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## UNMASKING THE "GODS OF POETRY" Race and the Academy of American Poets

**Editor's Note:** *The following letter and essay by Fred Viebahn, criticizing the Academy of American Poets for persistent racism on its board of chancellors, were first published in International Quarterly (Summer, 1998). Although the letter and essay speak for themselves, the reactions they provoked deserve mention here.*

A short editorial regarding Fred Viebahn's essay appeared in *Poets & Writers* (July/August, 1998) and was followed by two letters to the editor in the September/October issue of the same periodical. One of the letters was by Asian American writer David Mura, who forcefully supported Fred Viebahn's point of view, and the other letter was by Kathleen Norris, a former Academy of American Poets employee who attacked Viebahn without bothering to read his original statement. Fred Viebahn responded with his own letter to the editor, which was printed, in substantially abbreviated form, in *Poets & Writers* (November/December, 1998), accompanied by an immediate reply from Kathleen Norris and a long statement from two senior Academy of American Poets officers assailing Fred Viebahn for his "destructive, polarizing rhetoric" and "demagoguery." Fred Viebahn responded again in early November but was told by the editor of *Poets & Writers* that his response would not be printed. When Viebahn protested this decision, the editor of *Poets & Writers* broke off all communication.

The situation took a dramatic turn on November 10, 1998, when two of the Academy's chancellors, Pulitzer Prize-winning poets Carolyn Kizer and Maxine Kumin, resigned from the Academy's board of chancellors in protest, citing Fred Viebahn's journalistic initiative as crucial for their decision. At this point, the affair has made the pages of the *New York Times* and, subsequently, the radio waves of public broadcasting. And yet, as of this writing, no other chancellor has stood up to be counted, and the senior officers of the Academy of American Poets, both of them white men, have maintained their defensive stance, calling Fred Viebahn's accusations "totally unfair" (*New York Times*, Nov. 14, 1998) and claiming that, although there has never been a non-white poet on their board of chancellors, they have minority members on their board of directors and among their staff. Callaloo's investigation of the matter showed that there is one black member among the 26 directors of the Academy of American Poets—for a number of years the Cuban-American composer Tania Leon, who was replaced in 1998, curiously enough, by another Caribbean-American, the novelist Jamaica Kincaid.

It might be of interest here to note that until 1987—over half a century since the organization's founding—there were neither African Americans nor Jews among the directors, nor were there ever, at least until recently, any people of color or "minorities" among the Academy's senior members, its power brokers and decision-makers. Therefore to suggest, as the Academy's defenders do, that "minorities" among the junior staff might help to balance

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This essay was originally commissioned by the magazine *International Quarterly* and was published in its Vol. III, No. 2 issue, spring/summer 1998. © 1998 by Fred Viebahn. Reprinted by permission of the author.

*the ethnic picture seems no different from wealthy white families citing their relationship with their black household help as proof of racial sensitivity.*

*To give Callaloo's readers a chance to draw their own conclusions, we are also printing, following Fred Viebahn's essay, his letters to Poets & Writers, the magazine published bi-monthly by the New York-based literary service organization of the same name—and, as this issue of the journal goes to press, a final editorial statement concerning the latest twist in this saga.*

—Charles H. Rowell

*The following letter, originally sent by Fred Viebahn to about 50 literary friends and acquaintances, was reprinted in a sidebar in the International Quarterly essay.*

### Open Letter to Stanley Kunitz

February 6, 1998

Dear Stanley,

I just read an interview with you in the Fall 1997 issue of *American Poet*, the journal of the Academy of American Poets. I sympathized very much with what you said—it's no secret that I have been impressed with your views and your writings since I first met you 22 years ago, on that wintry day at the Library of Congress when I and my eleven fellow writers from Germany were introduced by our State Department hosts to the Consultant in Poetry. I especially liked your answer to the interviewer's question about "the poet's relationship to the political," when you cite the presence of "unimpeachable representatives of the liberal conscience" (you, Styron, and Arthur Miller) at the National Medal of the Arts dinner at the White House in 1993; I witnessed that momentous event myself, as you know.

I also saw in *American Poet* that you are now, after many years of service, Academy Chancellor Emeritus. Your "retirement" prompted me to take a look at the updated list of the twelve chancellors—and what I saw did not make me happy. Already in 1994 when, on the occasion of the Academy's 60th anniversary, Rita hosted you and the other chancellors at the Library of Congress, I had noticed that the composition of your board was not only very male dominated (I believe there was one token woman at the time) but showed an absolute lack of minority representation. Furthermore, I was told there had never been a non-white chancellor in the Academy. I found this appalling and said so privately; however, as the Poet Laureate's husband I decided not to follow my impulses and do what should have been done a long time ago: confront the Academy publicly with its apparent arrogance and, yes, racism.

Today, upon revisiting this issue, I see that the intervening years have brought no change, although there has been plenty of opportunity when chancellors retired. Such exclusionism is beyond appalling—it is disgusting. Since reading your interview, Stanley, I have asked myself how a life-long champion of "the liberal conscience" could have been so insensitive that he went along with this unabashed country club mentality for all those years, even after most country clubs had been integrated.

Please don't tell me that minority poets regularly received tasty crumbs from the Academy's table of fellowships, prizes and readings; I am talking about the twelve masses running the house, and I am curious: Did the "Whites Only" question ever come up among the chancellors? If no, how self-centered and otherworldly can twelve poets be in one room? If yes, what kind of inane, pseudo-intellectual Jim Crow arguments were brought forth to keep this bastion of rarefied wordsmiths free from the "dark forces"? It can't be that there were no qualified minority poets, can it?

I admit that I am partial in this affair—two decades in the United States and of married life with a Black poet have sharpened my sensibilities considerably in matters of race. Believe me, Rita has not "put me up to this" in any way. I came to my own conclusions, and they demand that I speak up. I've watched the racial lunacies in this country, including the condescending attitudes of quite a few white poets and writers, from close range—first staring at the crude surface of American race relations as a European outsider, then, as part of my process of "Americanization," gaining closer and closer insights into the insidious complications that give racial obsessions their sick spin.

To preclude the assumption that my anger might be related to a desire to see Rita become chancellor of the Academy, let me state that she has no such aspirations. There are, and have always been, others whose qualifications are beyond doubt and who, under decent circumstances, should have long found themselves elected. There were Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden, to name just a few. And there are African-American poets today who bring with them quality of work, national reputation and cooperative spirit to make them excellent candidates—I think of Michael Harper, for example. The abolition of white supremacist attitudes among the chancellors of the Academy of American Poets is long overdue.

I sincerely hope, Stanley, that you will lend your voice as *Chancellor Emeritus* to inject among your former colleagues the spirit of the society you, as you said in your interview, "yearned for: idealistic, openhearted, and free." So far, that board is the opposite: hypocritical, of a closed mind, imprisoned in old boy networking.

With best wishes,  
Fred Viebahn

**THE WHITE POETS' SOCIETY**  
or, How I Lost My Patience With The "Masters" of Verse

*by Fred Viebahn*

I met Stanley Kunitz 22 years ago, in 1976. He was the first American poet I had ever seen face to face: as a board member of the German Writers Association, I was leading a group of younger German scribes ("younger" then defined as born between 1938 and 1947) on a tour of the United States, and Kunitz was Library of Congress Consultant in Poetry. At the time I had little knowledge of the American poetry scene, being primarily a fiction writer and journalist, but I enjoyed the lively conversation centering on our common political sensibilities as we took tea in the Consultant in

Poetry's office right across from the U.S. Capitol and overlooking the Supreme Court building—"Poetry's Catbird Seat".

Later that same year I would spend a semester as a Fulbright fellow at the University of Iowa's International Writing Program—a semester that radically changed my life, for I fell in love with a dazzling woman graduate student. Her name was Rita Dove—what could have been more lyrical? She spoke an impeccable German and was the only African American in the Iowa Writers Workshop. We soon became inseparable, married, and have been together ever since.

The past two decades have not only transformed me from an impatient leftist German intellectual to a liberal semi-American pundit; they have also introduced me to the intricacies of contemporary American poetry and taught me a thing or two about the ravages of racism among the American psyche. Although the pretense of white superiority is a pervasive cancer in this society, the detection of ethnic prejudice in the literary world upset me especially—first of all because I am familiar with the characters in this immorality play, but also because hypocrisy reaches dizzying heights when white artists fence off their playground against minority participation—in particular those white artists who otherwise raise their voices for every liberal cause offering them a free publicity ride on its coat tails.

In 1994 my wife, then U.S. Poet Laureate, hosted the 60th anniversary of the Academy of American Poets at the Library of Congress. Arranged by the Academy itself and concentrating solely on its twelve chancellors and one chancellor emeritus, this event consisted of a self-celebratory afternoon with book signings and photo op, a dinner and an evening poetry reading. At the time there was only one woman, Mona van Duyn, among the dozen chancellors. (Amy Clampitt had recently died.) Since Ms. van Duyn was ill and another chancellor, James Merrill, was abroad, ten old or elder white men (who had elected each other to the lifetime position) recited their work; they were John Ashbery, Anthony Hecht, Daniel Hoffman, John Hollander, Richard Howard, Stanley Kunitz, W.S. Merwin, David Wagoner, Richard Wilbur and a sole voluntary chancellor emeritus, William Meredith.

I was incredulous in the face of such unapologetic exhibition of racial "purity" and gross gender imbalance—even more so when I was told that there had never been a chancellor "of color" in this Walhalla of self-appointed poetry gods. Yes, it's ridiculous, those I spoke to agreed, shrugging; but since the chancellors were elected for life, there was no quick fix in sight.

However, about a year later I heard that the chancellors, under pressure from executive staff and the non-poets on the separate Board of Directors, conceded their lifetime posts and instated a retroactive limit of two consecutive terms of twelve years. Maybe now, I thought, they would come to their senses and embrace the sensibilities of the late 20th century? But no, these sensitive souls obviously could not deal with diversity—anyway, hadn't they proven their openmindedness by electing two white women, Carolyn Kizer and Maxine Kumin, to replace Amy Clampitt and—after his sudden death—James Merrill? And so they continued: in 1996 two white men, J.D. McClatchy and Mark Strand, were elected to take the seats of Richard Wilbur and Stanley Kunitz who, according to the new rules, were required to retire. And last year another chance for the chancellors to disavow their racist tradition came

and went when the retirement from the board of Anthony Hecht and Daniel Hoffman prompted election of white establishment figures Donald Justice and Jorie Graham. So, in the three years after that 60th anniversary (where I'd been told that the chancellors' lifetime posts allowed for slow change only), the Academy managed to replace half of the chancellors with more of the same.

It seemed to me that this outrage was perpetuating itself indefinitely and with impunity. Some poet friends I complained to about the situation agreed with me, all the while looking over their shoulders for Big Brother, as if they feared the Academy would cut them off from future grants and prizes should they be overheard criticizing the Moloch. My wife did not want to go on record by launching a protest because she dreaded the distinct possibility that her motives might be questioned. ("I can hear people second-guessing me," she said; "'she just wants to be a chancellor herself,' they'd sneer"—as if she needed the Academy's feather in her cap, as if there weren't several African-American and other non-white poets at least as qualified and prominent as some of the current chancellors, not to mention the great poets of color overlooked in the past.)

In any case, I was seething at the audacity of this club of snobbish white poets who could continue their skin-colored exclusivity of yesteryear and at the same time gobble up major handouts of public financial largesse from foundations (\$250,000 from the Lila Wallace-Readers Digest Fund last year alone) as well as from the U.S. Government: The National Endowment for the Arts, while nearly bleeding to death from cuts made by a U.S. Congress hostile to federal funding for cultural causes, recently gathered enough strength to fork over \$95,000 for the Academy's three-year-old pet project, National Poetry Month. When I pointed out the racist make-up of the Academy's board of chancellors to Cliff Becker, acting director of the NEA's literature program, he stressed that such grants are decided by panels and intended to underwrite worthy causes—causes presumably devoid of racial discrimination. Well, then—could it be that the little fact of the Academy's discriminatory politics had eluded the NEA? Mr. Becker emphasized that the NEA's panel discussions are confidential, and that he was not at liberty to reveal if any panelist or NEA officer had ever brought into question the race-"pure" composition of the Academy's representative body. So much is certain, however: over the course of several decades so-called peer panels distributing this government agency's financial largesse either did not notice or did not care that they were funding an organization grandly claiming to represent "American poets" while never—not once!—seeing fit to elect a non-white member to its highest ranks.

So finally, on February 6 of this year, triggered by three nearly simultaneous events (a discussion with a group of poets, reading an interview with Stanley Kunitz, and the announcement of the NEA-funneled government subsidy), I decided to write an *Open Letter* to Kunitz, now, in his nineties, the "grand old man" in American poetry. I knew some might doubt that he was the right person to take to task—partially due to his age and his otherwise impeccable humanist credentials, and also because he is generally regarded as a *mensch*. But he had been a chancellor after all, and therefore a silent partner in maintaining the racist status quo—despite his lifelong leftist or liberal lip service, he has never publicly questioned the *Whites Only* politics of a board he served

on for 24 years. Makes you wonder: How much of his civil rights stance over the decades was just self-indulgent hot fog? As civil rights activists say: "If you talk the talk, you gotta walk the walk."

I mailed copies of my letter to about fifty poets and other literary people listed in my haphazard database—most by snail mail, a few via the Internet. Some of the recipients are members of the Academy, and one (W.S. Merwin) currently serves as a chancellor. Four days later I found a piqued message from William Wadsworth, the Academy's executive director, on my answering machine. "First of all!" he asked accusingly, why had I not sent a copy to him? Although his call indicated that by now someone had forwarded one to his attention, I immediately e-mailed the text to the Academy's office in New York.

Wadsworth's phone message remained the only reaction I received from the Academy. As of this writing, three months have passed [and nearly a year as of preparation of this reprint in *Callaloo*]; neither Kunitz nor Merwin nor any of the Poetry Month busybodies have deemed this matter important enough to respond. Perhaps they believe that it will simply disappear if they maintain a united front of zipped lips.

Aren't we all familiar with the kind of egotistical stonewalling that too often perpetuates injustice, unfairness, inequities? I learned from various reactions to my letter that "that dreary organization," as Askold Melnyczuk, editor of the literary magazine *Agni Review*, dubbed the Academy, has successfully employed this method before. A case in point: Toi Derricotte, one of today's most respected African-American poets, provided me with copies of her correspondence with the Academy. A couple of years ago Ms. Derricotte wrote a very gentle yet substantive letter to Jonathan Galassi, President of the Board of Directors of the Academy (a board of non-poets from the worlds of arts and finance which, though not as lilywhite as the Board of Chancellors, is not exactly an ethnic mirror of American society either). Triggered by the Academy's annual reminder to pay her membership dues, Ms. Derricotte's eloquent letter expressed her "simple concern": "Where are the writers of color among your officers, directors, chancellors? . . . I have always supported the Academy, which is really, if you think about it in terms of [my] concern, saying that I support white poets. In my mind it is possible for great white poets and great black poets to exist together; therefore, I don't want to stop supporting your goals. But, sadly, I feel that you and your organization cannot feel the same way about black poets. . . . Please allow that you and others within your (our?) organization can be transformed by something that you have not given entrance and power to."

Mr. Galassi passed Toi Derricotte's gentle complaint on to the twelve chancellors; three of them, William Merwin as well as female "newcomers" Carolyn Kizer and Maxine Kumin, wrote back sympathetic "*we're trying, but change is slow*" notes. Mr. Galassi himself pointed out that African-American writers had received prizes from the Academy and been involved in other Academy-sponsored events. But when Toi Derricotte countered that a few prizes aren't enough, that poets of color need a chancellor to represent them, Mr. Galassi, who earns his living as editor-in-chief of the publishing house Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, dismissed this irritation with a bland "thank you"—thereby, between the terse two lines of his reply, echoing the drumbeat

of racism so persistent in America's history, i.e.: *Don't you people know your place?* "Business as usual," was Toi Derricotte's comment to me.

Especially interesting among the responses received regarding my open letter to Stanley Kunitz were several attacks on the Academy by white poets and editors; their tone was often decidedly hostile, while black respondents tended to display more of a world-weary disillusionment. Although not everybody agreed to go on record for this article (after all, the Academy and its chancellors bestow grants, prizes, opportunities for readings), a few of my correspondents invited me to quote them. *Agni's* Melnyczuk wrote: "I couldn't agree with you more . . . To hell with all the boys." And Robert McDowell, publisher of Story Line Press, sent this statement: "Personally, it would not bother me much if a very large hole opened up suddenly and swallowed the Academy. . . . Unlike the PSA [Poetry Society of America], which makes a serious effort to represent poets and promote poetry nationwide, the Academy clings to a way of doing business, a model, that seems to have the most in common with an earlier era's private dining clubs at ivy league schools. It's a white male world, it's a regionally constipated world, it's small potatoes in the end. . . . I've seen nothing to suggest that the staff and officers of the Academy are anything but pleased with themselves, blissfully unaware of anything going on outside their tiny northeast circle."

One could simply dismiss the Academy and its chancellors as a reactionary holdout, a ridiculous remnant of separatist ideologies where white gentlemen and gentlewomen of the old school rationalize their sad need to sequester themselves by believing that they belong to an oligarchy of superior beings. But the chancellors are not just a private club entitled to foolish principles; they represent an organization kept afloat by hundreds of thousands of dollars flowing from public, corporate and foundation wells, money that enables them to wield considerable power in the world of American poetry and therefore in intellectual life. For too long the Academy of American Poets has successfully avoided public scrutiny. They should not get away with such outrageous conduct forever.

*This essay sparked a short article in Poets & Writers (July/August 1998) that was followed, in the Sept./Oct. issue, by two letters-to-the-editor, one of which (from Kathleen Norris, a former Academy employee) vigorously attacked Fred Viebahn's essay. What follows is his subsequent e-mail letter-to-the-editor, in its entirety, written in response to the Norris letter. Viebahn's letter appears in abbreviated form in the Nov./Dec. issue of Poets & Writers.*

Date: September 13, 1998

Re: "Poets & Writers Magazine," Sept./Oct. 1998—"The Academy's Accountability", page 4, letter by Kathleen Norris in response to "Academy Accused of Racism" in "Poets & Writers Magazine", July/August 1998, page 10.

Kathleen Norris, a former employee of the Academy of American Poets, takes issue with my attack on the Academy's twelve chancellors as arbiters of ethnic exclusionism. Her prime example in repudiating my charges is a story of how, in the early 1970s,

she and other (presumably white) staff were “led” by the Academy’s director “into some of the worst neighborhoods in New York City”; all we learn of “one streetwise Puerto Rican-American poet” who’d been “hired” by the Academy is his report to a local library “that their bathrooms were being used by drug dealers and addicts.” Is such dabbling in local exotica supposed to counterbalance the exclusionary policies of twelve self-appointed guardians of Mount Parnassus?

Ms. Norris scolds me for “rushing to judgment without knowledge of the basic facts of the Academy’s structure”—a ludicrous assumption, coming from someone who admits to not having read my Open Letter. She could have gotten a copy of my missive directly from her former employer, the Academy of American Poets—for, contrary to the allegation in the July/August issue of *Poets & Writers* that they did not receive my letter, I e-mailed them a copy on February 10, within days of sending it first-class to Stanley Kunitz. Ms. Norris also suspects ulterior motives behind my “method” of public attack, suggesting “it would have made more sense to address those responsible for the neglect and also to register a complaint with the Academy’s director.”

Indeed, had Ms. Norris relied on factual information instead of innuendo and first read my detailed article on the matter in the latest issue of *International Quarterly*, she would have learned that precisely this course has been pursued in the past, to no effect. Case in point: A few years ago the African-American poet (and Academy member) Toi Derricotte wrote a letter to Academy president Jonathan Galassi, expressing her “simple concern” that there were no non-white poets represented among the chancellors. She continued: “I don’t want to stop supporting your goals. But, sadly, I feel that you and your organization cannot feel the same way about black poets. . . . Please allow that you and others within your (our?) organization can be transformed by something that you have not given entrance and power to.” Mr. Galassi passed Ms. Derricotte’s gentle complaint on to the twelve chancellors; three of them, W. S. Merwin as well as Carolyn Kizer and Maxine Kumin (both newly elected at the time), wrote back sympathetic “we’re trying, but change is slow” notes, while Mr. Galassi emphasized that African Americans had received prizes from the Academy and been involved in other Academy-sponsored events. When Ms. Derricotte countered that a few prizes aren’t enough, that poets of color need a chancellor to represent them, Mr. Galassi dismissed this irritation with a bland “thank you.” That was the end of it, and the Academy’s business continued without skipping a beat: since then, four more white chancellors have been chosen to replace their retiring predecessors.

Although it would be presumptuous to blame the Academy’s staff for the sins of its Board of Chancellors, Ms. Norris’s portrayal of the “scant authority” of the chancellors is disingenuous at best. After all, poised as they are before the barricades of one of the most visible literary organizations in the United States, they bear all the trappings of a cultural delegation, handy for purposes of fundraising, prize-giving and sanctioning literary fashions of the day. Given such grand posturing and the high visibility of these self-appointed deities, there is no room for an abdication of responsibility for their actions. And when Ms. Norris argues that the chancellors form an independent entity within the Academy, proudly citing the organization’s silence



and non-interference when its chancellors bestowed a fellowship on Ezra Pound in 1963, one could easily interpret this not as an indication of non-interference but as cowardice or, perhaps, tacit complicity with the honoring of a convicted Nazi collaborator. Similarly, it would not strike me as unreasonable to interpret the Academy's continued silence toward the ethnic exclusivity of its chancellors as implicit compliance.

Ms. Norris would have us believe that silence is the better part of valor. I prefer to heed the words of the poet Nelly Sachs, who warned: "But silence is where the victims dwell."

*When a second letter from Kathleen Norris, together with a strongly worded attempt to rebut Fred Viebahn by the Academy's president and its executive director, appeared opposite Viebahn's excerpted letter, he e-mailed a second letter-to-the-editor of Poets & Writers.*

November 4, 1998

Re: "Poets & Writers Magazine," Nov./Dec. 1998

I find it strange that in the Nov./Dec. issue of *Poets & Writers Magazine* both Ms. Norris and the Academy of American Poets were given the opportunity to respond directly to my editorially truncated letter, while I was not afforded that luxury when Ms. Norris chose to attack me (without having read my essay!) in the Sept./Oct. issue. I find it even stranger that the parts excised from my letter included a concrete example of the Academy's past intransigence regarding poets of color, while you allowed Msrs. Galassi and Wadsworth to engage in precisely the kind of "destructive, polarizing rhetoric" and "demagoguery" they accuse me of. Their defensiveness speaks volumes: "Simply replace a word like 'pornography' with the word 'racism,'" they write, likening my cry against racism among their chancellors to the right wing attacks on the NEA's alleged support of pornographic art. Is this just a clumsy effort to ingratiate themselves to the NEA, their major funding agency, or an attempt to discredit me by associating my matter-of-fact identification of racism with the distortions and fabrications of people like Jesse Helms?

I don't really mind playing the role of the messenger vilified for shouting the truth, as long as the whole affair results in positive changes. Earlier, more discreet endeavors to open a discussion about ethnic shortfalls within the Academy were simply ignored or suppressed, as the example deleted by *Poets & Writers* from my previous letter demonstrated. To repeat the story: a few years ago the African-American poet (and Academy member) Toi Derricotte wrote a letter to Academy president Jonathan Galassi, expressing her "simple concern" that there were no non-white poets represented among the chancellors. Mr. Galassi passed Ms. Derricotte's gentle complaint on to the twelve chancellors; three of them, W. S. Merwin as well as Carolyn Kizer and Maxine Kumin (both newly elected at the time), wrote back sympathetic "we're trying, but change is slow" notes, while Mr. Galassi emphasized that African Americans had received prizes from the Academy and been involved in other Academy-sponsored events. When Ms. Derricotte countered that a few prizes aren't enough,

that poets of color need a chancellor to represent them, Mr. Galassi dismissed this irritation with a bland “thank you.” That was the end of it, and the Academy’s business continued without skipping a beat: since then, four more white chancellors have been chosen to replace their retiring predecessors.

Now, according to the Academy, these issues finally will be discussed, and an ad hoc committee will be formed to find “the most appropriate structures and procedures for governance in the 21st century.” Well, that’s all I was trying to stir up—first with my open letter to Stanley Kunitz and then, when that elicited nary a peep, with my essay in *International Quarterly*. (That’s called constructive criticism, by the way.) If people who have public responsibilities are deaf on one ear, you have to scream into the other; if they still stonewall, you may have to step on their feet. And don’t be surprised if they fall all over themselves while accusing you of “hobbling” them, since, oh sweet coincidence, they’d just decided anyway it was high time to join the dance.

*In an e-mail response dated November 5, 1998, associate editor Mary Gannon of Poets & Writers wrote Fred Viebahn to deny that the magazine had colluded with the American Academy of Poets by allowing Kathleen Norris to respond directly to his excerpted letter before it appeared in print. Citing their standard editorial policy concerning letters-to-the-editor, Gannon noted that Norris had been allowed to respond because his letter-to-the-editor directly “addressed her letter of September/October 1998.” Gannon closes her note to Viebahn by denying him the same right of response: “Having covered this subject for three issues in a row—first as a News article and subsequently in our Letters column—we, at this time, have no plans to publish any more letters on the subject.” The same day, Viebahn responded as follows.*

Dear Ms. Gannon,

Your response is not only disappointing but, in light of the way my letter was censored in your last edition, outrageous. To claim that letters to your magazine “may be edited for clarity” [quoted from the magazine’s *Letters* page] and then to delete the very passage proving my point—that the dialogue the Academy now touts had been broached by non-white writers before, to no avail—is an egregious act of hypocrisy. Furthermore, not allowing me the opportunity to respond to the Academy’s rather personal attacks on me in your pages is the height of unfairness. It raises the suspicion that you are, at the very least, biased—if not in collusion with the Academy.

I am still hopeful that you will revise your decision and publish my letter in its revised form as attached below (reflecting your assurance that you did not show my letter to the Academy beforehand); otherwise, I see no recourse but to take the whole affair to a different journalistic level.

Sincerely,  
Fred Viebahn

**Postscriptum:** *The most recent installment in this sad tale appears in the 1999 January/February issue of Poets & Writers. As promised, Fred Viebahn’s letter has not been printed;*

*instead a sidebar titled "Industry Shorts" gives notice of the resignations of two Academy of American Poets chancellors, Carolyn Kizer and Maxine Kumin, citing as sole motivation for their resignations the other chancellors' "resistance to elect members outside of the Eastern Seaboard Olde Boys Club." There is no mention at all of the propelling reason for these resignations: the club's racial exclusivity. Do the editors of Poets & Writers hope they can rewrite history by blindly fashioning their own "truth"? And again, as in the 1998 November/December issue of Poets & Writers, the president of the Academy of American Poets, Jonathan Galassi, is given the last word: He is quoted as not accepting the resignations, which he views as not "constructive." Perhaps Fred Viebahn's suspicion of collusion between the Academy of American Poets and Poets & Writers is not far off the mark. We begin to wonder: Is there a "mafia" at work in these New York-based clubs, a mafia that closes ranks—or should I say, circles their wagons—when its oligarchy is questioned?*

—Charles H. Rowell  
December 15, 1998

*A final note: According to the New York Times for March 22, 1999, the Academy of American Poets has apparently heard Fred Viebahn's voice: they have elected Lucille Clifton, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Jay Wright to the Academy's Board of Chancellors.*