

REVIEWS

INNOVATIVE WRITING IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: A LOCAL POETRY ANTHOLOGY. Messerli, Douglas, ed. *The PIP Anthology of World Poetry of the 20th Century*. Vol. 5. Intersections: Innovative Poetry in Southern California. Los Angeles: Integer, 2005.

The editor of this anthology has gained a remarkable position in the context of contemporary American poetry over the past decades for his several contributions to the development, publication, and dissemination of experimental poetry. Douglas Messerli has edited a good number of well-known poetry anthologies, among them, «*Language*» *Poetries* (1987), *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990* (1994) and *The Gertrude Stein Awards in Innovative American Poetry* (1995 and 1996). In 2000 he began his Project for Innovative Poetry (PIP) series of anthologies, of which this is volume 5, dedicated to innovative poetry in Southern California.

For this occasion, Messerli has gathered twenty eight poets —of which nineteen are men, and the rest are women. This should not surprise us, since the gender disparity has been a common feature in the majority of experimental poetry anthologies published over the last fifteen years, with some exceptions, for example *The Art of Practice: 45 Contemporary Poets* (1994) —edited by Denis Barone and Peter Ganick. Each of the poets in the *PIP* is introduced with a biographical and a bibliographical synopsis and a photograph. Some of them are well-known in the overall scene of American contemporary poetry: David Antin, Rae Armantrout, Michael Davidson, Harryette Mullen, Jerome Rothenberg, Douglas Messerli or Diane Ward. Others

are less well-known like Franklin Bruno, Barbara Maloutas or Robert Crosson, and this anthology is a good opportunity to get seduced by their writing.

In general terms, the publication of this work is to be commended as far as it adds to the rich and vital advance of experimental poetry in the US. However, the book is also plagued with a number of shortcomings, which easily collapse the integrative formulation of its editorial principles. Messerli starts tactfully explaining the reasons which drove him to publish this book, a practice common enough among editors of anthologies. Basically, he talks about two sets of useful interests: «the high quality and breadth of innovative poetry in Southern California» (7) and the aesthetic value and structural necessity of publishing poets who have not «been included in the many anthologies of Los Angeles Poetry published over the decades» (7). In a footnote he provides readers with a short history of the poetry anthologies published in Los Angeles from 1972 to 2003. He then goes on to observe that there is a clear absence of innovative poets in all the titles mentioned and that his anthology comes to fill a gap in this field.

This local focus on Southern California poets shouldn't need further explanation, since this region is vast enough to justify an anthology of the poets born and/or living in this part of the country. When he proceeds to refine the arguments for his decisions, Messerli exhibits some discontinuities associated with his project. In this sense, he specifically writes about his ongoing struggle to carry out a project like this one, though he «had backed away from the project» because «(he) (had) never been interested in regional gatherings. The accident of location, al-





though it certainly can be an influence upon one's writing and perceptions, seemed to me (...) myopic» (8). This is at least surprising since he is really involved in a local approach. Furthermore, he is aware of the lack of commonalities among the writers included and that «there seemed to be only that «accident» of being in the same place that brought them together» (9). Consequently, as a man of letters trying to link diverse poets into a larger community, Messerli destabilizes his first fundamental criterion based upon the adequacy of geography as a model to furnish an anthology of American poetry.

This ambivalent sequence that characterizes this anthology becomes also explicit when he declares that «despite the disparateness of the writing, they were «together,» and quite often – at readings, conferences, parties, lunches, dinners, and just plain fraternizing» (9). I find it difficult to see in what way the personal relationships among totally different poets might constitute a cogent reason for bringing them together in the same pages of an anthology. Messerli even dares to add that «At least one poetic couple had even been linked romantically –but we are fast approaching a private world of gossip» (9). Unfortunately, the couple remains unidentified. If gossiping was Messerli's approach, he should have made the readers participate in full. More gossip later.

When he finally gets «serious» about stating his editorial principles, Messerli observes six «linkings» or «intersections» among the poets included, «common interests or foci» (10) that were shared by all. These are:

1. Editing and Other Activities.
2. International Perspectives.
3. Film, Drama and Performance.
4. Visual Art.
5. The Landscape and Language of Southern California.
6. Narrative.

So, it is through this specification of interests that one of the most potentially fruitful dimensions of this anthology is exposed. Messerli makes a short but very well documented account of the contributors' activities as editors of jour-

nals and presses. This element, if not something that would add to the anthology's quality, is at least very informative for all those readers interested in the editorial development of little magazines and small presses in Southern California. Thus, we learn about journals such as *Sulfur*, *Invisible City*, *Boxcar*, *Temblo*, *Ribot*, *Lowghost*, *Witz: A Journal of Contemporary Poetics*, *Arshile*, *Primary Writing*, *Rhizome*, and others, all of them edited by poets included in this anthology. While some of the titles, *Sulfur* and *Temblo*, for example, are well-known for readers of innovative poetry, others haven't achieved a similar degree of publicity, and Messerli should be thanked for drawing our attention to them.

The «International Perspectives» intersection does not seem to generate some implications in different languages or any special commonality between the poets included in this book. Messerli argues that they have been translators and that they have published poets from a wide diversity of countries. He even notes as part of this «international perspective» the fact that «they have been invited to attend international conferences» (18). It seems to me that this feature may link many other American poets, and not only those in Southern California.

Intersection No. 3 is focused on the relationships of the poets with the film industry, drama and performance. Though this new section introduces new difficulties in the very problematics of deploying commercial and cultural interests in Southern California, and particularly in Los Angeles literary community. He introduces the topic claiming that «the effects and power of the film industry in Los Angeles and environs is one of the most difficult of issues» (19), and that «from the financial perspective, it appears, for example, that the film industry is the largest of southern California industries» (19). He then goes on to cite profit figures of such well-known companies as Walt Disney, Dream Works SKG, Metro-Goldwyn Mayer or Univision Communications, only to affirm afterwards that, nevertheless, other companies such as Anaheim Sports, Kaiser Permanente, Tenet Healthcare or the Boeing Company have higher figures, and that institutions like The University of Southern California or Los Angeles County have even more

employees than the former ones. All this statistical information leads him to conclude that «the film industry and entertainment does not dominate life in Los Angeles and Southern California» (20). He then proceeds to analyze the different connections between poets and movies, pointing out, however, that «the perceptions they have had about (...) the Hollywood film factories, has (sic) not always been positive» (20). What is the point, then, of even mentioning it? Maybe because poets need more likely to re-consider their role as players in a newer cultural game, as Messerli declares about his own relationship with movies:

As a graduate student at the University of Maryland, I briefly taught film, and taking advantage of my own library of tapes and videos of American and international films, I have watched at least one film daily for the past several years. Yet, in only one book, *Along Without*, subtitled *a film for fiction in poetry*, do I involve my writing with film. (22)

Just the same applies to his account of the poets' relationships with drama, about which he argues that «(...) as with film, their connections with this genre have been largely tangential to the numerous large and smaller theatres throughout southern California» (22). For this reason, my whole point throughout has been to suggest that in the articulation of principles for gathering poets together in the same book, an editor should mention aspects, topics, activities and other factors, that DO have a close connection with the writing. My tacit assumption that explains the inclusion of this «intersection» would be Messerli's fascination for potentially linking poetry and global cultural contexts.

When Messerli gets to a different interest—like the influence of Visual Art («Intersection» 4) in the writing practice of these poets— one comes across a brief description of the different artistic activities of the writers, but none about the actual convergence of Art or artistic expression in their «poetry». He mentions several facts; for example, that he has had «his collages shown in art galleries in the area» (25), that «Will Alexander is a painter, Paul Vangelisti a noted collagist» (25), or that «Barbara Maloutas,

Dennis Phillips, and Diane Ward all graduated from art schools» (25). Finally, he gives us more gossip: «I have lived with the curator of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for some 30 years, and over those years have regularly been involved with museums and galleries; Dennis Phillips is married to a visual artist» (25). How this incidental relationship with Art may be seen in their poetry remains unaddressed.

With a relentless path to cover another «intersection»—the poets' links with the landscape and the language of Southern California— Messerli suggests that «a few of the poets share an interest in the very landscape of southern California, that is the flora and fauna of the region» (25), and lists a number of plants, flowers, sites, birds, trees, and geographical places usually found in the poetry of the contributors to this anthology. Though he does not provide further poetical considerations about the overall significance that this element may have from a literary standpoint. Messerli's view of the presence of the Southern California language in the work of these writers multiplies the reader's doubts: «Anyone who has even visited southern California must realize that this region has no distinct dialect. (...) So, to talk about a southern California 'language' seems almost ridiculous» (27). The reason to include this aspect in the group of common features shared by these poets remains obscure. His perseverance in demonstrating an unique encounter between language and space in Southern California is exemplified through five brief passages—the longest of 4 lines—from five of the poets selected and tries to convince us that «each of the passages (...) shares several linguistic elements with the others» (27). Since I do not wish to tire the readers with even a summary of Messerli's far-fetched exposition—something he himself acknowledges (28)— of the common linguistic elements among these five paragraphs, I will save any further comment and just reproduce here the texts quoted by Messerli for the readers' judgement:

What the cool tomato cubes forming a rosette around this central olive have to do with love and happiness (Rae Armantrout)



An eclipse spills water knots, its eventual illusion a bubble. (Guy Bennett)

Each promise or statement equals a temptation and yet holding to a story can often create history. (Dennis Phillips)

The dead start where the dream never did... (Paul Vangelisti)

Avoidance proper is a verb conjugated in another tongue in routine and repetitive fashion in an Italian hilltown in which buildings wind their bricks in circular motion around relic fingerbone anchored in silver filigree. (Martha Ronk)

I would like to raise the question of whether the linguistic elements that these texts supposedly share are not, actually, shared by many other texts written in the English language in other spaces. Or why they paint a completely different portrait from other spaces all over the world.

The last «intersection,» «Narrative,» lays down the grammar of this anthology, based on poets interested in narrative, making clear that he does not mean «storytelling,» but «the sequential aspects of the poetry» (29), that is to say, the incorporation of narrative's «structures of repetition, episode, catalogue, brief remembrances, and yes, sayings and aphorisms into their works» (29). According to Messerli, the presence of these narrative aspects in the poetry has to do with «time and space, with the time one had to spend in the automobile and the space one transversed through the region simply to arrive at one's place of employment (...) There was something about moving through that space in time that broke experience up into small segments, as one passed through different communities and parts of the city» (29). Indeed, living in such a vast territory certainly leads to fragmentation and a sense of collage-like perception of life, as if disparate feelings were all possible simultaneously. As he puts it: «The only way anyone wanting to comprehend the experience of living and surviving in southern California can come to terms with the

place is to create a narrative of sorts, to piece together the area, bit by bit (...)» (32). The confluence of narrative and strictly poetical features is really a meaningful trait of experimental writing, and here Messerli has finally managed to highlight a clear common interest among the writers in his anthology.

Apart from the account of the «narrative» nature of the poetry, Messerli has not specifically singled out a formal demonstration to argue why and how the poets selected can be defined as «innovative.» There is no discussion of the notion of «innovative.» Precisely because the concept of «innovation» is permanently under examination, the editor should have put forward his own outlook about what «innovative» means. In a similar manner, the editor has not included a minimal account of the different poetics that inform the writing of the poets selected. He has confined his remarks to a desultory list of «intersections» or links that might be likewise applied to a big number of different poets all throughout the US, and can't, therefore, be considered to be characteristic of the poets in Southern California. He even makes the claim that other «intersections» between poets could have been: «music, politics, food...!» (33).

Some representative names included in this anthology —David Antin, Wanda Coleman, Jerome Rothenberg— have structured or helped to define innovative approaches in American poetry. In fact, they explicitly proposed distinct innovative forms, entailing pure creation and unexpected interactions that turn language into poetry. Certainly, Messerli's anthology would yield a better response if he had included a section on «poetical statements» or if he had clarified in a more accurate way the poetics that make all these poets «innovative» and creative. Nevertheless, it is clearly true that this anthology assumes that conceptual mobility and an experimental walk through language signs frame the winning strategy of contemporary American poetry.

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