Search Committee Chair (American and British poetry)
English Department
Box 226
University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309

Dear Professor,

I would like to be considered for the position of assistant professor of American or British poetry (1850-1950), advertised by your department in the October MLA job list. I am currently a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Michigan, specializing in antebellum American literature and culture, poetry, gender studies, and cultural studies. I am writing my dissertation, "The Poetry of Presence: Lyric and Literary Celebrity in Poe's Circle," under a graduate fellowship at the University's Institute for the Humanities. Kerry Larson chairs the dissertation committee; Julie Ellison, Rei Terada and David Scobey also advise the project. I expect to defend in May, 1996.

"The Poetry of Presence" re-assesses the work of Poe and a host of prominent writers of the period, many of them women, by placing them in the context of an antebellum "fan" culture that values poets as performance artists and celebrities rather than originators. These poets—Sarah Helen Whitman, Frances Sargent Osgood, Elizabeth Oakes-Smith and Poe himself—wrote and exchanged poems in which mimicry was central to forging personal relations, poetic identities, and literary reputations. Challenging the notion of the artist as creator, these writers mimicked romantic conventions of genius, demonstrating in the process the eminently imitable aspect of their own poems. Oddly enough, the primary vehicle for these duplicitous interactions was the lyric, often identified as the privileged locus of original invention, particularly in studies of the antebellum period. Drawing from archival materials as well as published sources, I explore the sites of lyric performance, duplication and circulation: epistolary networks, salons, genteel literary magazines, séances and the spiritualist press. I argue that, by modelling an aesthetic that relies heavily upon group activity, the writers in Poe's circle present their contemporaries with new ways to form selves and communities through lyric transactions. By focusing upon the poets who helped to popularize the familiar image of the original genius, I examine the historical roots of an idea of poetic creation that continues to underpin studies of American poetry while remaining itself unquestioned. I thus counter dynastic models of American literary tradition and interrogate the history of canonicity, particularly in respect to shifts in the gendering of literary forms and models of authorship.

In addition to preparing my dissertation for publication, I plan to explore the ways we might re-read the works of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, largely considered the two master poets of
the nineteenth century, in the light of a close examination of their poetic peers’ work. Such a comparison would posit an alternative to the transcendent model of poetic artistry still largely operative in studies of these two poets. I also want to investigate shifts in literary tastes, particularly with respect to poetry, in the years following the Civil War. Along these lines, I would like to develop a culturally located genre study of mid-nineteenth century poetry and fiction as they relate to contemporary ideas about the physical and the metaphysical. An interest in exploring the fictions of self in nineteenth-century memoir, hagiography, and autobiography has also emerged from my work on the current project.

While a student at the University of Michigan, I have designed and taught a variety of literature and writing classes. Recently, I created a course entitled “The Artist and the Community” that covered British, American, and Latin American fiction from the last two hundred years. I have also experimented with a number of approaches to teaching college writing, particularly in relation to the study of literature. For three years before entering the Ph.D. program at the University of Michigan, I taught English as a second language, including classes on topics in American literature and culture, to students of diverse nationalities in the United States and Brazil.

I would welcome the opportunity to teach a broad range of classes in early nineteenth-century American studies, with literature as a primary but not exclusive focus. I would like to explore the possibility of co-teaching with scholars specializing in other areas, particularly African American studies, history, anthropology, and psychology. Poetry survey classes, Comparative British and American Romanticisms, and Colonial and Republican American literature are other areas of strong teaching interest. My time in Brazil, spent both studying and teaching language, literature, and culture, has sparked my interest in teaching a course in literature of the Americas. Because I view student writing as integral to learning, it occupies a central position in every course I teach.

I have enclosed my vita and a one-page dissertation description. My dossier is available upon request from the University of Michigan’s Career Planning and Placement, 3200 Student Activities Building, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1316. I will be in Chicago to deliver a paper on lyric and literary identity in Poe’s criticism at the MLA convention, and I would be happy to meet with you there.

Sincerely,

Eliza Richards