

INTRODUCTION

It is true that some so-called innovative or experimental poetry anthologies have been directed to a smaller and marginal audience in the U.S.: primarily poets, critics and a few readers belonging to specific literary milieu. This is due to the less effective marketing strategy of some of the small presses which published these anthologies or to the difficulties created by some new poetical proposals demanding a basic training. The reasons given by Hank Lazer to the question of why we need to produce anthologies sheds light on this. Firstly: economy, allowing readers to easily obtain such variety, which otherwise would require buying several books and spending more. Secondly, anthologies are great tools for teaching, as they illustrate the conflicts within each country's cultural scene, although this is not always the case nowadays since some anthologies prefer to be limited to particular literary tendencies or to a cluster of poets sharing common aims. However, generally speaking, "anthologies reinforce the fragmentation of the world, and wittingly or unwittingly, reinscribe the non-conversation at large" (Lazer 142). Needless to say, they have become even more useful when they include statements or discursive notes on poetics that definitely help us to see that the poem itself comes first. This may be because these are written by the poets who usually tend not to write about a program of reading as most critics do, but to develop the emerging theme or spirit of the text. In such writing, although we sometimes find extremely abstract speculations, we are more often invited to see the other side of writing practice.

A new generation of American poets who challenge poetic norms, constantly experimenting with new forms became clearly established because of Donald Allen's invaluable anthology, *The New American Poetry* (Grove 1960). The rapid succession of poetic movements holding on to this intention of continuing to be radical in their writings, and their progressively more frequent appearance in print are clear signs of the key role of the anthology in the American poetic scene. It is also symptomatic of the heterogeneity of open poetry and its adoption in the last few decades, as exemplified by poetic movements like Deep Image, Ethnopoetics, concrete and visual poetry, performance poetry, language poetry and, to some extent, the elliptical poets. Of course, Allen's anthology has not been the only stimu-



lus to new interest in openness and wider acceptance of innovative modes in the literary America of recent decades. The spread of more easily accessible printing techniques, the academic absorption of many poets by the university system, the emergence of hyperspace, as well as the funding provided by the National Endowment for the Arts have also definitely helped towards this boom in experimentalism. Jonathan Holden refers to this new situation as an expansion of democratization and industrialization of poetry in America.¹ The spirit transmitted by Allen to future anthologists drives them to use independent criteria and present texts involved in a process of creation that demands new fields and structures. Struggling against habits and modes of imitation he preferred experimentalism, configuring an initial stage that permitted Charles Bernstein to vindicate in the nineties the concept of “the middle,” which blurs the distinction between the elitist and populist cultures.²

Generally speaking, recent anthologies focused on innovative poetry share many aspects: individuation of intentions —though some of them belonged to specific poetic trends— challenges about style and ideology, assignation of a political role to the act of writing and reading, remarks about the paragraph and the line, and new statements on the relationship between language and its representation. *The New American Poetry* appears as the closest antecedent of these anthologies; not only as it celebrates the intersection between poetry and poetics, but also because Donald M. Allen included poets who defy the limits of poetry. Allen gathered and evaluated the inclusion of poets challenging the existing poetical canon, who have tried to heighten the contrast between cooked and raw poetry. Perhaps with the intention of preserving a poetry that had been mainly published by small presses and little magazines. Though preservation cannot be considered in the same terms as when Alan C. Golding refers back to the 18th and 19th-century American poetry anthologies, “selecting from abundance, protecting from oblivion,”³ since most of recent poetry anthologies have the clear intention of gathering those few poets

¹ “... partly because of available funding, but also because of the “democratized,” *nonliterary* character of much poetry in the late sixties and early seventies, the institution of the “poetry reading” flourished on college campuses as perhaps it never had before,” This democratization means for Holden that “poetry could become a body of knowledge available to people who didn’t necessarily read very much or well” (20).

² Charles Bernstein’s main motto, “Just because something is neglected is sufficient reason to consider it” (41). Questioning high and low art he praises “the obscure, the peripheral or marginal or minor, the avant-garde, the complex, the eccentric, the dark, the distasteful, the ugly, the inassimilable, the erotic, the repulsive, the formally unsettling” (40-41). Inevitably Bernstein is against normalization and prefers what he terms “signifying practices.”

³ Alan C. Golding suggests that there were two motives behind 19th-century anthologies, “the historicizing and the inspirational” (282), through which to defend the emerging national spirit and the moral purity. Nevertheless for him, “Today preservation usually means selecting from abundance, not protecting from oblivion” (283). But I think that Allen not only confronted the academic establishment by publishing an alternative poetry, but was also conscious of its marginality and potential obliteration.

who react against standard values, who use open forms as a way of liberation, and add a new range of strategies in response to the demands of the new situation provided by contemporary social and artistic consciousness. In so selecting, today anthologists also preserve what is scattered and diluted in pamphlets, little magazines, small presses, and in hyperspace, giving us a documentary view of the period. It is true that anthologies are compiled to suit the editors' personal taste, but the main intention is to provide a voice to those experiments woven in the last decades of the 20th century.

This climate of avant-garde poetic taste at the turn of the 20th century was also presided over by a challenging of the habitual modes of writing and perception, an inevitable pre-condition for further steps in discovering new writing processes. The difference with respect to other periods is that there has been a proliferation of anthologies in recent decades, helping us to more clearly view the rapid changes and short-lived canons. Jed Rasula points out that contemporary American poetry is configured by four zones. (1) Poetic instruction provided by workshops within the Associated Writing Programs. (2) The New Formalism tendency recuperating traditional metrical forms. (3) The Language Poetry spirit, challenging the possibilities of language itself with its "critical reputation." (4) Groups composed of communities like the women's movement, Afro-American, and Chicano trends, which truly deserve the term multiculturalism (Rasula 440). This is a clear sign of the wide acceptance of various poetic commitments made clear by the continued presence of anthologies during the last few decades. All essays presented to this *RCEI* monograph on American poetry anthologies show new recent views on this phenomenon. Recent American poetry anthologies are not merely teaching tools for lecturers and students. They are useful to all readers in perceiving what is "new," what the boundaries of the literary "-isms" are and how the sociological and political aspects of meaning-making become obvious.

The proliferation of American poetry anthologies in the last two decades has made it clear that wider cultural issues lie behind their appearance. The almost simultaneous publication of some anthologies within a short period, reflecting various modes of writing and different ideological leanings shows the variety of our contemporary society as well as the rapid changes currently taking place in the United States. A rich variety of cultural approaches, a great abundance of innovative formulations and thoughts can be found, sparkling in the pages of these anthologies. There are selections from various historical periods, poets from different backgrounds and texts which illustrate the fullness of the fin-de-siècle experience. A common criticism of most anthologies is centered upon which writers are left out or which work is most representative of those included. To this end, this *RCEI* is intended to answer the questions which encourage editors to look for and find the creative *poiesis* in some, not all poets. The scope is wide, ranging from radical proposals to the most conventional issues in poetry but all these essays illustrate the wider than ever variety of active formulas in use in the American poetic scene.

This *RCEI* monograph has taken a long gestation, including various contacts with contributors, as well as opportunities to present diverse versions of my initial idea focused on anthologies of American innovative poetry as public lec-



tures. In fact, it grew from numerous sources, though I benefited most importantly from an extensive feedback from my colleagues associated with the Research Project, “An Historiographical Analysis of Avant-Garde American Poetry and Poetics Anthologies Published Between 1970 and 2000,” Kevin Power, Matilde Martín, and Nieves Alberola. I should thank an exact number of stimulating contributors, Jerome Rothenberg, Peter Gizzi, Hank Lazer, Ian Lancashire, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Abigail Bowers, Christopher M. Kuipers, Dennis Barone, Alison Van Nyhuis, and Richard Deming, for their prompt response to collaborate with me, and for their typical engagement and generosity. I also thank the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnología for additional support (BFF-2003-5914) of my research on this field during the period 2003-2006. Finally, I am grateful to Marie McMahon for providing productive inspiration and friendship.

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