

## Editor's Column

## Education Populism

THE SNOW HAD NOT BEEN PREDICTED, BUT IT WAS COMING DOWN in earnest, blanketing Philadelphia and catching even the cabs off guard. The Kelly Writers House was open that Saturday morning in January 2017, as it always is, seven days a week, apparently independent of the weather. And for good reason: someone else was already in the kitchen with a book and a mug of coffee, settled in and only briefly distracted when Julia Bloch, director of creative writing at the University of Pennsylvania, ushered me into the house.<sup>1</sup>

“One of our regulars,” Julia said. “A student from Temple.”

The interview could have ended then and there—one minute into it and I had already gotten ample evidence of what sort of company the house kept. But here I was, armed with a long list of questions, and I thought I should at least ask one.

“I’m interested in three things: PennSound, ModPo, and the Kelly Writers House.<sup>2</sup> Which is the most fundamental?”

“Kelly Writers House, without a doubt. It came first historically, and it still comes first in every sense. All the high-tech stuff we’re doing now follows as a result.”

The Kelly Writers House is an actual house, a white and green Tudor-style cottage built in 1851 by the Philadelphia architect Samuel Sloan. One of the few such cottages still in existence (fig. 1), it sits at the heart of Penn’s campus, on Locust Walk, a key counterpoint to the imposing tower of the Wharton School, a mere stone’s throw away. The university chaplain used to live here. In 1995, when digitization was just beginning to take hold, a group of students and faculty members, with zero dollars in funding, opened the house as a “pilot program of the Provost’s 21st-Century Initiative” (“About the Kelly Writers House”). The program’s mission statement emphasizes that “[i]n addition to being a *conventional location* for an exchange of

ideas, it will also be an *unconventional space* where virtual realities, electronic texts, and electronic publishing will have a presence” (Walker). That double infrastructure—digital and physical—would maximize access “within Penn and beyond,” opening it to “community service groups and their sister schools, Philadelphia book stores and libraries.”

And that is indeed how things have worked out. The house is now open to anyone and everyone. It belongs to no single department: classes in creative writing, critical writing, Africana studies, and cinema studies all regularly meet there. The house is also a portal, an entry point to Penn, for an even more diverse public: students from Temple and Drexel Universities; grade-school kids, such as those from Lea Elementary School participating in Write On! ([writeonpenn.org](http://writeonpenn.org)); and folks anywhere in the world holding down day jobs and eager to spend their spare time doing something else online. Typically, half of the in-person audiences are unconnected to the university (Filreis).

The donors who support the Kelly Writers House are just as diverse. Receiving only a fraction of its income from the provost's office, the house gets 81% of its funding from loyal supporters with personal commitments to this endeavor, giving it the means to launch

outreach initiatives such as the Kelly Writers House Fellows program and its Young and Emerging Writers Fund. Among these donors, 75% give less than \$250 (Filreis).

Thanks to these loyal supporters, the Kelly Writers House is now equipped with digital-video cameras, wall-mounted HDTVs, and a state-of-the-art recording studio, matching the needs of its cutting-edge programs: a sound archive, a massive open online course (or MOOC), and a Web forum featuring poetry analysis, news, and interviews.<sup>3</sup> Still, the physical house looks old. Its nineteenth-century crown molding, cuspidate windows, and original oak floors are still intact, going hand in hand with the worn leather couches and well-used kitchen and dining room. The logo for Robinson Press, the house's on-site printing press, is three mismatched chairs (fig. 2), a fitting emblem for the house as a whole, highlighting writing as a social art nourished by company and conversations, putting hand-me-down furniture to good use. The chairs depicted in the logo are in the Arts Café, the front parlor where poetry readings and symposiums are hosted. Humble but unmistakable signs of welcome, they offer everyone there a literal seat at the table, a comfortable perch as they listen and talk and enjoy the food made on the premises (fig. 3).

Part of the house's infrastructure, cooking and eating are as reliable as the house's high-tech experiments are risky. It is no accident that the main meeting room here is called the Arts Café or that its best-known student publication is *Penn Appetit*, the nation's oldest college food magazine ([pennappetit.com/](http://pennappetit.com/)). Now published in print only once a se-



FIG. 1

Entrance to the Kelly Writers House. Photograph by the Kelly Writers House staff.

mester, it flourishes as an online blog, featuring entries by students from the professional schools as well as by undergraduates. Two of the most memorable posts are by students from the Wharton School: “Cheese and Rice around the World,” by Justin Yue, and “Marcus Samuelsson Brings Soul Back to Food,” by Chase Matecun. Yue shows how to make Massimo Bottura’s *risotto cacio e pepe* while filling us in on the recipe’s origins: “Back in May of 2012, there was an earthquake in Northern Italy, which affected hundreds of individuals and also destroyed thousands of Parmigiano Reggiano (Parmesan) cheese cylinders . . . , so chef Massimo Bottura led a movement to get chefs around the world to buy these damaged cheese cylinders.” The risotto was part of that cheese-salvaging campaign. Chefs are among the heroes at the Kelly Writers House. Matecun, managing editor of *Penn Appétit*, profiles another one: Marcus Samuelsson, the owner and chef of the Red Rooster, a restaurant in Harlem. Noting that the menu combines “the soul food of the American South, Afro-Caribbean traditions, and even Asian flavors that reflect Harlem’s steadfast Asian population,” Matecun adds that the restaurant’s staff is just as eclectic, and he ends with what Samuelsson seems proudest of—that his restaurant has “the best Puerto Rican–Filipino staff meals ever” (“Marcus Samuelsson”).

This is not exactly the sort of writing one would expect from the Wharton School. Who are Yue and Matecun, and how typical are they of the institution that produced Donald Trump and Ivanka Trump? In addition to being a risotto connoisseur, Yue speaks Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese. Matecun, who just graduated, is the incoming rotational

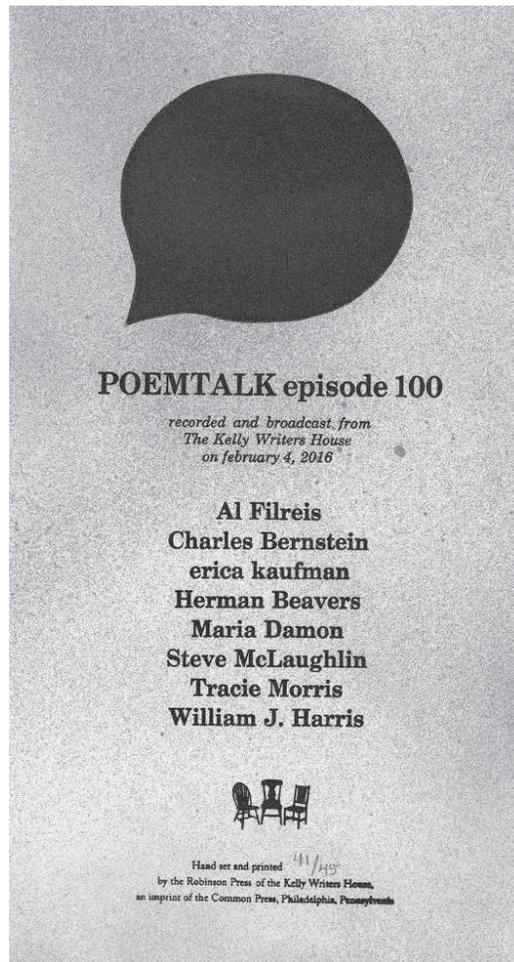


FIG. 2

Program for a reading at the Kelly Writers House containing the logo for its press.



FIG. 3

Students sharing food prepared at the Kelly Writers House. Photograph by the Kelly Writers House staff.

product manager at Zynga, a video-game company, but he continues to feature the Kelly Writers House prominently on his personal blog, "The Foreign Fork." "To me food is more than just nourishment—it's an experience that should be shared with others and appreciated both culturally and historically," he writes. He vows to "bring this understanding back to the United States" and to collect "traditional recipes from *paellas* to *montaditos*, interview local chefs and food producers, and sample and document the full spectrum of traditional Mediterranean foods." He concludes with yet another tribute to his benefactor: "How is this blog made possible? If it weren't for the generosity of the Kelly Writers House, I would be living off of baguettes and slices of second rate *jamón* each day. Thanks, guys!" ("About").

Yue and Matecun are not what we would ordinarily call writers, nor would their blog posts stand out amid the dizzying array of texts originating from the Kelly Writers House. But that is the point, the guiding principle of this unabashedly crowdsourced enterprise. Writing here is meant to be *unremarkable*, a daily routine for hundreds and thousands of people, fully occupied in other ways but somehow finding time to put words on the screen, doing it voluntarily, a little at a time, and with palpable satisfaction. What is showcased here is not the monopoly of established writers but a free-for-all open to anyone willing to give writing a try, justified only by the pleasure and instruction it affords the authors.

Writing of this sort democratizes education, makes it broad-based and self-directed and therefore the heart and soul of a university. The Kelly Writers House is one of the few places on campus where "engineers, economists, and literary critics share a common identity through writing" (Walker), emerging as colearners and coproducers of knowledge. Yue, writing about Buttaro's risotto recipe, learned firsthand about chef activism, an important part of the contemporary food movement that Oxfam, the Sierra Club, and *The*

*New York Times* have all reported on (Blanc et al.; Andrews; Feuer). Matecun, writing about Samuelsson, found out that there was such a thing as Puerto Rican–Filipino cuisine. And I, writing about the Kelly Writers House, have had my eyes opened in more ways than one.

Here, then, is an education populism, the opposite of the know-nothing version ascendant in the United States and Europe. Starting out at an elite university but not bound by it, this other populism proceeds not by building walls and banning out-groups but by insisting that no walls are necessary, that everyone is "in." If the Kelly Writers House is right, writing is not so much a talent as a universal entitlement: everyone can do it, and everyone will benefit from it. Even those at different ends of the political spectrum could come together on this basic level, this lowest, least divisive, and most enlightening common denominator. Is such a populism possible outside creative writing? Is it possible outside Penn? How viable or legible are its claims at public universities and community colleges? What are its pitfalls, its limits?

To my mind, the populism of the Kelly Writers House is tested by one of its own programs: PennSound, perhaps the best known and best loved among its offerings, though probably not its most egalitarian. Funded by private donors and codirected by Charles Bernstein and Al Filreis, the faculty director of the house, PennSound was launched on 1 January 2005 as the "iTunes of poetry," with technical support from the Annenberg Rare Books and Manuscripts Library and the computing department of Penn's School of Arts and Sciences (Matheson). The largest online archive of poets reading from their own works, PennSound contains, at the time of this writing, sixty thousand individual recordings, adding up to six thousand hours of listening. Some of these recordings are of readings that took place at the Kelly Writers House, some were donated directly by the poets, and others came from sister organiza-

tions such as the Library of Congress; UbuWeb; the Electronic Poetry Center, at Buffalo University; Washington University's Poetry Archive; and the Woodberry Poetry Room, at Harvard University.

Designed to be broadly accessible, PennSound states in its manifesto that all recordings must be "free and downloadable"; that all "must be of MP3 or better quality"; that they must be "broken down into singles," to be listened to individually or incorporated into course syllabi; that they "must be named"; that "bibliographic information must be embedded into each individual sound file"; and that each "must be indexed and retrievable from a library catalog under the poet's name and from search engines on the web" (Bernstein). These user-friendly measures have more than paid off. Since its inception in 2005, PennSound has maintained a track record of three million downloads per year (Matheson).

Historic readings by Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams are here; so too are readings by contemporary poets such as Jorie Graham and Claudia Rankine. But the site is by no means limited to these stellar figures. In fact, the big names tend to get lost among the multitude of poets represented, including a sizable number from Scandinavia and Eastern Europe—Dubravka Djurić, Alexei Parshchikov, and Grzegorz Wróblewski, to name a few—obscure to all but the most avid readers of contemporary poetry. The site is also committed to sponsoring poetry festivals and reading series open to newcomers, from the Festival of Contemporary Japanese Women Poets to Bernstein's Close Listening.

Still, there are puzzling omissions. How to account for the presence of Amiri Baraka but not Rita Dove, Lyn Hejinian but not Robert Hass, Samuel Delany but not Derek Walcott? The list of poets many of us would miss on this site is probably as long as the list of poets we would be pleased to find. PennSound is not particularly vocal about

its criteria for selection, inflected by its longstanding ties to conceptual poetry; but those criteria are easily inferable and not universally agreed on. They can certainly be gleaned from the course description for ModPo, a meticulously planned and decidedly nonneutral way to teach poetry, "with an emphasis on experimental verse, from Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman to the present" ("Modern and Contemporary American Poetry").

*Experimental*: this is the operative word—recursively operative, it seems, at every level of the Kelly Writers House's infrastructures: physical, digital, and philosophical. Having itself ventured into uncharted territory, the house looks for the same risk-taking spirit in the poets it showcases. Its platforms are capacious, but there is no question that some gatekeeping is going on. The time, money, and technical expertise required to produce PennSound's MP3 files guarantee that its authors list, however long, has limits. And, in any case, a sound archive preserving readings by poets is by definition curated. It is an honor to be admitted to this company; not everyone would be, not least because not every writer could be called a poet. How to reconcile the poetry selected by PennSound with the writing universalized by the Kelly Writers House?

Oddly, it is ModPo, the most controversial among the Kelly Writers House's experiments, that offers a reconciliation of sorts, bracketing these seemingly antithetical positions by putting poetry itself on the line, hard-pressed by the economics of a tech-driven media ecology. ModPo, a MOOC with a cumulative enrollment of 180,000, runs for ten weeks from September to November but can be joined any time of the year through Coursera, one of the "big three" MOOC providers.<sup>4</sup> Its presence on that platform has been a cause of alarm for many, raising deep concerns about exacerbated inequalities and the rapidly encroaching presence of the market.

Cofounded by the Stanford professors Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng, Coursera

was launched in 2012 with “financial backing from two of Silicon Valley’s premier venture capital firms” (Markoff). A for-profit company from the get-go (like its rival Udacity and unlike its other rival, edX, launched by Harvard and MIT the same year [“Big Three”]), Coursera was able to monetize its course offerings within one year of its launch, reporting in September 2013 that it had generated one million dollars in revenue from the sale of certificates verifying successful course completion (Empson and Ferenstein). Since then, it has grown to be the largest MOOC provider, now with 26 million registered users, more than 2,000 courses, and over \$210 million in venture capital (Stangel). It has made good on its for-profit promise, multiplying its revenue streams almost on a monthly basis, making the for-fee model the norm while expanding rapidly into new market niches.

In June 2016 Coursera scored a decisive victory over edX, partnering with the State Department to create Coursera for Refugees (“U.S. State Department”).<sup>5</sup> In August 2016 the company launched Coursera for Business (“Coursera”), a bid to take over the corporate e-learning market, estimated to be “worth \$12 billion in the US alone” (Sawers). In October 2016 Coursera began a systematic shift to monthly subscription plans, a still more effective way to generate revenue than its fee-per-course model. In January 2017 it rolled out yet another product, Coursera for Governments, partnering with seven Asian and African countries—India, Pakistan, Singapore, Malaysia, Egypt, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia—along with the United States.

Given the size of Coursera and its scale of operations, a ten-week course taught every year on modern and contemporary American poetry might seem like nothing, utterly trivial in the larger scheme of things. And yet from another point of view it could not be more consequential. Against the minute-by-minute vicissitudes of the online education market,<sup>6</sup> the steadfastness of ModPo must

mean something, even to Coursera. Filreis has been teaching a version of this course since 1985. Its digital platform has thrown it into a volatile world, but otherwise ModPo has remained the same, philosophically, pedagogically, even physically. Like everything else from the Kelly Writers House, it is nonprofit, does not generate revenue, and is entirely free. Rejecting the typical Coursera video-lecture format, it sticks to seminar discussions, live streamed through webcasts, and invites enrolled students to participate by phone or through *Twitter* or *Facebook Live* (“Modern and Contemporary American Poetry”). While ModPo does offer a certificate, this is awarded not for the fee paid but solely on the basis of completed course work—in this case, an extraordinary amount of writing: at least one online comment per week posted to the discussion forums, four papers, and four peer reviews of work done by others in the class, all read and graded by a team of dedicated teaching assistants, available for consultation through online office hours.

These writing assignments, along with a syllabus that might look unfamiliar even to seasoned teachers of American literature, help explain why this course is a key part of the Kelly Writers House—a lab where its aspirations are tested against the demands of venture capital, giving its populist conception of writing a chance to prove itself. A course on modern and contemporary American poetry that opens with Whitman and Dickinson might raise eyebrows, but the reading assignments for the second week (entitled Whitmanians and Dickinsonians) make it clear why these nineteenth-century poets are integral to the contemporary story—a story of writing as a critical mass collectively engendered across time, adding up to a nontrivial force equal to powerful but ephemeral forces. Whitmanians and Dickinsonians features poems by five poets: two by William Carlos Williams, one by Allen Ginsberg, one by Rae Armantrout, three by Lorine Niedecker, and one by Cid Corman.

The less-well-known of these five, Niedecker and Corman, are the animating core here. Students are asked to post online comments on Niedecker's "Grandfather advised me" and Corman's "It isn't for want" and to write their first paper using this material.

"Grandfather advised me," as fiercely experimental as any poem by Dickinson, and "It isn't for want," as much an effect of the first-person pronoun as any poem by Whitman, demonstrate what poetry looks like when imagined as a crowdsourced sequel. This body of material becomes a force not on the strength of prosody but through something far less specialized, something like generative power, measured by the inspired output by others, those driven to get in on the act. Any poetry worth its name has to produce a living sequel of this sort, an outpouring of words ongoing and multitudinous. If writing is a universal entitlement, poetry is what feeds it, amplifies it, and makes it perennial. Only on this basis can this seemingly rarefied body of writing make sense in the radically egalitarian world of the Kelly Writers House: far from being a privilege of the few, poetry here is another name for the populism that animates it, making its case, over and over again, that writing is durable precisely because it is for anyone and everyone, creating a literate public with no fuss and little cost. From the standpoint of this populism—and against the technocracy of Silicon Valley and the know-nothingism of the right—there is no contradiction between the selective preservation of poetry by PennSound and the nonselective nurturing of writing in the Kelly Writers House. The short-term goals of these two are different, but over the long haul they converge, producing outpourings of words that can be counted on to extend indefinitely.

It is a definition of poetry that Coursera might have respected, if anyone there had bothered to read the poems. I am sure no one did. What Coursera probably did notice was the outpourings of words occasioned

by ModPo, in the form of positive press. In 2013 an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* commended Filreis for being willing to "dig in the muck" and for making his "MOOC an 'outreach for poetry'" (Kolowich). An article in *PC Magazine* in 2015 hailed ModPo's seminar format as "a laboratory for 21st century experimentation in online education" (Fenton). It was not the typical Coursera MOOC but a distinct outlier that got everyone's attention, firing people up to do some writing of their own. Writing of this sort was legible to all in the business. In 2016 Filreis received a Transformation Award, one of Coursera's inaugural Outstanding Educator Awards, for "having contributed the most to the platform's vision of enabling anyone, anywhere to transform their life through its massive open online courses" (Leong).

Could an experimental humanities flourish at a major research university, meet a tech company on its own turf, and come away unscathed? The answer so far is a resounding *yes*. It is up to the rest of us to run further field tests, producing variants at our own institutions as tenacious and vital as this fearless prototype.

*Wai Chee Dimock*

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## NOTES

1. Al Filreis, the house's faculty director, was in Florida caring for his eighty-seven-year-old mother and could not join us.

2. PennSound is a digital sound archive of poets reading their own poetry; ModPo is an online course on modern and contemporary American poetry.

3. Convinced that media production is an integral part of writing, Filreis raised one million dollars in 2014 to build the Wexler Studio, a key component of the house's pedagogical infrastructure. Since the completion of the studio in 2014, podcasts and webcasts from the Kelly Writers House have doubled in number, making digital distribution an option for all programs sponsored by the house and all classes being held there.

4. The "big three" are Coursera, Udacity, and edX.

5. Even though edX had started offering online courses for refugees in February 2013, it was Coursera that won the contract with the State Department in June of that year ("U.S. State Department").

6. Two months after Richard Levin was replaced as CEO of Coursera, Koller announced that she was taking a new job as chief computing officer at Calico, a Google-funded company (McNeal).

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