Journal of American Studies of Turkey
1 (1995): 65-71.

Multiculturalism in Contemporary American Poetry

Robert J. Bertholf

bertholf@bvm.cc.buffalo.edu

The period 1968-1972 formed a pivot for American poetry, especially for the avant-garde. The turmoil in the society caused by the Vietnam War came to a climax. President Johnson declined to run for office for a second term, and in the aftermath of the war and more betrayals of the public trust, President Nixon was forced to leave the Presidency in 1974. The 1960s ended and the 1970s began with deep divisions in the society, the economy as well as in the province of poetry.

In 1965, Lyndon Johnson engineered the passage of the Civil Rights Bill through Congress. This was the culmination of years of social protest and civil right marches. But there would be no going back to a separated society of isolated minorities. It produced the beginning of a cultural openness in American society; it allowed the voices of minorities to be heard, to have political as well as artistic and poetic authority.

It must be borne in mind that forming a multicultural society has always been the promise of America as a nation. America is an immigrant society which imposed itself on Native American society and then imported Africans as an economic factor. That is not an apology. It has always been a sour irony of American history that the equality embedded in our nation's Constitution and Bill of Rights by men of great vision has struggled to emerge as actual social, political, and artistic equality. Each generation, for centuries, erected barriers to the forthright exhibition of the promised equality. Politics does press. The present discussion is still another round of growing: as Wallace Stevens said with great hope, "the real will from its crude compoundings come."

American poetry was also in turmoil. Theodore Roethke and John Berryman died, and Robert Lowell had stopped publishing. The major poets of the avant-garde had been involved in the antiwar movements and that effort had exacted an emotional and intellectual penalty. Denise Levertov was bruised by the conflict. Robert Duncan published his volume, *Roots and Branches*, in 1968, and announced privately that he would not publish another book for fifteen years. He announced

that publicly in 1972 when he published a reissued edition of *Caesar's Gate*. He removed himself from the world of publishing, a victim, he said, of the cultural times. In 1970 Charles Olson died. Olson instituted a massive redirection in American poetry away from closed forms with prescribed definitions, an allegiance back to Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry* and to John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism.* With his essay "Projective Verse" (1950), and the subsequent volumes of *The Maximus Poems* (1951, 1953, 1960), American poetry re-engaged itself in the action of the imagination that generated forms that were not predetermined, but were projections of the energy of content of expression. This new kind of poetry had its roots in the field composition of Miro's paintings of the mid 1920s, in such canvasses as "The Farmer," "The Tilled Field," and "Banquet of the Harlequin," all from 1923-1925. It also held allegiances to Pound's *The Cantos*, Louis Zukofsky's *A* and *All*, and William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* (1923) and *Paterson*. Allen Ginsberg had attracted attention to "the Beat Movement" with the reading and then publication of his poems *Howl* (1956), but by 1969 both Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassidey were dead. Ginsberg's book of poems about the 1960s came out in 1972 as *The Fall of America*. The Beat Movement changed into the `hippy' movement; and then the whole underground system in America emerged with the splash of Woodstock in 1969.

In American painting, the high accomplishments of the Abstract Expressionists were over: Jackson Pollock was dead, Arshley Gorky was dead, as was Barnett Newman. William de Kooning was painting major paintings, but a second generation of painters had arrived, which included Grace Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaller, Michael Goldberg, and Al Held. Robert Roschenberg and Jasper Johns had also arrived on the scene, and immediately gave up the painterly image in favor of collage, the use of junk and trash attached to the paintings. Johns's use of numbers, flags, and maps matched Robert Indiana's use of soup cans as subjects for painting. Soon, Larry Goons, Elsworth Kelly, Brice Marden and others would enter the scene with a minimalist approach to objects of art. Like the avant-garde in painting, the avant garde in poetry turned away from the high traditions of the past and opened up their work to include subjects and sources from a variety of backgrounds that had not been considered subjects for art and poetry before.

American literature in the nineteenth-century was based on the heroic action of individual struggles against European traditions, against the huge geography of the North American continent. Hawthorne, Melville, and Cooper, as well as Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman are major figures in this literature. As late as the 1930s, oddly enough, these writers were neglected by the reading public. The rediscovery of Melville and especially of Whitman as directive forces of a new literary history influenced the avant-garde in America. Emerson and Thoreau, the main prophets of the transcendentalist vision, suffered from the general condemnation of the "romantic" in all the arts. Ironically, at the end of the twentieth-century, Whitman is the central poet, the foundation point for moving past the heroic principles and the

conservative poetic line based on the immense domination of the criticism of T.S. Eliot. *Moby-Dick* probes deep into the transcendental values of the New England mind, even as it takes the Pacific Ocean as a metaphor for the great plains of America. Charles Olson carried on this heroic action in his book on Melville, *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), in which he declared SPACE to be the most important theme of the book and of American culture. The figure of Maximus in Olson's poems was the avatar of the colonial experience, the voice of the town and history of Gloucester, MA, the heroic builder of cities and societies.

In 1968, heroic principles were turned upside-down in a mock-heroic poem by Edward Dorn in the first book of *Gunslinger* (1968), and then in the second book (1969). This long poem, which was collected in 1975, created a parable of a journey from Boston to Las Vegas, and then to Four Corners, in search of Howard Hughes, the notorious billionaire recluse. The poem has a cast of characters, including Lil, Levi Straus, Slinger and horse, who projected multiple points of view into the poem. Multiple voice was not new to American long poems. It can be found in *Leaves of Grass* and *Paterson*, for example, but the use of multiple points of view using different vocabularies is another matter. Dorn picked up the jargon of the day, the language of the drug culture, the language of western towns, saloons, and cowboys--in short the language of the ordinary transformed into the metaphor of the mock heroic. Earlier he had published a book called the *Shonshoneans*, with photographs by Leroy Lucas (1966), which was a documentary of the Indians along the Wind River in Wyoming; and later *Recollections of Gran Apacheria*, which chose the tragedy of the hunting down of Geronimo as its subject. With Gordon Brotherston, he published *Image of the New World: The American Continent Portrayed in Native Texts* (1979), which sought out and translated Indian narrative and stories about the Western lands. Dorn considered Indians as belonging to the geography of the West, which means Indians are also part of the imagination of the geography of the West.

Post-war American poetry was dominated by poets in colleges and universities. Robert Penn Warren, one of the fugitive group, is the most written about writer of the period. Robert Lowell's first book, *The Land of Unlikeness*, contained a preface by Allen Tate, so he could trace his roots to the Southern New Critics and then back to T.S. Eliot. Eliot, in fact, was and is the single most authoritative critic and poet of modern American literature. His book *Selected Essays* (1932) formed the basis of Ransom's *The New Criticism*, and Brook and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Elizabeth Bishop, who were his students, are still the subjects of many critical studies. American poetry entered the universities and the workshops; then produced a political structure which sustained a kind of personal lyric, a post-confessional poem, so to speak. The poets were produced by workshops and then went to on other universities to teach more poets in workshops, as well as to edit magazines which published poems by poets from other workshops. This line is considered by many to be the main line of American poetry, and its authority has been sustained by such critics as Helen Hennessy

Vendler, Norman Bloom, and John Hollander. *The Norton Anthology of American Poetry* is one result of the views of this version of literary history. William Carlos Williams is scantily represented, Louis Zukofsky and the whole objectivist movement has been eliminated, and Charles Olson is absent. The same attitudes prevail in the recently published *Columbia History of American Poetry* (1993) edited by Jay Parini. At this point, the exclusion of Black poetry, Native American poetry, Chicano poetry is close to being criminal, and the exclusion of women poets as well as poets from the avant-garde academically irresponsible.

The avant-garde, on the other hand, produced a different tradition. Ezra Pound provided the example of going out to different cultures--first the European, then the Oriental--but there was also a place in *The Cantos* for Thomas Jefferson. Williams Carlos Williams looked to Whitman, after his early flirtation with Keats, for a basis of poetic form. Pound and Williams defined an attitude that has remained central to the poets who engage in the experimental in poetry: the need to search out and use multiple sources to find and sense of place, either poetic or actual, in a literary tradition. A leader in this search is Jerome Rothenberg, who published, with George Quasha, an anthology entitled *America A Prophecy: A New Reading of American Poetry from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present* (1973). The book's intention was to include American Indian poetry, Afro-American blues and narratives, writings of the Shakers as well as Chicano poets, alongside well-known poets. The book was one of the first to challenge the canon of what was the American poetic tradition. As Rothenberg writes in the introduction, the book attempts to map some of the lines of recovery and discovery of the poetry (and other writing) which understood language as a medium of prophecy: "All these developments share the sense of poetry as an act of vision, charged with the immediate energies of authentic speech and shaped by its moment in history." That first book was followed by three editions of Rothenberg's *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americans* (first edition 1971, third edition 1990), which included more and more of Native American poems, songs and narratives (Rothenberg lived for five years on a Seneca reservation in New York State), as well as poems by Spanish American and Oriental American poets. The anthologies were multicultural before that word acquired its contemporary usage.

New and diverse ideas were injected into American poetry . Allen Ginsberg was and is tireless in honoring the Buddhist traditions of India in his poems. Accompanied by Gary Snyder and Joan Kyger, Ginsberg made an important trip to India in 1963. Snyder himself then went on to Japan, to study Zen Buddhism and Japanese in Kyoto. There is thus in Snyder's early poems a spirituality, not present either in John Berryman's poems where he explores his Irish roots, or in Theodore Roethke's search for a spirituality in the Pacific Northwest.

From the influence of Charles Olson, two important journals of the period have had a lasting influence on contemporary American poetry. The first is *IO* (1965-1978), which was edited by Richard Grossinger, who was studying at the time for a degree

in anthropology. The journal is full of information: about ecology; about Indian myths and rites; and about the spiritual values and literary figures of India, Japan, Europe and Africa. The information in the journal was transferred to the poetry of the period; so poets like Robert Kelly, Chuck Stein and Donald Byrd derived a base of reference in the science and mythology of the Americas, while Marvin Bell and James Wright were producing poem after poem about the traumas of their psyches. The second important journal was *Alcheringa* (1970-1980), edited by Denise Tedlock. This magazine reached deep into the myths and literatures of the Maya and Aztec Indians, and offered them in translation as authentic literature. (Tedlock's book, *Finding the Center: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians, from Performances in the Zuni* by Andrew Peynetsa and Walter Sanchez (1972) was a monumental injection of the native traditions into contemporary poetic thinking.) The magazine also recognized the poems and the stories as acts of performance. The performance poem then became a part of contemporary poetry. To illustrate, David Antin is a man who forms his poems in the act of performing them, i.e., without notes of a written text.

I want to concentrate on the publication of three new anthologies to make the point that in the avant-garde in American poetry, multiculturalism--which here includes searching out many different cultural and literary sources, as well as recognizing the authority of poets from different cultures and traditions as part of contemporary literature--was active and alive from the period 1968-1972 onward. Multiculturalism in this situation was and is a literary activity, not a political position. In this sense, multiculturalism in contemporary literature has another source in the political and civil rights movements of the 1960s. Multiculturalism in poetry tied to the universities is, indeed, a political statement; administrative policy and laws are forcing a redefinition of its position after years of other attentions. In literary organizations, such as the National Endowment for the Arts, The Poetry Society of America, and The Poetry Center at San Francisco State University, featuring poets from different cultures has become part of the policy of programming, and is certainly a necessary and needed line of action. However, that position is further eroded by the publication of *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, which dismisses the main experimental poets of the century and drives straight through the twentieth century from T.S. Eliot to Robert Lowell and Mark Strand. Change has not taken place at the heart of the national educational institution.

Three anthologies can be exemplified:
1. Eliot Weinberger, ed. *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*.
2. Dougals Messerli, ed. *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960- 1990*.
3. Paul Hoover. *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*.

Eliot Weinberger makes a very interesting point in his introduction about the number of American poets who have gone, physically and in books, to Mexico and

South America for inspiration: Charles Olson, William Bronk, Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Carolyn Forché. Olson and William Bronk and Denis Tedlock all studied the Incas and the Aztec writings and their ruined cities not because they represented minority achievements, but because they had produced high civilizations with a visionary mythology, a sophisticated astronomy, and a language of elegance embedded in the literal enterprise. The importance of Octavio Paz, a Nobel Prize-winning-writer from Mexico, made poets aware of many poets from Mexico and South America. The translations of Clayton Eshleman of Cesar Vallejo, *Poemas Humanos* (1968), and *The Complete Posthumous Poetry* (1978) and *The Collected Poetry of Aimé Cesaire* (1983), as well as his translations of the French poet Artaud all form another case in point of the avant-garde drive to uncover the poetic vision in other cultures in order to add it to contemporary poetry's possibilities.

The telling value of the selection made by Hoover and Messerli is that they both include many cultural minority poets as part of their books without making a special point of it. Poetry comes first, not the politics of the poetry scene. Amiri Baraka, Gustaf, Jayne Cortez, Miquel Algarin, Wanda Coleman, Andrei Codrescu, Mei-Mei Berssenbugge, Victor Hernandez Cruz, Jimmy Santaho Baca, Lorenzo Thomas, and Nathaniel Mackey appear in Messerli's anthology as part of a statement of what contemporary American poetry is.

A secondary point to be made here is that the number of underground and small presses which publish minority writers as poets has increased in the last few years. (See the appendix for a few examples.)

Multiculturalism exists in the avant-garde as an active and stimulating part of poetics and poetic thinking. Finding new expressions and new forms of declaring the imagination is more important than the politics of the scene. The attention to publishing divergent voices grew out of internal concerns for poetry. It was not as thoroughly an administrative decision as the inclusion of minority writers in mainline programs, anthologies and societies. The conservative tradition has been slow to recognize a cultural diversity, though translation has long been an important aspect of poetry based in the universities. The acknowledging of difference goes a long way advancing the poetics of difference, a long way toward embracing the only dream of an American democracy of the poem.

However, I do not want to end this discussion with disturbances of the conservative and mainline brands of contemporary American poetry. The avant-garde has asserted a different approach.

By tradition and example, the avant-garde in poetry (or any of the arts, for that matter) is a condition of reaction to an accepted or established way of writing and reading. To clear the imaginative way for the statement of its own point of view, the avant-garde attempts to debunk, discredit, and refuse the writing of the norm.

As William Carlos Williams writes in "Spring and All," the process of creation involves the process of simultaneous decreation and creation. Establishing a fixed position is never the point here, but entering an imaginative process in which a different vision of the world and of writing emerges and continues to emerge is. Just as the great American writers of the nineteenth century fought to be released from England's intellectual domination, so the poets of contemporary America seek release from dominant antecedent poets. There is no anxiety about the influence of antecedent poets, but to use the other half of Harold Bloom's formula, there is certainly the desire to slay them, imaginatively. Removing the dominant poets as the voices of authority, however, is unsettling, disturbing and confusing. It requires then the recreation of a poetics based on other sources. Whitman, in the period 1970 to the present, has been taken up as a major source, the well head, as it were, for the formation of a new poetics. He is the one poet who did not engage in the generation of the heroic principle in American poetry: he was concerned with the vitality and strength of the prophecy of America, a prophecy that was not his alone, but included him. He was a part, a participant in the field of vision that he generated. Earlier in the twentieth-century, Whitman's influence was defined in terms of the making of the long poem. Numerous studies traced his influence in Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, and then onto Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*, and Robert Duncan's "The Passages Poems." But for the contemporary poet, the making of a long or epic poem is no longer an obligation; the contemporary poet is concerned with how Whitman successfully broke the iambic line, how he allowed the tone leading of vowels to combine lines in units of sense when logic does not, how he managed paratactic constructions to come into narrative descriptions. Subject matter was not restricted, so the one great taboo of the nineteenth-century, the body, sexuality, appeared in *Leaves of Grass*right along with the vision of America, notes on the Civil War, or worry about politicians. Whitman has become a source for the new poetics, not of identity, either national or personal. Moreover, the sources mentioned above, mainly Mezo-american civilizations and literatures, Native American narratives and myths, Indian Buddhism, Japanese spiritualism, French poetry (Michael Palmer and Norma Cole), Russian poetry (Lyn Hijanian), geography, anthropology come into the mix, along with Duncan's favorites of the literatures of the occult tradition, Hermeticism, Gnosticism--all these form a mix that appears inside the poem as a multicultural deposit of interests.

In a simpler way, perhaps, contemporary American poetry, in recreating itself out of the social turmoil of the 1960s and the reaction against institutionalized poetry, produced, as a factor in its own redefinition, a multicultural frame of reference within itself. Poetry of every kind is now judged by its own merits of engaging human experience in the art of language. It is not judged against the fixed standards of institutionalized poetry, but allowed to achieve its own wisdom and distinctive forms. In this frame of references, voices of other cultures come into the poem in a non-hierarchical way, which means that there is no minority literature or majority literature, just a various culturalism inside the poetry itself.

Appendix

Underground and small presses which publish minority writers and poets:

1. Alice James Books of Cambridge, Mass., has published 65 books of poetry by women since 1973. The publication of poetry by women in the small presses, however, has been going regularly and is not as strong a political issue as, say, publication of books dealing with sexual preference.

2. Calyx Books:
Alexander, Jo., et al. *Women and Aging: An Anthology by Women*.
Geok-lin Lim, Shirlet. ed. *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Woman's Anthology*.
James, Sibyle. *In China with Harp and Carl*. "Pan-culturalism and the future."
Sherman, Charlotter Watson. *Killing Color*.

3. Greenfield Review Press:
Bruchac, Joseph. ed. *Songs from The Earth on Turtle's Back: An Anthology of Poetry by Indian Writers*. (1994).
Kellman, Anthony. ed. *Crossing Water: Contemporary Poetry of the English-Speaking Caribbean*. (1992).

4. Arte Publico Press:
Fernandez, Roberta. ed. *In Other Words: Literature of the United States*. (1994). This is an anthology of Latina writers.
Tashlik, Phyllis. ed. *Hispanic, Female and Young: An Anthology*. 1994. This is an anthology of teenage Hispanic writers.

Others:

Brown, Steward. ed. *Caribbean Poetry Now*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986.

Calyx, A Journal of Art and Literature by Women. Special Issue on "Women and Aging." 9. 2/3 (Winter 1986).

Cronyn, George W. ed. *American Indian Poetry: An Anthology of Songs and Chants*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991.

Espinet, Ramabai. *Creation Fire: A Cafra Anthology of Caribbean Women's Poetry*. Toronton: Sister Vision, 1990.

Gloseffi, Daniela. ed. *Women of War: Essential Voices for the Nuclear Age from a Brilliant International Assembly*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988.

Hongo, Garrett. ed. *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America*. New York: Anchor Books, 1993.

Hospital, Carolina. ed. *Cuban American Writers: Los Atrevido*. Princeton NJ: Ediciones Ellas/Linden Lane P, 1988.

Howe, Florence ed. *No More Masks: An Anthology of Twentieth Century American Women* Poets. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993.

Kenneth Ramchand and Cecil Gray. eds. *West Indian Poetry*. Essex: Longman Caribbean, 1989.

McEwen, Christian. *Naming the Waves: Contemporary Lesbian Poetry*. Freedom CA: The Crossing Press, 1989.

Mohin, Lilian. *Beautiful Barbarians: Lesbian Feminist Poetry*. London: Only Women Press, 1986.

Wang, L. Ling-chi and Henry Yiheng Zhao. eds. *Chinese American Poetry: An Anthology*. Santa Barbara: Asian American Voices, 1991.

Works Cited

Dorn, Edward and Gordon Brotherston. *Image of the New World: The American Continent Portrayed in Native Texts*. London: Thomas and Hudson, 1979.

Hoover, Paul. *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*. New York: Norton, 1994.

Messerli, Dougals, ed. *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960- 1990*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994.

Peynetsa, Andrew and Walter Sanchez. *Finding the Center: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians, from Performances in the Zuni* . New York: Dial Press, 1972.

Rothenberg, Jerome and George Quasha. *America A Prophecy: A New Reading of American Poetry from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present*. New York: Random House, 1973.

Weinberger, Eliot, ed. *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*. New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1993.