



Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present

Lesley Wheeler

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The most interesting tensions and ambitions of twentieth-century American poetry intersect in one resonant word: voice. The term "poetic voice" emphasizes poetry's reliance on sound, which is prominent in ethnic American writings, new formalism, and many species of performance and sound-directed poetry, both mainstream and avant-garde. However, voice is also a metaphor for originality, personality, and the illusion of authorial presence within printed poetry—meanings that have been particularly useful (and provocative) in literary criticism and creative writing. In *Voicing American Poetry*, Lesley Wheeler explores how and why American poetry of the twentieth century and beyond keeps returning to voice as an idea, even though the term frustrates definition. Poetic voice is a crucial term precisely because of its ambiguity: both poets and critics invoke voice to argue for poetry's power. Because voice can also be a medium for poetry, this book offers a uniquely full history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry performance in the United States. Beginning with Edna St. Vincent Millay's captivating performances of presence on the page, the stage, and the radio, Wheeler investigates the rise of the academic poetry reading circuit and its various lively alternatives, from the Beats to the poetry-slam scene. Along the way Wheeler examines how Langston Hughes transformed oral culture into visual poetry, and how collaborative poetry challenges the very idea of self-expression. *Voicing American Poetry* also features an annotated list of important poetry readings in the United States since 1950. Wheeler finds that American poetry itself remains a vital, coherent enterprise and that this commitment is constantly renewed in lecture halls, auditoriums, coffee shops, bars, and classrooms.

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