Reviews

edited by
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The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First-Century American Poetry. Edited by Timothy Yu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), xix, 246pp.

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This volume in the well-established Cambridge Companion series demonstrates—through its array of authors and through related reflections in several essays—the closely intertwined worlds of scholars and poets in twenty-first-century North American academia. Half of the contributors are published poets or, to put it differently, poets who are also scholars or vice versa. They teach, write, and do research in a variety of departments. This variety in itself indicates the disciplinary multiplicity of the new kind of poetry studies which this volume promotes. The editor, Timothy Yu, is a prominent scholar of American and Asian American literatures whose publications have contributed greatly to opening up highly necessary and new ways of approaching contemporary American poetry and of seeing Asian American poetry within the larger context of American poetry.[1] Needless to say, he is also a poet.[2] In addition to affiliations with English departments and American studies programs, the other contributors work in African American studies, African diaspora studies, comparative race and ethnic studies, comparative literature, gender studies, American Indian studies, writing/rhetoric, sociology, and teacher training. Fittingly, the volume's closing essay by Dorothy Wang addresses why and how old-school "poetry studies" as traditionally practiced in English departments in English-speaking North America needs to be replaced by approaches commensurate with the immense breadth of so-called American poetry.

Is it too early for a volume on twenty-first-century American poetry in the year 2021? Timothy Yu asks this question in his introduction, but then allays fears related to the lack of temporal distance and of canonization processes by arguing that "[s]hifting our attention away from individual, canonical writers and from dominant

critical narratives is in fact very much in keeping with the multiple centers of gravity that increasingly characterize American poetry" (1). The feasibility of truly acknowledging the gravitational pull of numerous hubs from which American poetry has been emerging appears particularly realistic because the last two decades produced more scholarly literature on non-white authors, more research by non-white scholars, and more awareness of "distinct poetic traditions informing the work of poets of color and Native poets" (4). Non-white poets have seized new communicative options offered by so-called new media (8), have supported each other in poets' networks (9), and become increasingly visible in creative writing programs (19). On the one hand, controversies and conflicts blossomed in abundance along this somewhat promising path; on the other hand, these developments firmly established a sense of crisis (11) and the topic of race (12) as central concerns.

How, then, does this essay collection "reevaluate, revise, and rewrite the frameworks" (1) that evolved between 1945 and the end of the previous century? The volume does not contain any essay that is dedicated to one author. Instead, the overview-oriented contributions discuss (a) poets subsumed under an umbrella term tied to ethnicity, cultural tradition, gender, or sexuality; (b) a specific aesthetic or genre; or (c) poetic forms in response to twenty-first-century predicaments and crises. Among the four essays on African American, Asian American, Latina/o, and Indigenous poetries, the first and the last ones are particularly satisfying in terms of their argumentative depth. Both discuss contemporary authors with an extensive historical tradition in mind. Keith D. Leonard ("New Black Aesthetics: Post–Civil Rights African American Poetry," 17–30) convincingly argues that internalizing African American cultural history has served as a crucial prerequisite for the "aesthetic freedom" (18; also see 29) with which contemporary poets practice their art. Poets like Natasha Trethewey thematize the interdependence of sociopolitical history and individual experience by elevating innovative poetic forms in order to "remake the black historical self" (23). Mishuana Goeman's contribution, "Sovereign Poetics and Possibilities in Indigenous Poetry" (61–70), makes an equally strong case for Native American poets' methods of dismantling Western, settler-colonial notions of time and mis-uses of language (see 61, 62, 65). Her analysis of Layli Long Soldier's poetic techniques (66–67) leads up to her conclusion, in which she claims: "Words matter, as poets so deftly show, so does their dismembering in settler common-sense" (69).

Michael Leong ("Traditions of Innovation in Asian American Poetry," 31–47) provides a fine overview of anthologies and seminal scholarly work (31–32) and then emphasizes the experimental drive of numerous Asian American poets, which he locates in "three major counter-modes": "(1) *a surrealist mode* . . .; (2) *a documental mode* of postmodern montage . . .; and (3) *a phenomenological mode*" (32–33). His partially problematic remarks on Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge (41–43), however, reveal an issue

that the entire collection and current research on American poetry in general have failed to discuss satisfactorily. This issue is the question as to how poetry scholars and historians have been dealing with multiracial, multiethnic, and multinational poets. Leong's broad claim about the impact of a "mixed-race, multicultural identity" (41) on Berssenbrugge's work seems hurried and unclear. As the volume under review argues, more work needs to be done in moving away from privileging white poets in scholarship. At the same time, scholars need to acknowledge that reducing poets to one component of their racial, ethnic, or multinational heritage can limit and distort the perception of the artist's work.

Several essays on specific aesthetics or groups of poets read like encyclopedia entries that swiftly move from a sentence or two about one poet to an equally brief remark on the next author. These essays are useful when looking for new texts that one could read, explore, or teach. At the same time, it is often hard to gauge whether the claims about specific techniques and schools of thought possess sufficient depth. Despite the immense ground that they cover, some contributors manage to shift areas of inquiry into the spotlight that—more often than not—are not discussed in overview publications. For example, Declan Gould's "Disability Aesthetics and Poetic Practice" (106–119) usefully explains how poets have developed stylistic approaches with specific audiences in mind. Gould also points out how the diverse field of various disability poetics should be studied in conjunction with concerns like race and gender and with broader societal understandings of disability as distinct from pathology in mind (115).

Jonathan Skinner's "Blockade Chants and Cloud-Nets: Terminal Poetics of the Anthropocene" (147–68) masterfully addresses the ways in which the apocalyptic scenarios popularly associated with environmental disaster and climate change exacerbate the debate about "poetry's relevance" (147)—a debate that has been particularly rampant since the 1990s. By zeroing in on four poets, Skinner manages to develop and undergird claims about something like a new kind of intersectionality which scrutinizes "ports" as "regions of transition between biological communities" that "become productive within capital" (152). He also plausibly demonstrates how poets argue that their art transcends mere "description" and rather becomes an "act" (157). Thus, protest and activism have also found expression in highly innovative poetic forms that are decidedly not meant for the ivory tower but that instead aim at broad exposure and social change.

Comparable to exploring poetry and/about environmental activism in terms of the interrelation of aesthetic strategies and political content, research on the role of warfare in contemporary poetry offers new vistas in a subject area that—like poetry traditions that address notions of nature and of the (non)human—is simultaneously

ancient and currently topical. Stephen Voyce ("Of Poetry and Permanent War in the Twenty-First-Century," 191–205) finds that the "most sustained treatment [of war] appears in three overlapping communities: Middle Eastern American poetries, documentary poetics (or "docpo"), and left communist circles" (193). His claim that "the weaponization of language" (199) often works on the basis of banal words that veil what is really being described connects these poems with the equally treacherous language of settler colonialism and discrimination that are central to other essays in the companion. Importantly, Voyce concludes that contemporary war writing does not focus on the soldier but rather on the suffering of civilians and on "the economic and political machinery of national security" (202). Thus, understanding current war poetry requires a shift similar to the one Yu suggests in the introduction—namely one of decentering those who, for the longest time, seemed to be the "natural" protagonists within specific thematic areas.

As indicated at the beginning, this essay collection keeps poets' and scholars' perspectives in view—for one thing, through half of the contributors' backgrounds as artists and academics. The second component in achieving this double perspective can be found in the two closing essays, which discuss creative writing programs and poetry studies at North American universities, respectively. To Kimberly Quiogue Andrews ("Poetry in the Program Era," 206–219), some poets manage to "fold. . . an explicitly hermeneutic practice or process into the poetry itself" which makes "the speaking subject . . . an actively, discursively analytical subject" (212). Regarding Myung Mi Kim and Claudia Rankine, she argues that both "reconfigure the personal in service of the more broadly intellectual" (216)—a conclusion that resembles Leonard's above-mentioned reading of Natasha Trethewey's method of intertwining historical consciousness and contemporary experience. In contrast to Andrews's focus on what she understands as a positive effect of creative writing programs, Dorothy Wang opens her polemical and programmatic discussion, "The Future of Poetry Studies" (220–33), with an indictment of those who oppose a new direction in the field. This new direction acknowledges that, first, "it is possible to pay close attention to formal properties of a poem and take into account the historical and sociopolitical contexts of a poem and the large role ideologies and institutional structures and practices play, both in the production and in the reception of poems"; second, that scholars must stop reading non-white poets ethnographically (221); and third, that poetic forms can embody "concrete materialities and structures of power" (223). After critiquing recent publications by scholars whose works she finds wanting, Wang suggests six specific measures to remedy the situation (229–30). Her suggestions overlap with Yu's and specify, for example, the demand for new analytical frameworks, especially those suggested by non-white, non–North American, and non–English language theorists whose ideas enliven our understanding of poetics

and of language. Echoing Toni Morrison, Wang closes with highlighting "poems themselves" as sources of theoretical deliberations (230). Particularly this last point poignantly concludes the volume with an assertion of the cultural and sociopolitical relevance of poetry.

The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First-Century American Poetry comes like a breath of fresh air in the world of such series by academic publishers. While several contributions do not convince this reviewer, the collection certainly offers ample food for thought, as do the "Chronology" (xi–xix; compiled by Timothy Yu and Jacqulyn Teoh) that precedes the introductory essay and the (rather brief, but still helpful) "Further Reading" section (234–37; compiled by Timothy Yu and Caroline Hensley). This volume links up quite well with the equally welcome innovative impetus of the extensive and variegated *Cambridge History of American Poetry* (ed. Alfred Bendixen and Stephen Burt, 2014),[3] which also follows a highly insightful revisionist trajectory. For scholars interested in contemporary poetry in the United States and for instructors who want their students to strive toward developing innovative research projects, *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First-Century American Poetry* is definitely an asset.

Notes

1 See, for instance, Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Timothy Yu, "Asian American Poetry in the First Decade of the 2000s," *Contemporary Literature* 52, no. 4 (2011): 818–51, DOI: 10.1353/cli.2011.0040.

2 See, for instance, Timothy Yu, *100 Chinese Silences* (Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2016).

3 Alfred Bendixen and Stephen Burt, ed., *The Cambridge History of American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States. By Daniel Immerwahr (New York: Picador, 2020), 516pp.

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Daniel Immerwahr's *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* features an introductory chapter that centers on the Japanese attacks in the Pacific in December 1941. While few strategists would have doubted the strategic value of outlying U.S. possessions such as Guam, Howland, and Wake Island (and even less the Philippines), official discourses marginalized these areas and focused on the attacks on Hawai'i instead. "Pearl Harbor" became synonymous with Japanese aggression, a site that represented an assault on (white) America. In 1940, more than one in every