

A Reflection on Amanda Gorman's Commodified Verse

Robert Bernard Hass

Since the advent of Romanticism in the late 18th Century, one consistent feature of poetry is that its practitioners have nearly exclusively chosen to write from the periphery of society, looking from the outside in, most often in an antagonistic relationship with the state, decrying its abuses and injustices. This artistic vantage point has been especially true for our nation's greatest African American writers and musicians, who, forced to the margins by the dominant culture, have used their platforms to expose state atrocities and to condemn the civic power structures that support them. Like the romantics before them, our contemporary African American poets, pledging fealty to authentic individual experience as one of poetry's highest virtues, have unflinchingly borne witness to the violence and sorrow of our age, thus fully embracing Shelley's dictum that poets should serve as the "unacknowledged legislators of the world."

One of the great problems confronting an inaugural poet, then, is that the poem's occasional demands run antithetical to this post-romantic tradition. The inaugural ceremony requires any poet working in the genre to merge poetic virtue and state virtue in didactic celebration. Such an occasion, perhaps the only time in America when a poet might command a vast audience, obliges the poet to abandon the private vision, and its concomitant authenticity, in exchange for a public voice that promotes "national unity." Though all poetry is in some sense "public," no American poet in recent memory (save for the six inaugural efforts beginning with Robert Frost) has voluntarily composed a poem in tribute to an American leader, the way Virgil happily did for Augustus or Spenser for Queen Elizabeth. In a post-industrial and late capitalist age, and in an era when social media has fully revealed the ubiquity and frequency of violent injustice, the task of writing an occasional poem in celebration of the state or a leader has become nearly impossible.

In light of this context, I found myself oddly troubled and deeply saddened by Amanda Gorman's "The Hill We Climb." In spite of its Whitmanian optimism and calls for peace, and in spite of Ms. Gorman's regal poise and scintillating delivery, I couldn't help but think, as she performed her verse, that much of the poem's content was a lie—a big lie if you will—and that its call for unity and healing was precisely the wrong message the country needed to hear in the aftermath of a failed insurrection spearheaded by white nationalists.

This is not to say that Ms. Gorman completely ignored our historical moment or that harmony in and of itself is not an ideal worth pursuing. Nor do I mean to suggest that Ms. Gorman does not possess her own agency—she willingly, and with sincere intentions, composed the poem and message she thought the nation would be willing to hear. The problem, however, is that the occasion constrained her. Bound by political necessity to echo the great theme of President Biden's inaugural address, Ms. Gorman had no choice but to mollify her outrage and offer a message of hope so as not to harm the presidential brand.

In alluding to racial injustice, Ms. Gorman thus relied heavily upon abstraction and cliché so as not to make her audience too uncomfortable. Her sanitized language of “never-ending shade,” “belly of the beast,” and “the norms and notions of what just is” rejected a more poignant idiom that might better have expressed our revulsion at the knee that crushed George Floyd’s neck or the hail of gunfire that graffitied Breonna Taylor’s bedsheets red with her own blood. In deference to the moment, Ms. Gorman’s euphemisms recoiled from white brutality, thus making her poem safe for children and the forty million Americans who watched her.

In addition to her constrained language, I was further troubled by Ms. Gorman’s “borrowings” from Lin Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*. Like many of her generation, Ms. Gorman has been smitten by Miranda’s sweeping tour de force, an ambitious production, replete with hip hop and blues tracks, that not only won a Pulitzer Prize for drama but also earned high praise from Michelle Obama as “the best piece of art in any form that [she had] ever seen.” Ms. Gorman’s passion for the songs that helped her overcome a debilitating speech impediment echoes my own students’ obsession with the show. In my early American literature and American Studies courses, for example, many students, having seen *Hamilton* or heard its music, confess to me that Hamilton is their favorite founder because of his abolitionist attitudes and rags-to-riches reinforcement of the American Dream mythology.

Unfortunately, Mr. Miranda’s portrait of Hamilton, like Ms. Gorman’s “The Hill We Climb,” presents us with a distorted reality that glosses over the hard truth. As Ishmael Reed and Jesse Serfilippi have admirably disclosed, not only did Hamilton enslave people of African descent, but his complicity in the slave trade fashioned his identity and played an indispensable role in helping him realize his sizeable ambitions. When it became politically or financially expedient to do so, Hamilton conveniently ignored his early objections to the “peculiar institution” and purchased slaves to work in his own household.

Reed’s and Serfilippi’s carefully documented and accurate portrayals of Hamilton as slave-owner, have placed them at odds with Hamilton apologist Ron Chernow, whose Pulitzer Prize-winning *Alexander Hamilton* served as the primary historical source for Mr. Miranda’s play. In the 818-page tome that inspired *Hamilton*, Chernow, whitewashing the existing contradictory evidence, unabashedly labeled Hamilton an “uncompromising abolitionist.” Such a description must have pleased conservative financier Lewis Lehrman, co-founder of the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History, who, in addition to underwriting Chernow’s biography, has promoted an exceptionalist version of American slavery as little more than a “world” institution that “Americans took initiative in destroying.”

The cumulative effect of Ms. Gorman’s language to “put our differences aside” and “lay down our arms / so we can reach out our arms / to one another” is that its healing gestures, rather than ameliorating racial injustice, function instead to preserve and reaffirm the very ideologies that make injustice possible. Rather than speaking truth to power, her poem avoids the language of conflict and cognitive dissonance—the “good trouble,” as John Lewis called it—that disrupts complacency and forces Americans to confront their nation’s failings. As a narcotic for a citizenry desperate for hope, the poem momentarily numbed our collective pain but failed to

address our systemic national illness, a collective sickness that sanctions the assassination of unarmed black men and women, that legalizes the incarceration of brown-skinned children in cages, that trades in the anti-Semitic lunacy of Q-Anon conspiracy theories, that destroys indigenous peoples' lands in the name of profit, and that suppresses the vote of the urban demographic that made the inauguration possible in the first place. Despite her claims that the nation "isn't broken / but simply unfinished," the accumulated evidence from just the last four years indicates that it clearly is indeed broken.

In his dedication to the Frost Library at Amherst College on October 26, 1963, President John F. Kennedy reminded his audience of the proper role of the poet in a free society. Delivered during the height of the Cold War, Kennedy's speech defended the poet as "the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state." Arguing that the dissenting poet is just as "indispensable" to the health of democracy as those who support it, Kennedy perceived poetry as the vehicle that saves "power from itself." "When power leads man toward arrogance," he wrote, "poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his experience. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses." The modern poet, as Kennedy defined her, is thus a "solitary figure" who, while promoting a private vision of justice, "sails against the currents" of her time.

It is particularly discomfiting then, to see how quickly the nation's neoliberal infrastructure so thoroughly commodified this young woman. Within days of her inaugural reading, Ms. Gorman received job offers, signed book and modeling contracts, and accepted a commission from the NFL to read a poem at the Super Bowl. Though I have no objections to a young black woman capitalizing on her instantaneous celebrity, I do worry about the high cost to dignity Ms. Gorman may be willing to pay to sustain her market appeal. I wonder how her appearance will engage the fact that football (especially among college ranks) has a long history of exploiting young black men, or that the NFL effectively banished Colin Kaepernick for having the temerity to kneel during the national anthem in protest of police brutality. As Ms. Gorman matures into her role as a public poet, I look forward to the day when she will find the courage to move beyond the easy palliatives of healing and patriotism and embrace an ethos more Nina Simone or Audre Lorde than Disney.

I don't mean to presume Ms. Gorman's thoughts, nor do I wish to prescribe from my privileged position an agenda more consistent with my own political pieties. I am curious, however, to see how Ms. Gorman will seize her moment in the spotlight. Will her Super Bowl performance be merely an encore to the inaugural poem? Or will she use the occasion, in which she has greater liberty to express herself freely, as an opportunity to speak truth more directly and urgently to power?

If the latter, I will applaud her with hope and gratitude. If what emerges, however, is a heartwarming paean to the status quo—an anthem to the always-yet-to-be realized dream of justice and harmony—then I can only hope that in that darkened stadium there will be persons of every race, gender, creed, class, and age who choose in good conscience to take a knee.

Above all, I hope I do not have to witness a national spectacle, from which emerges the ancient and ugly trope of wealthy, powerful white men exploiting a young black woman to serve their larger purposes, to pretend that everything is fine as they seek to exonerate themselves from their culpability in injustice. Until I see the ugliest factions of our society admit accountability and offer restitution for their deplorable, violent actions, I simply cannot sanction the language of healing until that day arrives. Though such an ideal at this moment may be little more than an imagined utopia, it is one that our artists, with courage and fortitude, might nevertheless help us to achieve.