



"The Belly of the Beast": Amanda Gorman's *The Hill We Climb*

K. Zissouli

American Public University

The author received her BA in Classics from The University of California, Irvine (1990), and her MA in English and Comparative Literature from San Diego State University (1992). She obtained her PhD in American Literature, Culture and Ideology from The University of Athens (1997). Dr. Zissouli has taught writing, literature and philosophy for a number of years and has held a Yale University Fellowship in Teaching and Learning. Her research focuses on philosophy, literature, and teaching and has been published in various professional journals. She has also published two academic books and is in the process of publishing her first novel.

Abstract

Amanda Gorman, the first American National Youth Poet Laureate, captivated more than 33 million people at the Biden/Harris Inauguration in January 2021, with her poem, *The Hill We Climb*. Gorman's poetry blurred the distinction between dominance and subalternity by creating a third space, a hybrid territory (an amalgamation of sorts) between the two where the past is reconciled with the present and looks toward the future. In Gorman's own words, "...what I'm about and what I'm here for is way beyond this moment. I'm learning that I am not lightning that strikes once. I am the hurricane that comes every single year, and you can expect to see me again soon" (See *Unity With Purpose* 02/04/2021). Today, Gorman's poetry functions as a welcome relief in a politically charged, divided country. Lessons from such performances testify to a country's determination, perseverance and love for the nation and its people. As a result, Gorman affirms that whatever the price and beyond life's contradictions, the human spirit is perpetually involved in seeking, not to divide, but to unite in the name of truth, authenticity and harmony for an ultimate deliverance.

Keywords

Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, American poetry, Biden inauguration, postmodern theory

On July 5, 2000, CBS launched its adaptation of *Big Brother*, based on the Dutch reality show under the same name (see https://www.cbs.com/shows/big_brother). Currently, the US version of *Big Brother* is one of the longest-running adaptations globally (only second to Spain's). Viewers glued to their televisions appear to have accepted this and other "live" reality game shows as factual and true. Yet, this acceptance seems to be based on anything but reality, fact or truth. Even though time and time again viewers have been told that these are scripted shows via controlled realities for entertainment purposes only, they have bought into the illusion of "reality" in these seemingly "live" spectacles. In Jean Baudrillard's words, this "...artificial microcosm of *Loft Story* [France's *Big Brother* equivalent] is identical to Disneyland, which provides the illusion of the real external world, while if one looks deeper, one realizes they are one and the same. The entire United States is Disneyland and we are all on *Loft Story*.... The televisual universe is nothing more than a holographic detail of global reality" (5). This is what Baudrillard calls, "experimental reality" which is precisely what people seek. As a result, the desire for this "spectacle of banality" has inevitably become "the real pornography, the real obscenity" (5, 6); hence, viewers have become willing and/or reluctant voyeurs and consumers of a new kitsch reality. This global surveillance system does not have to take place in a prison, as Michel Foucault claims. Rather, it begins in the home where entire families participate by being glued to a television screen.

Within all this "existential banality as the most deadly event, as the most violent actuality, even as the site of the most perfect crime" lives poetry (Baudrillard 6). More specifically, within this illusion of reality, lives Amanda Gorman's poetry. Gorman's Inaugural poem, *The Hill We Climb*, contributed to an intellectual as well as cultural crash landing for a number of the Inaugural spectators (at least for those who paid attention) because it did not seem forged, fake or artificial. Gorman, in fact, said in an interview with *The New York Times* that the theme of the poem is "America United" (Alter 01/19/2021), and it appears that a large number of people (per the *Los Angeles Times*, 33.8 million viewers watched the Biden/Harris Inauguration) were captivated not only by Gorman's extraordinary performance, but also by her literary chops. In this case, however, people were "fascinated and terrified" neither "by the indifference for the Nothing-to-say, Nothing-to-do," crowd of shows, such as *Big Brother*, nor "by the indifference to their own existence" (Baudrillard 6), but as a result of an unfortunate, poignant reality that is deeply-rooted into the American psyche. This reality up until recently was rarely discussed in a meaningful way by mainstream media.

Presenting her poem at the 2021 Presidential Inauguration was not the only first for Amanda Gorman. She was also the first poet ever to present an original poem at the Super Bowl. Consequently, the 32-page special edition preprint of her Inaugural poem, *The Hill We Climb* became a bestseller and debuted at #1 on the *New York Times* Bestseller list and the *USA TODAY*'s Best Selling Books list. According to Penguin Random House News, the publisher of the special edition, Gorman's poem had the highest first week sales "of any poetry book ever published" (04/08/2021). As a result of high demand, the book's first printing of 1 million copies soon turned into 1.5 million copies.

Since then, Gorman has become a household name in this new American reality. In fact, she has been featured in a number of magazines, including *Time*, *Vogue*, *Essence* and *O* (She was the first poet ever to be featured on the cover of *Vogue*). In addition, her popularity and frequent TV and newspaper interviews are a testament to our obsession with Amanda Gorman, the poet, the activist, the role model, a young woman who speaks about social justice, who defies stereotypes and dispels certain misconceptions regarding both the politicization and future of poetry and who does it all with grace and purpose. And this is the same young woman who shared on Twitter (03/06/2021) that she was followed home by a security guard who did not believe that she lived in her building and who told her that she looked suspicious (see @TheAmandaGorman—Gorman’s Twitter account). Therein lies the conundrum that has forced a large number of people to bring to light prejudice tendencies in their attempt to address systemic racism.

Be that as it may, Gorman’s poetry speaks to a familiar historical, cultural and political reality, the discussion of which some people avoid because it brings to the forefront certain painful truths which they would rather ignore. As a matter of fact, she begins *The Hill We Climb* with a historical account of the plight of those who have been oppressed, abused and harassed:

When day comes we ask ourselves,
 where can we find light in this never-ending shade?
 The loss we carry,
 a sea we must wade
 We've braved the belly of the beast
 We've learned that quiet isn't always peace
 And the norms and notions
 of what just is
 Isn't always just-ice (Liu 01/20/2021)

Unmistakably, “race” in America is a loaded word, a term “full of contradictions and ambiguities; it is at once the greatest source of social conflict and the richest source of cultural development” (Gates 4-5; Guerin 288). Even though this is a moot point today, it is one that must be made time and time again. This is evident in the past and more recent murders of black Americans by police officers whose oath of always maintaining the highest ethical standards unfortunately applies only to certain people among their ranks. It is also evident in some people’s actions who take it upon themselves to commit felonies and in some cases even murder as a result of their political and cultural misgivings and diehard, fanatic beliefs. Bernard Bell’s ideas on African American writing, in fact, drive this point home:

Traditional white American values emanate from a providential vision of history and Euro-Americans as a chosen people, a vision that sanctions their individual and collective freedom in the pursuit of property, profit, and happiness. Radical Protestantism, Constitutional democracy, and industrial capitalism are the white American trinity of values. In contrast, black American values emanate from a cyclical, Judeo-Christian vision of history and of African-Americans as a disinherited, colonized people, a

vision that sanctions their resilience of spirit and pursuit of social justice.

(5)

As Bell points out, no other ethnic or social group in America has experienced (and is still experiencing) what African Americans have suffered: “kidnapping, the Middle Passage, slavery, Southern plantation life, emancipation, Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction, Northern migration, urbanization, and ongoing racism” (5). This is where Gorman’s poetry is rooted; it is based on an anguished past, yet its rich tradition is a testament to the resiliency of the African American people. This resiliency helps shape its decisively distinct future, in its relentless quest for human rights and uncompromising determination to repair the harm done over the years.

Using the looking glass of cultural studies, inevitably leads to the obvious politicization of writing as a discipline and its placement in an oppositional role vis-a-vis the various societal power structures and struggles which contribute to the search and discovery of different models for the binary opposition, dominance and subalternity (Guerin 278). According to Guerin, since “meaning and individual subjectivity are culturally constructed, they can thus be reconstructed” (278), as well as reterritorialized.

In other words, the legitimacy of the binary opposition, “dominance and subalternity” comes into question, as postcolonial and cultural studies, according to Homi K. Bhabha, are characterized by what he calls “hybridity” (209). This idea is the result of the emergence of a “Third Space” which is used to reconcile the past with the present (Guerin 304-305). Still, when one relates this idea of “hybridity” to some of Foucault’s assumptions, it appears that society does not necessarily move “from a state of barbarism to one of civilized governance, but from one form of domination to another” (See Prasad 247). In addition, Foucault claims that “as the postulate of essence or of attribute, power would have an essence and be an attribute, which would qualify those who possess it (dominators) as opposed to those on whom it is practiced (dominated)” (Deleuze, *Foucault* 27). The idea of hybridity, as opposed to cultural imperialism, however, has been and still is very real. In fact, Thomas Friedman claims that the flattening of the world inevitably has introduced new players who are ready not only to participate, but also to compete by taking a dominate role because they are able to adopt quickly (214). In other words, hybridity is a global reality, and it is made apparent in Gorman’s poetry, where Other takes over and sweepingly jams the political void with meaningful, realistic images of potentialities, as in Heidegger’s *being-in-the-world* (See *Being and Time* 225ff).

We the successors of a country and a time
Where a skinny Black girl
descended from slaves and raised by a single mother
can dream of becoming president
only to find herself reciting for one (Liu 01/20/2021)

And elsewhere:

For while we have our eyes on the future
history has its eyes on us
This is the era of just redemption (Liu 01/20/2021)

This leads to Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's idea of deterritorialization, which is what happens when one abandons the territory or what they call, "the operation of the line of flight" and reterritorialization, which is the reorganization or restoration of a certain territory that was submitted to deterritorialization (*A Thousand Plateaus* 508), as in Gorman's:

We will not be turned around
or interrupted by intimidation
because we know our inaction and inertia
will be the inheritance of the next generation (Liu 01/20/2021)

As a result, deterritorialization may lead to "a compensatory reterritorialization obstructing the line of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 508), which is accurately expressed by Gorman:

But one thing is certain:
If we merge mercy with might,
and might with right,
then love becomes our legacy
and change our children's birthright
So let us leave behind a country
better than the one we were left with
Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest,
we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one (Liu 01/20/2021)

As Heidegger writes, this "difference is primarily a matter of language, 'Language speaks. Its speaking bids the difference to come . . .'" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 210). Be that as it may, when asked by Michelle Obama if she thinks about the things she writes, Gorman responded, "Absolutely. Poetry and language are often at the heartbeat of movements for change. If we look to the Black Lives Matter protests, you see banners that say, They buried us but they didn't know we were seeds. That's poetry being marshaled to speak of racial justice" (See *Unity With Purpose* 02/04/2021). During the same interview, she goes on to say,

Poetry is the lens we use to interrogate the history we stand on and the future we stand for. It's no coincidence that at the base of the Statue of Liberty, there is a poem. Our instinct is to turn to poetry when we're looking to communicate a spirit that is larger than ourselves. Whenever I'm writing, I'm looking at the history of words. The specific history of words in the Inaugural poem was: We have seen the ways in which language has been violated and used to dehumanize. How can I reclaim English so we can see it as a source of hope, purification and consciousness? (See *Unity With Purpose* 02/04/2021)

This is how language speaks, bidding "the difference to come" which Heidegger also discusses in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (210). In other words, Gorman attempts to reclaim the English language so that it is not used to dehumanize, but to lead to a "unity that actually moves us toward the future [which] means that we accept our differences—we embrace them and we lean into that diversity. It's not linking arms without questioning what we're linking arms for. It's unity with purpose" (See *Unity With*

Purpose 02/04/2021). Without doubt, this purpose helps America move forward today, one painful lesson at a time.

Moreover, Ferdinand de Saussure claims that in a social and cultural sense, language precedes the world and makes it intelligible through concepts that it provides for producing differences (Morton 81; Andriotis 119). Saussure's basic premise is that without language ("differences") there is no ("cultural") reality. Heidegger drives this point home, "Language is not only and not primarily an audible and written expression of what is to be communicated. It not only puts forth in words and statements what is overtly or covertly intended to be communicated; language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time" (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 73; Andriotis 119). It is a constant struggle to come to terms with cultural differences and renegotiate norms and expectations when dealing with systemic racism (institutional racism). Consequently, it is not that racism has become more prevalent in America today; rather, it is due to the fact that racist outbursts are "getting filmed," as Will Smith recently reaffirmed (see *The Hollywood Reporter's* Will Smith interview).

As a cultural artefact, *The Hill We Climb* inexorably makes connections within current popular culture in its attempt to waken and decode social meaning as it pertains to the oppressed in American society. Furthermore, it deconstructs the experience of the so called, "subaltern" by bringing to light painful truths and reconstructs it via Heidegger's notion of "being-in-the-world" (*Being and Time* 67-68), shifting from "this never-ending shade," "a sea we must wade" and "the belly of the beast," to "the dawn is ours," "but within it we found the power" and "We will not be turned around" among other such notions (Liu 01/20/2021). If language, according to Heidegger, is "the house of being" (*Being and Time* 54), "our being-in-the-world is a tacit practical know-how that we use in the course of solving our problems in everyday life" (Leidlmair 34). At the same time, when the search for a place in the world through authenticity and truth intertwine with language, Gorman's poetry speaks to a new cultural reality where righteous indignation leads to equity since it perpetually targets and unmasks racist tendencies.

Additionally, language for Heidegger is the precise point where *Being* takes shape, "As original condition of being-in-the-world, language, taking form in speaking, asserting, hearing, listening, heeding . . . lets Being first appear as such: it is the lighting and advent of Being itself" (Quoted in Leitch 61; Andriotis 119). Heidegger goes on to say that language must be understood only through the essence of poetry. In other words, the primordial source of language is poetry. As a result, thinking, according to Heidegger, manifests itself fundamentally as poetic activity, "Making language possible, poetry gives Being a local habitation and a name" (Quoted in Leitch 62063; Andriotis 119). Similarly, language as well as poetry are "at the heartbeat of movements of change," according to Gorman (See *Unity With Purpose* 02/04/2021). She goes on to say, "If you analyze Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech, it's a great document of rhetoric that's also a great document of poetry, of imagery, of song. Never underestimate the power of art as the language of the people" (See *Unity With Purpose* 02/04/2021). Clearly, for Gorman, language is understood through the essence of poetry. As such, for Gorman *art for art's sake* is an illusion. As Chinua Achebe has often said, all art is political (617), and it is, indeed, political for Gorman as well.

Clearly, many authors and philosophers have been preoccupied with language over the years. More specifically, in Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates announces: "I decided to take refuge in language, and study the truth of things by means of it" (Plato 24; Andriotis 116). That is to say, language for Socrates is a reliable means of transcending mundane reality. Perhaps it would be easier to classify it as a sort of true reflection of the world (Morton 78; Andriotis 117).

This point cannot be stressed enough: language makes understanding possible. For, in the context of language and as language, things cannot be known, only understood. In fact, Foucault, in *The Order of Things* takes this idea one step further by saying, "... language exists first of all, in its raw and primitive being, in the simple, material form of writing, a stigma upon things, a mark imprinted across the world which is a part of its most ineffaceable forms. In a sense, this layer of language is unique and absolute" (Foucault 42; Andriotis 160). Gorman makes this understanding possible, in *The Hill We Climb*, "Somehow we've weathered and witnessed/a nation that isn't broken/but simply unfinished," and elsewhere, "Then victory won't lie in the blade/But in all the bridges we've made" (Liu 01/20/2021).

Furthermore, there is much to be said about the poetic vision of authenticity. It is very difficult, the existentialists claim, to maintain authentic existence in the face of tremendous pressures to conform (Spanos 2). In fact, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger maintains that "the silent call of conscience summons us to authenticity, calls on us to understand ourselves in an ontologically appropriate way. But we can only hear this call if we are ready for it," in spite of the fact that everyday disclosedness, which seems to be inauthentic, is characterized by "idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity" (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 211-219; Andriotis 104). In that sense, Gorman's poetry relentlessly pursues authenticity, as she develops the theme of *America United*, thus proudly strutting away from idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity,

We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,
we must first put our differences aside
We lay down our arms
so we can reach out our arms
to one another
We seek harm to none and harmony for all (Liu 01/20/2021)

Heidegger also claims that "...if everything 'good' is a heritage, and the character of 'goodness' lies in making authentic existence possible, then the handing down of a heritage constitutes itself in resoluteness" (*Being and Time* 435; Andriotis 110-111). According to Søren Kierkegaard, in resoluteness or in the search for conscience, the individual acknowledges that the primary responsibility is to be authentic, an idea which is not far removed from Heideggerian thought (Kierkegaard 210; Andriotis 111). Subsequently, Gorman's quest for authenticity in *The Hill We Climb* is unmistakable,

When day comes we step out of the shade,
afraid and unafraid
The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it

If only we're brave enough to be it (Liu 01/20/2021)

As a result, Gorman is able to blur the distinction between dominance and subalternity by creating a third space, a hybrid between the two where she reconciles the past with the present and looks toward the future with *purpose*. In Gorman's own words, "...what I'm about and what I'm here for is way beyond this moment. I'm learning that I am not lightning that strikes once. I am the hurricane that comes every single year, and you can expect to see me again soon" (See *Unity With Purpose* 02/04/2021). Today, this is a welcome relief in a politically charged, divided country. The poet understands that the world is watching, and what they observe, thanks to artists and activists, like Gorman, is a lesson in determination, perseverance and love for a nation and its people. As a result, she reveals that whatever the price and beyond life's contradictions, the human spirit is perpetually enthralled in seeking not to divide, but to unite in the name of truth, authenticity and equity for all.

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