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# Reginald Shepherd's *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries*

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Randall Jarrell writes that "[a]nthologies are, ideally, an essential species of criticism." *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries* clearly wants to be an important critical/theoretical text by presenting work that situates itself in the supposedly newfound territory between American mainstream and experimental poetries. As Reginald Shepherd asserts in the anthology's introduction, "This anthology collects the work of twenty-four poets whose work crosses, ignores, or transcends the variously demarcated lines between traditional lyric and avant-garde practice." However, when considered carefully, this anthology reveals itself to be, at best, carelessly crafted and, at worst, actively detrimental, presenting a skewed picture of what might otherwise be a significant, interesting, transgressive trend in American poetry.

Though, as its introduction makes clear, this is not a collection of work by younger poets, this anthology does collect work by poets who had published, at the time of the anthology's publication, "no more than two full-length books of poetry." These poets, the introduction asserts, have been brought together not through synchrony and not as a "representative sampling" of trends in American poetry, but so that the poetry of the between, of the lyric/experiment middle space, might be "explicitly laid out and brought together." This rationale, though, smacks of a cover-up. The notion that the middle space might be fruitful territory for poetry to explore is not the invention of these newer poets but others—including Jorie Graham, Alice Fulton, Donald Revell, and Michael Palmer, just to name a few mentioned in the introduction—who have theorized and written in and from this space with varying degrees of success for decades. Including such work in this anthology, though, would be problematic, revealing how derivative so much of the anthology's supposedly "new" poetry actually is.

Or is it "poetries actually are"? Though this is an anthology assembled according to the "commonality" of the included work, its title refers to "poetries" and its introduction refers to the poets' various "directions," as if to say that among this new work there are new developments and varieties. While this anthology wants this to be the case—it employs many pages, regardless of its "[s]evere space constraints," to introduce the work of each individual poet with a brief "Artist's Statement," a cursory look at the poet's aims and influences—such is not the case. What is most shocking about the statements is how very similar they are to the introduction and to each other.

Many of these poets think of themselves as poets of the middle space. Jocelyn Emerson notes that she is "fascinated by the process of trying to map governing epistemes of putatively antithetical discourses against one another (the 'scientific' and the 'aesthetic' for example) to see where their mutually exclusive definitions of self and other become visible and audible..." and Heather Ramsdell begins to investigate the governing epistemes of the anthology, wondering, "Is language poetry scientific? Is lyric spiritual?" In this middle space, these poets also, as Shepherd writes, "reject the dichotomy of thought and emotion, feeling thoughts and thinking feelings..." This notion is borne out in Dan Beachy-Quick's hopes that "the poet's mind pulses, the poet's heart thinks" and in Joanna Klink's positive assessment of Stevens, Bishop, and Eliot as "poets [who] *thought* in their poems," who "could not separate physical pain from its mental shape..." Lastly, according to Shepherd, all included in this anthology are "poets for whom experience is not prior to the poem but something we undergo with and within the poem, for whom the poem itself is an experience." Karen Volkman agrees, stating, "I believe one of the jobs of poetry is to discover and enable different and more complex ways of engaging experience..." And Amy Newman virtually seconds this, defining poetry's task as answering "the complicating, intoxicating call for the near-impossible, the magic trick of representation: a desire to capture the moveable world with a tool that might always seem somehow inadequate."

From such similar ideas spring very similar poems. The inadequate tools of choice for many of the anthology's poets seem to be chance, fragmentation, and paratactic assemblage. As the various statements reveal again and again, these poems have been put together "by slow accretion," according to "phonetic associations...[an] accrual of design...[that] allows for electrical mistakes, resonant slippages, kinetic cryptographies..." employing "accident," with "a lot of hypertextuality" and not too much concern for "fit." This results in, largely, a plethora of half-baked meditations, pointless narratives, and series of short-circuitings which in the end really are, as Cynthia Cruz labels her own work, "broken lyrics." While this may be the new American poetry, it is reminiscent of the kind of poetry challenged in Mary Kinzie's 1984 essay, "The Rhapsodic Fallacy." What's really new here is not the poetry but how familiar such poetry has become, and how improved are the capacities and means—including the anthology's introduction and statements—for theorizing, or excusing, such poetry.

What the anthology's cant tries to conceal is the anthology's general lack of wit. Though Emily Dickinson is a tutelary spirit, referenced in numer-

ous artist statements and poems, the Dickinson who intrigues this anthology's poets is the Dickinson of variants, of multiplicity, the Dickinson favored for her obliquity, her telling it "slant." But this understanding of Dickinson gives no credence to why her multiplicities are worth attention in the first place: Dickinson is the great poet of wit, if we mean by wit something much more than mere verbal cleverness and mean by it, as Charles R. Anderson does in *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (1960), "the power of joining thought and expression with an aptness calculated to delight by its unexpectedness..." Though Shepherd claims that the work in his anthology is "fully accomplished work," it is not accomplished to the extent that, as Anderson claims, "[w]it is indispensable to the great poet."

In part, the omission of wit is due to the nature of writing now. Many of the included poems simply weren't made to be anthologized in the way that they are, as they have been selected from longer, sometimes book-length, series of poems in which, according to Karen Volkman, the "movement of mind" is "from poem to poem," and in which, according to Jenny Mueller, there may as a result be "less interest...in 'finishing' or 'originating' individual works." However, part of the anthology's lack of wit is also the result of bad editorial decisions. Some of the writers here are poorly represented; often, their wit has been removed. Nowhere is Laura Mullen's cheeky "After I Was Dead." Nowhere is one of Rachel Zucker's strongest poems, "In Your Version of Heaven I Am Younger"—a sassy poem that begins, "In your version of heaven I am blond, thinner, / but not so witty." And while the poems included by D. A. Powell generally are very good—like so much of Powell's poetry, which is some of the strongest poetry being written today—they are not nearly Powell's best, and they all largely share a similar elegaic tone. Nowhere appears the bawdiness of Powell's "dogs and boys can treat you like trash. and dogs do love trash," a traditional poem, much like Wyatt's "They flee from me," about lost love, but completely contemporary in its brashness and liveliness, or the sheer inventiveness of the sad and hilarious "morning broke on my cabin inverted. tempest in my forehead," a poem that employs the narrative of *The Poseidon Adventure* as an extraordinary extended metaphor for dealing with AIDS.

Shepherd clearly is not just re-presenting poetry of the middle space, he is shaping it, defining it. The problem is that he hobbles it, too, by presenting it weakly, substituting for literary quality—at most, thirty of the nearly two hundred poems included are really good poems—a safe, unified style and tone. The extent to which this representation is hobbled is even clearer when one considers all that Shepherd has not included. Even limiting oneself to poets with a family resemblance to the anthologized poets—excluding, for example, poets participating in that very American phenomenon, slam poetry—it's hard to imagine how Shepherd relegated poets such

as Olena Kalytiak Davis and Geoffrey G. O'Brien to a "Further Reading" list at the end of the anthology, and it is simply unimaginable that there is no mention whatsoever of work by poets such as Gabriel Gudding, Chelsey Minnis, or Spenser Short, poets who have written some amazing poems, all very different from one another and yet situated squarely in the middle space. Such exclusion seems especially unconscionable considering that in their place, Shepherd selected the generally convoluted

work of Jocelyn Emerson, Catherine Imbriglio, and Jenny Mueller, three poets that, one assumes, Shepherd knows personally, as they are thanked "for their comments, encouragement, and inspiration" at the end of his book, *Otherhood* (2003).

Of course, it should be noted that in his introduction, Shepherd states, "I have chosen poets whose experiments most compel me." Fine, but it's not clear why their experiments are really new, or particularly American, or actually plural. Far from

presenting new, American poetries, Shepherd has half-assembled and half-created a coterie, and, in doing so, he merely asserts a manner of writing already indicted and surpassed by so much of what it excludes.