountability. In contemporary lyric studies, scholars—including William Camponovo in the open-access digital arm of this folio—have responded in various ways to Kamran Javadizadeh’s argument in “The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads: Claudia Rankine, Robert Lowell, and the Whiteness of the Lyric Subject” that the work of the lyric, as it has been historically understood, is to produce “the condition of white innocence” and that “what underwrites the autobiography of confessional poetry is its construction of whiteness, an identity that assumes its universality even as it anxiously apprehends its sovereignty to be under threat.” Javadizadeh ponders where the lyric can go from there, asking how “a poet [can] retain the intimacy allowed by the lyric tradition without replicating its pernicious political effects.” In her recent book *Before Modernism*, Virginia Jackson offers a different framework:

What if these poets and others worked in poetic genres and discourses that rendered their work a record of the ways in which the racialized social antagonism that is modernity’s foundation made “subjective expression” the precise “locus of impossible speech” that came to define the alienated modern lyric subject?

Engaging with these trends in criticism, the writers and artists of this folio explore that lyric subject, tracing manifestations, pronouns, and interrelationships produced through the dynamics of contemporary modernity.

The resulting selection here represents a collective effort—a “we” of very individual “I”s—to engage such topics. Initiated upon the release of our 2022 publication, *Public Feminism in Times of Crisis*—a text that considers the ongoing political and epidemiological crises we are living in today and the significant intersectional feminist responses to them—this folio develops from one of the book’s chapters that considers the “collective lyric I” in the context of lyric poetry, reception, and performance, proposing an I/we relationship woven into lyric practices. Yet such proposed collectivity was never just about formal concerns; instead, we have been particularly interested in the power of the collective as a much-needed source of activist intervention. In this folio, we are joined by other writers, scholars, and artists who also ask what possibilities and frictions emerge from an exploration of a plural “I.” The contributors to this project offer a range of examinations of the relationships and tensions between the singular and the collective that both affirm and critique such notions, shaping engagements that take a variety of forms, including poems, literary criticism, and visual arts, and thread through shared interests in concepts like parachorality, materialities of and in texts, temporalities and attentions, and feminized labor, among many others.

We divide the work of the folio’s contributors into four sections.

The first, “Poiesis” (the Greek word from which we get “poetry”; from *poieō*, “to make”), deals directly with poetry and the concept of lyric subjects. Bookended by poems by David Ishaya Osu and Bethany Dixon that play with concepts of a collective lyric “I,” this section features three scholarly meditations by Virginia Jackson, Margaret Ronda, and Michael Leong on the production of lyric subjectivity as well as one bridging essay by Sasha-Mae Eccleston that connects that scholarship to practices in and beyond institutional contexts.

The second, “Praxis” (“practice”—or what we like to imagine as theory in action), broadens our focus to art practice with a particular attention to form.

Art collective Related Tactics constructs a piece written in footnotes; Christine Hume and Laura Larson share lyric image-essays exploring the individual and the collective, and Briony Hughes offers an art book project that materializes collective engagement with literary texts. Theorization and pedagogy also take center stage with Kandis Williams's multimodal conceptualization of Etherization and Sarah Beckmann's meditation on making as teaching.

The third section, the open-access digital arm of the folio project, showcases scholarship on poetry and art by William Camponovo, Ella Gonzalez, Sean Gordon, Steven Leyva and Jennifer Keohane, Yuki Tanaka, and Eleni Theodoropoulos; lyric essays by Bethany Dixon, Pia Hargrove, and Les James; and a video essay by Kandis Williams, all in the service of examining, contesting, and enacting collective lyric "I"s.

Finally, we will offer postpublication digital and print broadsheets featuring the art of Kandis Williams, along with an index of the print folio as another take on text-based collectivity, lyricism, and art.

Each of the projects featured in the folio asks us to think a bit differently—to read, theorize, practice, and consider in new ways, tilting our very epistemologies in the process. We recognize that not all readers have encountered discussions of lyric subjectivity before, because although the idea of a lyric "I" has a deep history and layered meaning within literary and academic practices, outside such circles this formulation is not a part of everyday speech. And yet it is also true that as we move through the world—and even as we engage with this folio—we are always navigating the I/we relationships that a lyric "I" seems to contain, along with all their political reverberations. So perhaps, as we explore these offerings, we, too, can bring them beyond the page and into a place of democratic and shared agency—Sappho's praying of words that might even reshape worlds.

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GUEST EDITORS