America Through Its Inaugural Poems

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1. Introduction

The United States presidential inauguration, occurring every four years, is not a strictly political event. Held in front of a live audience of thousands and a television audience of millions, inaugurations set the stage and provide the space for presenting ideas and sending a message to the public at large. Although there have not been many, poems recited as part of the presidential swearing-in ceremonies have constituted a notable contribution to inaugural tradition. To date, six poets have participated at the inaugurations of four presidents. They are Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, Miller Williams, Elizabeth Alexander, Richard Blanco, and Amanda Gorman, and the presidents at whose inaugurations they recited their works are John F. Kennedy (Frost), William J. Clinton (Angelou and Williams), Barack H. Obama (Alexander and Blanco), and Joseph R. Biden Jr. (Gorman), respectively.

Inaugural poems are classified as occasional poems, i.e. poems written with the intention of being read or performed at a particular occasion. Occasional poetry takes into account the specificities of the occasion in question and is often intended as a celebration of it. Inaugural poems, according to a definition provided by *Poets.org*, "[require] a kind of ringing, triumphal, sentimental tone", in the tradition of "wedding songs, dirges, elegies, hymns, and odes" which make up the majority of the canon of occasional poetry. The particular nature of U.S. presidential inaugurations means that the poems written for and delivered at these events follow a specific narrative and adhere to certain ideas.

The poets who have delivered their poems at presidential inaugurations have focused on the past, present, and future of the United States, encompassing a number of paradigms, from American space and time, to the questions of culture, nationality, and legacy. The underlying motifs, ideas, and similarities present in the poems form the main focal point of this paper, as do the ways of looking at and thinking about America which they offer. A comparative analysis of the presidential poems shows the overarching themes and idea(l)s inherent in the observation of the United States, but through a poetic lens. In addition to the six official inaugural poems, there have also been 'unofficial' inaugural poems which were not delivered during the inaugurations themselves or which were included in other parts of the ceremonies, but which show yet another side in the observation and representation of the United States. Written at specific points in U.S. history, they are all pastiches of their individual times, and they present, individually and collectively, an idea of the United States, an image of the nation and its history, culture, and people.

2. Inauguration and Inaugural Procedures

The term 'inauguration' refers to "a formal ceremony to mark the beginning of a leader's term in office" (Miller et al. 27). In the case of the inauguration of the President of the United States, it commemorates the beginning of a new term of an American president.

According to the United States Constitution, the only integral and mandated part of an inauguration is the taking of the presidential oath or affirmation on the behalf of the president-elect. The regulation, stated in Article II, Section 1, Clause 8 of the Constitution, is as follows: "I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States"[1]. The oath or affirmation is usually administered by the chief justice of the United States (the chief justice of the Supreme Court of the United States), although this is not strictly regulated by the Constitution.

The various traditions and other elements which have been added to the inaugural ceremony over the years are thus not defined by law and are often left to the individual president's plan, as are the remaining aspects of the inaugural day itself. These usually include inaugural parades, dinners, and other social gatherings. Certain events have become tradition, and there are other regulations which are adhered to or which have been altered over the years. For example, since Franklin D. Roosevelt attended church before his inaugural ceremony in 1933, all subsequent presidents-elect have done the same. Similarly, the same year marked the ratification of the Twelfth Amendment which specified that the date of the inauguration must fall on the 20th of January. The only exception is made if the 20th falls on a Sunday, in which case the public ceremony and celebrations are moved to the following day, Monday 21st.

With the advent of technology from the last decade of the 20th century onwards, inaugurations have been brought to an even wider audience via various networks and live streams. Looking at the six inaugural ceremonies of the four separate presidents observed in this paper, only one was moved to the 21st of January (Barack Obama's second inauguration in 2013), and all but one were held at the West Front of the U.S. Capitol building in Washington D.C.; the only exception was John F. Kennedy's, which was held at the East Portico of the same building, since it was not until the first inauguration of Ronald Reagan that the West Front became the designated place for the inaugural address and other parts of the swearing-in ceremony.

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[1] https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/artII-S1-C8-1/ALDE_00001126/ (Accessed 28 May 2021)

These inaugurations were also notable because John F. Kennedy's was the first inauguration to be televised, William J. Clinton's second inauguration was the first one to be broadcast live on the internet, Barack Obama's first drew the largest ever crowd both live and online, and Joseph R. Biden's was held during the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that there were considerably fewer people present in the audience.

Reflecting on the symbolism of the inaugural ceremonies, Harold K. Bush Jr. writes that "any presidential inauguration, (…), is among those 'rituals' which foster and confirm the American ideology" (46), the "rituals" in question being those pertaining to the establishment and continuation of the myth of the American nation. The inauguration is a direct opportunity to present an image of the United States that correlates to its ideals and paradigms. The poets who read at the inaugural ceremonies are chosen by the presidents-elect, and their poems, which are written for the occasion, are approved beforehand. The only exception is the poem "The Gift Outright", which Robert Frost had written and published years before the inauguration at which he would read it, but which was personally requested by president-elect Kennedy.

3. Inaugural Poets and Their Presidents

As stated, on six separate instances, inaugural ceremonies were marked by contemporaneous American poets reading poems written for the occasion (with one notable exception being the very first time it happened). Four presidents-elect have asked poets to participate at their inaugurations. The first was John F. Kennedy, who asked Robert Frost to read a poem at his inauguration in 1961. Thirty-two years had to pass before another poet was asked to be part of the swearing-in ceremony – Maya Angelou delivered a poem in 1993, at the inauguration of William J. Clinton, who then welcomed another poet, Miller Williams, at his second inauguration in 1997. A little over a decade later, Barack Obama asked Elizabeth Alexander to deliver her poem at his first inauguration in 2009, and then Richard Blanco four years later for his second. Most recently, it was at the inauguration of Joseph R. Biden Jr. in 2021 that the youngest ever inaugural poet, Amanda Gorman, delivered her poem.

As Jen Benka, executive director of the Academy of American Poets, explains: "[i]naugural poems fall under the category of occasional poetry, (…), the label encompassing poems that are written for important moments in time" (*NBC News*). Occasional poems have a long history and strong presence in world literatures and cultures. In an interview conducted

by the Library of Congress with then-Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera in 2016, the poet described an occasional poem as "a poem of direct emotional power: it is accessible, and it fosters a public relationship [and] the place [where] we all can meet—to offer our words, the news, and the heart of our lives—in a time of crises" (*Library of Congress*). In *Contemporary Poetry*, Nerys Williams proposes that "[arguably] no more direct intervention between poetry and politics exists than the presence of a poet's recitation during presidential inauguration day in the USA" (63), which can be seen as a strange tandem "given poetry's association with privacy and politicians' perpetual search for an audience" (63). Ian Crouch makes the same distinction in his piece "Poetry for Presidents", when he states that "poetry and power [tend to be] kept (…) at quite a distance". However, U.S. presidents have, throughout history, aligned themselves with the sphere of literature. In "The American Presidency", Maubach et al. mention several American presidents, from Washington, to Adams and Jefferson, moving across time to Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and notably the (at the time of writing) three presidents who welcomed poets at their inaugurations, and state the appreciation these presidents and others had for poetry, and literature in general, as well as the significance they ascribed to it. However, as noted, the relationship between poetry and presidency, or more broadly politics, is not straightforward, and it is not a matter of politics coming to ignore poetry or simply deem it insignificant. Maubach et al. also reflect on the complicated nature of this dynamic, stating that "until fairly recently, the American presidency was not a major concern for literary historians and critics (…) beyond questions of rhetoric and style [in their inaugural addresses]" and that they have also generally ignored "the way literature has dealt with American presidents" (30-1), pointing to the many ways the two branches have joined and separated at different points in history,

The four presidents who invited poets to recite at their inaugurations have all been Democrats who came to the position after a Republican had been in office – Kennedy succeeded Dwight D. Eisenhower and beat Richard Nixon to reach office; Clinton defeated George H. W. Bush and independent candidate Ross Perot, and then defeated Republican Bob Dole and again Ross Perot, now the Reform party leader, to stay in office for another term; Obama beat John McCain and succeeded George W. Bush, and then beat Mitt Romney at the re-election, and most recently, Biden defeated the incumbent president, Donald Trump, to assume office. Two of them, Kennedy and Obama, succeeded presidents who could not go up for re-election since they had already been re-elected. Clinton and Biden, on the other hand, defeated presidents who had spent only one term in office, while Clinton and Obama defeated their challengers to remain in office. When looking at the state of affairs in the U.S. at the time

of each of the presidential inaugurations in question, it is necessary to not only observe the presidents-elect who would assume, or in two cases of the incumbents who would re-assume office, but also to observe their predecessors and some key elements which characterized their time in office. It is impossible to analyze the legacy of a president coming into office for the first time, only the image associated with his campaign and election, as well as his previous work.

In addition to the six poets who were invited to read their poems at inaugurations, there have been a few additional instances throughout American history where poets had (unprompted or otherwise) contributed to the general discussion of the presidential election by composing poems. The analysis in this paper will focus on the six official inaugural poems, but some of the other examples will be presented in a short overview.

3.1. Robert Frost and John F. Kennedy

When he was asked to participate at the inauguration by then-president-elect John F. Kennedy, Robert Frost was 86 years old and considered a legendary poet of the nation. He had been actively writing and creating for over 60 years and had cemented himself as a key figure in American poetry. As Jason Schneiderman notes in 2012, when he read the poem at the inauguration "Frost was the face of American poetry, and in many ways he still is" (44), sixty years on today. Frost, a poet associated with New England, was the first poet specifically chosen by a soon-to-be president, who coincidentally also hailed from New England.

At the time of his inauguration, John F. Kennedy was the youngest president to assume office by election, at the age of 43; only Theodore Roosevelt had been younger, but he assumed the role following the assassination of William McKinley. Kennedy, often referred to by his initials JFK, was a United States Senator and Member of the House of Representatives for the state of Massachusetts before being elected president. In the race for the Oval Office, he narrowly defeated Richard Nixon, winning only 0.17% more of the popular vote (the closest margin in 20th century elections), but 303 of the electoral votes to Nixon's 219.[2] As President, Kennedy would inherit Eisenhower's America at the beginning of the 1960s. The previous decade, the 1950s, saw a shift in the idea of the American Dream, which meant a large growth in affluence for some Americans and a further descent into poverty for others, the remnants of the House Un-American Activities Committee and McCarthyism, an increase in military

[2] https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/life-of-john-f-kennedy/fast-facts-john-f-kennedy/1960-presidential-election-results (Accessed 2 June 2021)

spending, and, significantly, it also marked the beginning of the Cold War, as well as the beginning of the fight for social issues (such as the Civil Rights Movement) which would become further centralized in the following decades.

Frost's poem and the occasion at which it was read (despite not being a true occasional poem) have been observed and analyzed in much larger quantities and more detail than the poems of his inaugural peers. It is not a surprising fact due in part to Frost's own position as a national poet, as well as the mysticism surrounding President Kennedy, brought on by his assassination and untimely death, but also notably because it was the first time a poet had been asked to take part in the inaugural process itself. The influence of Frost's poem can be found in all the subsequent inaugural poems, since all of them in one way or another reference each other, and by extension, Frost's poem, "The Gift Outright".

The poem opens with what Greg Mosson dubs "maybe the best opening of any inaugural poem—capturing that sense of America as [an] unfolding project". The line in question is "[t]he land was ours before we were the land's". The poem's 16 verses present a view of the establishment of the United States, not only as a country in a geographical sense, but also as a nation and its identity – American, distinctly different from English. Bob Holman and Margery Snyder write that they, "the people of America, are the gift of the poem's title", evident in the poem's line "[s]uch as we were we gave ourselves *outright*" (emphasis mine), directly referencing the titular 'gift'. The possessive "land's" denotes on the one hand belonging – "the land has possessive power over its people" as Mosson points out, – and on the other hand surrender, as pointed out by Holman and Snyder: Americans became American, became the land's, "not by conquering [it], but by surrendering to it". With the use of the collective 'we', the reader (and the listener) is "immediately incorporated by the narrator into some sort of social grouping or identity, and the paradoxical nature of this co-optation by the narrator recalls the simple opening of the U.S. Constitution: 'We the people'" (Bush 47). Frost explicitly writes that the people of America "found salvation in surrender". Hamida Bosmajian calls the stage before this surrender a sort of "an existential limbo" (98) in which the Americans found themselves, and goes on to write that it was not until the physical and spiritual union that "[b]oth men and land become truly living" (99). Juxtaposed with the idea of a gentle union between the land and its people through submission is the line "[t]he deed of gift was many gifts of war". As Zofia Burr notes in her analysis, the poem's tonal ambiguity leads the contemporary reader to "distance themselves from what is frequently taken as an unambiguous celebration of 'expansionism based on violence'" (429). Jason Schneiderman also notices the violent undertones in the poem, but posits that it "insists on the violence of displacement and

the violence— both physical and emotional—embedded in the achievement of statehood" (45). Frost's depiction of America as "still unstoried, artless, unenhanced, /Such as she was" underlines the omission of indigenous peoples in the discussion of American history. The land, although "realizing vaguely westward" as it was, had not been uninhabited at the time when 'Americans' were still "withholding [themselves] from [their] land of living". Some, like Ian Crouch, have stated that the poem is more than "a mere patriotic ode to an American birthright". It presents the complexity of the ideas of Manifest Destiny and the conquest of the American continent. It is this critique that pits the tranquility of surrender to the land against the violence of conquest, whether that be the ruthlessness of English colonization of America, or the American colonization of that "land realizing vaguely westward".

The poem's closing line, in its original version first delivered in 1941, was "[s]uch as she was, such as she would become.". At the request of President Kennedy himself, it was slightly altered by Frost when he recited it in 1961. The line then read "[s]uch as she was, such as she *will* become." (emphasis mine). However, Bosmajian underlines the difficulty of those final lines, writing that Frost is "playing with the reader of his commentary and of his poem" (100) – the lines "[t]o the land vaguely realizing westward, / But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced" refer not only to the fact that the land was such, but that that is what it would become – "[s]uch as she was, such as she will become.". President Kennedy's insistence, then, to change 'would' to 'will' serves (surely unknowingly) to further emphasize the fact that America "will" become a land that is "unstoried, artless, unenhanced", rather than the fact that it was such and then became something else when "we", or rather the people, started to belong to it.

3.1.1. The Undelivered Poem

JFK had requested Robert Frost recite the "The Gift Outright", which he did end up doing. However, Frost had prepared an additional, truly occasional poem for the event, which he titled "Dedication". At 77 lines, it stood significantly longer that his other poem, but it did not end up being read. The reason was entirely prompted by conditions out of Frost's control – the inauguration day was cold, but very sunny, and the glare of the sunlight reflected off the piece of paper where the poet had typed the poem the day before. Because of the intense light, the faint text became illegible, and after a few tries Frost gave up and opted for his other poem, which he had already memorized by heart.

The undelivered poem's opening lines, "[s]ummoning artists to participate / In the august occasions of the state / Seems something artists ought to celebrate" specify, as Theodore Ziolkowski writes, "a profound personal honor but also as a vindication of [Frost's] views when he was invited to play a role in the inauguration." (5); yet, the same lines elicit a vastly different response from Dwight Garner, who called them "pleasant thoughts, but awful poetry – probably the worst three lines Robert Frost ever put to paper" in his piece "The Intersection of Poetry and Politics". The "Augustan age" Frost evokes at a few instances in the poem is a reference to the renowned period of Roman history and literature, when Virgil and Horace also wrote occasional poems. "Dedication", in more detail than "The Gift Outright", highlights the history and the establishment of the United States, its evolution from the 'new world' of Christopher Columbus to the democracy it is today, from the rule of the French, Spanish, and Dutch, to the victory of the English and the later establishment of "a new order of the ages", commemorated to this day "on the dollar bill".

At several points in the poem, the allusion to the president-elect is evident. Although never mentioned by name, John F. Kennedy is referenced as "young ambition eager to be tried"; his previous work, the Pulitzer-prize-winning book "Profiles in Courage" is alluded to in the lines "[t]here was the book of profile tales declaring / For the emboldened politicians daring / To break with followers when in the wrong"; his victory is mentioned as the result of "an election like the last, / The greatest vote a people ever cast"; finally, in the very last line of the poem, Frost again places the focus on the present occasion, when he states that now begins "[a] golden age of poetry and power / Of which this noonday's the beginning hour". The quoted lines are some of the most overt references to the inauguration itself in all the poems delivered during the same occasions.

3.2. Maya Angelou and William J. Clinton

Despite Robert Frost being the first poet to recite at the inaugural stage, it was not until 1993 when Maya Angelou became the first poet to read an original, truly occasional poem. As only the second poet ever to read at a presidential inauguration at the time, and the first woman, Angelou's choice drew numerous comparisons in contrast to her predecessor, especially because, as a black woman, she found herself "occupying a representative role that, in the earlier era, it would have been hard to imagine anyone other than a white man fulfilling" (Burr 428).

The president at whose inauguration she recited the poem, Bill Clinton, had been the Democratic Governor of Arkansas before running for the presidential office. His victory in the 1992 election signified that the incumbent president, George H. W. Bush, had lost his bid for re-election, the tenth president in U.S. history to do so. It was also the first time in over eighty years that the Democratic/Republican dichotomy faced a serious third-party opponent – independent candidate Ross Perot, although ultimately acquiring no electoral votes, won over 19.7 million, nearly 19%, of the public vote[3]. In *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn writes that Clinton's first election, despite "carrying with it a vague promise of change, did not fulfill the expectations of the hopeful" (633), who were anticipating a change and a restoration which would come after what Zinn called the "uncertainty [and] the alienation which [were] intensified during the Reagan-Bush years". Fred Greenstein also points out the immediate response to Clinton's time in office from the very first couple of months, writing in *The Presidential Difference* that "the glow was gone by inauguration day" (178) and that "[m]uch of what could go wrong for Clinton did go wrong" (179) in the first hundred days in office. His election, however, marked the country's first Democratic president in twelve years – Jimmy Carter had been the last Democrat in office, and was followed by two Republicans, Ronald Reagan and George W. H. Bush, who were in office two, that is one term, respectively.

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, but raised in Stamps, Arkansas, Maya Angelou was an established and renowned poet and writer when she was invited to participate at the inauguration of the new president, but her performance and the poem brought her additional fame and attention. The new inaugural poem was titled "On the Pulse of Morning" and numbered 106 lines. Because of its length and style, Mary Jane Lupton refers to it as the "Inaugural Ode" (85) in her article on the poetry of Angelou. The poem was "conceived and unveiled as an inaugural poem" (Burr 431), and as such "is read in the suspicious light of public discourse". Burr also lists a number of opinions presented by contemporaneous critics after the poem was first recited. As George Mosson writes, Angelou's poem "echoes Frost's first line from 'The Gift Outright' by imagining this 'land' in America's landscape in its pre-human, Paleolithic days". The temporal shift that Angelou presents by going back to a time of "species long since departed", "the mastodon / The dinosaur, who left dried tokens / Of their sojourn here" serves to remind the listener and the reader that there was a time when the land claimed by the American people had belonged to someone else, or no one at all. It goes on to

[3] https://www.britannica.com/event/United-States-presidential-election-of-1992 (Accessed 3 June 2021)

complement Frost's poem by having the 'land' speak. It says "I the Rock, I the River, I the Tree / I am yours" – it is this way confirming that it is "ours", of the people, as Frost had put it. Here, the paradigm of American space becomes personified through Angelou's lines and her voice while she performs the poem.

In addition to explicitly mirroring "The Gift Outright", "On the Pulse of Morning" also references Frost's undelivered poem. It is what Zofia Burr describes as "the multiplicity of ways in which Angelou's inaugural poem speaks back to Frost's inaugural poems" (433), beginning the tradition of the inaugural poets all taking inspiration from each other's occasional poems. Angelou's poem creates an "intertextual dialogue" with Frost's poems, which becomes apparent when the poems are observed as complementary, rather than contrasting. The main point of interest for most of the critics at the time of Clinton's first inauguration, however, remained on the contrasting aspect of the poem. Many of them opted for finding as many direct comparisons between the poems and their authors as possible. As Burr states, whether Angelou's poem "fulfilled the auditor's expectations or requirements for a good poem became so important for some commentators that it overwhelmed the poem's politics" (432).

Angelou points out the complexity of the American identity by addressing not only people by their ethnic background and race, but also their religion, sexual orientation, and occupation, echoing Whitman's *Song of Myself* and the amalgamation of all people who make up the American nation. This notion, the complexity of the American nation, will be established as a recurring element in the subsequent inaugural poems as well. Angelou introduces another significant element, that of the birth of a new day, "the pulse of this new day", "a new beginning" marked by the breaking of a new dawn. She grounds the poem in the present by addressing the listener/reader with a command to "[l]ift up [their] eyes upon / This day breaking for you", although she makes no overt mention of the president-elect, nor does she refer to him as Frost had done for Kennedy in "Dedication". Alluding to the new shift in politics, i.e. the election of a first Democratic president in twelve years, Angelou ties up her poem with the final lines, stating that on this new day, her peers, whom she addresses explicitly, should "say simply/ Very simply / With hope – / Good morning".

3.3. Miller Williams and William J. Clinton

Unlike the previous election, Bill Clinton had more leeway in his victory over the Republican candidate Bob Dole, dubbed by Fred Greenstein as being "profoundly

uncharismatic" (182), and Reform leader Ross Perot, who had secured another portion of the votes, which was significantly lesser than his sweep four years prior. Clinton thus won another term in office and, in 1997, became the first president to have two poets participate at his inaugurations when he asked fellow Arkansas-born poet Miller Williams to write a poem for the occasion.

Williams was a slightly different choice to both Frost and Angelou since he was not as known to the general public as his predecessors, and this position as the least mentioned of the inaugural poets has stayed much the same since. As Francis Clines recounts, Williams said shortly before the inauguration that his poem, which would end up being thirty-four lines long with the title "Of History and Hope", would be "about the American idea". The title of his poem also alludes to the birthplace of the president at whose inauguration it was read, whether or not that was something Williams had been aware of or intended to reference at the very start: Bill Clinton was born in a city "with the politically valuable name of Hope" (Greenstein 175), in southwestern Arkansas.

Like Frost in "Dedication", Williams opens his poem with a reference to his own position as a poet, whose task it is to memorize and memorialize America. In the lines "[i]n ceremonies and silence we say the words, / telling the stories, singing the old songs", he offers somewhat of an allusion to the occasion at which he is also participating, but does not specify it further. Where Frost and Angelou had only hinted at the question of the future, Williams is the first of the inaugural poets to overtly introduce it, in addition to placing his poem in the past and the present – he asks "[b]ut how do we fashion the future? Who can say how / except in the minds of those who will call it Now?". Pondering, as the other inaugural poets do as well, on the idea of land, Williams draws attention to the difference between the present and the future by stating that the land of the children, the future generations, is "a land we never can visit – it isn't there yet", turning the land Frost calls "ours" into 'theirs', offering another perspective on the idea of ownership, as Angelou had also done. In another reference to Frost's "gift", Williams hints at "what our long gift to them may come to be" – the gift is the history of the land and its nation, the very fact of remembrance and memory, encompassing all of the trials and tribulations experienced across the ages. Indirectly referencing the United States motto, "E pluribus unum", Williams posits that "[w]ho were many people coming together / cannot become one people falling apart", commenting on the notions of complexity and togetherness. Drawing comparisons from, as he put it, the "American idea", Williams references the ideals of the American nation that the people have tried, and are trying still to reach – to be "just and compassionate, equal, able, and free".

Williams' position as an inaugural poet is particular in the sense that he is, in a number of overviews and studies, the least analyzed and mentioned of all the inaugural poets. In his article, Jason Schneiderman observes and analyzes all the inaugural poems, apart from Williams'. However, in a column for *The American Poetry Review*, which contains the unabridged version of the same text, he calls the poem "pedantic" and "flat" (13). He offers the following contemplation on Clinton asking another poet to participate at his second inauguration: "Maybe inaugural poems are only a good idea for a first term. Or maybe it underscores the wisdom of Kennedy asking for a specific Frost poem, rather than commissioning an inaugural poem" (13). The idea Schneiderman presents suggests that an occasional poem, i.e. an originally composed poem for a particular event, seems to not be the finest option in the context of the inauguration. Dwight Garner gives an opposite opinion, writing that Williams "seemed to get it about right" and calls his poem "dignified, with a weather-beaten resonance".

From start to finish, and arguably also prior to and following, Bill Clinton's presidency had been marked by a number of personal and professional scandals. Even at the time of his second inauguration he was already plagued by the controversies which had perpetually been brought to light, and which would ultimately culminate in an impeachment for lying under oath in 1998.

3.4. Elizabeth Alexander and Barrack H. Obama

For his inauguration in 2009, Barack Obama took inspiration from JFK and Bill Clinton and invited a poet to compose a new poem for the occasion. He turned to Elizabeth Alexander, who came up with the forty-three-line poem "Praise Song for the Day". Alexander was a previous acquaintance of Obama's – they had both worked at the University of Chicago at the same time, she as an assistant professor in English, and he as a senior lecturer in law, and Alexander's brother had worked on the newly elected president's campaign in 2008.

When he won the election in 2008, Obama received what was at the time the record number of votes, nearly 69.5 million, which accounted for just under 53% of the public vote. He was elected as the first ever African-American president. Like Kennedy at the time of his election, Obama was also a sitting Senator, from the state of Illinois. His Vice President was Joe Biden, Senator from Delaware, who would be elected President himself twelve years later. Obama's election marked the end of the Bush years under George W. Bush. Towards the end of his presidency, the 43rd president experienced a continuous decline in approval ratings,

which stayed under the 50% margin throughout most of his second term and ran close to 25% in the second half of 2008[4]. This was one of the focal points in the campaigns of both Obama and his opponent, the Republican John McCain. In the book *Assessing George W. Bush's Legacy*, the editors suggest that the outcome of the 2008 election and the Democratic victory came as a result of a "repudiation of George W. Bush rather than a positive endorsement of Obama and the Democrats" (217). As is often the case, the shift from a Republican to a Democratic president (or vice versa) speaks as much, if not more to the disappointment in the current government than the belief in the promises of a new one. It is important to notice the cultural impact of Obama and the fact that his "radical newness (…) had less to do with the reality of his politics than with the rhetoric and representations of his presidency" (Grgas 2019: 435). Obama as the 21st-century incarnation and adaptation of R.W.B. Lewis' 'American Adam' served as a stark contrast to George W. Bush and the white political establishment in the first decade of the new millennium.

Elizabeth Alexander faced a significant amount of attention as an active participant in a momentous occasion. Her poem, despite featuring the word "praise" in the title itself, is "far from (…) a praise song of America, [focusing] on the elements within American society which fail to function" (N. Williams 66). Alexander states that the people are "repairing the things in need of repair", referring to very mundane tasks of "stitching up a hem, darning / a hole in a uniform, patching a tire", but also to the idea of repairing the country which, after eight years of the Bush administration, seemed to many to be in dire need of repair. Although the poem is a far cry from a definitive praise of America, it still offers a celebration of the many people who helped create and shape it. It recounts the steps in the building and rebuilding of a country and a nation. The past is referenced in mentioning and honoring those "who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges, / picked the cotton and the lettuce, built / brick by brick the glittering edifices they would then keep clean and work inside of", while also suggesting, in these lines and the ones that follow, a different kind of violence against the very people who helped build it. On the other hand, the contemporariness is then underscored by the invocation of "today's sharp sparkle, this winter air", which is the only clear reference to the moment of the inauguration (occurring in the winter of 2009). Alexander also calls back to the land by confessing the "need to see what's on the other side", a slight reference to Frost's land "realizing vaguely westward". In the same way she points out the times past when the people built America and its tracks and bridges, a few lines further back she offers another nod to

[4] https://news.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx (Accessed 27 May 2021)

those who "cross dirt roads and highways that mark / the will of some one and then others", referencing the spirit of discovery and conquest which has, since Turner's 'frontier thesis', been seen as the defining trait of the American people. Like Miller Williams twelve years before her, Alexander also "looks to the next generation for its optimism" (Mosson). The temporality of Alexander's poem, however, is not as focal as it is in the previous instances of inaugural poems – her mentions of the past and future are not as specific and concrete, providing instead examples from everyday life of any era. The poem is mostly anchored in the present moment, emphasized by the very title and the "day" she celebrates, but still almost atemporal.

According to Nerys Williams, the poem "stresses the importance of encountering others through travel, and the curiosity to know what is beyond one's own community" (66). Just as Zofia Burr noted that Angelou's poem crafts an "intertextual dialogue" (433) with Frost's poem, so too does Williams state that both Angelou and Alexander "create a dialogue with previous inaugural poems" and that "Alexander's poem especially enters into a direct conversation with Angelou's" (64). A clear comparison between Angelou and Alexander is also made via the fact that both of them are black women, which counters them to the other two inaugural poems at the time, who were both white men. Angelou's "pulse of this new day" is directly echoed in Alexander's "[p]raise song for the day", and the "bright morning dawning for you" which Angelou instructs the listener to observe becomes the final thought that Alexander offers as the "praise song for walking forward in that light".

Perhaps more than any other inaugural poet before or since, Alexander has faced significant criticism for her poem, most of it aimed at it being considered stylistically and narratively inadequate for the occasion. Adam Kirch criticized the poem for being "not public but bureaucratic – that is to say, spoken by no one and addressed to no one", which he contrasts to the occasion at which it was recited – Obama's inauguration, according to Kirch, was "just the kind of event that might inspire genuine poetry" since Obama "has often been cast as a 'poetic' figure, thanks to his eloquence and the appeal of his image". Jason Schneiderman writes that the poem was "clumsy and diffuse", trying to "appeal to too wide an audience" (Schneiderman 2015: 47).

3.5. Richard Blanco and Barrack H. Obama

The inauguration of Barack Obama for his second term in the Oval Office was under much less attention than his first four years prior. Reflecting on Obama's first term and

the continuation of his polity at the onset of his second, Bert A. Rockman states that "[t]he continuing struggles over how to fix the debt problem and, more importantly, how to bring the economy on a path to sustainable growth" (55) marked the majority of Obama's time in office, but he also turned his focus on civil rights and issues of inequality, education, gun control, and the position of undocumented immigrants to the United States.

For his second inauguration in 2013, Obama, like Bill Clinton, turned to another poet to write a poem for the occasion. This time, he asked Richard Blanco, who thus became the first Latino and the first openly gay poet to recite at the presidential inauguration, and was also, at the time, the youngest inaugural poet. His poem was titled "One Today" and comprised sixty-seven lines. Blanco starts the poem by positioning it in the present moment, writing that "[o]ne sun rose on us today", before taking a figurative trip across the United States, presenting its geography, its people, their lives and customs, the discovery and evolution of a nation, all in the metaphorical sphere of one day. Not only does he ground the poem in the present, but he also specifies, to an extent, what the particular moment is for – an occasion for which he "[wrote] this poem", although he does not particularize any other details which might point to said moment being the presidential inauguration. The focus of the poem is placed, much like Alexander's, on the building of America, and the struggles and effort that come hand-in-hand with building a life for oneself as a marginalized community. Blanco's immigrant and working-class background is evident in the callbacks to his mother and father who worked in stores and on sugar-cane plantations to provide a better life for him and his brother.

The geographical overview which Blanco gives of America firmly places the listener/reader in the sphere of American space, moving from the Great Smoky Mountains over the North American continent, to the Rocky Mountains towards the Pacific, covering the U.S. from the east to the west coast. He zeroes in on the land, referred to as "one ground", worked by "hands", which metonymically stand for the American people, who

> clean tables, read ledgers, or save lives— / [teach] geometry, or ring-up groceries" and who are given an abundance of tasks, "gleaning coal or planting windmills / in deserts and hilltops that keep us warm, hands / digging trenches, routing pipes and cables (…) / weaving steel into bridges, finishing one more report / for the boss on time, stitching another wound / or uniform, the first brush stroke on a portrait, / or the last floor on the Freedom Tower.

Such is the power of human hands, or American hands in particular, counters Blanco, that the sky "yields to our resilience", a show of human endeavor and perseverance. This is only made more powerful when he baptizes it as "one sky, our sky", tying it with 'our land' that all of his predecessors mentioned. He introduces a sort of conquest of the land at the hands of its people, but his point of view leans as much to acquisition as it does to discovery and mastery. It is not land that is simply taken, but land that is shaped. The particularity and complexity of America is further underscored by the multitude of its people, who Blanco addresses in their many languages: "hello / shalom, / buon giorno / howdy / namaste / or buenos días". The poem comes full circle from the "one sun" which marked the early morning and the beginning, to the "one moon" which signalizes the end of the day and today, while the final lines usher in the sentiments of 'hope' and 'togetherness', referring to the assemblage of people represented by different languages and cultures.

Blanco's poem was also much more positively received than that of his predecessor. Writing for the *Los Angeles Times* on the day of the election, Hector Tobar praised Blanco for creating "a masterfully polished, disciplined and heartfelt response to the task [of] crafting a poem that not only commemorated the civic ritual for which it was commissioned, but that also captured the collective hope and unease of our shared national experience", while Jason Schneiderman, comparing it to Alexander's poem, states that it "took the same strategy (…) but fleshed it out more narratively and personally" (2015).

3.6. Amanda Gorman and Joseph R. Biden Jr.

In January 2021, it was announced that Amanda Gorman would recite a poem at the upcoming presidential inauguration of Joseph R. Biden Jr. At the age of 22, she would become the youngest poet to read at an inauguration to date. Joining the ranks of Maya Angelou and Elizabeth Alexander, she is the third woman, as well as the third black woman inaugural poet. She was also named the country's first National Youth Poet Laureate in 2017 – the only other inaugural poet who had been named Poet Laureate was Robert Frost, who held the position from 1958 to 1959 (when it was still referred to as 'Consultant in Poetry'[5]). Gorman's poem, "The Hill We Climb" is the longest inaugural poem, at 110 lines. The author and her work received widespread critical acclaim, as well as more attention than all the other inaugural

[5] https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-history/ (Accessed 5 June 2021)

poems, and the published version quickly became a bestseller. Gorman found herself catapulted into the spotlight very quickly and became a national and international sensation.

Joe Biden secured the Democratic nomination and chose Kamala Harris, then Senator from California, as his running mate – after their election, Biden became the oldest sitting president, and Harris become the first woman, as well as the first African-American and Asian-American vice-president. Only two weeks prior to the inauguration, the United States saw an attempted coup in Washington D.C. On 6 and 7 January, the supporters of the then still incumbent president Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol Building in protest at the result of the presidential election which had taken place in November 2020. Their goal was to stop the session inside the building itself, where speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi and incumbent vice president Mike Pence would begin the proceedings to confirm the votes of the electoral college and fully confirm the victory of Joe Biden, which naturally meant Trump's defeat. The event can be seen as the culmination of the presidency of Donald Trump, marked by an ever-growing schism between opposing political parties and their supporters. The election in 2020 saw record numbers of people (over 155 million) casting their votes, and Biden and Trump received the highest and second-highest number of votes in U.S. history, respectively[6]. Biden's 81 million votes and 306 electoral colleges also signified wins in several states which had previously or for a long time voted Republican, such as Arizona, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

When compared to the other inaugural poems, "The Hill We Climb" is the most overtly political of the bunch, directly pointing to the attempted coup and referencing the conflict that is inherent in America's history and its constant struggle towards progress. Reflecting on the significance of poetry in an interview for Time Magazine, conducted by former FLOTUS Michelle Obama, Gorman called poetry "the lens we use to interrogate the history we stand on and the future we stand for". The titular 'hill to climb' is referred to half-way through the poem as the "promise to glade", the duty of the present generation to build bridges and work towards a union of peace, and not violence. The poem is an open denunciation of violence and violent conquest, as well as a call to togetherness and a celebration of democracy.

Like Blanco before her, Gorman progresses across the space of the United States, coast to coast, rallying its people. Gorman's poem presents a journey through the past, present, and future of her country, tying itself strongly to what was, is, and will be. The poem

[6] https://ballotpedia.org/Presidential_election,_2020 (Accessed 2 June 2021)

is assertive though the use of "will" to signify both certainty and intention, as well as the future. Contemplating the present issues in America, particularly the renaissance of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Gorman brings to the foreground the issue by noticing the difference in the fact that "what just is / isn't always justice". Throughout the poem, she seeks to emphasize the resilient nature of the American people in the face of many challenges, without ever undermining the difficulty of reshaping and fixing an existing nation – she states that "once we asked, / how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?", and provides the answer by proclaiming that "now we assert, / How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?". Just like Elizabeth Alexander focused on "repairing things in need of repair", so too does Gorman when she posits that a crucial aspect of the American identity must also be the conscious effort to observe and acknowledge one's history, "the past we step into / and how we repair it". The America depicted in Gorman's poem is "far from polished. / Far from pristine", "a nation that isn't broken / but simply unfinished", but she brings attention to this fact and reassures that the effort to implement change is something which is worth pursuing, so that the American people could one day claim to have not "a union that is perfect", but "a union with purpose".

4. Common Themes of the Inaugural Poems

Following an individual presentation of each of the six official inaugural poems, the analysis now turns to a comparative overview. The focal points here are the common themes and motifs in the six poems, and their place in the broader understanding and analysis of American studies.

In preparation for their performances on the inaugural stage, all the inaugural poets (with the obvious exception of Frost) have remarked that they had at least read the previous inaugural poem(s), while they have also all more or less explicitly referenced them in their own poems. Frost has the singular status of being the very first inaugural poet in American history. As the number of inaugural poets grows, so too does the number of references, which in turn means that the later poems can also be viewed as carrying more direct references to their predecessors.

As Steven Gould Axelrod posits in his piece on "Frank Bidart's 'Inauguration Day'", the recently re-established tradition of having poets recite at presidential inaugurations "is inherently weighted down with obligation and propriety" (39). Similarly, in "Why Can't We

Have a Good Inaugural Poet Ever?", Sean Hughes writes that inaugural poets "have the added challenge of writing about a particular occasion while also writing *ceremoniously*". Written just after president Obama's second inauguration, the article includes a commentary on five of the six poems (it obviously leaves out Gorman's, which will not be written for another eight years).

Hughes also singles out two conventions which have established themselves in the poems since Angelou, and those are "a titular metaphor of morning or sunrise" and "Whitman-inspired listing". In addition to these two, there are a number of other conventions which tie the poems together and which provide room for a comparative analysis. Nevertheless, and as seen above, the poems all provide for individual interpretations and can be observed as distinct and isolated works of literature, while still producing a perceptive and profound commentary on the United States.

Overall, the commonalities of the inaugural poems underline two key facts – that the poets have consulted or taken inspiration from the preceding inaugural poems, and that ideas presented in the poems fall in line with some of the notable interpretations and images of the United States in literature and culture. The notions of space, time, people, hope, and legacy are contrasted and compared on the basis of the six poems in order to assess the picture they paint, individually and collectively, of the United States.

4.1. Land and Space

The paradigm of American space represents the significance of land, as well as property in American history and the American consciousness. The inaugural poems all more or less directly take that into account and provide space for the presentation and discussion of the land and its importance. In the poems, the American landscape is either mentioned or alluded to, or overtly described and named. The physical aspect of what it means to be American is always tied to the land itself. All of the official inaugural poems present the building and shaping of the United States, and in each case, they point to the crucial role played by the land. The people are shaped by their land just as much as the land is shaped by its people. The American identity, as it is, cannot exist without the land, because taking the land out of the equation would necessitate the creation of a completely new set of parameters upon which this new identity could then be created.

Robert Frost is the first to assert the significance of the land at the very onset of his poem, placing "the land" at the beginning of the first verse, and tying the rest of the poem,

America, and the people in it, to the land. The importance of the land is further strengthened by every subsequent inaugural poet. They all see the country metaphorically and the land physically as something that is a remnant left for the present people by previous generations, and as a legacy they will have to secure for generations to come. The question of the land's future is always pertinent. Angelou, for example, explicitly reminds the American people in her poem that "your country" is "[n]o less to you now than the mastodon then", referring back to the first stanza of her poem – noting that for now, the land may be theirs, or "ours" as Frost had put it before her, but that before it had not been, and that the question of whose it might be in the future, whose and what "it would become", is always changing. The changes experienced by the land are reflected on the people as well, who must learn to change accordingly.

4.2. Time and History

All the poems in one way or another plant themselves in the present moment, but not necessarily the occasions themselves. The temporality of the poems is evident in their references to the past, present, and future. George Mosson aptly refers to the poems' point of view when he attributes to them the descriptive "Janus-faced". The deity in question, Janus, is a Roman god with two faces, one facing forward, the other backward, seeing both the past and the future. This reference ties into not only the way the poems observe the past as well as the present/future of America, but also to how they incorporate the meaning of 'Janus-faced' as having two contrasting or differing aspects, observing a given situation from two angles. The poets have the advantage of being the omniscient narrators relating the history of their country, but the certainty with which they narrate begins to fade as they move to today, and even further when they ponder over tomorrow. The importance of this uncertainty also means that nothing is set in stone and that the mistakes of the past can be amended or avoided. This is the point at which the understanding of history becomes the most relevant and ties itself closely to the ideals of the time to come.

The invocation of the past gives the poets the opportunity to also pay homage to those who came before and who helped build the country, while the call to the future provides them with enough space to speculate about what could come to pass. Observing the past also enables the poets to have an overview of American history, which then in turn means that they can celebrate, reprimand, or simply mention all its aspects which become key in understanding the people and the country of today.

4.3. People and Unity

One of the main points of contact for all the poems is the motif of the complexity of the American nation. Angelou individually references a number of ethnic and religious groups, Alexander and Blanco provide more of a social perspective and point to the working class which built America, and Frost (in his delivered poem), Williams, and Gorman point to the people in a much more general sense, but still encompass the multitudes for which they think the nation stands. All the poems ask the question 'what does it mean to be American?'. Some, like Amanda Gorman, offer part of an answer – "being American is more than a pride we inherit, / it's the past we step into / and how we repair it". The notion of repairing is present with Alexander as well, pointing to "repairing things in need of repair".

What is also significant here is the focus on certain classes and groups in America, and how these group have helped shape the nation, and the poems themselves. Both Angelou's and Alexander's poems were influenced by African-American poetry and lyrical tradition – "On the Pulse of Morning" recalls "the Langston Hughes poem, 'A Negro Sings of Rivers' (…) [and] a poem by Jean Toomer, 'Brown River, Smile'" (Lupton 85-6), and "Praise Song for the Day" refers to praise songs, a common form in African, as well as African-American[7] literature. Alexander and Blanco place the most outward focus on the American working class and immigrants who, as they describe, very specifically helped construct the physical and cultural aspects of the United States.

Inextricably tied to the notion of the people and the nation is that of 'unity'. All of the poems underline the importance of togetherness, despite, and perhaps even thanks to diversity, as the foundation of America. The diversity of the nation is evident in a number of references detailing the different experiences of a people living in the same country over the period of its history. Three of the poems also name 'love' as a significant factor in the consciousness of the people – Alexander deems it "the mightiest word", Blanco states to give "thanks for a love / that loves you back", and Gorman states that "[i]f we merge mercy with might, / and might with right, / then love becomes our legacy".

4.4. Hope and Light

Writing about Alexander's poem in particular, Jason Schneiderman points out that "the poem is about the difficulty of joy in the face of history's weight" (47), but the idea

[7] https://www.britannica.com/art/praise-song (Accessed 3 June 2021)

itself can be extended to all other inaugural poems. Ian Crouch writes that, “for all their collective shortcomings, the way inaugural poems gesture to the past is what gives them strength”. It gives them the opportunity to offer a more profound understanding of the country by providing evidence of its history, be it through accomplishments or injustices inflicted on others. The poets do not shy away from the more violent parts of American history, but they always stress the significance of hope and perseverance. Crouch ties the meditation on hope with more of a political comment, adding that, even if “these poems move a bit too self-consciously toward hope, they nonetheless still leave room for meditations on a country with a complicated past and a tangled present, which requires much of the person elected to lead it”.

The motif of the ‘light’ is present in the majority of the poems. Angelou introduces the image of the sun and the rising of a new day, a light breaking the dark. Alexander takes the imagery of a new day and concludes her poem by inviting the reader/listener to go “walking forward in that light”; Blanco opens the poem by mentioning the “one sun”, and concludes it by invoking the “one moon”, which still offers a source of luminosity; and Gorman calls on the people to “step out of the shade/ (…) for there is always light”. In each instance, and even in the cases of Frost and Williams who do not outright mention the light, the connotation of moving forward is directly tied to the idea of moving towards something bright, literally or metaphorically.

4.5. Legacy

In addition to the notion of future discussed above, the poems overall also deal with the notion of legacy. This aspect places a spotlight on the image of America depicted in the present and preserved for the future. Like Williams’ final line, “If we can truly remember, they will not forget.”, Gorman’s poem also ends with a conditional – she asserts that “there is always light, / if only we're brave enough to see it. / If only we're brave enough to be it”. Both Williams and Gorman also introduce a complex temporality when they each create a comparison between the present and the future – Williams questions “how do we fashion the future? Who can say how / except in the minds of those who will call it Now?”, and Gorman asserts that “[f]or while we have our eyes on the future / history has its eyes on us”. In both situations, the importance of the future generations is placed forward, underlining the idea of creating a better life and world for the people to come.

The complexity of legacy is evident in the last lines of Frost’s “The Gift Outright”, “[s]uch as she was, such as she will become”, and Gorman’s lines “[s]o let us leave

behind a country / better than the one we were left with" – while Frost offers a line with a complex meaning and multiple interpretations of what the legacy of the land will be, Gorman explicitly asks for a better country. Both lines hold onto a note of uncertainty, since, as Williams also remarks, this is clearly a country that "it isn't there yet". The uncertainty of this desire for change will remain until the country is truly changed, yet the fact remains that its fate is unknown.

The notion of legacy is also tied to the past as much as it is to the future. Frost introduces the syntagma of the "many deeds of war" as the "gift outright" given to the land. Angelou and Alexander continue with the same idea and reference Frost – Angelou writes from the perspective of the land which affirms that the "passages [of the people on the land] have been paid", while Alexander reminds the listeners "that many have died for this day". Blanco talks of the sacrifices made by previous generations for their children, and Williams ponders over what that legacy, the "long gift", may come to be. Gorman clearly points to "inaction and inertia" of the present generation as that which "will be the inheritance of the next".

5. Not-Quite Inaugural Poems

The six poems, with the addition of Robert Frost's undelivered poem, presented above form the canon of official U.S. inaugural poetry. Apart from these, there have also been other instances throughout American presidential history where poets wrote pieces to commemorate, comment, or criticize a newly elected president for the occasion of his inauguration, but did not deliver the poem at the occasion itself. Some of them, however, were still incorporated into the inaugurations.

When observed this way, the first 'unofficial' inaugural poem, i.e. one that is occasional but was not recited at the inauguration itself, was the poem "An Ode in Honor of the Inauguration of Buchanan & Breckinridge, President and Vice President of the United States" by Col W. Emmons, who wrote it for the occasion in 1857. Written to be performed to the tune of the "Star Spangled Banner", it was only printed on a poster. The second poem of this kind, and the first to feature at the inauguration, was titled "An Inaugural Poem, Dedicated to Abraham Lincoln, of Illinois, and Andrew Johnson, of Tennessee". The poem was in fact printed on the side of President Lincoln's inaugural wagon during the parade in 1865 but was never read. The two poems are more overtly occasional than the official inaugural poems in the sense that they explicitly refer to the inauguration as an event, and mention the presidents and vice presidents by name, as well as celebrate their specific successes and achievements.

Almost a hundred years later, American poet Robert Lowell wrote "Inauguration Day: January 1953" following the election of Dwight Eisenhower. Lowell was a supporter of the counter-candidate Adlai Stevenson, and openly opposed Eisenhower's election. His poem is "concise, yet concerns itself with the wide and fraught swathe of American history" (Crouch), depicting in particular the history of New York, from the beginning of the American part of its heritage, to Lowell's present day. Just like the rest of the inaugural poems, it references the past, but it focuses on the repetitiveness of history and the hopelessness of the situation. It mentions two generals-turned-presidents – Ulysses S. Grant and Eisenhower. It evokes Grant and his defeat at Cold Harbor[8] and references Eisenhower in only by his nickname "Ike", while also underlining the circularity of history by creating the parallel of the cold and winter, from the "snow" of the first line, over "Cold Harbor" to the repetition of "ice, ice".

In 1977, at the midway point between Kennedy and Clinton, James Dickey read his poem "The Strength of Fields" at the inaugural gala of President Jimmy Carter after the inauguration itself. Carter was also a Democrat, which means he followed in the tradition of all the other presidents who invited poets to recite at their inaugurations, although it would be more apt to state that he drew inspiration from Kennedy and that the remaining three presidents (i.e., Clinton, Obama, and Biden) followed in their footsteps. The poem races across the small towns, railways, and fields of America and references purpose, hope, and strength. Despite not being read at the inaugural ceremony itself, rather, only after Carter has already been sworn in, it is still the closest any other poem has come to being an official inaugural poem, and it has the added advantage of being an occasional poem in its own right.

Another poet created an unofficial inaugural poem, but gave it an official name – for the occasion of Barack Obama's first inauguration, Frank Bidart wrote the poem "Inauguration Day". According to Steven Gould Axelrod, the poem "joins [the] "counter-tradition (…) of unofficial poems critiquing American history, institutions, and character" (39). Rather than joining the ranks of celebratory occasional poems, it instead paints a picture of both 'hope' and 'dread', alternating between references to racism, assassination, and history, with mentions of Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman. Referencing a quote by Henry James, Axelrod states that the poem "evokes the always 'complex fate' of being an American" (39).

[8] Cold Harbor refers to the one of the bloodiest conflicts and biggest defeat of the Union army at the hands of the Confederacy during the American Civil War (1861-1865): https://www.britannica.com/event/battle-of-Cold-Harbor (Accessed 9 June 2021)

6. Poetry, Orality, and the Written Word

There is a specific performative and oral element inherent to poetry. As Lisa Lenz states, "poetry is meant to be read aloud in the same way that music is meant to be played" (597). David Orr points out a similar thread, stating that "as the lyric insists on privacy, the act of insisting necessarily implies that there's someone to be insisted to" (418). These statements and others like it, such as Donald Hall's that a "poetry reading is publication by the body" since the body, and particularly the voice, is "poetry's principal mode of publication" (74), call attention to the performative nature of poetry, as well as the contrast between the spoken and the written word. In considering Angelou's poem specifically, Zofia Burr posits that an inaugural poem, written for that specific occasion and intended to be performed, "must subsequently seek an afterlife as a genuine poem—a very different and hugely fraught (perhaps impossible) transition" (431), a comment that can easily be applied to all later inaugural poems, since all of them were unveiled for the first time at the moment of pronunciation, and later revisited in writing. Reflecting on the difference between the two media in his article "Orality, Literacy, and the Memorized Poem", Mike Chasar notes that

> [p]ublication […] is a far more 'credible' sign of a poet's accomplishment – far more likely to elicit respect, scholarly consideration, and even promotion or tenure -– than poetry in performance or other non-print contexts, historical or contemporary (…) This is one reason why poets with print-based, rather than performance-based, résumés 'read' at presidential inauguration. (377).

Interestingly, although not surprisingly since the article was written in 2015, this idea is somewhat at odds with the last inaugural poet – Gorman established herself as a poet partially through slam-poetry, which is characterized by the combination of "performance, writing, competition, and audience participation"[9] and relies heavily on the memorization of a poem.

Frost notably delivered "the most famous recitation of a memorized poem in U.S. history" (Chasar 379) when he recited from memory at JFK's inauguration. It is this instance that Chasar positions as more significant than just the fact that the eighty-six-year-old poet remembered the poem from memory; it is "the fact that he gave up the printed poem he had available and recited from memory instead - inclining, on a national stage, away from the

[9] https://www.britannica.com/art/slam-poetry (Accessed 25 May 2021)

values of print and toward the values of orality" (380). The orality of Frost's poem and his delivery is underscored by the fact that "the optimism of the poem lies partly in the magical incantatory quality of the poem, enhanced when the poet himself becomes the chanter" (Bosmajian 103). In his undelivered poem, Frost also consciously refers to the occasional nature of his poetry by mentioning the performative aspect in the line "[t]his verse that in acknowledgement I bring". He is aware not only of the occasion of the inauguration itself, but, through iteration, the fact that he is reading or performing it outright. Like Frost, Blanco and Gorman also reference the moment of reading or reciting, showing a self-awareness of their role as poets and the fact that the poem is being read – Blanco gives an overview of the American working class and his mother's sacrifice all so that he "could write this poem", a line which references the act of writing while being read; Gorman also references her family and directly references the inauguration when she states that America is a country "where a skinny Black girl / (…) / can dream of becoming president / only to find herself reciting for one".

Pointing out the distinction between a "'public poem' and a 'poetic text'" (432), Burr also extends her analysis to encompass what is meant by the idea that "a poem is meant to be read silently and in private because what counts as poetic richness and complexity must be distinguished (…) from any complexity that would be the effect of the context of performance". Similarly, in his book *Orality and Literacy* Walter J. Ong focuses on oral cultures, "untouched by writing" (9), but he makes several points in relation to poetry in the context of oral literature. Inaugural poems are first and foremost, in the tradition of oral epics, made to be performed. Unlike their historic predecessors, however, they are written down and read aloud at the occasions in question. Ong writes about the "reflectiveness of writing [as] (…) encouraging growth of consciousness out of the unconscious" (147) and points to writing and reading as becoming primarily "solo activities" (150). The inaugural poetry performance, however, is an instance of reading a written-down poem which changes this solitary nature to a public one, and also shifts the previously singular state of existing in writing to the state of existing in uttering and being heard. The role and influence of poetry has, over the years, grown to encompass many disciplines. Joseph Harrington notes that its role in the consciousness of American critics has expanded substantially in the late 20th century, meaning they became aware of the fact that it "does cultural work" (167). Harrington also points out that in the 1990s, when the position of poetry in academic circles diminished, it still continued to be "produced, distributed, and used via extra-institutional avenues" in other parts of American society, from "poetry slams and performances and open readings through video teleconferencing and interactive poetry, as well as older institutions such as poetry societies and workshops" (168),

the scope of which has only grown since with the advent of technology, as well as the appearance of new practices and traditions in recent years. It can be said without a doubt that the strengthening of poetry in these spheres was also influenced by the performances at the inaugural stage – Harrington himself mentions Maya Angelou, while Amanda Gorman's most recent performance at the inauguration helped further popularize both the poet and poetry.

The performative nature of poetry also underscores the link it has with other disciplines and domains. In the case of inaugural poems, the strongest case can be made for the link between poetry and politics, a link which depends on a number of aspects. David Orr points out that "poetry and politics are both matters of verbal persuasion" (409), accentuating the connection between politics on the one hand, and rhetoric and orality on the other. While inaugural poems do present ideas which have a sound basis in political ideology and belief, their central focus shifts from the observation of the political establishment itself to the observation of those within and under it, i.e. the American people.

7. The Arts and the Partisan Divide

A quick overview of the four presidents analyzed over the course of this paper points to the fact that (so far) only Democrats have opted for an official poetic addition to their inaugurations. When observed chronologically and continuously, it can be seen that every Democratic president since JFK, excluding only his successor Lyndon B. Johnson, has in one way or another included a poetry reading as part of his inaugural ceremonies – Clinton, Obama, and Biden officially, and Carter unofficially.

In a short commentary written for the *Atlantic* on the eve of Donald Trump's inauguration in 2017, Spencer Kornhaber noted that the "fact [that only Democratic presidents-elect had opted for poetry at their inaugurations] alone — the fact of presidential poetry as a partisan tradition—is a reminder of America's cultural divides", a divide which in this case juxtaposes the openness of Democratic presidents-elect towards approaching poetry and the arts, with the reluctance of Republican presidents-elect in doing the same, but which also emphasizes, on a larger scale, the differences between the parties when it comes to support, financial spending, and legislative decisions. The Republican stance in this situation falls under the party's general attitude towards the arts. Ever since the 1980s, Republican legislators and heads of state have attempted to cut federal budgets for state art agencies, and notably the reach of the National Endowment for the Arts, an independent governmental agency which offers

funding and support for artists and various artistic projects. Created in 1965 by the Congress of the United States and President Johnson, the agency accounts for a small percentage of the government's annual budget, yet it has often been the target of considerable cuts. There have also been several attempts, mostly by Republicans and conservatives, to abolish the agency in its totality, from Ronald Reagan's initial attempts at the beginning of his time in office, to New Gingrich's opposition during the Clinton administration, to Donald Trump's failed plan in 2017[10]. Marie Myung-Ok Lee attributes this stance to the fact that "public investment in the arts threatens the conservative agenda" (*Quartz*), underscoring the notion that art plays a crucial role in shaping and expressing political thought and affiliation, and that the political identity of artists often aligns with, in America's case, Democratic values.

The imbalance in attitude towards the arts based on political affiliation has been the subject of research and debate. Arthur C. Brooks' study "Who opposes government arts funding?" from 2000 considers which characteristics might have an effect on the link between political affiliation and support for the arts. The main point related to political affiliation is that self-described conservatives are more likely to oppose art subsidies than self-described liberals. In addition to this, the results of the study also show that men are more likely to oppose support for the arts than women, that upper- and middle-class donors, who also privately donate to the arts, are more likely to be in favor of additional government support than people who earn significantly less money, and that regional discrepancies also play a role. Another similar study, from 2018, titled "The 'Right' Side of Creativity: Creative Personality and Social Risk-Taking Predict Political Party Affiliation", initially conducted in the aftermath of the 2016 Presidential election, raises the question of whether "creativity [is] linked to political party affiliation" (4). The study observes the creative personality and political party affiliation of 406 American citizens, focusing also on risk-taking, social risks, and right-wing ideology. The results have shown that, broadly speaking, Democrats and people who align themselves with Democratic values and ideas are more likely to have a creative personality than their Republican peers, which "might explain the relatively conservative attitude of Republicans towards the arts and the creative community (compared to the Democrats), such as the frequent opposition to arts funding in budget negotiations" (15), as mentioned above. The scope of the creativity described in the study extends across multiple spheres, and includes literary creativity, which is central in our discussion of inaugural poetry.

[10] https://thehill.com/policy/finance/314991-trump-team-prepares-dramatic-cuts (Accessed 29 August 2021).

8. The Unsung American Reality

The nature of the inaugural poems brings to attention the question of not only "whether a poem is political, [but also] *when* a poem is political" (Orr 418). Sean Hughes notes that "while they oblige themselves to make the poem about the incoming government, [the inaugural poets] spend most of the poem saying general things about America" and adds that "inaugural poets [after Frost] have all written poems that are ostensibly about the day […] and yet they won't really address the particular president that's being inaugurated" since they do not outright mention the occasion at which they are participating. In all instances, the inaugural poems do not explicitly address the presidents for whose inauguration they are written. There are a few exceptions, although they only serve to underline the analysis, and not to contradict it – in "Dedication", Robert Frost alludes to the dawning of a new day and "[o]f young ambition eager to be tried", referring to JFK; Richard Blanco and Amanda Gorman, as mentioned above, allude to the moment of reciting their respective poems at the inauguration, but they also do not mention the presidents by name or offer any specific pointers.

When talking about the now in the United States, or about any other singular time in American history, there is also an impossibility to do so without talking about its economy and money in general. The importance of capital means that "without venturing into the sphere of money and profit, we cannot talk about American contemporaneity" (Grgas 2014: 95), which means that economy is crucial in the understanding of the United States now, and the understanding of the United States at any particular moment throughout its history. The depiction of economy in literature can be used to "decipher the enigma of the United States" (Grgas 2014: 317) because of the tight link between economy and the American identity, yet the relationship between economics and literature is both profound and understated. The connection between the two disciplines is equally complex in the case of the inaugural poems, since none of them mention the sphere of economics, and certainly not explicitly. The depiction of wealth is that of the symbolic kind, of cultural and historical riches, rather than financial gain.

Much like the presidential inaugurations themselves belong to a sphere that is not completely political, so too do the people, or men, who find themselves at their center. The President of the United States is the chief executive of the country, yet he does not play "only [a] political [role] in American life, but also [a] social and cultural [one]" (Maubach et al. 29). Consequently, then, inaugural poems are also instances where the "political, theatrical, and poetic may be intertwined" (Burr 431). This adds another layer to the role of the inaugural

poets – they take on a mantle that brings them closer to the center of public discourse. Burr further argues that "if poetry has a public role to perform it is only by virtue of and on the basis of its ability to remain an idiom apart from all the public discourses of society", meaning that "the maker of the poem cannot anticipate a public role for his or her work and have it remain poetry" (430). The poems do underline the issues of class, race, and equality, but also refrain from doing so overtly or too politically. Because of their affiliation with the category of occasional poems, they fulfill certain "duties as civics lessons" (Crouch). This again plays into the fact that they do not overtly refer to the presidents for whose inaugurations they were composed, and why they gesture to a more overtly poeticized depiction of the United States and its reality. Nerys Williams writes that America, according to Angelou and Alexander as inaugural poets, "remains in a state of possibility and the role of the inaugural poem is not to glorify political achievements" (67).

The focus on certain aspects of American reality and the absence of other, equally significant elements which help understand the U.S. for what it is, brings forward the issue of authenticity in the poems. Reflecting on this question, Jason Schneiderman counters that "all of these poems look at the America that's all of America—even when it fails to live up to the promises that we like to call 'America'" (2015: 48). Throughout the history of the United States, poets have had the "marked tendency to regard poetry as either an alternative to or refuge from the public, (…) a way of negotiating or problematizing the separation of public and private spheres" (Harrington 11). The distinction between the public and the private, as well as between the political and the civil societies, is not so cleat-cut today as to warrant a clinical separation without the possibility of leeway. Similarly, the selectivity of the inaugural poets not to venture into the sphere of economy and overt political commentary does not diminish their interpretation of America. It speaks to the nature of occasional poetry and the poetic tradition in which the poems are created and read.

9. Conclusion

In the history of U.S. presidential inaugurations, only six poets have been officially asked to participate and read their poems at the swearing-in ceremonies of four presidents. John F. Kennedy was the first to include a poet in his inauguration, inviting Robert Frost to read a poem at his first and only inauguration in 1961. Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden followed in his footsteps – Clinton invited Maya Angelou for his first inauguration in 1993 and

Miller Williams for his second in 1997, Obama invited Elizabeth Alexander for his first in 2009 and Richard Blanco for his second in 2013, and Biden invited Amanda Gorman for his, the most recent inauguration, in 2021.

The poems written and read by these poets are classified as occasional poems, due to the fact that they were written for a specific moment, and, because of the specific nature of U.S. presidential inaugurations as celebrations of American culture, history, and democracy, they follow a particular narrative and incorporate particular notions. The history of the United States, as well as the questions of culture, space, and people, make up the corpus of American inaugural poetry. The motifs and ideas pertaining to the image of America and referenced in the poems have been analyzed over the course of this paper. A comparative analysis of the presidential poems shows the overarching themes inherent in the observation of the United States as focusing primarily on its space, time, and people, and the way these aspects correlate and interact with each other. The analysis also included several 'unofficial' inaugural poems which were not delivered during the inaugurations themselves, but which nonetheless help form the critical lens through which the institution of the U.S. presidency is perceived. Observed individually and collectively, the inaugural poems paint a picture of the United States and offer a reflection on its history, culture, and people.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of the inaugural poems written for and read at the inaugurations of American presidents. To date, six poets have been invited to participate at the inaugurations of four presidents. They are Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, Miller Williams, Elizabeth Alexander, Richard Blanco, and Amanda Gorman, and the presidents at whose inaugurations they recited their works are John F. Kennedy (Frost), William J. Clinton (Angelou and Williams), Barack H. Obama (Alexander and Blanco), and Joseph R. Biden Jr. (Gorman), respectively. Inaugural poems fall into the category of occasional poetry, that is, poetry written for a specific moment. The poets who delivered their poems at presidential inaugurations focused on depicting the past, present, and future of the United States, encompassing a number of issues which are crucial for understanding the way America is viewed and how the American identity is constructed. The key motifs and ideas presented in each of the inaugural poems form the focal point of this paper, as does a comparative analysis of the poems, which shows the common themes inherent in the observation of the United States. These elements include the people, land, and time of the United States, and the complex ways in which they are intertwined. The analysis also includes several 'unofficial' poems which were not recited at the inaugural ceremonies themselves, but which still provide a lens for the observation of American history in general, and the institution of the U.S. presidency in particular. The questions of orality, performance, and authenticity also arise over the course of the analysis. Written at specific points in U.S. history, all these poems stand as representations of the American idea, and they each present an image of the United States, that of a nation and its history, culture, and people.

Keywords: poetry, occasional poetry, inaugural poem, United States