

On Condensing and Nuance

Our world is constructed by condensing and abstracting. Each year as a faculty member I'm asked to recap my teaching practice in under 1000 words. This of course is an impossible task. How does one go about synthesizing hundreds of classroom hours, weeks of preparation, student meetings, and curriculum practicums into a mere 1000 words? This isn't a purely academic problem; look at any form: *If yes, please provide an explanation below*: three lines stare back at you. Journalists are asked to condense a complex societal issue into a catchy headline that will stop our scroll and tempt us to click. Go look up your favorite book in a database; it'll be condensed down to a few key words: Poetry, Asian American Poetry, poems about place.

Consider our large language models that are being infused into our daily world. Their understanding of the world is not contextual; rather, it's a series of informational encoding and decoding: some lines of code that have computed a ton of texts into tokens, armed with the internet and delightfully waiting for your query. So yes, when the AI overview tells you the capital city of your state is This and not That, yes, at a mathematical level this is an error in the tokenization process (well, actually not an error, since our LLMs are next-best guessers, not correct-information givers — but that's another story); more vitally, this shows the way our need to quicken, cut, and condense has harmed our recorded understanding of the world. What I think the poem was aiming at is this concept that we live in a world of nuance, yet in practice we are asked to limit our language to a single, screen-fitting text block.

Yes, the poet has many roles in society; to me, one of the vital roles is to not let the dailyness of life numb us. Rather, it is to be attentive to the dailyness, to mine it, to be in it, to record the expressive landscape it creates.