

CARY NELSON, *The Oxford Handbook to Modern American Poetry* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012), 716 pp.

Cary Nelson's *Oxford Handbook to Modern American Poetry* is in many ways the companion piece to his *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (Oxford UP, 2000), which was republished as a two volume edition in 2014. Nelson's influential revisionist poetry anthology combined canonic poets with writers on the left, neglected women writers, and African American political poets, among many other new voices he introduced. Moreover, the anthology broadened the poetic archive by including genres such as experimental collage poems and broadsides. Most importantly, Nelson's anthology put all of these voices into conversation with each other, hence emphasizing that it is necessary to think about the history of modern American poetry outside of schools and established critical trajectories and to see poetry as a vast field of cultural expression in which unforeseen connections can be established if the alternative texts are selected.

The *Oxford Handbook to Modern American Poetry* draws out these methodological and theoretical implications and develops them into programmatic essays about new directions in poetry scholarship. Although the collection of essays offers a number of exemplary readings of canonic and non-canonic texts alike, it is best understood as a research handbook offering new perspectives on modern and contemporary American poetry. It succeeds almost completely in its attempt to create what Nelson calls "coexisting alternative maps of the modern poetry terrain" (6). The book gathers a representative selection of contemporary critics that have redefined the terms of scholarship on modern and contemporary American poetry.

The two opening essays set the volume's agenda; they are among the best recent writing on modern and contemporary American poetry because they both gracefully steer clear of assigning poets to various schools, instead insisting on the cultural and social dynamics from which particular poems emerge. The first essay, contributed by Nelson himself, is perhaps the best short survey of modern American poetry and mandatory reading for all classes on twentieth-century American poetry. Instead of iconoclastically doing away with established paradigms, Nelson carefully

charts the complex history of modern American poetry, not only putting T.S. Eliot, Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams (themselves often divided into various schools) into conversation with poets such as Aaron Kramer, Muriel Rukeyser, and Melvin Tolson, but also with post-World War II writers such as Sylvia Plath, Lovelock Paiute poet Adrian Louis, and Native American literature's superstar, Sherman Alexie. Nelson makes clear that the "century of innovation" was united in its experiment with poetic form to tackle cultural, social, political, and economic issues of the day. This emphasis on the use of form in different cultural, social, and political contexts questions the logic of holistic categories such as modernist poetry, women's poetry, or Native American poetry since, as Nelson points out with regard to contemporary Native American poetry, "[w]hatsoever generalizations one might be inclined to make about the new Native American poetry [...] are likely to be undone by the next generations of poets" (48).

The following essay addresses similar assumptions about form and social content from a more theoretical perspective. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, an important poetry scholar as well as a renowned contemporary poet, contributes an excellent essay which combines formalist and cultural studies approaches to poetry. She avoids reproducing tiresome debates about whether formalist or 'contextual' approaches do more justice to poetry. In fact, she insists that these are two sides of the same coin. DuPlessis argues that "[c]ultural studies readings often resist purely aesthetic strategies of formal analysis, yet to address the text successfully, readings evoking cultural studies methods need to assimilate formalist readings dialectically, making sure that a poem gets treated as an art object saturated with aesthetic choices (even banal ones)" (61). Instead, she stresses the need to examine the uses of poetic form, "to analyze the meanings, ideologies and social-political functions associated with these in their time and across time" (53; original emphasis). DuPlessis suggests the need for "a close reading ethos with a commitment to uncovering, in poetic texts, the inflection of social materials and ideologies, along with some plausible historical and political meaning" (65). The essay presents these claims so gracefully and persuasively that it will be standard reading in future poetry and literature classes.

The following essays establish new lineages of modern and contemporary American poetry based on these claims. They vary from incidental poetry's relationship to popular culture (Mike Chasar) to the political poetry of the fifties (Michael Thurston); from twentieth-century African-American Poetry (Karen Jackson Ford) to "U.S. Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop" (as the title of James Smethurst's excellent essay has it); and from American poets and their relationship to mass culture (John Timberman Newcomb) to prison poetry (Mark W. Van Wienen). Since it is impossible to do justice to the variety and breadth of these texts, all of whom present programmatic case studies that delineate future research directions in American poetry, I will single out two of the most representative and successful essays. Robert Dale Parker, editor of the seminal anthology *Changing Is Not Vanishing: A Collection of American Indian Poetry to 1930* (2010), surveys the field of American Indian poetry before the 1960s. In what is an excellent survey for students and researchers alike, Parker shows that poems written by American Indian authors had a remarkable scope. Native American poetry displays a conflicted relationship with Christianity, just as poets wrote about American imperialist endeavors in Cuba and the Philippines. These writers suggested "an analogy between the federal treatment of American Indians and the United States' betrayal of its promise to support Philippine independence" (78). In addition to delineating the diversity of Native American poetry, Parker makes clear that these insights are crucial not only for an understanding of American Indian literature, but also for modernist poetry. Reading "Change," a poem by Cherokee Lynn Riggs, Parker argues that it is "Riggs's version of W.B. Yeats's 'The Second Coming,' as finally Riggs steps aside from his characteristic gentleness and indirection to proclaim that 'all form / Crumbles like stones of cities'" (83). Parker's attention to form and tradition shows how Native American poetry is never an entity in itself, but needs to be read as intertwined with modern American poetry in all its variations.

Parker's essay is representative of the other essays' endeavor to overcome separations between schools and eras. In an original article on war poetry, Philip Metres discusses poetry ranging from the Civil War era to the War on Terror; the thematic focus is in itself rewarding. Even more importantly, Metres regroups Whitman and Melville with Langston Hughes's

poems about the Spanish Civil War and Barrett Watten's *Bad History* as well as Adrienne Rich's "An Atlas of the Difficult World," both poems about the Gulf War. Of course, such a thematic focus can quickly turn into the ahistorical search for motifs. Yet, Metres skillfully shows that these poems are "part of a larger human confrontation with the violence, injustice, and oppressions that is in us and in our world" (360), while the poets adjust their representations to specific historical situations. Metres's point is not to provide a complete history of war poetry, but to suggest an alternative perspective on modern and contemporary poetry from which a different lineage emerges.

Of course, despite the volume's comprehensive scope, there are omissions. Although it is a cheap shot to look for those, it perhaps bears pointing out that one or two essays on the institutionalization of poetry and the search for alternatives to the lyrical mode dominating contemporary American poetry would have added to the volume's complexity, especially given that much of the most original recent poetry scholarship comes from these fields. But generally, *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* stands out from the plethora of companions and handbooks because it manages to survey and critically investigate a field that is in urgent need of revision and leaving behind artificial distinctions, questioning the orthodoxies and rigidities of schools and literary histories, in order to reopen the field of modern American poetry for future investigations. The volume's most successful essays outline future research agendas as part of a complex map of modern and contemporary American poetry. Nelson's handbook emphasizes original research over the dogmatic discussions that often prevent critics from seeing American poetry as part of a complex social and cultural field in which authors interact and influence each other. Moreover, the volume places a strong emphasis on the necessity to expand the poetic archive and to rearrange canonic and non-canonic poets, bringing them into fresh conversations with each other. And ultimately, it argues that no history of American poetry is possible without regarding the intersection between poetic form and social content. *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* will serve as an important resource for teacher and students of American poetry alike.

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Clemens Spahr