engagement of secondary works. After all, historians have demonstrated that Boston’s was one of the most organized free black communities, which waged a protracted and formidable battle against slavery and colonization and also agitated for education and social equality. Black Bostonians, in fact, played an even greater role in radicalizing abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison than this book suggests. Those issues aside, however, this book is recommended for all students of legal, educational, abolitionist, and Connecticut histories.

Nikki Taylor is Professor and Chair of the Department of History at Texas Southern University.


“The postwar years saw a boom in most everything, . . . but especially babies and poetry readings” (p. xvi). Poetry scholars—always a bit arrière-garde, I’m afraid—discovered readings a bit later than that. They’d been attending them, sure, but it was only in the nineties that they decided to attend to them en masse. Essay collections like Opposing Poetries, volume 2: Readings (1996), Sound States (1998), and Close Listening (1998) led the way; and the stack of monographs on this subject has been growing steadily ever since. Raphael Allison’s Bodies on the Line is arguably the best (and easily the best written) of this bunch. There’s a quiet complexity to its argument—not the kind that comes at you in a barrage of Greco-Latin patois, but the kind that lands softly: heavy concepts on the wings of an image. Bodies on the Line covers only seven poets, but it manages to conjure their performances thoroughly. In fact, Bodies stands out for its refusal to settle for sound. “Audio recordings only reveal,” Allison notes, “a limited dimension of actual live reading” (p. 8). So, not only does he close read poems and close listen to recordings, he also uses audience accounts, poets’ statements, and all kinds of archival documents to help set the scene. He lavishes such attention on these seven poets, he says, because they stand in for an entire subset: that is, poets who perform their poems avidly despite their poetry itself having a distinctly “textual bias” (p. 19).

Allison calls this genre of performance “the sixties reading.” The term doesn’t refer to a single performance style, nor does it describe something unique to that decade. Rather, it describes “a condition
that suffused poetry readings beginning in the 1950s, had major expression in the 1960s, and is still with us today” (p. xiii). If it’s hard to define this “condition,” that’s because it’s a fundamentally ambivalent one. When you first saw “the sixties reading,” Allen Ginsberg’s face probably flashed across your mind’s eye. After all, he’s an icon of the “poetics of presence” (p. 1) that dominated that event-drenched decade. But, as Allison points out, an opposite approach to the reading emerged alongside Ginsberg’s “humanism.” This was a “skeptical” style of reading, epitomized by John Ashbery, master of monotony, doyen of detachment. This is a lucid distinction, though by no means original. Allison’s innovative claim is that these opposing styles actually “braid, twist, and tie . . . in knots of contradiction and interdependence” (p. xv). What’s important is how individuals resolve the contradiction, how they balance the scales between the humanist and skeptical strains. This teetering, then coming to rest—these define the “condition” of “the sixties reading.”

Robert Frost, the subject of chapter 2, is a “pivotal” figure in Allison’s narrative (p. 44). You can hear Frost’s pivot as two alternating tones that he uses in performance—one precious, the other careless; one “sighing,” the other “tumbledown” (p. 53ff.). By “insisting on literary emotiveness,” then “dismissing it with a shrug,” Frost finds his way to a new style of reading, call it skepticism humanism (p. 55). The poet-readers of the sixties were all followers of Frost, in this sense. To prove the point, Allison turns to a provocative example, Charles Olson—more avant-garde, far less folksy than Frost. Olson, a product of the same performance culture as Frost, went further in applying his skepticism to the humanist norm. Frost grew wary of his own humanist tones; Olson distrusted readings themselves, so he turned them into “battles royals between the forces of page and stage, voice and text” (p. 68). Expanding elegantly on Olson’s own well-known theories of a page-bound “breath” (of a vocal text), Allison argues that Olson also had a textual voice that he performed when he gave a reading. Olson’s poems and his readings, that is, explored the same no-man’s-land between print and performance.

Whereas Frost and Olson tackle tone and form, Gwendolyn Brooks brings cultural context into the mix. Chapter 4 tells of her “incomplete transformation . . . from private to public poet” (p. 102). Brooks had as complicated an attitude toward readings as Olson did, but her reasons were more politically interesting than his. She began as a formalist poet of interiority, but—for complicated reasons that Allison explains in fine detail—she grew committed to the publicity of her
poetry during the sixties. She never adopted, however, the humanist style of the Black Arts figures who embraced her. Never accepting the prophetic voice common in poetry of mass politics, she made her poems out of a panoply of voices that she could sound, often ironically, in performance.

The fifth and final chapter similarly complicates the story Allison told in the first three. Whereas Brooks’s blackness charged her readings with a new kind of politics, which she only accepted in part, the audible disabilities of Larry Eigner and (surprisingly) William Carlos Williams must change our sense of what “voice” we hear when we go to a reading. Williams broke his lines to accommodate his body after a stroke left him partially aphasic. That, anyway, is Allison’s provocative thesis about the genesis of Williams’s triadic line. If Williams “cripped” his line in order to “normalize” his voice, Eigner refused to let his voice be “normalized” by his written poems. Instead, he boldly sounded “his incomparably odd voice” onstage. Reading aloud, to use Allison’s incisive pun, means (for Eigner) that his voice is allowed, beyond the norms of the page.

Bodies on the Line—the title is ultimately a pun. The sixties were a decade of be-ins, protests, and gatherings, but the sixties reading, like sixties politics itself, wasn’t quite as simple as that. Instead, it was caught in “a decade-long dialectic between total immersion and skittish withdrawal” (p. xvi, quoting Todd Gitlin). Poets embraced spectacular presence, but they also withdrew into literary distance. They put their bodies on the line for their poetry, but they also subsumed them into the lines of their verse. What’s important, Allison shows us, is not the factions that formed—wild zealots and wary agnostics—but rather the tension between them and the various equilibria they achieved.

Christopher Grobe is Assistant Professor of English at Amherst College, where he teaches mostly drama and performance studies. His own work on poetry performance has appeared in PMLA, and it will soon appear also in his monograph on confessional performance across the arts, Performing Confession: Robert Lowell to Reality TV.