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# Millennial Poetics: An Analysis of Hybridity in 21st Century American Poetry

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MILLENNIAL POETICS:  
AN ANALYSIS OF HYBRIDITY  
IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: Millennial Poetics: An Analysis of Hybridity in 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Poetry

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Numerous anthologies and critical treatises on poetry over the last two decades have weighed in on the possible dissolution of what many critics see as the two major camps of American poetry (the mainstream and the experimental), questioning the camps' viability and porous natures. In 2009 W.W. Norton & Co. published the anthology *American Hybrid* edited by Cole Swensen and David St. John. It marked neither the first attempt to anthologize a murky blending of mainstream and experimental poetry, nor a crystallized vision of what a hybrid poetics might look like. However, it did spur a great deal of criticism ranging from concerns about its depth, breadth and inclusivity to the validity of its claims about generic categories (the avant-garde, the traditional), to its definition of a hybrid poetics, to its reliance on established poets already well entrenched in particular camps. For all that, however, the claims it makes require some investigation. After all, no movement in poetry is apolitical. These debates are not simply about naming rights for a new movement; rather, it is a question of how best to unpack critical concerns about the role of language and poetry in resisting the status quo. It is a question about a population's belief in the ability of particular poetics to enact change. Hybrid poetics asks what happens to the content of the experimental if we burglarize the techniques.

Desiring to interrogate Swensen and St. John's argument, this dissertation will track the history of the experimental and the mainstream as far as it leads to what I am calling Millennial Poetics, with the intention of asking, is this *a* new poetics in the 21st Century?

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Positioning**

Contemporary poetics are in flux. A current concern with poetry, though by no means the only concern, is the convergence of the two most significant schools of American poetry, the mainstream and the experimental. This imagined corradiation springs from the fact that many traditional poets are borrowing traditionally experimental techniques without adhering to the messages and intents of the experimental. Numerous anthologies and critical treatises in the last two plus decades have weighed in on the question of the dissolution of these two monoliths. The first question asked is, did they ever exist? From there critics have wondered about the camps' current viability, their porous natures, and if they were ever the frameworks and scaffolding many assumed they were.

Among the most interesting of these arguments is represented by Cole Swensen and David St. John's 2009 anthology *American Hybrid* from W. W. Norton and Company, which argues for an understanding of contemporary poetry not modeled on the "binary opposition" of the two-camp hypothesis of American poetry, but instead proposes a "contemporary moment [that] is dominated by rich writings that cannot be categorized and that hybridize core attributes of previous 'camps' in diverse and unprecedented ways" (Swensen xvii). Swensen and St. John's anthology is interesting because it embodies a sea change in American poetry by foregrounding a 21<sup>st</sup> century poetics concerned both with the inability of past formal poetic methods to deal with current crises and with the supposition of a new blended model of the past camp structure for understanding contemporary American poetry. Though this idea itself is a scion of previous merger attempts (*Third Way*, *Fractal Poetics*, *Elliptical Poets*), the concept as spelled out here is uniquely 21<sup>st</sup> century if we consider many of the poets included in the anthology as seeds, as

ingredients and catalysts for a growing insistency on a new way of categorizing and comprehending contemporary poetics—a concept I would broaden beyond the hybridity suggested by Swensen and St. John into what I call Millennial Poetics.

What follows is an analysis of Millennial Poetics. Using *American Hybrid* as a starting point, I will explore a shifting consciousness in American poetics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ultimately, I do not believe that Swensen and St. John’s idea of hybridity fully captures the zeitgeist of poetry in this coming millennium. While I believe they mean to create a resource for readers, writers, and students of contemporary poetry, what they have actually produced is a sourcebook for poets on the tipping point directly before the shift to Millennial Poetics. They focus not on poets practicing this new poetics, but on those poets who opened the door to such a shift.

Their anthology is one of many concerned with labels and the genres and subgenres these labels create. They mean to erase the thick, black line dividing one camp from another; however, what they actually produce is another exclusionary brand. While the theory of hybridity they present is porous and flexible, the practice (as seen in the choices of representative poets) is far narrower. Choosing lions from either camp, Swensen and St. John highlight their recent poetry and make a claim of hybridity. To me, this reads like poets’ reactions to a changing poetics. True, the poets represented in the anthology likely spurred—through various means this shift—, but they are seldom representative of the shift itself. Nevertheless, Swensen and St. John have latched on to a concern of critics and poets across America. The camps—real or imagined—have confined if not the creativity of the poets, the reactions of the readers. In fact, a fear of being boxed into a particular type of poetry is a millennial concern.

So, what is Millennial Poetics? After I have explored the poets that fed the movement and some of the poets that are practicing it, I will provide a more thorough exploration of the poetics.

But, for now, I will provide a quick overview. Millennial Poetics is, in part, an act of hybridity. Dissatisfied with the ability of mainstream poetry (the lyric, logical, subjective poetry) to address 21<sup>st</sup> century life and disillusioned with the ability of the experimental to enact change and to practice the inclusion it often preaches, Millennial Poetics seeks to merge techniques from both schools, accepting, on some levels a post-postmodern world.

Critics of the hybrid often begin their deconstruction of the theory by attacking the idea that America has (merely) two camps that can be cleaved cleanly down some imagined middle. They condemn the idea of camps as broad, generic glosses—oversimplified umbrellas of pluralized poetic movements. While there is some merit to this concern, it is difficult to read a history of American poetry without some recognition of a bifurcated poetics split around the issue of either maintaining the status quo or formally resisting it—even when this split and these camps have fuzzy boundaries at times. If we accept a more complicated model such as Raymond Williams’ theory of dominant, residual and emergent cultural elements, we still see a divide between that which adheres to the loose idea of the mainstream (dominant) and that which resists (some emergent literature). Williams’ approach, in fact, better explains hybridity as it is practiced in Millennial Poetics. Though Swensen and St. John want to cleave (in both senses of the word) American poetry into two camps, a true Millennial Poetics wants to create a more cosmopolitan alloy. Williams suggests, in *Marxism and Literature*, that when an emergent cultural practice arises, “the process of attempted incorporation significantly begins” (124). Further, he suggests the danger of this is that this “incorporation [begins to look] like recognition, acknowledgement, and thus a form of *acceptance*” (125). In some cases, however, this acceptance is not wanted and resistance is subsumed into the dominant culture. Williams complicates this even further by confessing that not all emergent cultural practices are or mean to

be resistant to the dominant or status quo. Further, he calls our attention to the fact that residual cultural elements also exist not as remnants of the past but revenants, still active and sometimes incorporated into the dominate culture, sometimes deviating from it. Millennial Poetics would welcome the various successful resistances, incorporations, and residuals. That is, because Millennial Poets hope to craft a union of voices, whether the camps are bifurcated or sundered further makes little difference as they all act as resource. Millennial Poetics would hope to accept and borrow from the residual, the emergent and the dominant. Yet this is a the problem for many critics who point out that the reasons behind this historic divergence (however it is imagined) do not allow for a merger. That is, many people are concerned with how the experimental and the traditional can be unified when much of the experimental exists in direct opposition to the ideas and conventions of the traditional. In other terms, they are alarmed with the idea that when the emergent (e.g. conceptual poetry) that challenges the dominant and the residual that has never been a part of the dominant (e.g. Poe and Pound) becoming accepted that this is a conversion to the dominant.

In spite of this concern, this concept of a hybrid poetics that fuses the two camps of American poetry is not new, nor is Swensen and St. John's anthology the first to attempt such a critical merger. This suggests that they are not the first, or only, critics to both trust in the historical existence of this binary (or greater) model and to resist it—or more specifically suggest that this divide has run its course. In fact, their search for the Grand Unified Theory of Poetry, the monologic of American poetic identity, is not unusual and as a process has been going on for centuries and may yet produce a historically significant shift in American poetics. Recent seekers of this new method include Reginald Shepherd, a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and editor of two anthologies engaging in a similar belief: *The Iowa Anthology of New Poetries*

(2004)—an indication of the source of much of the contemporary push for hybridity—and *Lyric Postmodernisms* (2008)—the title alone hints at the idea of a hybridity. In 2002, Claudia Rankine and Julianna Spahr’s anthology *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* attempts to discuss poets’ “revisioning of the lyric tradition” (Spahr 1). Here we can take the lyric to stand in place of the traditional or mainstream poem. As early as 1999, Stephen Burt labeled a group of similar poets “Elliptical Poets.” Alice Fulton calls it “fractal poetics.” And before all of this (1970s-90s) we had Third Way poetry—a poetry specifically aimed at finding a place between traditional and experimental poetics. Each of these anthologies, essays and movements leans on a similar inventory of poets, among them Jorie Graham, C.D. Wright, Harryette Mullen, Nathaniel Mackey, and Reginald Shepherd and Cole Swensen themselves, suggesting some agreed upon (at least by these critics) concept of a new poetics, even when most of these poets would not consider themselves practitioners of any such movement.

So, while Swensen and St. John’s anthology marked neither the first attempt to anthologize the murky blending of mainstream and experimental poetry, nor offered a developed vision of what a hybrid poetics might look like, it did spur a great deal of critical activity. In 2011, for example, Mary Biddinger and John Gallaher published *The Monkey & the Wrench*, a collection of essays on contemporary poetics. The book includes an entire section, born from a 2010 Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference in Denver, entitled “Hybrid Aesthetics and its Discontents,” as well as Cole Swensen’s response to this section. In the book, Mark Wallace condemns Swensen and St. John for attempting to end factionalism. He points out that “the hybrid distorts the normal unifying marks of many literary concepts. Genre, technique, tradition, or the identifying marks of a movement or school: in the hybrid, all these things are

subject to mismatching and deforming” (121). He urges a continued fracturing and, as the title of his essay suggests, stands “Against Unity.” He sees Swensen and St. John not as saviors of a split people, but as enforcers of a dominate aesthetic.

In this way, he matches Arielle Greenberg’s idea of hybrid as “Work that defies genre and medium. Work that shape-shifts as it goes along, that strains against convention (*any* convention! Even avant-garde convention!), is undefinable or between definitions, between aesthetics” (133). Greenberg goes on to suggest that she supports the idea of hybridity, but recognizes it as problematic and questions whether *American Hybrid* captures the essence of hybridity. Too, she is careful to point out that though she enjoys the poetry, she does not expect or want it to “heal” any rifts in American poetics.

Craig Santos Perez also seems to support the idea that such a thing as hybridity exists, though his concern is that as Swensen and St. John define it, hybrid’s dominate aesthetic (as the poetry that came before it) remains white. In “White washing American Hybrid Aesthetics” he attacks Swensen and St. John’s choice of representatives as being largely white and not at all Asian, Native or Latino/a.

Michael Theune, in his essay “No Laughing Matter: The Humorless Hybrid,” identifies “mixed mode” poets such as D.A. Powell and Dean Young. For Theune, the hybrid sought by Swensen and St. John is also too narrow. As the title suggests, Theune insists that their framing of hybridity ignores humor: “hybrid thinking reinstates it [the two-camp model], and it does so in the most traditional and predictable of ways: separating the (seeming) serious and the comic, the (supposed) high and the low” (130).

Megan Volpert points out a similar binary concern in her essay, “A Drag Queen’s Lament.” In the final response to *American Hybrid* in *The Monkey & the Wrench*, Volpert, too, is

dismissive of the idea that camps are resolved by this anthology. Volpert writes: “Hybrid is an umbrella term that points to the problem of camps; it does not eliminate camps” 141). From there the attack moves on to the anthology’s insistence on using “tried and true” poets who have positive critical recognition and are frankly more likely to sell copies; Norton’s ultimate, actual goal.

Ron Silliman, in a 2009 blog post, also addresses the issues of hybridity in general and *American Hybrid* in particular. Placing the anthology in context, he examines how Swensen and St. John make their claim about the “amelioration” of what he famously calls the school of quietude and the post-avant poets. He compares Swensen and St. John’s work with that of previous anthologist and laments the insistence on an alphabetical organization and the use of poets on “the high side of 70.” Such structure, he believes, does little to highlight changes in poetics. It does not produce a text whose content makes an argument either.

In the same year, Johannes Göransson posts in *Exoskeleton* concerns about not just *American Hybrid* but the movement in general, often imagined as coming from Stephen Burt and *Fence*, though also accredited to the University of Iowa and Brown University. Göransson makes a claim often leveled at hybridity, namely that it addresses form but never content. He writes: “Both [American] Hybrid and “Close Calls” [Burt’s work] begin with histories of post-war American poetry. And both histories are almost entirely formal. Poets change positions because they are drawn to new formal qualities. Little mention of gender trouble, Vietnam, etc. People like the Language Poets because they are ‘difficult’.”

Amy Moorman Robbins is not only concerned about content but authorship. In her book *American Hybrid Poetics: Gender, Mass Culture, and Form* (2014), she is concerned that for all the claims made by hybrid proponents about the newness of the movement, the aesthetic has

actually been around for a long time. It has been ignored, she claims, because the act of hybridity is performed largely by women dissatisfied with what she sees as the male-only camps of experimental and mainstream. She, too, is exasperated by the apolitical insistence of this “new” poetics.

Indeed, Swensen’s and Burt’s somewhat bland claims that today’s poets are simply feeling free to choose from ‘a wealth of tools’ as they embark on a lot of what John Ashbery referred to as ‘fence-sitting’ suggests not a politically and aesthetically investigative poetics but rather Fredric Jameson’s thoroughly pessimistic description of postmodernism, in which aesthetics of formal pastiche produce what he calls ‘a new depthlessness,’ a state of affairs making the end of interested social critique. (Robbins 10)

This criticism—that further ranges from concerns about the depth and breadth and inclusivity of hybridity, to the validity of its claims about broad, generic categories such as the avant-garde and the traditional, to its definition of a hybrid poetics, to its reliance on established poets already well entrenched in particular poetic schools or camps—underscores perhaps the major questions that drove poets of the first decade of the 21st century: how do I combine my love of the mainstream and the experimental? How do I express clearly my uncertainty in this terror-driven landscape without also engaging in the politics that allowed it to happen? Where is the poetic space for this new world? It also hints at a locus for such poetic sparring—the creative writing classroom, a place already charged by many critics with the crime of standardizing poetry and declawing it in the process. While critics and proponents of the hybrid will argue that it attempts (or succeeds in) surfing past sticky issues of politics and content, the fact remains that a turning away from the politics of form *is* an act of politics.



But, obviously, no movement in poetry is apolitical, and so this trend should not be any different. These debates surrounding the classification of a new poetics are not simply about naming rights for a new movement; rather, it is a question of how best to unpack critical concerns about the role of language and poetry in resisting the status quo. It is a question about a population's belief in the ability of particular poetics, at a specific historic moment (in this case the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century), to enact change. Millennial Poetics asks what happens to the content of the avant-garde if we burglarize the techniques and display them like the Elgin Marbles? That is, if we steal them from their home, their context, and their history and present them without comment or with minimal comment for public consumption in a different location, a different format. It is a question about the politics of aesthetics and the ability of poetry to enact recordable change.

I offer Millennial Poetics as a label specifically because the resistance to hybridity above is profound and sound. As this study will attempt to show, the action of hybridity is real, but the idea of it is rooted in some dangerous thought. The name, hybridity, is too complicit in a binary imagination of American poetry that marginalizes all the factionalized poetics that have grown up alongside the two supposed camps of mainstream and experimental. These factions have been residual, emergent and dominate. They have resisted the status quo and enforced it. But, more often than not, they are the groups long and often marginalized: women, poets of color, immigrants, native voices, etc. Where hybrid poetics aims toward apolitical aesthetics, Millennial Poetry means to confront the idea that hybridity is free of the burden of politics in its pursuit of aesthetics. It includes what has been excluded from Burt's and Swensen's evaluations of 21<sup>st</sup> century literature. A quick look at those poets often named as practitioners of the hybrid (Rae Armantrout, Harryette Mullen, Claudia Rankine) makes such easy claims about apolitical

aesthetics impossible to endorse. The truth is, a new poetics does exist. It has a history; it has a context, and it is politically motivated, even if some of the anthologist and apologists do not see it this way. Burt et al. can claim freedom for the new formal techniques of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but form is political.

So, if, in fact, Millennial Poetics is a new formal convention, born in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but with antecedents in the early to late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it marks an important moment in the poetic history of America—no matter how long it lasts/lasted, no matter what ripples it causes/caused in the fabric of poetic space-time. American poetry has long been collaged by the cicatrix of such movements. Each formal shift denotes an external echo: “There is a politics of form as well as a politics of content. Form is not a distraction from history but a mode of access to it. A major crisis of artistic form—let’s say, the shift from realism to modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—is almost always bound up with an historical upheaval” (Eagleton 8). Therefore the “shift” towards a hybrid poetics—whether or not it lives up to the lofty ambitions of merging the two great schools of American poetry, whether it addresses marginalized voices and styles—is indicative of “an historical upheaval.” Thus, the study of it is worth our time. Swensen and St. John’s anthology, Reginald Shepherd’s, too, Burt’s essays and management of *Fence*, the MFA programs at Iowa and Brown, all track a change in American poetics.

St. John, in his introduction to *American Hybrid*, explains the change like this: “We are at a time in our poetry when the notion of the ‘poetic school’ is an anachronism, an archaic critical artifact of times gone by” (xxviii). Ironically, this statement is made in spite of the proliferation of literal schools of poetry of which Swensen and St. John have been both attendants and instructors. Nevertheless, hybridity, according to St. John, aims to dissolve the camp model,

move into an era where “stylistic possibility (as well as their attitudes toward aesthetic, the theoretical, cultural, and political urgencies) are now articulated as compelling hybridizations” (xxviii). And yet, we cannot rely on the editors of one anthology to stand as an aggregate of the critical masses of contemporary poetry. If hybridization—or its more encompassing and politically minded cousin, Millennial Poetics—is truly a movement in contemporary poetics, it should suffer the same growing pains all “historical upheaval[s]” suffer. That is, there should be numerous critics that agree *something* is happening, *some* change is occurring without an agreement as to what that change is, and this *something* is likely bound to a complex matrix of historically complicated shifts. And, that’s exactly what we find.

That is, Swensen and St. John’s idea—as with almost every idea—is not sprung from the godhead fully formed. Their anthology descends from, among other critical treatises, Stephen Burt’s conceptualization of “elliptical poets” (1999). As he writes, “Language writing has become for many younger writers less phalanx than *resource*, revealing a ‘Stein tradition’ of dissolve and fracture less radical work can use” (41). To be fair, however, Burt likely has a smaller coterie of practitioners in mind than Swensen and St. John have, and the conventions of his generic formulation are tighter in principle than Swensen’s and St. John’s. Still, both argue for a poetics that merges the traditional schools of American poetry—or at least a poetics that sees both schools as “*resource*.” Both also fail to provide specific tools for exploration beyond the idea of “newness” and “combination.”

In the same year that Burt makes his claims about elliptical poets (1999), Charles Altieri forwards mainstream American poet Robert Hass and suggests that, though the current avant-garde may despise him, they would be wrong to do so. In a sense, he argues that on some levels a hybridity of poetics is at work. Altieri believes that Hass is aware his poem “Happiness” is

“cute”—a condition contemporary experimental poets might dismiss—but points out that “there is a large difference between being merely banal and coming to terms with necessary banalities that frame our lives and that both make and test intimacy” (637). It’s no coincidence, then, that Swensen and St. John include Hass in their collection. While Altieri doesn’t suggest that Hass is a hybrid poet, as Swensen and St. John do, he does suggest that we need to address the issue of the camp structure in American poetics. “My claim is a simple one: if we fully honor the best contemporary work done in less overtly experimental modes, then we can do more than is usually done to put pressure on avant-garde criticism and avant-garde work in the arts” (638). His reasons spring from a questioning of the actionability of the avant-garde or experimental formal pursuits in the realm of radical politics. That is, he asks how “cultivating semantic indeterminacy and readerly reconstruction in any way provides a substantial alternative to dominant capitalist practices”—a specific goal of much of avant-garde poetry (641). So, in covering how Millennial Poetics works we must raise the question of goals, an outcomes assessment for the camps of poetry that will follow. Among the goals, then, of the Millennial Poets is to seek an inclusion that has escaped the previous ideas of mainstream, experimental, *and* hybrid. That is, even critics of hybridity as a movement are not really suggesting that such a thing does not exist. Instead, they are asking can it do what previous camps could not accomplish? Is it more than aesthetics? Is it action?

Altieri is not the only critic asking about the actionability of the avant-garde. In the March 1, 2007 issue of *American Literature*, we see this same concern promoted by Brian M. Reed. He, too, argues that some concerns regarding the “actionability” of the avant-garde are no longer subterranean but surface—that even practitioners of the experimental must ask questions

about the effects of “indeterminacy” and “readerly reconstruction” in the face of renewed not subdued capitalism. He writes:

Global capitalism has proved so pervasive, so invasive, that no literary gesture, however transgressive or audacious, has shown itself capable of averting the negative effects of commodification. Why fetishize formal innovation if it ultimately achieves little more than product differentiation, that is, if it succeeds only in making certain goods more appealing to a niche market, the professoriate? (216)

Like Altieri’s concerns, then, the question asked is, “what do we do instead?” What is important here is that whether the actions that follow this question succeed or not, they are actions, formal and otherwise, that echo a historical pessimism about the ability of “formal innovation” to resist “Global capitalism.” Further, they echo a concern about the process of such invention if the goal is impossible.

Anthony Mellors and Robert Smith, along with other critics and writers like Swensen and St. John and Burt and Shepherd, look to see if a new poetics isn’t born from the ashes. While Mellors and Smith are unlikely to agree with Hass as an exemplar of this new generic poetic moment, they do, in their introduction to *Angelaki’s* April 2000 edition, christen a new group of poets, “Poets on the Verge.” For them, “the ‘verge’ is located...between difficulty and resistance” (2). They, too, are seeking, as the title suggests, a middle ground. But, again, these terms are nebulous at best. For example, what does *difficulty* mean in this context? Are we discussing a structural difficulty? A functional difficulty? Both? Neither? Beyond that, we are left to question what are these poems resisting? Altieri and Reed seem to be suggesting these works no longer (if they ever did) resist, in any meaningful way, “global capitalism.” But, Mellors’ and Smith’s location for their “Poets on the Verge” is between “difficulty and

resistance.” This implies a continued belief in experimental resistance even if it fails to provide a specific tool for reading these new poets. Their concerns of resistance, I might add, do not couple with Swensen’s, St. John’s, or Burt’s idea about the new poetics. The latter group sees hybridity as a largely formal movement, but Mellors and Smith, Reed and Altieri are arguing for a more complicated, political merger that resists global capitalism and its positioning of the subjective self in contemporary poetry.

This uncertainty about poetics leads Altieri to hypothesizing that “there may be a major shift emerging in our understanding of poetry, at least if one takes seriously the efforts of some poets trained in the experimental or ‘innovative’ tradition to find traction for their lyrical voices by identifying with rhetorical ideals condemned by that same tradition” (“What Theory” 65). Altieri is speaking specifically about Julianna Spahr and Jennifer Moxley, but includes poets like Ben Lerner, Lisa Robertson, Karen Volkman, and Geoffrey O’Brien in this idea of a return to rhetoric. His idea that the experimental is moving back toward the traditional (though he would not say it this way) foregrounds a push from both sides of the aisle toward the middle.

In 1999, Alice Fulton argued that this shift might be what she calls fractal poetics, suggesting that “Although a fractal poem might offer transcendence at the local level—in a line, a phrase—like a complex adaptive system it does not try to sustain a sublime optimum throughout. Its high lyric passages might be juxtaposed with vulgar or parodic sections; its diction can range from gorgeous to caustic” (128). Might we call this a Millennial Poetics—part lyric, part experimental? As suggested above, a tenet of Millennial Poetics or fractal poetics might be the worry that neither the mainstream nor the avant-garde accomplishes what poetry needs to accomplish in the present.

There is some agreement here, too. In “Make Make It New New” Joshua Mehigan writes that “In the end, poetry looks radical only to the outside world, which ignores it, while from inside it looks static. Poets got out of these situations before by doing something new, but novelty is superfluous now. There is no way to get into the game without upping the ante, and there is no way out without bluffing or folding or everyone agreeing on a new game” (560). The concern about formal invention then is also a concern about, as Mehigan’s title suggests, Pound’s edict to “Make It New.” Presently, there is a growing concern that there is no new way to craft a poem so that it estranges an audience and by language forces them to pay attention to the world. Admittedly, this concern that nothing new can be done is an old concern, but that does not mean current worry about it does not ideologically affect poets entering the game.

Swensen, St. John, and company want to suggest that the “new game” is hybrid poetry, fractal poetry, elliptical poetry. While Swensen and St. John published their anthology four years before Mehigan writes his complaint, they seem to be saying what is old can be new again through the act of combination. Whatever the case, it seems that at least some critics are in agreement. Something new is needed. John Barr insists on the same thing three years before Swensen and St. John’s anthology. “Poetry in this country is ready for something new... A new poetry becomes necessary not because we want one, but because the way poets have learned to write no longer captures the way things are, how things have changed. Reality outgrows the art form: the art form is no longer equal to the reality around it” (433). And currently, that reality includes no real change to global capitalism, at least not change inspired by poetry, according to adherents of the hybrid. In fact, poetry is ready for something new because of the lack of change, because of, for instance, the rise of the war on terror, the crash of 2008, immigration debates, etc. Barr echoes what Eagleton suggests, formal change comes as a response to historic change.

However, hybridity as defined by Swensen, Burt, Fulton, and Shepherd does not go far enough to explain this change. Its insistence on a politically neutral adoption of the techniques of previous camps makes it a formal convention that fails to respond to historical change.

Therefore, a better descriptor is needed.

All this talk of change though does demand a definition of the status quo. After all, what are we changing from? Writers like Sonia Sanchez argue that “All poets, all writers are political. They either maintain the status quo, or they say, ‘Something’s wrong, let’s change it for the better’” (83). But rarely is the status quo defined, and rarely is change defined either. For this reason, Swensen and St. John do commit to an idea—the hybrid is the change from the status quo. And, the status quo, as far as they are concerned (and many of the above critics) consists of at least two large, nebulous “camps” of poetry. Millennial Poetics, however, is concerned with the viability and actionability of all camps that constitute the status quo in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and with avenues out of what these critics see as the quagmire of contemporary American poetry.

That is, while hybridity means to marry the mainstream to the experimental, Millennial Poetics takes a more cosmopolitan attitude, allowing that a factionalized poetics exists at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and endorsing a continued splintering. Both Millennial Poetics and hybrid poetics draw from the same resources, the same past; however, Millennial Poetics recognizes that resistance to a two-camp model cannot be achieved through a simple wedding. They seek voices and styles beyond the binary model. Millennial Poetics hears the critics of hybridity and includes the gurlisque, the humorous, the marginalized, etc. They also recognize that the history of the new blending has its roots as far back as Gertrude Stein, and it is not



apolitical but rather a response to both camps that have attempted to define what is or is not political, useful, or beautiful.

A primary difference, perhaps, between earlier critiques of the (variously defined) experimental and traditional over the last two decades is data. No one but the most blindly optimistic thought social change would manifest in a light-speed quickening from earlier avant-garde poetries. Instead, time would be needed. Now, arguably, that time has come, and for some, the conclusions are bleak. Altieri writes in “On Difficulty in Contemporary American Poetry”:  
“Experimental poetry has fallen on hard times. Poetry that makes its difficulty a basic means to accomplishing its ends seems now mostly a throwback, a fantasy that the excitements of modernist art can continue into the present. It also faces charges of privileging artistic complexity over political obligation, of championing ambivalence over conviction” (113).  
However, its replacement, its substitute has not been the lyric, but rather all of the variously defined new poetics listed above—a miasma of uncertainty as to where to go and why. Swensen et al. wish to forward an idea of the hybrid as *the* new poetics. However, in order for this to be true, some tweaking of Swensen’s ideas of hybridity is required—not in the least, a reexamination of the two-camp model. For this reason and others, I find Millennial Poetics a better term to capture the protean wrestling match whose lifespan has strung over the last four maybe five decades.

Let’s examine. First, does this binary exist? Critics like Mark Wallace, in “Against Unity” want to believe that we should surrender all such labels, all camps, groupings, movements. I find that utopian and not plausible in a world where poetry needs to be read as well as created. Labels, camps, genres, and subgenres do more than simply divide poetry into two competing modes. They orient a readership. While a perfect word might be populated by readers

willing to approach any poem as an event unto itself, most of us have expectations before we enter the experience of a poem. I also find it ahistorical. Critics, if not readers and writers, have long divided American poetry into camps. Of course, Wallace isn't really suggesting the camps don't exist. Instead, he suggests they should not. Or at least that they should not be unified under one large umbrella school. He sees hybridity, as it occurs in Swensen and St. John's estimation, as trying to unify that which he would rather see remain hydra. A good analogy here might be to some Grand Unified Theory of poetry. He suggests anthologies like *American Hybrid* might be pushing too hard toward such a theory, driven by "the need to define poetry by the singular, and the fear of the inchoate chaos that might result if one does not." This, Wallace argues, "remains a guiding principle of many poetics discussions" (122). And, as we will see later, it is a driving impulse behind much of the canonization process in American poetry, the urge to create a poetic monologic, a driving and centralizing force to explain the teleologic of American poetic progress. He continues, however, to point out that contemporary poetics are dominated by poets who "now work with an awareness of multiple and global poetic traditions." The idea of camps therefore concerns him. He writes: "Insistence on the primacy of any single literary tradition seems more than ever like narrow-minded provincialism" (123). In his argument, however, he contends, as so many of his contemporaries do, that while mainstream and avant-garde and hybrid might be trying too hard to be a Grand Unified Theory, nevertheless, the world of poetry has shifted.

There have now been about fifteen years of claims that the distinction between so-called "mainstream" and "avant garde" literatures are increasingly irrelevant. And in fact the contemporary poetic landscape shows that to be true. But that's not because poetry exists in any greater state of unity than before. Just the opposite: probably we have more

differing claims than ever regarding the value of contemporary poetry. *American Hybrid* and Shepherd's anthologies represent not a new middle ground but instead posit specific schools of thought that oppose themselves to other schools of thought. (Wallace 126)

Wallace means to maintain factionalism, therefore, but because for him, the hybrid is a Hegelian overlord, not a description of poetry in the now. He is against hegemonic and homogenizing poetic descriptors because they do not fit the cosmopolitan present. In this regard, Wallace is far more concerned with the creation of a Millennial Poetics than he is a hybrid poetics. Again, hybridity remains locked on the idea of two distinct approaches to 20<sup>th</sup> century American poetry. Millennial Poetry, however, does not mean to bring together camps as much as it means to recognize a factionalized resource for contemporary poets. The nature of hybrid poetics, to critics like Wallace, is hegemonic. He resists the insistence of *both* camps.

Noteworthy like Ron Silliman, while not specifically agreeing with Wallace, also denounced the idea that the hybrid can deal with the camps at all, proclaiming, "Hybridism wants to be new & it wants to be the well-wrought urn. For the most part, it accomplished neither. Above all else, it is a failure of courage" (par. 5). His and other's concern is that the poetics of hybridity fails to engage in the politics of the experimental and the craft of the lyric, that the very act of hybridity divorces form from theory in both camps. The problem with Silliman's argument, however, is that it relies on a particular vision of the "new." Specifically, he relies on poets in binary opposition to what he calls the School of Quietude to define the new. In part, and especially among the marginalized and underrepresented, this is what both the hybrid and Millennial Poetics rejects. The gatekeepers of the new position "newness" as the converse of "well-wrought." A wealth of legitimate, historical reasons exist for Silliman and company's

rejection of anything “well-wrought” as new or resistant to dominate culture, but these historical justifications are facing new historical pressures.

## **A History**

It seems reasonable, then, that in order to get to the core of a hybrid poetics, we must look closely at why the perceived, broad schools of mainstream and experimental bifurcated in the first place and what exactly defines the camps if in fact they can be defined and conventionalized. Too, we must explore the function of canon creation especially as it pays out in the history of the anthology—after all, *American Hybrid* is a very specific type of anthology with some specific goals. This exploration springs from the need to recognize mainstream and experimental for what they are—canons. And from the need to see *American Hybrid* for what it is—an attempt at canonizing a historical, poetic moment or movement (depending on your level of optimism).

But, first things first. We must understand, if only briefly, these two camps to see how they are modern divisions that are key to the American poetic landscape over the last century and change. We must understand, too, that this split is part of a way of looking at poetry that has long been binary, and that works like *American Hybrid* arise and reify at a time when such demarcations are troubling. That is, the same impulse that drives Wallace to want to end all such camps drives Swensen and St. John to suggest a hybrid poetics. That impulse, that urge is the idea that the confining nature of the two camps neither accurately highlights American poetry nor enacts the change many hoped it would. A quick look, therefore, at the history and its organization might help us understand present concerns.

The history of the two-camp model of American poetry is as old as American poetry in English. The roots of the divide might reach back as far as Poe even if the formalization of the

theories waits (for good reason) another hundred years. Richard Gray, in his *A History of American Poetry*, contends: “Poe argued that it was the special merit of art in general, and poetry in particular, that it had no use value, no moral and—at least, in the commonly accepted sense—no meaning” (5). Though Poe’s politics are not in line with what will become the experimental voice of American poetry, his concern with “the heresy of *The Didactic*” is. For many critics, Poe is the symbolic terminal for the experimental, and Whitman is the station for the traditional. As F. O. Matthiessen puts it, back in 1950 in the Introduction to *The Oxford Book of American Verse*, “in the broadest terms, most of our later poets could be described as descendants of Whitman or as descendants of Poe” (xxvii). Yet, in many ways, Poe’s writing is the far more traditional than Whitman’s. Whitman broke from form. Whitman was original. Poe criticized even slight variations in metered verse.

Yet in so many of the anthologies of American poetry produced especially in the modern era, it is Whitman that is the focus, the starting point of what we call American poetry and thus the traditional camp. Among other traditional critics, Harold Bloom stands out in claiming Whitman as the central figure in all of American letters. Bloom sees Whitman as the immediate descendant of Emerson and thus the original “American” poet, the voice against the tradition brought to American by the English. Because of his Romantic blinders, Bloom sees Whitman as the genesis for all American poetry though early Americanists would certainly disagree, as would early American anthologies of poetry. In his critique of Bloom, Timothy Morris laughingly and rightfully points out that “One can open the introductions [to any of Bloom’s Chelsea House critical texts] virtually at random and read a capsule of the Bloom version of tradition: ‘The central strain in our literature remains Emersonian, from Whitman to our contemporaries like Saul Bellow and John Ashbery’” (16). Morris is leading us, through this

criticism, to how Whitman and others have become canonical and what that means for American literature and in directly what that means for the fissured camps that Swensen and St. John intend on bringing together in their anthology. In short, Whitman helps an imagined construction of a homogenized “American” literature distinct from other English-language poetries. Morris points out that

Indeed, a feature of attempts to define an American literature, from John Knapp in the 1810s to Susan Howe in the 1980s, has been the attempt to seek some centripetal force in American poetic and literary language...the idea that a pure national literary language will be monologic is essential to American literary nationalism. The founder poet will erase the past, utter new Adamic words, and thereby found a tradition. He will center American culture around himself and his essential spirit. (44)

This “monologic, centripetal impulse” not only drove much of the canonization process of American poetics, but also is likely a root cause of Swensen and St. John’s anthology. After all, the two camp model replaces a monologic structure with a binary structure, but a hybrid model—they believe—might just repair all such rifts. Unified, utopian poetics, though, don’t allow for a plurality of voices, and therefore critics of *American Hybrid* point to (a) the camp model as problematic and simplistic and (b) the idea of resolving it with a return to a monologic of American poetics as too easy a fix for too complicated a problem.

That is, because so many 20<sup>th</sup> century anthologists begin American poetry with Whitman instead of Poe or colonial or native or slave voices, and because Poe et al. is outside Whitman’s centralizing ken, we have a canonized core of poets pullulating from Whitman when in fact Bloom’s idea that both Saul Bellow and John Ashbery belong to the same poetic family makes sense only in a world where all American poetry has a single patriarch. That is ultimately the

danger of anthologies and canon in the first place. It is also the danger of Swensen and St. John's dubious claims of a two-party system of American poetry. They give a *sense of the* American poetry without giving us the breadth of it. In truth, anointing Whitman the father of American poetry is a spurious act. Whitman's position as the premier poet of American letters (alongside Emily Dickinson) is modernist rewriting of early American literature. It is an act of politics more than an act of aesthetics. In his time, Whitman would not have held such a distinction. The canon and focus of many anthologies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century would have looked at Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and William Cullen Bryant. Other three-name poets like Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes and James Russell Lowell appear in great abundance in pre- and post-Civil War anthologies.

In Alan Golding's study of these anthologies, *From Outlaw to Classic*, he points out that Charles A. Dana's influential *Household Book of Poetry* "places Poe well below the New England poets and does not include Whitman in his 1858 or 1868 texts" (17). Most classroom anthologies produced now would not even dream of suggesting either Whitman or Dickinson or Poe as the starting point for American poetry. And, earlier American anthologies of poetry predate Whitman. Yet, like *American Hybrid* and its more celebrated cousins, all of these collections attempt to fashion a national identity. Elihu Hubbard Smith's *American Poems, Selected and Original* (1793) and works that followed it into the 19<sup>th</sup> century underline what Alan Golding calls America's "urgent need to assert...an indigenous poetry recognizably different from English poetry" (5). Arguably, that same urgent need exists today, though a broader concern with what is American now complicates this need. Anthologies often aim at addressing these needs.

Wallace and Silliman and others point out that *American Hybrid's* urge to hybridize what Swensen and St. John perceive as long-standing camps into a monologic is a nationalistic—do we go so far as to say jingoistic?—tendency in keeping with many an American anthology of poetry that means to provide a sense of what is American as much as it means to survey poetry. Though, unlike broad and historically minded anthologies, Swensen and St. John do not delve back into the poetic roots of American poetry. They do, however, look to the past to justify their claims. Most of the poems in *American Hybrid* are from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; however, some are as old as the 1970s and 80s and many of the poets represented in the anthology have been staples of American poetry since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is in this pastward gaze that Swensen and St. John identify an American poetics split down the middle. Considering the 20<sup>th</sup> century roots of their argument, they might be forgiven for believing this. As highlighted above, everyone from Silliman to Shepherd endorsed—not always explicitly—a binary model of American poetry.

In her Introduction, Swensen makes such a claim explicitly. She endorses Paul Auster's model that "most twentieth-century American poets took their cue either from the British poetic tradition or from the French" (xvii). She continues this argument with claims that 20<sup>th</sup> century poets were "influenced by the Romantics on the one hand, and the Modernists on the other," suggesting that "one thread...inherited a pastoral sensibility from British Romanticism, emphasizing the notion of man as a natural being in a natural world...[while the] second prominent line of poetic thinking stems from the urbane modernism of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Apollinaire" (xvii-xviii). Hybridity from her perspective is the alloy of these two traditions. It is a return to a monologic for American poetry.

Swensen and St. John, as anthologist before them, turn to the past to promote figures from a previous era as hybrid (John Ashbery, for example) to underline the inclusivity and



universality of their work and their movement. But, Ashbery or Whitman or Poe is less significant than the whys and whens of such choices. Anyway, such parsing and praising becomes quickly tedious. We might run through every woman and man of letters in American history to decide if they are traditional or experimental, of Whitman or of Poe or of some other antecedent. Yet, that divide (a) isn't what really separates the traditional from the experimental, (b) isn't clean or sharp enough a portrait to understand the camps as Swensen and St. John understand them, and (c) is riddled with poetic lacunae. In other words, beginning with Poe and Whitman is too easy. Using the broad lens of the present to focus in on particular techniques of the past constructs an ahistorical look at our poetic past.

If anything, Poe is a proto-experimental poet, Ur. Whitman is a traditionalist only because he became a model for "American" poetry. We may as well begin with Bradstreet. The divide between the experimental and the traditional, as it becomes relevant to Swensen and St. John, instead depends upon two things: (1) the establishment of the mainstream and the experimental as the central poetic principles of 20<sup>th</sup> century American poetry. And (2), the revolution of the modern. Both of these acts correspond with a number of historical and literary events beginning in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continuing, at least, to the formation of MFA programs and the proliferation of university-sponsored journals.

Though it is necessary to track these actions, it is worth pointing out here that an argument might be made that we have moved past this binary or monologic certainty (or at least that many are trying to do this). Though *American Hybrid* is an attempt at the monologic, I would suggest that it is, nevertheless, a product of a move away from binary thought—a product of a cosmopolitanism alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *American Hybrid* is a failed attempt to capture the historical shift away from a 20<sup>th</sup> century binary into a Millennial Poetics that wishes

to make room for a more diverse history of American poetics. Though the anthology might fail, the principle remains: the camps of American poetry that have been canonized exist, but might simply be the loudest members of a large family rather than a bickering, childless couple.

*American Hybrid* and its detractors, therefore, look back at how certain poetics rose to prominence, and believing these poetics have failed on political and aesthetic fronts, ask if there is another way. This process of looking back is how the poets represented in *American Hybrid* hybridize their poetry. Who they look back on is determined by a canon ready made for poets wishing to hybridize.

Canon formation is a complicated system of checks and balances. The American canon of poetics did not begin in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Critics, poets, magazines, textbooks and anthologies had been constructing the concept of an American literature for over a century beforehand. By the mid to late 1800s important American poets like William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Greenleaf Whittier not only constructed a model for the American man of letters (e.g. Emerson's "The Poet") but also crafted anthologies with the aim of showing off American poets. However, while it might be useful to explore every anthology of American poetry from early collections of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the major academic collections published today by Norton and its revisionist counterpart Heath to the famous anthologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by McClatchy, Aiken and Allen, that is beyond the scope of this dissertation and anyway has been already been done and better than I could do (See, especially, Alan Golding *From Outlaw to Classic*). And, while it would certainly be enlightening to track the critical voices about which poets and poems have garnered enough praise to be deemed meritorious, our time is probably better spent tracking briefly the various constituent parts in the canon-making

process to demonstrate how the traditional becomes traditional, how the experimental becomes its antithesis.

That said, it is important to situate *American Hybrid* in its context. Robert McDowell argues in “The Poetry Anthology” that anthologies may have a number of different goals, sometimes simultaneously. He writes:

It [the poetry anthology] may celebrate the status quo and attract new readers to the accepted poetry of a particular period; it may introduce the work of young poets, or present the work of a particular school (The Beats, Black Mountain, Language Poets); it may focus on specific occasions (opposition to the Vietnam War, the struggle of Adult Children of Alcoholics); it may gather selections from *The Great* for convenient appreciation and reference; in our time, especially, it may be used as a classroom text, making available to students a wider range of poets than would otherwise be possible; it may attempt to explain the art of poetry, or make no claims at all; it may consciously appeal to a small, sympathetic readership made up of other writers; it may seek to revise the historical canon, or it may responsibly represent and add to it; it may ignore all considerations of audience, or it may attempt to reach the indifferent audience that finds no immediate reason to attend to poetry. (594)

*American Hybrid* fits into the group that “present[s] the work of a particular school.” I believe it also “attempt[s] to explain the art of poetry.” In this way, Swensen and St. John mean the collection to stand beside the works of anthologists like Donald Allen whose seminal work was *The New American Poetry*. As Allen was editing against anthologies like *The New Poets of England and America*, Swensen and St. John set their volume against more recent anthologies they see as belonging to one camp or another. Specifically, they see their work as not existing in

the shadow of either Ron Silliman's anthology nor any of Helen Vendler's but as another path. Though Norton published the collection, it is not meant, specifically, as a classroom text. While it may, as McDowell suggests, make "available to students a wider range of poets than would otherwise be possible," it intends to make a statement more than it intends to create a broad portfolio. However, on some levels, this is its failure. While the claims *American Hybrid* lays out in its Introductions are far more interested in presenting an emergent school, much of the content depicts lions of previous schools. Possibly, the editors do this to demonstrate how the canonized poets have led to the hybridity Swensen and St. John see in contemporary poetics. And, they see the canon as highlighting the divide they believe drives the poets they want to call hybrid poets. Therefore, it is worth looking, briefly, at the way in which the canon forms.

Alan Golding and before him Alastair Fowler divide the canon down into several categories: "the potential, the accessible, and the selective" (Golding 3). These categories should provide us some idea of how a canon forms and who gets included and who excluded. Too, this system can demonstrate how the American canon formulates two large camps with very different ideas about poetry. In short, the "potential canon" is all available literature. As the discussion of American poetry moves into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the potential canon expounds and proliferates. When this multitude of voices is read by poets and critics of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, they get sifted into different camps alternately (not to say interchangeably) called experimental and traditional, raw and cooked, avant-garde and lyrical. The potential canon, therefore, includes both of the camps Swensen and St. John argue are a part of American poetry. It includes, as well, all the movements, modes, poets and poems excluded by Swensen and St. John's anthology, excluded by Burt, Fulton, Shepherd, Mellors and Smith as well. The potential canon contains the writers an anthology of Millennial Poets might be drawn from. It also contains the writers that fit every

anthology. However, the idea that such a canon exists is part of what distinguishes hybrid poetics from Millennial Poetics. Hybrid poetics insists that most of the “major” voices of the potential canon are either experimental or mainstream. By using a broad, stylistically descriptive algorithm, endorsers of a hybrid poetics can designate all poems in the potential canon as either of one camp or the other. Critics of hybridity argue that such easy separation is a misunderstanding. They argue that what is lost in such a bisection is the intention behind the form. Poets who might fit the category of Millennial Poets recognize a more diverse potential canon and resist such breezy divides. However, critics and Millennial Poets have to contend with the material reality of the available canon.

The available canon, in Fowler’s understanding of it, is literature with an ease of access in the form of reprints, anthologies, etc. Though there are numerous ways *access* may be examined, some simple truths help us situate a canon for American poetry. First, the 20<sup>th</sup> century produced more books than the previous century. Between 1860 and 1930, the rise in private printing houses increased the potential canon even if it didn’t always increase the available canon. Translations also began to multiply, increasing spatially the realms of access for the average reader. (This will happen again the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries with the advent of the internet) Yet, coupled with these increases came the institutionalization of literature in English and access to the canon in the form of university study and the rise of the textbook and, as a result (of this and numerous other factors), the ascendancy of New Criticism. Alongside this, the 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw the rise of such canon forming institutions as The Great Books courses by John Erskine and later Mortimer Adler and Robert M. Hutchins. Though The Great Books courses construct a canon larger than the American poetic canons, the impulse toward loosely defined meritorious canons of Great Books is in keeping with the monologic structure of

Western ideals. It is easy to see how, from this monologic, a “Great Divide” might be imagined. If the canon of meritorious Great Books endorsed by Universities across the country presents one case for American poetics and another (or many other) poetics arise to confront that claim, the hegemony of the first claim may reduce the plurality of the second to “that which opposes.” Thus, many 20<sup>th</sup> century anthologies present a back and forth binary of poetics that begins to dominate the available canon.

The final category Fowler gives us is selective. According to Golding, “the selective canon...covers those works in the accessible canon that trained readers have selected as especially worthy of attention” (3). As Golding explains this complicated process, he points to anthologies and their conflicting natures. Anthologies might have numerous goals (to survey American poetry, to highlight a specific time period or location, to introduce a new movement or school), but they are all a winnowing of the accessible canon. Though again it would be interesting to track all such anthologies and their resulting effects, my interest here is pointing toward how canon formation has fallen into a camp model as well. Golding, again:

Once an accessible canon develops, preservation becomes a less urgent motive for anthologizing [this point occurs in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> Century]. Once a stable literary and political culture is established, literary nationalism and political orthodoxy also become less urgent. Continued revision is the logical and ongoing final state, but any revisionist editor who invokes universal standards in his or her defense walks on shaky ground. That editor may use the principle of transhistorical excellence to propose a new canon: the established poetry, in this view, does not meet universal standards, a more conservative editor, however, can use the same principle to justify the established canon. In this view, the “best” work rises to the top. A good poem or poet, once recognized, will

always be, and will always be considered, good. Both anthologists, then, face a contradiction in this late stage of canon formation: if transhistorical excellence can be invoked to justify two different kinds of poetry, it offers neither the revisionist nor the more conservative editor a sound basis for a canon. (7)

Though not specifically speaking about mainstream or experimental poetry, Golding is making a point about the stability of each camp. They are established and at least perceived as transhistorical. Consider, for example, the numerous critics above who argue for a Third Way, suggesting a “stable...literary nationalism.”

These transhistorical claims (ironically occurring at a specific historic moment in American poetry), tend toward, as Golding suggests, “two different kinds of poetry.” However, to be fair, Golding continues and points out that these standards are, in fact, “historical, *not* transhistorical” (8). Still, canon-making is by nature selective and restricting in the same way the large camps Swensen and St. John invoke are. That is, they are often including figures as diverse in subject matter, political goals, form, and time as Nathaniel Mackey, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson and T. S. Eliot. Marjorie Perloff, for example, thinks of many of the high modernist like Pound, Eliot and Williams as lions of the experimental canon. And she is not alone. But, equally, others, like Charles Bernstein, will suggest that Eliot’s radicalness like Whitman’s before him has become deflated by the institutions that laud him.

The camp idea of poetry is a bit like one-size-fits-all clothing, no one really believes the camps are all encompassing or that they will look as good on one poet as another. In fact, when we talk about poets belonging to camps we might engage in some of the same ideas we talk about when discussing genre. As David Shields has suggested in *Reality Hunger* (a book that plays with hybridity itself), “genre is a minimum security prison.” Camps, movements, and

canons are also soft penitentiaries. There are some controls in place, some wardens and walls, but there are furloughs, too. Anthologies can act as such penitentiaries, or at least they have the barbed-wire look from the outside. In fact, however, any application of genre theory or the camp model needs to keep in mind that no genre, movement or form has ever been “metahistorical ...but [rather]... bear[s] the clear stamp of the period of their origin” something that “can usually be seen afterward, and with relative ease” (Bürger 15). Still, genre theory isn't a bad way of imagining these camps since they are broader than movements and defy (on some small scale) historical boundaries and are often imagined as a set of deterministic conventions or “as a rigid trans-historical class exercising control over the texts which it generates” suggesting that all works, experimental or otherwise, are “members of previously defined classes which have causal priority over” the construction of other works in the experimental or traditional camp (Frow 23). This, John Frow points out, is not how genre works, nor how we should see these camps. Still, the fact remains that the experimental camp covers the Avant-garde, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, the Black Mountain School, Conceptual Poetry, etc. and has major names associated with it like Charles Bernstein, Charles Olson and Susan Howe, but is not defined by these poets nor their work alone. Each act is an expression of the experimental as it exists in opposition to the traditional which includes everything from the New Formalists to the Confessionalists to Mark Strand to Mary Oliver and Robert Hass.

Golding's idea about canon formation, then, suggests that the two-camp model and all its soft borders are the result of specific historic trends. That is, the stability of a two-camp model for American poetics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a result of a specific type of anthologizing and counter anthologizing based on presumed transhistorical ideas about literary greatness. The need to conceptualize poetry for the classroom and for the public has insisted on these camps. Genre



critic John Frow agrees. Peter Bürger, too. Because not enough of an accessible canon existed before 1900, Whitman and Poe are less significant than how anthologists selected poets after a significant tonnage of American poetry was made available. Starting from the moment of the anthology or the movement the anthology endorses and funneling backwards through history, critics and editors found earlier examples that fit their ideas of what was or what is American poetry. That is, whether the roots of the mainstream grow from Whitman or some other source, whether Poe is the progenitor of all experimental verse, is less important than when critics and poets felt it necessary to begin making those claims. In other words, conservative claims for the canon (the traditional) and revisionist claims (the experimental) require the radical shift in poetry that occurs in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In his Introduction in *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900-2000*, Jon Cook makes the argument that though poetics in English before the Modern period experienced change—he points to the differing views between John Donne and John Dryden (we might look at the differing views between Poe and Emerson)—this change was incremental. As he puts it, in the shift to the modern, “Neither reform nor renewal is at issue, but revolution” (1). Cook draws a distinctive line between “modernist” and “traditional” poetry. Modernist poetry, in his estimation, is not that same as poetry written between the world wars. Though it is dangerous to remove the sense of time from the poetic movement, it is important to recognize that not every poet writing during the modernist time frame is a participant in what Cook and others deem Modernism. It is equally important, as this discussion continues, to recognize that not every modernist is experimental, as this term will come to bloom later in the century. Beyond this, revisionists and literary historians will move people from camp to camp—yet most will agree that the divide begins when the 20<sup>th</sup> Century begins.

Such X-raying might lead to the idea that, if we continue to separate the bones of all the trends and shifts and movements in modern and contemporary poetry, we might have such plurality that “what is usually called ‘modernist poetry’ [becomes] not a single phenomenon, nor does it leave a single recommendation for the poetry that succeeds it, other than the obligation to sustain the energies of experiment” (Cook 2). In other words, there are not *two* camps but a dozen, a hundred. And, millennialism, therefore, might simply be another poetic fracturing in a world of already shattered poetics instead of an attempt to resolve an actual divide. Cook’s concern (and mine with a series of caveats) with such an imagined diffusion is that it provides no ground for discourse. If the 20<sup>th</sup> century is merely a hundred, a thousand poetics, every new idea can find a place because it is not in conflict with, not suffering anxiety from, not adding to the poetry and the critical responses to the poetry that came before. Further, this overlooks structures of power and how they operate and dominate. It erases the canon and the idea of the canon—perhaps a laudable pursuit, but one that is troubled by how a great deal of the population receives its poetry. But, as Cook points out, “These arguments [about new movements like the hybrid] do not invite their readers to respond with a shrug of the shoulders as they gather another item in the checklist of ‘poetics,’ but with articulate agreement or disagreement” (2). In fact, these new poetics have invited such vehement agreement and disagreement that it became possible to divide the multiplicity of movements into two broad camps quickened in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and divided around the issue of the institutionalization of poetry and what that might mean.

Institutional poetry might be another way of saying traditional poetry; however, in order to pull off that substitution we would need several allowances. First, we would need to recognize what constitutes the traditional and why. Second, we must recognize “institutionalization” as

both a process that has been going on for centuries and a process that significantly shifted at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of the cultural industry and the resultant birth of the avant-garde.

But the question that remains is what is the avant-garde? The experimental? Really, what is the mainstream, too? The various canonizations and anthologies aside, we might ask what it is that journals, poets, publishing houses, and academics is dividing? The truth is, that's a question this dissertation is going to have to answer more than once if for no other reason than because what is mainstream and what is experimental is always turbulent. One simple edict for the experimental might be Pound's famous command to "Make it New." As a war cry for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century poets, this decree while not easy to adhere to, had a more readily available mainstream to diverge from. Now, a century later, the idea of making it new becomes a more problematic proclamation.

Beyond that, we must consider not just what is new, but why. Peter Bürger suggests that the avant-garde, the soul if not the originator of the experimental in American poetry, is that historical moment beginning around 1915 with the rise of Dadaism when art shifted from being about a particular style to being a criticism of the role of art in bourgeoisie society in general. This distinction is an important one. If the Impressionists were daring, they were daring with a stylistic goal in mind. Whitman, too. We might say the same about the Imagists as Pound defines them. But the avant-gardists resisted the institution of art itself, not just previous styles or poetic concerns. Thus, while the New Formalists of the 1980s and 90s are attempting, in their own way, to Make It New, they are not the avant-garde which sees these slight stylistic shifts as movements within a closed system. That system, of course, is late capitalism. And, the pervasiveness of the system is a part of what challenges experimental poets at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century. Meaning, while experimental poets attempted to challenge the capitalistic bourgeoisie art as a system "unassociated with the life praxis of men" (Perloff "Avant-Garde" 549) by producing *the new*, often, instead—according to critics like Altieri, Mellors and Smith, and others— they fell into stylistic movements: black mountain school, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, etc. These stylistic movements, nevertheless, are part of the experimental camp. That is, whether they were Avant-Garde or Conceptual or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, a growing consensus of particular critics and poets (largely from the Iowa School), read a particular aesthetic to their approach which these critics suggest can be and are being appropriated. When this happens, we must ask if the work can continue to resist capitalism and its standardizing effects.

And this is the point of *American Hybrid*. Ultimately it doesn't matter if the movement ever catches on. There is evidence in the form of a growing body of criticism dissatisfied with claims of hybridity to suggest it will not. Nevertheless, the movement underlines a critical concern in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Poetry in general and American poetry in particular have become too bicameral. Critical trends in literature today, like the rise of cosmopolitanism, focus on the weakness and Westernness of binary thought in literary criticism. Though *American Hybrid* does not offer the plurality of voices that cosmopolitanism does, it addresses the same concern: a binary understanding of literature. Where critics like Wallace and Kwame Anthony Appiah argue that this century needs to acknowledge all the voices in the room for their distinct tenor and accent, Swensen, St. John, Shepherd, Fulton, Burt and others argue that all these voices are coming together—or to be more fair, are no longer standing in two large groups at opposite ends of the room.

In order to explore whether Swensen and St. John's approach makes sense, the remainder of this dissertation will explore if it is possible to smudge the boundaries between the camps (and

if it is advisable). That is, when hybridity borrows experimental techniques, does the divide truly disappear? Or, instead, is the divide still firmly in place but harder to recognize? Does the work *look* experimental and traditional (perhaps sounds that way, too) but remain a watering down of both camps? On the other hand, if it is possible that the hybrid is more than an aesthetic lacquer, this dissertation will examine what such an intersection might look like, why it is important, where it misses and why, who is excluded and can they be welcomed back in, and finally, is this a significant movement in American poetic history. Beyond this, I will address the shortcomings of the hybrid approach. Hybridity is too rooted in a model that does not make sense in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though it is reasonable to see why Swensen and company would insist on a two-camp model of American poetry and though in many ways this model works, poets practicing a 21<sup>st</sup> century poetics tend to favor a far more pluralistic, even atomized, view of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetics. Millennial Poetics is a better term because it acknowledges a greater source material for inspiration, it underlines the historic location of the movement, and it accepts contemporary poets' concerns with the hegemonic dominion of the two-camp model. Nevertheless, because of the prominence of *American Hybrid* and the subsequent critical response, identifying and clarifying what hybridity is precisely will help secure our understanding of how it differs from Millennial Poetics and why the latter is a better descriptor for the poetry produced today.

### **Terms**

In this dissertation, I use terms like the experimental, the avant-garde, mainstream, the traditional and the lyric. I do not mean to suggest that any of these terms are interchangeable. The avant-garde is a very different movement from, say, conceptual poetry. It has different historic and cultural influences and backgrounds. But as *American Hybrid* and Third Way poetics insist on a two camp model for American poetry, I will put groups like the avant-garde,

conceptual poets, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, etc. under the umbrella of experimental poetry to better understand why endorsers of hybridity make the claims they do. Swensen, St. John and company identify these poets as practitioners of a disruptive, fragmented and decentered voice. Representatives of the experimental camp might include poets like Michael Palmer, Bruce Andrews, and Barren Watten. And, though it is absolutely true that how these groups go about decentering is vastly different and poignantly pluralistic, it is equally true that they mean to see the world differently than how a mainstream poet would. And, while labeling the experimental a genre is premature and possibly incorrect, the camp does collectively mean to create meaning in an obviously different way from that which in this dissertation I call the mainstream.

I am comfortable doing this because, as John Frow says of genre, “far from being merely ‘stylistic’ devices, genres create effects of reality and truth which are central to the different ways the world is understood” (19). The experimental may have different stylistic techniques within its fuzzy borders, but most of it has some shared ontological concerns. Those concerns are often position in opposition to the mainstream. The margins of the mainstream will surround all traditional poetics including lyric poets, New Formalists, Romantics and works that foreground a subjective self. Representatives of this school include poets like Billy Collins, Mary Oliver, and Galway Kinnell.

## **Chapter Overview**

What follows is a breakdown of the chapters and a brief description of their contents with the aim of previewing the argument and contextualizing it. The individual chapters that follow will unpack these concerns in greater detail and offer examples to help locate a Millennial Poetics.

## Chapter 2: Millennial Poetics: A Guidebook

The second chapter will outline the precepts for a Millennial Poetics. Is Millennial Poetics a poetry that (in Stephen Burt's language) attempts "to split the difference between a poetry of descriptive realism, on the one hand, and, on the other, a neo-avant-garde" (50)? Or, is it something beyond the hybrid?

Specifically, the chapter will break down what Millennial Poetics would look like. In a series of discrete sections, the chapter will identify formal and political aspects of Millennial Poetics, attempting to separate it from hybrid poetics and thereby the concerns that revolve around the term and its practice. It will outline poets and poems that might fit into the model that will not be explored in greater detail later in the dissertation, hopefully highlighting trends and trendsetters in the movement with an eye to the overall significance of such a movement. This chapter will insist on a concept of contemporary poetics not wed to the two-camp model but still familiar with the debate, acknowledging the need to address the most insistent voices from the past century without kowtowing to them.

Plenty of critics have weighed in on the idea of a hybrid poetics. The majority seem to consider the concept either dated or shallow. However, a growing body of critics argue for a new poetics that explains what has happened in poetry over the last two to three decades, focused especially on younger poets who are coming of age at the turn of the millennium. Some critics call this movement Hybrid or Third Wave. Others, Poetry on the Brink, or On the Verge, or Elliptical or Fractal or, or, or. The point is the old systems of experimental and traditional may no longer be acceptable (if they ever were). Swensen and St. John's collection has too many holes in it; a hybrid poetics might still be *a* new poetic subgenre but is more likely a part of a

broader movement of poets resistant to both the two-camp model *and* the idea that they are practicing a merger of these camps.

The question is, can we in any discernible way track this new movement and is it worth the pursuit? The following chapters will explore these concerns while this chapter attempts to define them.

### Chapter 3: The Politics of Ore: Past Poets as Resource

Chapter 3 will read poems by some of the more famous experimental poets—specifically John Ashbery, Nathaniel Mackey and Lyn Hejinian—anthologized in *American Hybrid* to determine three things: (1) is the poem an example of a hybrid poetics as Swensen and St. John define it? (2) How does that effect how we read the poem, how does it change our perceptions? And finally, (3) with a hybrid reading of the poets in mind, is this a true representation of poets working today? Does this reading, endorsed by Swensen and St. John among others, provide us with the tools to understand 21<sup>st</sup> century poetry?

Fairness dictates that we recognize the poet may not intend for their poem to be read as anything other than experimental and also that their intention may not coincide with the ways their poems are being read by the next generation of poets. Lyn Hejinian, for example, "espouse[s] a poetics of uncertainty, of doubt, of difficulty, and strangeness. Such a poetics [she suggests] is inevitably contradictory, dispersive, and incoherent while sustaining an ethos of linkage. It exhibits disconnection while hoping to accomplish reconnection" (Swensen and St. John 78). How, we might ask, can such a poetics be read as existing in a limbo of experimental and conventional? Perhaps it can't. Perhaps, though, some of her poems don't conform fully to her vision. Or, perhaps she is misread by critics like Swensen and St. John. Genre theory may help us come to some terms with how poems such as Hejinian's "The Beginner" might *act* as



hybrids (or proto-hybrids) now that the “genre” is created. Though genre is a dangerous description for hybridity, some theory might help us navigate the nuance of these fuzzy categories for the purpose of understanding if a hybrid poetics exists and is a reasonable response to contemporary concerns and if it reveals the permeability and flimsiness of the earlier binary model. Once this is established it will be easier, later in this argument, to ask if hybrid poetics makes sense as a title. I mean to problematize this by pointing out Swensen and St. John’s back-facing mentality, suggesting it is often a theorization of where poetics have been not where they are going. All new poetic movements and genres come from somewhere. This chapter will look at Swensen and St. John’s somewhere and ask were they standing in the right place when they turned to ask, how did we get here? Keeping to concerns of fairness, I will read these experimental poets as I believe Swensen and St. John intend.

By taking poems instead of poets into consideration we can look for those trends that Swensen and St. John suggest are essential to hybridity; Fulton suggests is fractal; Burt elliptical. Here, too, we take up Wallace's presumption that each poem must be read as an individual act, unbound. Specifically, according to Swensen, the poems need to

selectively [inherit] traits from both of the principal paths outlined above [experimental and traditional]. . . Today’s hybrid poem might engage such conventional approaches as narrative that presumes a stable first person, yet complicate it by disrupting the linear temporal path or by scrambling the oral syntactical sequence. Or it might foreground recognizably experimental modes such as illogicality or fragmentation, yet follow the strict formal rules of a sonnet or a villanelle. Or it might be composed entirely of neologisms but based in ancient traditions. (xxi)

In a fairly straightforward way, then, the poems mean to blend experimental playfulness and exploration with conventional tactics. No real claims are made by Swensen and St. John as to the result of this fusion. Therefore the chapter will look at a series of Millennial criticisms to begin positioning these poems into the larger landscape of American poetry. Swensen does suggest that placing “more responsibility on individual readers to make their own assessments” creates stronger readers. However, they leave out any direct conversation about the political implications of these “new combinations” of “the previous adjectives—well-made, decorous, traditional, formal, and refined as well as spontaneous, immediate, bardic, irrational, translogical, open-ended, and ambiguous” (xxv).

What this means for the chapter is a development of a key for reading the hybrid. Specifically, the chapter will explore what “well-made” looks like in combination with the “translogical.” Poems that are hybrid or fractal might, therefore, have movements of epiphany punctuating readerly indeterminacy. Some theory of what the avant-garde looks like and on how to read the traditional will be used to examine if the hybrid actually means to be in two places at once. Specifically, we will need to explore Ashbery’s idea of the avant-garde and track that against Swensen and St. John’s concept of the hybrid as well as Shepherd’s idea of “Third Way” poetics and Fulton’s idea of “fractal” poetry. This tracking should consider carefully not just the technique of the avant-garde, but also the purpose. What is gained or lost in the borrowing of experimental ideas? And, does the act of borrowing suggest an acknowledgement of avant-garde techniques as an aesthetic and therefore not what Bürger or Ashbery would any longer consider a viable avant-garde?

## Chapter 4: A Deeper Well

Chapter 4 will examine what has been imagined as the flip side of the coin, looking specifically at the poetry of Robert Hass (using him as a stand-in for what is typically imagined as traditional poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century). Swensen and St. John include five of Hass's poems in *American Hybrid*, all published between the years 1989 and 2005. Hass, often considered an exemplar of the modern day lyric, undoubtedly participates in some of the linguistic experimentation poets like Ashbery, Mackey, and Hejinian routinely use. "They Yellow Bicycle," for example—one of the poems anthologized—might be said to be strange. After two stanzas it turns into a long paragraph narrative that is slightly disconnected from the first, second and final stanza. But the work could hardly be called difficult. The site of meaning most likely resides less in the reader than in the poem.

However, Swensen et al. mean it to be hybrid, not avant-garde. Its politics may not sync with Hejinian's, but Swensen and St. John predict that: "While political issues may or may not be the ostensible subject of hybrid work, the political is always there, inherent in the commitment to use language in new ways that yet remain audible and comprehensible to the population at large" (xxi). Charles Altieri takes this even further in his critique of Hass's poem "Happiness" (not included in the anthology). Though he would never argue that the poem is experimental (in fact he calls it banal), he does suggest that this banality is not accidental but an intentional response to the banality of daily living. Is that enough to be hybrid? Certainly not. However, has every poem produced by experimental poets asked us to question capitalism, patriarchy or even poetics in general?

Sticking to reading Hass as I have read Ashbery, Mackey, and Hejinian, this chapter will examine why contemporary poets might look to the works of Robert Hass as source material for

their poems. And, while I might concede that some individual poems of his lean toward a hybrid poetry, I cannot endorse using Hass's formal techniques and content matter as a representation of where poetry is today.

### Chapter 5: Beyond the Anthology

This chapter examines works excluded by Swensen and St. John in their *American Hybrid*. Obviously, no anthology can capture every poem that fits within even the ill-defined boundaries of an anthology; however, if what is not included in an anthology begins to form a pattern, it would be a good idea to explore exactly what that pattern is and consider reasons as to why it exists. In the case of *American Hybrid*—and, to be fair, other anthologies of this vein (e.g. *Lyric Postmodernisms*)—one obvious gap is inclusivity. From the outset, the idea of a hybrid poetry that merges *the two* great camps of American poetry assumes a position regarding poetry: namely and obviously that the traditional and the experimental are not just two important movements in American poetics, but that they are *the two* movements and that other movements are some form of pluralizing from these pure centers. Some critics, however, contend this is not the case. They argue that from the moment of the camps' creation they have favored particular groups and particular systems for resistance.

In particular, Craig Santos Perez in his “Whitewashing American Hybrid Aesthetics,” takes issue with Swensen and St. John's selection of poems and visualization of hybridity, focusing on their claims of inclusivity, which Perez sees as continued exclusivity. Perez attacks what he repeatedly calls “a white poetic legacy.” He points to the dearth of latino/a poetry included in the anthology—the total absence of Native American poetry, and he asks, how can this be representative?

This chapter will suggest as an anthology, it is not representative of how poetry is being created today or by whom (their voice, their identity). However, the question that might remain is, does a hybrid poetics actually exist that demonstrates “the historical depth and vitality of the concept of poetic hybridization in American poetry”? This quote, taken from “Legacy,” Swensen’s introduction to *American Hybrid* becomes a sarcastic refrain in Perez’s article. While I believe Perez’s argument is a valid volley against the anthology, it does not preclude the possibility that such hybridity does exist and has some historical roots. Therefore, this chapter will explore the works of several Native American, Latino/a and Asian-American poets to see if it is possible to read acts of hybridization in their works. This, too, will be inconclusive in that it will inevitably leave out important groups, movements, resistances, etc. However, the hope is, it will answer the question is this a truly hybrid American poetics that combines in democratic inclusiveness or is it, in fact, simply the latest manifestation of “a white poetic legacy”? If it is the former, it would mark a significant change in American poetics. If it is (more likely) the latter, it still marks a shift in a particular American poetics; however, that shift might be given a better (less collective) name—one that better describes its function in the world. That is, hybridity as a title (as with Third Way poetry before it) all return to the two-camp model that many critics today argue erases its multicultural and trans-national roots.

To test these ideas, the chapter will read poems by poets like Alfred Arteaga, dg nanouk okpik, Joy Harjo, and Cathy Park Hong, putting forward, in particular, okpik and Hong as true representatives of where poetry is today.

## CHAPTER 2

### MILLENNIAL POETICS: A GUIDEBOOK

The need for the hybrid, for a "Third Way" in poetry, a need which came to a head at the turn of the century, was as much a need for a new poetics as it was for a new way of reading—a binding of writerly intentional shifts and readerly conventional shifts. It points to the changing face of poetic creation and the changing face of poetic readership, a broadening of cultural knowledge and identities alongside a shift in concern with capitalism and dominate cultural ideologies. This generation of readers, as seen through the loupe of Millennial Poetics, has matured in an arena where John Ashbery shares the limelight with Robert Frost, Joy Harjo with Jorie Graham, Langston Hughes with Harryette Mullen—often not as rivals in poetic ideas and politics but as uneasy allies in battle against the dying of the light.

Mainstream poetry no longer holds the center in the way it once did. Though more and more poetry is being published than ever before, the prestige of the poet is arguably diminishing, alongside the rising portfolio of its market share. The readership has paradoxically narrowed as it has changed. That is, the proliferation of MFA programs and publishing companies (traditional and cyber) has produced a reading population trained differently than past generations. There are not more readers, but instead a broader potential canon and a broader accessible canon. The Venn diagram of these groups looks more and more like overlapping circles thanks to sets of technology that have increased production, lowered costs, and provided different and more accessible media for the student or reader of poetry. This, in turn, has created a far less centered mainstream than in years past.

True some pockets of poetry do dominate the mainstream, and true those pockets are as traditional as ever (Billy Collins, Mary Oliver). However, thanks to countless anthologies and

electronic pluralism, students and readers new to poetry are as likely to come across Ashbery, Palmer, Hejinian, Olson, Graham, Swenson, and Spahr, as they are representatives of the more approachable poetries. The camps defined by the major publishing houses and the classroom begin to dissipate. And, these readers, critics and writers are likely to find books, essays and online guides about how to read these poets—putting aside, momentarily, the potential danger of such a gloss, is it not reasonable that poets and readers both begin to recognize technique divorced from movement? Blend, merge, play, alter? Hasn't that been the game of the postmodern for some time anyway? Hasn't the last century gone out of its way to teach this generation to read exactly in this manner? And, if a larger percentage of the poetry reading population is at least toying with the idea of also being writers, it seems natural that technique and style will be learned and adopted—admittedly often at the cost of a political or ethical statement. Add to this a rising and critically dominate concern that the avant-garde has not brought about the change it was supposed to usher in and the old Modernist need to "Make it New," and you have a recipe for Millennial Poetics.

If we take the great swath of criticism from loosely the 1980s and 90s until the publication of *American Hybrid* (2009), from Ron Silliman to Charles Altieri to Stephen Burt to Alice Fulton to Cole Swensen to Cathy Park Hong, and seek out a common thread for a contemporary poetics at the turn of the century, we see claims of brinksmanship poetry. Whether we call it Third Way poetry, Fractal poetry, Elliptical poetry, Poetry on the Verge, Poetry on the Brink, Hybrid poetry, or Millennial Poetry there is some consensus that driving toward and now arriving in the new millennium, we have also arrived at the locus of a new poetry that is built off of the mixed-up blueprints of previous poetics. Even critics of the various names and clades rarely suggest that such a movement is not happening. Instead, they are wary of its ability, agility

and likelihood to erase the politics of the avant-garde or its narrowly defined borders or the voices chosen as avatars of this new movement.

A work like this, therefore, must not simply state that the movement exists, it must define what it is, provide some understanding of the parameters and takes some guesses as to why it has come about. Further, we must consider what effects such a movement might have, how it might confront or avoid issues born of the legitimate concerns about the politics of mainstream poetry and the ability of experimental poetry to confront these politics. While I find it unlikely that such a movement will cauterize wounds, stitch together (to continue the metaphor) the torn flesh of American poetics, and “heal” poetry, it would be irresponsible to suggest simply because a movement has a high likelihood of failure it does not exist. Because of lack of representation, the urge to make it new, anxiety of influence, or need to resist what can seem like the penitentiary bars of camp, Millennial Poets are attempting to forge a new path, one that both relies on previous techniques and veers sharply away from the idea that these techniques come ready-made with rulebooks and penalties.

On one level, it is difficult to buy Swensen and St. John's claim that poets like John Ashbery are part of a hybrid movement, although this claim is softened by Swensen and St. John's reassurance that poems, not poets, are hybrid. Nevertheless, I find it easier to see poets like Ashbery, on one side, and Robert Hass, on the other, Joy Harjo on still a third side as resource for the new poets rather than revelation. But, these resources are exactly the point. The praise lauded Ashbery, Hass and Harjo might demonstrate the exact concerns of Millennial Poetics: namely, the cosmopolitan recognition that they agree with both the politics and fractured nature of the avant-garde and the importance of clarity and union in making some statements. Turn of the century poets trust that plurality is a strength and might confront in the classroom



and in the bookstore a broader array of stylistic differences without the camped politics often tied to them. The Sixth Edition of *Poetry: A Pocket Anthology* by Penguin Academics (2009), for example, cleaves vigorously to a mainstream approach to poetry, but includes works from John Ashbery and Harryette Mullen. The anthology does nothing to suggest readers approach these poets differently than the traditional poets sandwiched next to them, all bearing similar headers: born here, studied here, famous for this. No guide on how to read the poetry. No note about the differences between Ashbery and X. J. Kennedy. The Seventh Edition of *Poetry: An Introduction* (2013), published by Bedford/ St. Martin, also nestles Mullen among the Wordsworths, Roethkes and Wilburs.

We should be wary of such readings and placements without being dismissive. The 21<sup>st</sup> century, as all centuries before it, will practice what Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence* might label *clinamen*—the act of “*misreading...the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation*” (30). Of course, in Bloom’s mind there seems to be a correct interpretation and a definitive reading of any given poem. Most poets who practice Millennial Poetics will resist such totalizing ideas and see their acts of “creative correction” more like a borrowing. They are the architects that find an unfinished, ancient building and do not attempt to make the “true” building it was meant to be, but instead add to it with all the tools they now possess. The anxiety the Millennial Poet suffers from now is not only focused on the concept of greatness, but also inclusion, appropriation, plurality. At times, undeniably, the acts of hybridization are therefore acts of erasure. Combining the experimental with the traditional, the Western with the non-Western—even cognitive of the dangers of such behavior—is likely to result in the practice of some dominate behaviorism. This, after all, is the concern of critics like Craig Santos Perez have about Swensen and St. John’s anthology. Whereas critics like Mark

Wallace argue that Swensen, St. John, Shepherd, Burt, Fulton, et al do not just exclude, they act. Through their anthologizing, Wallace argues, these critics unavoidably—and sometimes against their will—represent a particular school of thought and such classification minimizes and devalues differences between not just the plurality of schools and movements alive during the last thirty years, but between individual poets in those schools (Wallace 126-127).

Nevertheless, as the academy weighs in on the birth or miscarriage of a new movement, as companies like Norton begin the process of anthologizing hybridity, the questions of what defines poetry at the turn of the millennium arise. Though the process of demarcation brings with it all the flaws and concerns above, it will happen. Arguably, the broader the possibilities of any new poetics, the more we seek to define and tame it. And, there are broad arrays of poetic techniques today. There is conjunction, too. The waters get murky. The camps are not drawn up in battle lines but instead cradled together against the harsh winds in the lee of history. As always, such mingling and dividing causes confusion, not just for the new poetics, but for the poetics that precede it. Every new poem acts like a pebble in a pond rippling backwards through time, changing the once still surface of the movements that came before. Few poets today consider themselves avant-gardists, language poets, new formalists. The terms have lost their power and meaning. More, the push toward Third Way or Hybrid poetics muddies taken-for-granted definitions of the past. In 2015, Harvard University Press published Jonathan Culler's three-hundred plus page *Theory of the Lyric* because a theory is now needed, again. In 2009, Routledge published Scott Brewster's *Lyric*. 2014, *The Lyric Theory Reader*, an anthology by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, debuts. In the same year, Gillian White publishes *Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of Contemporary American Poetry*. All of this in spite of the fact that criticism of the lyric has been the practice of poetics for millennia. Yet, Culler opens his

Introduction with the claim that regardless of the vast history of the lyric, it suffers from “an uncertain generic status” (1). I find I agree, though I wonder if it has always been the case that its status has been so in question. Hegel does not seem to think so. Nor Aristotle. Yet, Culler is suggesting that as new lyrics come in, new definitions and delineations are needed for older lyrics. The same is likely true for the experimental.

The work of defining movements and genre is the work of locating the exact moment the sea turns into the ocean. Crossovers, nuance and misreadings occur. But, caveats and apologies aside, a theory of the poetics of Millennial Poetry is possible if we allow for raggedy edges and some generalizations. What follows, then, is an approximation of the theory with examples from poets often imagined to be practicing some version of this new poetics whatever name the poet practices under or critics have assigned them. Each definiens offers at best a borderland for a 21<sup>st</sup> century poetics. It should not, therefore, be expected that all poetry produced between the 1990s and now fit all or even some of the categories below. Instead, it should be expected that a style of poetics that relies, to some extent, on the merger of previous schools and movements can be defined by the following ala carte menu. The hope is a creation of a working model for Millennial Poetics—a merger of the numerous and variously defined hybrid, elliptical, fractal, on the verge, Third Way poetics of the past thirty years, while simultaneously a resistance to the limiting precepts of those earlier movements.

However, the seeds of such a poetics can be found even earlier. The third and fourth chapters of this dissertation will look at those poets whose works have long been tied to earlier models: avant-garde, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, lyrical. These poets and their works are likely germinators of the poetics discussed below. John Ashbery, Nathaniel Mackey, and Lyn Hejinian have all produced work that the next generation of poets will be influenced by, techniques

Millennial Poets will absorb and steal. Swensen and St. John think of some of their work as hybrid, but I imagine their identities are more likely to make these experimental poets a resource than an embodiment. The fourth chapter looks at how mainstream poets like Robert Hass also act as stock for present and future poets. Because some of his work fits into the category of a hybrid poetics, younger poets might recognize a disintegration of the great poetic divide, a leaning toward a different center.

The final ingredient for the recipe below is a discussion about what voices are left out and why. Inevitably, the act of defining anything results in a residuum. Some poetry will not fit into this new movement. Many poets, including some of the above, don't want to be associated with a Millennium Poetics. However, there is a difference between not fitting, not wanting to fit, and being left out. In the fifth chapter, I will look at poets who many have been excluded from conversations about a new poetics because conversations about older poetics often erased their presence. Many Native-, Asian-, and Latino/a- American poets are deeply engaged in the idea of finding a new poetry that neither deletes or ignores their identities nor eroticizes or Romanticizes them. Combined, then, we see the various chunks and filaments that collectively define Millennial Poetics. These poets often see hybridity not as a break from the past but as an embracing of it. For many poets practicing Millennial Poetry, that is an unacceptable historic alliance. Poets like Cathy Park Hong see both the experimental and the mainstream as caught up in a historic, poetic whiteness. They would not want to hybridize the two-camp model. For poets like this, such claims are undermining the newness of what they are doing and binding them to a past that specifically excludes them. And, the insistence on names like *American Hybrid* and *Third Way* troubles poets who do not see their work as growing only from two major source

groups. Therefore, I offer Millennial Poetics as a better descriptor for a specific trend in contemporary American poetics. What follows is an attempt to spell out the movement.

### **Millennial Poetics Is Cosmopolitan**

Adhering to a variation of Derrida's vision for cosmopolitanism tuned to the implementation of a writerly cause, the poetics of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century practices a version the hospitality discussed in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* though in linguistic space as opposed to socio-political space. Drawing on Kant, Derrida explores the idea of cosmopolitanism as one focused on hospitality—here, best defined by Kant's idea of hospitality as the right to visitation not residency. In terms of poetics, this might mean the difference between the arrival of and space made for voices and styles atypical to the two-camp model of American poetics (because they are foreign or minority driven) and the shift to a whole new style. In other words, it does not involve the birth of a new Harlem Renaissance or equivalent movement but a merger of styles from various, often marginalized, locations. It is a borrowing from multiple pasts and histories not just the merger of two great schools with binary political goals. Derrida suggests that cosmopolitanism

takes place *between* the Law of an unconditional hospitality, offered *a priori* to every other, to all newcomers, *whoever they may be*, and the conditional laws of a right to hospitality, without which *The* unconditional Law of hospitality would be in danger of remaining a pious and irresponsible desire, without form and without potency, and of even being perverted at any moment. (22-23)

In the language of poetics, this might mean that some of the controlling (often at a significant hegemonic cost) power of mainstream and experimental poetics must be maintained in order for the poems to be hospitable and not displaced, hybrid and not mutated. This gives readers like

Craig Santos Perez good reason to be critical of hybridity's claims of inclusivity, as many critics of cosmopolitanism point out that the model is Euro- (if not more broadly Western-) centric.

That said, it should be noted, that most of what has been deemed, broadly, hybrid is American—a particular type of Euro-American whiteness, to be specific. The title of Swensen and St. John's anthology obviously alludes to this. For this reason, we might pause in our attempts to label Millennial Poetry as cosmopolitan. If anything, it might seem nationalistic. Reading hybrid poetry as such does make some sense. It is guilty of attempting to force another monologic reading of American poetry on the public. However, while such a reading may make sense for hybridity, any attempt to apply the same gloss to Millennial Poetics overlooks an aesthetic cosmopolitanism that has defined much of the poetry included in this analysis. For example, writing about post-soul poets of the 1990s, Malin Pereira argues that terms like *cultural mulatto* no longer (if it ever did) accurately reflect the voice and attitude of African-American poets in the contemporary world. Drawing on Greg Tate for support, Pereira claims that middle class African-American poets writing in the shadow and aftermath of poets like Rita Dove are dissatisfied with earlier labels that do not

accurately reflect the poetic subjectivity of contemporary poets working from a black middle class, culturally hybrid perspective. Instead such writers position themselves as cosmopolitan...[and see] cosmopolitanism as an integral dimension of the "postnationalist black arts movement," which is "more Afrocentric and cosmopolitan than anything that's come before" (206). To say these poets are cosmopolitan is to note the wide array of cultural materials they employ in their poetry, evidence of which can be found in their poems' allusions, poetic techniques, personae, and themes. (710)

In other words, if we extend our definition of, at least, aesthetic cosmopolitanism to include “allusions, poetic techniques, personae, and themes,” we better see how Millennial Poets practice cosmopolitanism. Pereira, of course, makes paramount to her argument the idea of “a rescripting of the middle passage across the ‘black Atlantic’ and among diasporic cultures” (711), thereby insisting on a cosmopolitanism that is culturally hybrid as well as poetically. But, this insistence is witnessed in the aesthetic that merges technique and history.

### **Millennial Poetics Avoids the Subjective Anecdote**

While many concerns might be raised about what exactly Millennial Poetics does, how it differentiates itself from other related and antecedent poetics, one thing that can clearly be stated about the poetry itself is it does not adhere to mainstream poetry’s reliance on a subjective location for narration. But here we must tread carefully. The subjective position does occur in Millennial Poetics. However, the pure sense of the self, the poetic *I* of past mainstream poetry is no longer acceptable. Where much of the mainstream insisted on the Emersonian eye/*I* and much of the experimental means to call such an insistence into question, Millennial Poetry is fractal. As Alice Fulton suggests, it is simultaneously subjective and disruptive. “Although a fractal poem might offer transcendence at the local level—in a line, a phrase—like a complex adaptive system it does not try to sustain a sublime optimum throughout” (128). Here it might be subjective. Here ambiguous. Frank Bidart’s brief poem, “Poem Ending with a Sentence by Heath Ledger” might be a good example. The poem begins in the narrator’s voice. It is fragmented and separated with italics, space, and line length from the altered voice of Heath Ledger that follows it. Further, it bring in the multiple identities all actors inhabit at times, while simultaneous presented multiple voices in the poem.

*Each grinding flattened American vowel smashed to*

*centerlessness, his glee that whatever long ago mutilated his*

*mouth, he has mastered to mutilate*

*you: the Joker's voice, so unlike*

*the bruised, withheld, wounded voice of Ennis Del Mar.*

Once I have the voice

that's

the line

and at

the end

of the line

is a hook

and attached

to that

is the soul. (100)



Merging Bidart's introduction with a manipulated line from Heath Ledger presents both the sense of the subject self in the poem's first three stanzas and its final seven stanzas. The final stanzas' sense of self is perhaps more clear, but both sections present a self. Yet, collectively they resist materializing a narrating subject.

### **Millennial Poetics Seeks to Recover Modernist Ideals**

In his "Introduction" to *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries* Reginald Shepherd explicitly tracks how "New American Poetries" try to capture some of the spirit of modernism as an antidote for some of the post-modern fatigue that he claims has laid its lethargic hand across much of late 21<sup>st</sup> century poetry. Exhausted by the ironic and sarcastic, poets included in his anthology (and in *American Hybrid* and others), according to Shepherd, want the return of passion—something he, and they, locate in modernism. About these new poets, Shepherd says, "Even in their critiques of Modernism, these poets recognize the possibilities that Modernism offers the contemporary poet, possibilities often foreclosed or simply ignored by both the poetic mainstream and the self-appointed experimental opposition" (xiv).

In *21<sup>st</sup>-Century Modernism* (2002), Perloff, though arguing about poets happily camped—in time and purpose—with the post-modernists, points out that "the tired dichotomy that has governed our discussion of twentieth-century poetics for much too long: that between *modernism* and *post-modernism*" is closer to a continuation than a disruption (1-2). She calls the post-modern "a carrying-on, in somewhat diluted form, of the avant-garde project that had been at the very heart of early modernism" (2-3). But, in her concluding chapter, she goes a step further, discussing poets like Lyn Hejinian and Susan Howe (both included in *American Hybrid*) as poets ultimately engaged in the process of poetics the modernists started. Perloff links Hejinian to Gertrude Stein, arguing that Hejinian consistently pays homage to Stein with an

“insistent charging of a single word” that Perloff argues dominates both poets’ stylistic approaches (185). She also links Hejinian to Wittgenstein, Khlebnikov and Russian formalists like Jakobson.

Yet neither Shepherd nor Perloff argues these contemporary poets are modernists. Perloff comes close, but does insist on the title *21<sup>st</sup>-Century Modernists*; thereby separating poets who might approach the language of their poetry in the same way early modernist poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did, but also clearly aware of what has changed since that time.

This Modernist longing also highlights a desire to move past an era of perceived fracturing for the sake of fracturing. 21<sup>st</sup> century poets (the generation following Perloff’s examples) are often looking to break as sharply from their past as the Modernists did from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, 21<sup>st</sup> century poets are still attempting to figure out what this might mean and are therefore blending, borrowing, stealing—much like their early 20<sup>th</sup> century predecessors did.

### **Millennial Poetics Claims an End of Partisanship**

One common thread between all the turn of century theories is the idea that Millennial Poetics will end a partisan bifurcation between camps of poetry usually described as mainstream and experimental. Putting aside, for the moment, the fact that a clean dichotomy of poetry does not and has not ever existed in American poetry, it is still possible to recognize that Millennial Poetics gathers and intertwines techniques often associated with both the mainstream and the experimental. Millennial Poets exhibit a legitimate concern that neither the mainstream nor the experimental accomplishes what needs to be accomplished in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Millennial Poetics often attempts to end the partisanship through *acts* of poetry instead of institutions of poetry. David St. John’s concern with previous identifiers is that “they did not make available...the

fulsome poetically focused investigation or charged discussion of any given poem that comes” (xxvii). Mark Wallace, though believing St. John’s model equally guilty of limiting investigation, agrees that poetry today is best read as acts of individual poetic achievement or failure outside of their camps. He writes that it is “increasingly unlikely that poets would know only, or work only with within, one literary tradition. Instead, many poets now work with an awareness of multiple and global poetic traditions. Insistence on the primacy of any single literary tradition seems more than ever like narrow-minded provincialism” (123). Again, this is why we divorce Millennial Poetics from hybrid poetics. The hybrid may claim to engage with a poem outside of its camp and tradition, but, because of its continued insistence on the prevalence and relevance of these camps, the hybrid remains mired in the provincial nature of that bifurcation. Millennial Poetics, however, practice “an awareness of multiple and global poetic traditions.”

While these claims are lofty and, to my mind, difficult or even impossible to achieve—we all read in a tradition even if that tradition is not as narrow as it used to be, that does not mean that Millennial Poets and Poetics cannot or do not aspire to it. Think of the ambitious manifestoes of previous movements, Modernism and avant-garde included. Even if Millennial Poets never achieve any of the goals laid out here, that does not mean they do not aspire to them. The desire to end what some see as partisan poetics is a desire to be inclusive, often where poets felt previous camps were exclusive because of their subjective position or because of the makeup of the group espousing the idea or for any number of other reasons.

### **Millennial Poetics Is Born of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Many of the poets explored in this dissertation precede the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with the belly of their work. In spite of this, Millennial Poetics, if it is a movement, is truly a movement only after

the millennium. Earlier poets, like Ashbery and Mackey, are more resource than product. While I believe it is reasonable to see acts of hybridity in their works, poets who come of age in the aftermath of the avant-garde, the postmodern, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, are more likely to consistently practice a Millennial Poetics. These poets are less wedded to particular camps. They move, with liquid ease, from style to style, camp to camp—even if that ease sometimes comes at the cost of surrendering the politics that attended the aesthetics of that camp.

Cathy Park Hong and dg nanouk okpik are the poets included in this dissertation that best represent Millennial Poets. Born in the latter quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they blend together with greater ease the various poetics of the last century. Owing no special allegiance to a movement, camp or group, they are more likely to explore a non-partisan path to their poetry.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE POLITICS OF ORE: PAST POETS AS RESOURCE

#### **Acts of Hybridity**

A first step in examining Millennial Poetics, I believe, is to recognize the realities and dangers of assuming that it is identical to hybrid poetics. With that in mind, this chapter will track what Swensen and St. John highlight as hybrid (especially as it relates to those poets typically imaged as experimental) in an effort to construct a working theory of hybridity to place in a Petri dish beside Millennial Poetics and thereby establish their differences and their similarities.

One of the first major claims that Swensen and St. John make is that hybridity is an *act* of poetry, not a designation for a poet. To understand what I mean by *act*, some complicated mathematics must be performed. That is, while this chapter will cover the poets John Ashbery, Nathaniel Mackey, and Lin Hejinian—famously experimental poets—it will actually be looking at some of their discrete poems instead of their oeuvre. There is a history of such exploration that has allowed, for example, a divided Yeats (one part Victorian, one part Modernist). Truly, any poet who has survived more than one bout of fame is likely to have more than one poetic incarnation. Pound was, among a dozen other things, an imagist. Labeling poets (or allowing them to self-label) helps us understand some unity of historic importance. It binds ideas and movements, changes in poetics and politics.

Further, an *act* is not purely driven by the poet. As indicated above, the era and the resulting cultural pressures factor in. And, as a result, a readership born of these pressures understands a poem in a new light. A purely heuristic reading of these works may well identify some techniques that resonate with millennial frequencies, but such vibrations might also be

found in works of Gertrude Stein or Gerard Manley Hopkins or poets writing in the year 2120; that hardly qualifies them as Millennial Poets any more than Mary Oliver is a Romantic—true, her poems don't exist without the Romantics, and, true, a close reading of her work might highlight a specific poetics, but she is not Shelly or Keats or Wordsworth because no audience reads her as such and the Romantics cannot respond to her.

A poem that *acts* millennial, then, is complicit in acknowledging both that two major camps of poetics (experimental and traditional) have been argued about and articulated over the last century and in resisting the divide as artificial and no longer useful. If such a hybridity is a historic, poetic moment, it makes sense that it would not only be the product of poets coming of age during the first part of the Twenty-First Century (poets whose first collection was published after the millennium), but also a turning away from older practices from some established poets. Such poets provide a resource for this next generation of Millennial Poets. Obviously, not every poet will be carried by the tides of change. Richard Wilbur, for example, is little likely to find himself caught up by a sudden change in poetic style. Perhaps it is true, therefore, that poets who have always lived in the realm of experiment are more likely to be part of such historic changes. Whatever the case, it is clear in their anthology that Swensen and St. John believe poets more closely associated with the avant-garde are more likely to produce poems that are hybrid. As change or difference is a function and concern of experimental poets—formal change as well as linguistic innovation—this makes some sense. However, it does not help clarify why Swensen and St. John included them beyond their experimental leanings. Therefore, this chapter will conduct a series of close readings focused on these poetic acts in an attempt to understand what, specifically, is hybrid in the work. It will also explore how much if any of this translates into Millennial poetics and why.

## Ashbery as Ore

John Ashbery makes sense as a first target. He is a poet whose fame belies his daring. To quote him paraphrasing George Bernard Shaw, “it is the fate of some artists, and perhaps the best ones, to pass from unacceptability to acceptance without an intervening period of appreciation” (“Invisible” 287). His rise to status of famous poet is supported by critics as diverse as Harold Bloom and Marjorie Perloff. Anthologized in a great percentage of all classroom anthologies that mean to “introduce” poetry to freshmen literature majors, Ashbery is a visible landmark and presence to most poets writing today. In other words, he maintains a position of great stability in the current poetic canon. I mention this because it highlights two things: (1) Ashbery is broadly accepted as a poet of great importance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and (2) he is already a poet whose reception history (at least) seems hybrid. This, too, makes sense. After all, in his famous address to the Yale Art School, “the Invisible Avant-Garde,” Ashbery suggests that Jackson Pollock’s work remains “alive” because of the “doubt element.” This “doubt element” is represented by acceptance and by the consistent, nagging suspicion that Pollock’s work or Ashbery’s is not art, “has not congealed into masterpieces” (Ashbery “Invisible” 288).

Yet, this claim by Ashbery was made in 1968. It seems similar to some hybrid claims. Works need to be unacceptable and acceptable, dangerous and mundane. If this is the avant-garde, what then is the hybrid? Swensen, at least, argues that the hybrid is not about the boundary between the reckless and the traditional; no, it is about what hybrid poets don’t do—namely, they don’t “adhere to or uphold either of the dominant camps of 1960 to 1990 American poetry...they come out of environments in which that binary model was a principle influence, and they have chosen to rethink it, often with results that leave them outside the available poetic labels, be they two, five or fifty” (“Response” 150). She later points out that the hybrid is not the

synthesized. It is not homogenous, but a product of both progenitors. And, in truth, Ashbery's early claims are about separating the traditional from the avant-garde. So, what remains is a question about whether or not his recent poems meet the somewhat vague descriptors of the hybrid Swensen et al offer. Obviously in the editor's minds Ashbery's poems qualify, but we want to be careful not to simply accept this judgement without review. Ashbery, after all, is an author who has long comfortably existed in the experimental camp.

In "Well-Lit Places," the first of his poems included in *American Hybrid*, Ashbery begins with a stanza of simple, declarative sentences—six of which are end-stopped lines. The first two, in their banal straightforwardness, neither inspire confusion nor emotion. The third line, however, gives pause. "Mussolini offers a diamond to Corot." Grammatically the line is clean and we can understand it. Historically the event is impossible—Mussolini being born eight years after Corot dies and in a different country. In other words, it is in keeping with many avant-garde poetic standards. For example, there is a logic of sound that drives through the entire first stanza. A sibilance that begins with the *s* in "horse" and concludes with the double *s* sound in "sweetness." However, this can hardly be called traditional. The sign-signifier logic is harder to track—from trees to Mussolini to the "famous" and "magnificent" to "Embassies" to "insolence." Though, of course, the poem returns to images of nature in its conclusion: "She will conquer in all things, with God's help and that of the fuchsia, the / orange, and the dahlia" (20-21). Too, there is a repetition of the theme of conquering and dominance in all three stanzas that ties them together in some version of the traditional ideas of unity. However, the poem does not "foreground recognizably experimental modes such as illogicality or fragmentation, yet follow the strict formal rules of a sonnet or a villanelle," as Swensen argues such hybrids might attempt (xxi). It does not, for example, act like Michael Palmer's "Sonnet" with its loose adherence to



the form. But, it does combine (arguably) a sense of the “conventional” by demonstrating some “coherence,” some “narrative,” with some “experimental” techniques like “juxtaposition” and “rupture.” (xxi). This mixing and matching of conventions, Swensen suggests, crafts the hybrid.

Yet, don't most poems in the experimental camp occasional borrow from the traditional? Barring those poems that are visually driven or on the far extreme of experimental, don't most poems have some element of the “traditional” hidden within them? A distinction, then, that critics of this new hybrid, Third Way, or—as Reginald Sheppard calls it—lyrical investigation highlight is that poets practicing a post-bifurcated American poetry produce “work [that] crosses, ignores, or transcends the variously demarcated lines between traditional lyric and avant-garde practice. Their work combines lyric allure and experimental interrogation toward the production of a new synthesis” (Shepard i). Alice Fulton agrees with this sentiment. Swensen and St. John, too. But, while the claim may be made that work in this vein bridges, merges, and fuses camps no longer suited to the work of confining contemporary poetry, it is another thing altogether to show where this happens.

In the case of Ashbery, if such a composite of traditional and avant-garde is present, it seems to be in poems of his engaged in practice of producing stanzas and lines that offer minute logic. That is, in these poems, to borrow from Yury Lotman, several of the systems at work in any poem are working together, if only momentarily. That is, in “Well-Lit Places” Ashbery crafts lines with a consistent system of sound, grammar, semantic groupings, etc.

Consider: “Embassies are loud with the sound of cymbals and organs.” This line makes perfect sense in terms of self-contained logic. Embassies produce sound from musical instruments. It makes sense grammatically, too. Constructed in simple syntax, the sentence has a plural noun followed by the copula, adjective and prepositional phrases leading to objects. The

pattern of sound exposed is also available to be analyzed with a tradition close reading. Not aurally explosive, the line does consist of assonance (loud/sound) and a sibilance that continues from previous lines and most obvious in “Embassies,” “sound,” “cymbals” and the concluding plural of “organs.” Symbolically, the choice of “cymbals” and “organs” could be explored in relationship to previously mentioned ideas of pride, fame, magnificence and “megalomania.” This, too, could be linked with the direct allusion to Mussolini. In other words, at least momentarily, the poem opens itself up to a familiar New Critical approach (close reading)—an approach in keeping with how students are often prepped to read every poem from Tennyson’s “Ulysses” to Eliot’s “Wasteland” to Frost’s “The Road Not Taken.” But this approach is very much the opposite of what Ashbery himself suggests is the avant-garde. We do not question if this is art, as he would have us do, but instead read it as art with the same professorial spectacles that that we hooked behind our ears to read a W. H. Auden poem. And that would be the end of it, but for the fact that the rest of the poem doesn’t conform to such standard investigation.

The same system of systems we use to investigate a single line of this poem cannot be used to read the poem as a whole. Yes, some logic stretches across each of the three stanzas. The sense of importance highlighted by “princes” “coat[s] of arms” and her ability to “conquer in all things” is reinforced in the name dropping of Mussolini and Corot. But it is also challenged by banal statements about nature and the occasional disruptive sentence (e.g. “The taste of insolence is sharp, with an agreeable mingled sweetness”).

We might, given this knowledge, argue, as Jerome McGann does about poetry in general, that “Well-Lit Places,” because it is constructed of such “overlapping structures” exists “outside the language game of information” (8). That is, the poem’s many codings or strands of DNA—to continue borrowing from McGann—force us to recognize that the poem cannot, does

not work on a purely informational level. Poetry, in general, exists as phenomenon acting as a counter to “the language game of information”—a system McGann borrows from Wittgenstein. Ashbery, however, crafts a poem that teases readers with the possibility that the game of information is what is being played, yet ultimately fails to play the game. Or, perhaps more accurately, plays the game by coding *information* in fragments within a larger *aesthetical* game. Other, more traditional poems might code information alongside aesthetical logic, as in a Yeats poem. Experimental verse, on the other hand, might insist on a greater division of information and aesthetics—as in a Gertrude Stein poem. The hybrid, therefore, might exist as a place of combined if fractured and taped together codes and games. If this is true though, we must consider how this differs in purpose from experimental verse and how it belongs to the specific historical moment of contemporary poetry. One answer, again, is to look to McGann and his conception of “meaning-consensus” (5).

Simply, and obviously, “meaning-consensus” exists when “a poem has been widely read.” Read enough, a poem begins to be fit into its demarcation zone, at least in the public eye. This poem is Romantic or lyric or experimental. It gets anthologized and reproduced as a token of greater categories—as an example of a movement, a group, an epoch, a genre. In part, that’s what Swensen and St. John are attempting to do by including Ashbery in their collection. Yet, the readership for “Well-Lit Places” cannot compare to the readership for a Keats’ poem or a Frost classic; nevertheless, arguably, the “author-function” (borrowing from Foucault’s ideas here) of John Ashbery may. This process, I believe, may create a readership comfortable in an Ashberian mode. Here is where the political-historical movement of the hybrid is born—after audiences have had enough time to assimilate (maybe defang) Ashbery’s aesthetic. Some critics, after all, argue that this is how we get the modernists.

Charles Bernstein, in *Attack of the Difficult Poems*, suggests that this defanging has already occurred in many of the most prominent “difficult texts” ever written. About *The Wasteland* and *Ulysses* he says, “these cease to be difficult texts insofar as they are fetishized as Arnoldian tokens of ‘bestness,’ a process that replaces their linguistic, aesthetic, and sociohistorical complexity with the very unambiguous status of cultural treasure” (10). Whatever the intricacies of that particular legerdemain, one thing we might be able to take from it is that the techniques of Eliot and Joyce become more commonplace as the status of their magnum opuses becomes “cultural treasure.” Bernstein rightfully points out that this narrows our ways of reading these difficult works, but acknowledges that this narrowing of readings broadens the readership and creates (rightfully or wrongfully) a “meaning-consensus” that makes approaching an Eliot poem today a seesaw of criticism that teeters between a readership with a general idea about the text and the author and the actuality of “The Wasteland” itself.

The Millennial Poetic, however, cannot simply be “fetishized,” older avant-garde works, even if the hybrid can. If experimental poets like Ashbery mean to engage in defibrillating a numbed public by defamiliarizing language, a cross current of technique, readership, and normality must be forded. However, when some of these techniques lose their “newness” (think Pound here), they might become resource in addition to acts of poetry. Because, in other words, some of Ashbery may have reached a “meaning-consensus,” newer poets can borrow the technique without the value. An immured sense of “Ashberianism” is born which is actually, in all likelihood, a misreading of his work in the vein of Blake reading Milton but is, nevertheless, productive in creating works with elements of the avant-garde without all of the earlier cross-currents.

Since about the early 1990s, then, Ashbery has existed simultaneously as producer and resource. Brian Glavey points out—concluding with a quote from a 2005 edition of *The New York Times*—that while he was “Once considered exasperating and difficult, Ashbery now has ‘become a part of our mental furniture’” (527). Marjorie Perloff, among others (including, undoubtedly, Charles Bernstein) resist the idea that Ashbery can be “normalized.” But his acceptance by critics from both camps does allow for readers from a broader spectrum. It increases his appearance in anthologies and his likelihood to be taught in the classroom. In his seminal *From Outlaw to Classic*, Alan Golding points out that Ashbery, along with eight other poets, begin appearing regularly in anthologies by the 1980s and that this “indicates the power of alternative poetics to diffuse or redefine the center” (35). Glavey suggests this is perhaps in part because, “The difficulty of Ashbery’s work stems from the fact that his particular forms of experimentation resist the discourses used to describe avant-garde poetry just as much as they evade traditional understandings of lyric” (527-8). A notion, I’m certain, Swensen latches on to in order to declaim proof of Ashbery’s status as hybrid icon. In any case, four decades of Ashbery’s work as foremost American poet has provided a readership that has at least attempted to “normalize” his poems. We might say, then, if his techniques have not shifted toward the center, the center has shifted toward his techniques—whatever the cost or gain.

We might, then, expect to have a collective of young poets and critics armed with past practice and a sense of the author-function of Ashbery, ready to read “Well-Lit Places.” Thus, students of poetry picking up Swensen and St. John’s anthology in the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century might recognize in Ashbery’s poems techniques of the avant-garde and the lyric, but they may not be inclined “unlike their elders” to “feel that they have to choose between...the conventional and the experimental” (Swensen xxiv). But, why not? And did the “elders” have to

choose? Part of the answer is what is spelled out above. The formal decisions made by poets like Ashbery are driven by ethical and expressive concerns for a readership tuned to some of these same moral interests. Swensen suggests this is the root of the camp structure in American poetry. She would also likely be one of the critics who suggests a less than complete success for the experimental camp, arguing that the avant-garde, for example, did not destroy global capitalism, for example. As the readership for the experimental camp changes, ages, and broadens, the hard lines between the camps (in the wake of their effects on readers) blurs.

Swensen, I believe, is arguing that in the past a clearer distinction was necessary to produce the hoped-for effects. Millennial Poets, however, are not necessarily as tied to the idea that formal shifts are the only method to enact change—perhaps because they believe, as critics like Charles Altieri have argued, the result of the avant-garde were not as revolutionary as hoped for—or perhaps because students and Millennial Poets were raised on a diet of one part experimental technique, one part traditional. Ashbery is as likely to have been a part of their education as Eliot. And, all of it is fair game for poets. As Harryette Mullen writes in the preface to *Recyclopedia*, poetry “remakes and renews words, images, and ideas, transforming surplus cultural information into something unexpected. My poetry exists in part through interaction with communities of readers, writers, and scholars and also through dialogue with editors and publishers whose books and periodicals help to constitute such communities” (vii). This, perhaps, is the reason why so many younger poets and students of poetry can adopt Ashbery’s style: he is part of the (pardon the reduction) “surplus cultural information.”

But, do these same students respond to other, less canonized experimental poets with the same liquid ease? Anthologized alongside Ashbery are Nathaniel Mackey and Lyn Hejinian. Born approximately two decades after Ashbery, both poets have made names for themselves in

what Swensen would call the experimental camp. If their works, too, had become a part of the hybrid movement of the early Twenty-First Century, we would likely be able to read some of the same techniques in their poems. Techniques not born of a hybridity, but instead grafted into it. No single moment in Ashbery's poem is hybrid in any identifiable way. Rather, it is the coming together of experimental techniques, traditional poetic style and a readership versed in the production of both the difficult and the lyrical, the experimental and the logical, the counter-culture and the Romantic. So, what we need to seek in Mackey and Hejinian is a convergence not a single practice. Do these recognized, experimental poets provide enough DNA from both species to call this thoroughbred a mule? For now, we will leave off the political implications of this. However, we must eventually and inevitably return to what might be the most vexing concern of the hybrid: it may drain the purpose from the experimental and the sublime from the traditional.

### **Mackey's Hybridity**

In many ways, Mackey is an obvious choice for hybridity. A poet renowned for his merger of jazz and folklore and poetry, Mackey has long been a master of the mosaic. In *American Hybrid*, Swensen and St. John include a segment of Mackey's famous and most important poem, "Song of the Andoumboulou."

This, too, is an interesting choice. "Song of the Andoumboulou" is a multi-volume poem of great length and complexity. Swensen and St. John don't begin, as it were, in the beginning of the poem. Instead, they choose a passage that they feel meets the quality of hybridity. Obviously concerns with this approach include opportunities for extra-contextual readings of the poem. Many people, for example, have come to Lawrence Ferlinghetti poems mid-poem thanks to some anthology or another. Walt Whitman, too. Most people read William Carlos Williams's poems

outside the context of his *Spring and All*. Certainly, such readings risk misreading, but they have also built (albeit not without some damaging shifts in poetics) the narrative of who these poets are. Therefore, we need to begin with a word of caution. If we find here that Mackey's poems fit remarkably well within the framework we are establishing for Millennial Poetics, that might be, in part, because we are ripping them out of their natural environment. A smart move, then, is to explore, instead, the greater poem, the panorama that allows for the vistas we see anthologized. However, we might also recognize that all labeling and classifying is guilty of some measure of unhousing and dehistoricizing. And, the hybrid thrives, in Swensen and St. John's definition, on the recognition that it is the moment, not the poet, that matters. In a poem of the length and scope of "Song of the Andoumboulou," the stretched timeline and serial nature of its production and reception might allow for a reasonable, segregated reading of parts of the poem.

The poem included in the anthology is "Song of the Andoumboulou: 64—sound and sediment—." Part of the greater mythos of this multivolume work, this excerpt, too, has hints of the Dogon storyline and jazz that weave through all of the works. Constructed of short lines with numerous refrains, the poem moves through a series of narrative moments that aren't always immediately logical in their individual grammatical units. Whereas "Well-Lit Places" has lines like, "The taste of insolence is sharp, with an agreeable mingled sweetness"—difficult but not illogical, "Song of the Andoumboulou: 64" is constructed around lines like:

Sweet beast in whose  
belly we fell asleep again,  
  
the  
  
sweet beast music was



we'd be. (253)

that do not function around the same straight forward, if fragmented, logic of Ashbery's poem. While there exists a system of information constructed around the patterns of sound in the poem: the assonance in "sweet," "beast," "we," "asleep," and "be," the syntagmatic logic of "the / sweet beast music was / we'd be" takes a bit more effort. But, can we say of it that it, as St. John argues in this Introduction, "ignore[s] and/or defie[s] categorization"? That it is "poetry that embraces a variety of—even sometimes contradictory—poetic ambitions and aesthetics" (xxviii)? I have a harder time here than with Ashbery.

Certainly Mackey employs skills and techniques commensurate with traditional poetry. To some degree every poet writing in English likely does. Certainly, too, he is not as ambitious in breaking some of traditional methods in this poem as poets who have crafted works that are more of a visual exercise than an aural one (think Susan Howe's *Souls of the Labadie Tract*). However, he does not meet any of the obvious markers of tradition that a Robert Penn Warren or a Cleanth Brooks would point to as an example of a "successful poem." This is not to suggest some hierarchy of experimental poetry (or, for that matter of traditional poetry). Both camps present far too much variance for such a claim, and every poet practicing in either camp has acts of poetry that are closer to the center of each model. What I am suggesting here is simply that this section of Mackey's larger poem advances moves that are harder to see as being traditionally traditional.

Unity, for example, is a problem in the text *if* we insist on unity as belonging to the text by itself. It is unified with larger aspects of the multivolume work, with Dogon mythology, etc. But, such unity isn't typical of the traditional. In fact, this text seems to want to disrupt such unity by creating fragmented lines and syntagmatic hiccups.



this sense, too, readers in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are likely equipped with the skills needed from some of this decoding. They are likely and rightfully cautious of the poem whose logic is “obvious” or “undeniable.” They are likely thankful for the space Mackey provides to insert a plurality of voices into the poem. In, “On Edge,” Mackey calls this getting “a word in edgewise.” He reminds us about Robert Duncan’s argument about unity: “Not only the experience of unity but the experience of separation is the mother of man” (246). About this separation and edge, Mackey suggests that poems, presumably like his own, allow “differences [to] intersect, [it is a place] where we witness and take part in a traffic of partialities, where half-truths or partial wisdoms converse, contend, interlock” (246). In this essay, Mackey continues to contend that what is needed is not orality or jazz or literacy or shouts or speech, but the edge, the place of intersection. Nevertheless, he cautions that this edge is needed because of the cultural dominance of ideologies that have long dominated the traditional notions of language and poetry.

This leaves us in a difficult spot. We must come to a place, he might argue, that is, formally speaking, on the edge of both the experimental and the traditional, but we must also recognize that the traditional has been dominated by ideologies harmful to the oppressed and steered by “the totalizing imperial project that ... poetry in that Western tradition can be seen as being complicit with and some kind of reflection of” (*Paracritical* 276). This sounds more like an attempt to resist the traditional than it does an attempt to merge with it. However, as always, it’s dangerous to trust an author’s take on his own work. For one thing, it dismisses (see above) the reception of the audience. Yes, much of Western poetry might be seen as being “complicit with” imperialism, but that does not mean that today’s audiences are reading without resistance. They may, perhaps do, come to poetry like Mackey’s specifically because they track both the

elements of the traditional and the elements of the radical in it. After all, part of Mackey's project is to combine Western poetry and African mythology, Dogon and Don Cherry.

Perhaps a point of concern needs to be our narrow definition of *hybridity*. Consider, as Richard Quinn writes: "*Strict* is a text-recording of boundless hybridity, a cross fertilization of jazz and poetry which opens cognitive hatches to a world where conceptual dualisms (I/they, meaning/nonmeaning, sense/nonsense) disintegrate before the fertile power of that which rationality excludes" (608). This is true, in part, because Mackey's work is a bringing together of all of these elements. His poetry occupies the line between avant-garde jazz, sound poetry and innovative language creations." Here, the definition of *hybrid* is not a simply the merger of the experimental and the traditional, but jazz, mythology, experimental and traditional. This leans towards a point I attempted to draw before; *hybrid* as defined by Swensen and St. John circumscribes a too narrow idea of Millennial Poetics. If we, instead, pursue a concept of hybridity that is the convergence of Fractal Poetry, Third Way Poetry, Elliptical Poetry, Poetry on the Verge, Lyrical Postmodernism, etc., and American Hybrid Poetry, we might better explore what Mackey provides in his multivolume, transhistorical, transcultural masterpiece.

Let's consider, for example, Alice Fulton's idea of fractal poetics. She writes:

On the ground between set forms and aimlessness a poem can be spontaneous and adaptive—free to think on its feet rather than fulfill a predetermined scheme. In a departure from Romantic ideals, fractal aesthetics suppose that "spontaneous" effects can be achieved through calculated as well as *ad libitum* means. This "spontaneity" does not refer to a method of composition but to linguistic gestures that feel improvisatory to the reader. Riffing and jamming, rough edge and raw silk—such wet-paint effects take the form of long asides, discursive meanderings, and sudden shifts in diction or tone. (127)

Many of the words Fulton collects to describe her version of this new, post-avant, post-lyric world should sound like perfect descriptors of Mackey's work. The work, according to Fulton, should be "spontaneous" and "riff" and "jam"; it should be on the "rough edge." Fulton's definitions borrow from jazz as much as from math and science (the original analogy of her analysis). She suggests, if Mackey is Fractal (for now a place holder for hybrid or what I want to call Millennial Poetics), his work will, jazz-like, embark on "discursive meanderings." For an example of such Daedalean wandering, let's explore the shift that occurs between the break at the beginning of "—sound and sediment—." It reads:

...Soul was only  
itself said the right...  
Sweet beast in whose  
belly we fell asleep again,  
the  
sweet beast music was  
we'd be. I was pinioning  
light's incommensurate  
object. I wanted the  
baby's cry to mean I'd  
begun  
again



Soon it came time to go,  
the one thing we'd hear



like Mackey are, in part, the result of the need to merge the exclusive, earlier experimental mode with poetry that was more diverse in subject, authorship, race, gender, etc. “By the late '90s, when Language poetry felt compelled to be more inclusive with respect to gender, race, and ethnic diversity, it became difficult to tell what was or was not a "Language poem" (Perloff “Poetry on the Brink” 61). To be clear, the suggestion is that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry first mounted a serious retort to the lyric, but then fell into its own narrow and dangerous exclusivity. When this selectness collapsed, it was replaced by these Millennial Poetics which produced (or were produced by) poets like Mackey. Call it Hybrid. Call it what you like. It is a movement and an aesthetic that resists both the lyric and the Language. According to Swensen and St. John, this resistance manifests in a merging more than another binary and polar about-face. According to Swensen and St. John’s critics, it merges more than the experimental and the traditional (two largely white male dominating poetics). Part of the reason, however, for this break, at least according to Perloff, is to confront exactly this point. Hybridity arose from the need for inclusivity, the drive toward plurality that the experimental had long sponsored but may have failed to fully present itself as champion of the very historic impulse that birthed it.

Whether it did or not, however, we might read Mackey with an eye toward how his poetics are part of a movement that resists both the lyric and the experimental for their narrow pursuit of an aesthetic or tapered approach to complex socio-political concerns. In this way, Mackey is a nexus of different poetics and a candidate for a Millennial Poetics. In this way, too, he stands separate from the final poet this chapter will explore, Lyn Hejinian.

### **Hejinian and a Place for Language**

Also included in *American Poetics*, Hejinian is in some ways the hardest match for a hybrid poetics. Where Ashbery’s status as premier American poet and Mackey’s place as a joiner

of dissonant voices help solidify their position in a new pantheon of hybrid poets, Hejinian stands, to my mind, as a poet deeply immured in the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement. Swensen and St. John's introduction of Hejinian even suggests she is "One of the principal writers associated with West Coast Language poetry" (185). Again, I do not mean to imply a hierarchy, suggesting a slide rule of difficulty, but instead I mean to suggest that some poets are already bent toward a hybridity or Third Way. Hejinian does not seem, on the surface, as prepared for such yogic move. Of course, such a reception of her work does not, in and of itself, prevent her from also being hybrid, fractal, elliptical or any other merging poetic movement. And, we must take at least some of Swensen and St. John's claims seriously. Sometimes a poem acts hybrid (following their definition) even when the poet herself is not. And, even there, many poets long associated with one school or the other have—if not identified themselves as hybrid—admitted to the tendencies prevalent in the hybrid.

Michael Palmer, another great voice of the experimental and another poet included in *American Hybrid*, "In a 2006 interview...described the trajectory of his poetry as 'moving a little bit away from radical syntax into the mysteries of ordinary language, in the philosophical if not every day sense. It probably looks less unusual on the page. And I've been interested in the infinite, ingathering potential of the lyrical phrase—not confession, but the voicing of selves that make up the poetic self, from Greek lyrics to the Italians, to modern poets like Mandelstam'" (Poetry Foundation). Though he has always been more traditional (perhaps) on the spectrum than Hejinian, his move to the "mysteries of ordinary language" and the "potential of the lyrical phrase" speak of a movement toward hybridity from experimentality. In some ways this suggests that it is possible to have long been a member of one group and slide into membership of another (with or without the poet's express acknowledgement of this shift). Too, as Swensen and St. John



have argued and as stated above, it is possible to write mostly L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry but to produce the occasional hybrid work. Still, even with all of this in mind, even considering Swensen and St. John had the option to choose whatever from among her oeuvre, I find it difficult to read Hejinian's work as work intended as hybrid. Hejinian has long defied the conventions of what poetry is. Arguably her most famous work, *My Life*, blends and bends so many genres and traditions to label it a poem is as inaccurate as labeling it a novel or an autobiography. While that may seem to endorse its status as hybrid, the uniqueness of it and its position as anti-mainstream at the time of its publication argue for a far more experimental understanding of the work, of all of her work.

For this reason, *if* we want to recognize Hejinian as part of a shift in poetics, as a force in Millennial Poetics, we must note the difference between how she might be received today and in the early part of the Twenty-First Century and what she was attempting to do with her poetry. As one of the most original and powerful voices for women in the world of experimental poetry, she has possibly helped make the space needed to bridge the gap between L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and hybrid.

To explore this idea, we need to look at the language of a poet of a very different sort, Eavan Boland. Boland, arguably the most important Irish poet today, often reflects on constructing space for women in Irish poetry. Though her poetry is undoubtedly mainstream, especially in comparison to Hejinian's work, her thoughts about what her poetry has done might shed some light on why critics like Swensen and St. John can now read Hejinian as hybrid—the trick is the partial success of Hejinian's enterprise. Boland's concern in the crafting of her poetry was and is the role of nationalism in defining women. She points out that "The national ethos, as it had been allowed into Irish writing, continued to issue certain permissions as to what the poem could be

about. You could have a political murder in it; but not a baby. You could have the Dublin hills; but not the suburbs under them” (Boland 76). Indeed, the beginning of her career was filled with critical concerns regarding the subject matter of her poetry—calling it “domestic” and suggesting no place for it with the greats of Irish literature. However, by her own admission, things changed:

The Irish poem, as it now exists, is a changing interior space. It no longer has predictable component parts. Above all, the historic transaction between the passive/feminine /national and the active/expressive/male Irish poet has been altered. I don’t think it will be re-established. (Boland 77)

What she is describing here is not simply a shift in poetic aesthetics. She talks about building into the Irish poem a place for women. And while some of this is important to the poet, more of it is important to the reader. For example, readers might happily find, now, a space for the old woman of expression and action in Irish poetry—something Boland will argue had been written out of Irish history. A space for the tea kettle alongside the hazel wood. This is not about subjects for writing, but about subjects of understanding and existence. Boland says the work of the woman poet is “to go to [the] past: not to learn from it, but to change it. If we do not change that past, it will change us” (Boland 79).

If she was successful, as I believe on some accounts she (and many other women poets—Irish and otherwise) was, what changes is how a population reads. Subjects forbidden or forgotten become subjects standard. And, more importantly, techniques and concepts unpracticed become, for a wider audience, *de rigueur*. This is exactly the concern of critics like Perloff and Bernstein who lament the morphing of the experimental modern into examples of the classical best. However, on some levels, isn’t this always the price of success? Ashbery argues that the

avant-garde must always possess a quality of “is-this-art-ness.” But at some point, haven’t we accepted Jackson Pollock as an artist? T. S. Eliot? Gertrude Stein? Lyn Hejinian? That is, is there a case to be made that we have read enough Hejinian, enough Palmer, enough Ashbery, enough Graham, enough Howe and Armantrout and Fulton and Apollinaire to see the dangerous “newness” of the work as technique? Stephen Burt defines these techniques as elliptical and suggests “they are easier to process in parts than in wholes” (41). Alice Fulton suggests a similar reading technique in her argument about Fractal poets. Swensen and St. John agree with Burt’s claims that these new poets use techniques like “delete[d] transitions...Fragmentation, jumpiness, audacity; performance, grammatical oddity; rebellion, voice, some measure of closure: Ellipticist” (Burt 47). All of these techniques, Burt and others will suggest, are learned from poets like Hejinian.

Therefore, because a wider audience is schooled in how to read these aesthetics, that audience might be prepared to read Hejinian’s work as crossover—the way Modernists read Gerard Manley Hopkins and the way Romantics read Milton, the way—Perloff and Bernstein will argue—we read the Modernists. Misreading might be a more appropriate term, but that’s what it means to construct an audience beyond those adherents to the particular philosophies of a school. Harold Bloom might call this “poetic misprision.” Though there are acres of concern with Bloom’s canonical approaches to influence, it might be worth considering that plenty of misreading and anxiety about the experimental could be responsible (in combination with a series of cultural shifts in poetics in general) for the birth of a poetry that dwells in the liminal non-experimental, non-traditional space—a poetry Swensen and St. John label Hybrid, but I label Millennial Poetics as Hybrid, I think, puts too much focus on the merger of camps and not enough on the shift in reading lenses. Bloom says “[t]hat reading is likely to be idiosyncratic, and

it is almost certain to be ambivalent, though the ambivalence may be veiled. Without Keats's reading of Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth, we could not have Keats's odes and sonnets...Without Tennyson's reading of Keats, we would have almost no Tennyson" (xxiii). Can we make a variation on a claim here? Without Ashbery, no Dean Young? Without Lyn Hejinian, no Juliana Spahr? "Moreover," poet and critic Alice Fulton says, "[c]ommon sense...suggests that contemporary work must be inflected by the pressures of its day regardless of the poet's willed intentions" (126).

Hejinian's poetry, therefore, would need to be available to be read as hybrid even if it was not written that way. Let's look at what Swensen and St. John included in their anthology. In *American Hybrid* they include three excerpts from longer works of Hejinian's: "The Beginner," "The Composition of the Cell" and "The Book of a Thousand Eyes." The excerpt they take from "The Beginner" speaks directly to the evolution above and may be part of the reason Swensen and St. John see the work as hybrid. Hejinian writes:

If in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Gertrude Stein said, people saw parts and tried to assemble them into wholes, while in the 20<sup>th</sup> century people envisioned wholes and then sought parts appropriate to them, will the 21<sup>st</sup> century carry out a dissemination of whole into all parts and thus finish what the 19<sup>th</sup> century began (February 7)? (186-7).

The statement is direct, "unpoetic," and easy to understand. Of course, it is ripped from context here. It is preceded by the line "And then it's too late for pity" and followed by the line "Even when nothing happens there is always waiting submerged in the task of beginning and task it is in thoughts to begin afresh." Even so, it fits with Alice Fulton's idea that "a fractal poem might offer transcendence at the local level—in a line, a phrase—like a complex adaptive system it does not try to sustain a sublime optimum throughout. Its high lyric passages might be

juxtaposed with vulgar or parodic sections; its diction can range from gorgeous to caustic” (128). Burt and Swensen would agree. The line utilizes a technique that Millennial Poetics employs. Even if Hejinian is avant-garde in her approach, her style can now be borrowed and “regarded as formal functions rather than lapses into formlessness” (Fulton 126).

Interestingly, this is also the subject of the excerpt. Hejinian suggests parts are finally recognized as whole and individual parts (rather than as incomplete portions of the whole) in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—therefore a poetic instant can be part of a complex system of poetry that also includes mundanity, sublimity, and formality. Of course, this prosaic language is bookended by more poetic, more ambiguous language. The excerpt itself begins with a far more “typical” experimental voice:

This is a good place to begin.

From something.

Something beginning in an event that beginning overrides.

Doubt instruction light safety fathom blind. (“The Beginner” 186)

The language here is self-referential and playful. The passage above and, indeed, most of the poem is coy, daring a broad understanding but pulling away before too much of the old, careful logic can form. Perhaps, Swensen and St. John, Fulton and Burt, would suggest this is what makes it hybrid, fractal, elliptical instead of experimental, but it stands to reason that Hejinian might resist such labeling. Yet, her own “Some Notes Toward a Poetics,” Hejinian—a champion of the experimental—puts forth a poetics that does sound similar to Swensen and company’s claims for this new poetics.

Poetics is not personal. A poetics gets formed in and as a relationship with the world.

Poetics is where poetry’s engagement with meaning as meaningfulness gets

elaborated—poetics is the site of poetry’s reason—where the plurality of its logics and viability of its contexts are tested and articulated.

Poetics consider how and what a specific poem means within itself and its own terms and how and why it means (and is meaningful) within a community that congregates around it—around it as writing in general and around certain specific writings and writing practices in particular. (78)

Hejinian likely believes that the “certain specific writings and writing practices” that surround her poems are those of the experimental—in particular of the Language school. However, her inclusion in *American Hybrid* suggests that the “community that congregates around it” is perhaps broader than she imagines. Too, the community might well be reading her in a way that finds meaning in the techniques she employs and thus borrows her “poetics of affirmation...poetics of uncertainty, of doubt, difficulty, and strangeness” (Hejinian “Some Notes” 78). Many of the same techniques of the experimental—readerly indeterminacy, difficulty, dispersion, and decentered subjectivity—become the reason (whether through misprision or intention) for the rise of a Millennial Poetics that recognizes some of the tools experimental poets meant to use as sledge hammers against form and technique as technique itself. This is how any poetry seeking a “third way”—as opposed to being an “experimental” poet or a “traditional” poet—might operate. It borrows from each school in the medium most poetry relies on, language.

With this in mind, it might be possible to see how Swensen and St. John include Ashbery, Mackey and Hejinian (three avatars of the experimental) in their anthology of hybridity. While I find it difficult if not impossible to label any of these three poets practitioners of hybridity, it is far

easier to imagine certain examples of their works as foundational texts for poets seeking to stick to Pound's old maxim to "make it new."

In terms of Millennial Poetics, understanding how and why Swensen and St. John include these three experimental poets in their hybrid anthology helps an audience orient what formal moves are a function of contemporary poetics. That is, a close examination of these poems in light of the broad and sometimes vague descriptions provided for hybridity, elliptical, fractal poetry, highlights at least a portion of what critics identify as the millennial change in poetry (not that they call it that). In other words, by reading these poems (not even these poets) through the lens of Swensen and St. John, a pattern towards their idea of what is new begins to emerge. Due to the significance of their anthology and the weight given to the concept of hybridity, identifying these techniques begins to situate their concerns regarding poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From here, we can unpack what the hybrid is and where it came from and then separate it from Millennial Poetics, which employs many of the techniques of hybridity but is not confined to stealing its material from these two camps. Therefore, recognizing the formal moves that Swensen and St. John call hybrid in poetry that is not experimental or mainstream may highlight the greater cosmopolitanism of Millennial Poetics. As this dissertation moves forward, then, I will look at the flip side of the above model to track which aspects of mainstream poetry read as hybrid to Swensen and St. John before moving on to uncover poetry ignored by critics hoping only to blend previous camps and genres.

## CHAPTER 4

### A DEEPER WELL

#### **Representative Hass of the Traditional Lyric**

In a section entitled “Lyric as Genre” in *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), Johnathan Culler suggests that genre theory is reemerging as a tool for understanding literature in general and poetry in particular. In what seems a direct rebuttal of atomizing claims about reading poems as poems (e.g. Mark Wallace’s “Against Unity”) Culler writes, “If today what we are inclined to value in a literary work is its singularity, that singularity nonetheless emerges against the background of conventions of genres. The conventions, in fact, emerge most clearly in their violation or disruption” (42). A page later, he continues, arguing that genre categories are

reflective instruments of analysis that we use to identify traditions and which affect the domain they portray. Genres change as new works are created that either modify the categories or, eventually, delimit them differently in creating new categories.

Fundamental to the nature of genre is the way in which new works allow us to see how earlier works were functioning, displaying already, perhaps in different form, features that are brought out more clearly by later instances. (43)

In some very clear ways, this is what *American Hybrid* is doing. By looking back at poets of established acclaim through the somewhat myopic lens of Swensen and St. John’s theory, the text “delimit[s]” these poets, “creating new categories” through the backward looking eyes of this new millennium.

Though I, by no means, aim to suggest that Millennial Poetry is a genre, some of the same tools Culler uses to identify the lyric in the changing present might be used to examine works that “modify” or “delimit” preexisting categories like the experimental and the traditional



(again, not necessarily genres but certainly a style of writing full of conventions). After all, Swensen and St. John are relying on a “background of conventions” to make their claims about camps and resistance to camps in *American Hybrid*. Stephen Burt, Alice Fulton, Reginald Shepherd and every other critic and poet who recognizes this shift is doing the same thing. Third Way poetics, after all, suggests, by its very nature, a recognition of the conventions of two previous ways. With this in mind, we might suggest that Millennial Poetry, too—if such a thing exists—presents “new works [which] allow us to see how earlier works were functioning.” But, unlike hybrid poets, when Millennial Poets look back they see not a poet or a poem that sits properly in one camp or another, but a problematic structure of genre in the first place—one that is narrow and exclusionary.

In order to accomplish this task, then, we must explore new works—especially those new works that “modify” or “delimit” previous works in the genre (if I’m allowed to use the term loosely here). Culler argues that such genres or categories are “functional for writers...readers.... [and] critics” (43). They help a writer formulate her work; they help a reader digest what he has read rather than dismiss it; and, they help the critic find level so she can understand what comparisons and contexts are needed. So, when we explore new poems the hermeneutic response as reader and critic exists on some level as a contrast to the backdrop of conventions—a backdrop whose very nature is changed by the addition of the act of poetry performed on the proscenium before it. Therefore, a careful look at works that might fit into a Millennial Poetics could (a) define a new set of conventions, or (b) help clarify some of the previous conventions, possibly creating subgenres and subcategories.

First, then, we must find works from an author (as I think Foucault’s idea of the author function needs to be read into the audience’s response to a work’s conventions) who can stand as

a representative of a previous genre or camp—in this case the traditional camp (often dominated by the lyric subgroup), but who is also producing something new. Ashbery, for example, might embody a different camp, the avant-garde, a category that I am placing loosely in the broader generic group experimental poetry. The traditional author, on the other hand, must emblemize clarity and sublimity, but must also be at least seen as attempting something not quite camouflaged by the conventions that typically surround his work. Therefore, I will focus on Robert Hass.

Robert Hass is the most traditional and most surprising poet represented in *American Hybrid*. He is surprising in the sense that for most of his long career he fit pretty neatly into the camp of traditional poets. In that regard, he may seem no more surprising than Ashbery, who fits so obviously and so squarely in the camp of the avant-garde. But the inclusion of traditionalists is, seemingly, always more surprising in anthologies that mean to present the new. New and traditional, in the minds of most critics, inhabit very different landscapes on the great map of American poetry. The experimental voice (recognizing that there is not *one* experimental voice but instead a plurality) is the voice of opposition to this tradition. It is unsettled and pluralistic. Its greatness is harder to define and recognize, and thus any new movement might reasonably claim members of previous experimental movements and camps that stand against the mainstream.

Therefore, it is more surprising to see Hass in Swensen and St. John's anthology, especially since he is, arguably, one of the only, obvious traditional poets—poets often devoted to the role of the subjective self in the lyric—represented. Charles Wright, Norman Dubie, and Arthur Vogelsang are the only other possible choices in an anthology of over seventy poets. This is not to say that others—e.g. Jorie Graham, D. A. Powell—aren't established poets who we

would be hard pressed to label experimental. Instead, it might be recognized that these poets have already long lived in the realm of poets dabbling in more than one school. Powell appears in Shepard's *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries* (2004). And Michael Theune, among others, has labeled Graham and the whole Iowa school the progenitors of Third Way poetics. Hass, though, is not a voice like Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, a voice we expect to see in an anthology about an emerging(ed) school of hybrid poetics.

Hass has won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. He was the Poet Laureate of the United States from 1995 to 1997. While that alone does not disqualify him from being experimental or hybrid, the fact that he is a well-known and well-read poet who has often been praised for his clarity—the sort of praise that poets like Hejinian and Mackey would neither expect nor desire for their own works—often does. The poet Hass, and more specifically a poem of Hass's, becomes the author-function-Hass. David Orr, for example, has said in a *New York Times Review*, that "Reading a good Hass poem...is like watching a painter whose brush strokes are so reassuringly steady you hardly notice how much complex and unsettling depth has been added to the canvas." It would seem, therefore, that Hass, while certainly an accomplished poet, is anything but a practitioner of hybridity. Instead, he appears to be the pole which the experimental use to measure against and a resource from which the hybrid/Millennial Poets might borrow from in their admixture of avant- and rear- garde.

So, is his inclusion in *American Hybrid* more to do with his popularity as a poet than with his poetic voice? Or, are we to use Hass as the bookend for the traditional in the anthology and poets like Susan Howe and Lyn Hejinian as the far side? (If so, I can't help but echo Ron Silliman's criticism of the anthology, which points out that alphabetical ordering of poets is the

weakest form of organization for an anthology). Or do we accept Swensen's idea that poems not poets are hybrid? In which case, we might read some of Hass's more recent work as in keeping with the changing face of poetic expression. He might not be at the foreground of a Millennial Poetics, but he is a poet of his time and therefore produces work engaged in the practices of the time—which, for a short time around the turn of the millennium, was the practice of merger, fractals, and ellipses. In this way, we might use his works as both new (and therefore able to demarcate) and representative.

### **“Happiness”**

In fact, perhaps because of his critical attention and reputation, Hass has often found himself at the crux of the two American camps. Critics like Charles Altieri have explored how Hass is often underestimated as a daring or different poet—or at least as a poet with a greater urge to resist the dominant ideologies of capitalism than many (including Altieri) would have believed and because of this deserves at least a reassessment in terms of the experimental. In his 1999 article “Avant-Garde or Arrière-Garde in Recent American Poetry,” Altieri takes a closer look at Hass’s poem “Happiness”—a poem Altieri himself confesses “all of my modernist desires for art to challenge society in formal and rhetorical and thematic ways led [him] to hate” (633-634).

It is important to note there that “Happiness” is not—by Altieri or myself—being imagined as experimental or hybrid or elliptical or even Millennial. The poem is undeniably traditional in all formal ways a free verse poem can be traditional. It is cute and epiphanic. The poem begins:

Because yesterday morning from the steamy window  
we saw a pair of red foxes across the creek

eating the last windfall apples in the rain—  
they looked up at us with their green eyes  
long enough to symbolize the wakefulness of living things  
and then went back to eating— (3)

In other words, it begins with the Romantic voice. The poem's title and its opening salvo unite the idea of nature and ebullience. From there the poem continues with the repetition of the subordinate clause beginning with "because" and continues the logic of the poem's overture. It touches on words like "soul" and "luminous" and makes a slight self-referential mention of the idea of writing within the poem. It maintains, however, its focus on nature and the natural world as the source of happiness. Swans appear—grass, fields. And, the narrator preserves the traditional concept of subjective and individual witness to the awesomeness of nature—all while sipping a cup of tea. What could be more traditional than this? The poem concludes by inserting a third subordinate clause:

and because the tea steamed in front of me,  
and the notebook, turned to a new page,  
was blank except for a faint blue idea of order,  
I wrote: happiness! It is December, very cold,  
we wake early this morning,  
and lay in bed kissing,  
our eyes squinched up like bats. (3)

Reading this poem, it would be difficult to locate aesthetic moments from any camp of American poetry other than the traditional. The closest Hass gets to experimental stylistic techniques is m-dashing, colons and exclamation points—none of which is remotely daring, new or experimental.

The poem positions the subjective self as central to the outcome of the narrative unfolding. It relies heavily on nature metaphors to make its purpose clear, and its purpose is clear. There is no sense of difficulty inherent in the poem greater than: "from what she thinks of as the resistance of the matter," and "the luminous and indefinite aspect of intention,"—lines easily resolved within the context of the poem—and no linguistic playfulness beyond the scope of traditional rhetorical devices.

However, according to Altieri, that does not remove its contemporaneity even if it locates the poem well out of the realm of the experimental. Altieri goes on to point out aspects of the poem that are contemporary: a willingness to directly confront happiness when so many poems use the "lyrical apparatus of lament" (635), its attempt to merge "several modes of life," and finally the poem's ability to be "faithful to the modernist vision that poetry has to test how its formal energies can be made part of the real" (636). Still, this does not make the poem hybrid, elliptical or any other new subgenre or class. Nevertheless, if Altieri is right about Hass, it might help us recognize him as a solid representative of the traditional camp who remains capable of redefining old generic boundaries with some of his earlier poems and shifting into a hybrid poetics in his newest poems.

Presuming, for a moment then, the truth of Altieri's claims about Hass, we are left with the reason this study must look at Hass's inclusion in *American Hybrid*. His work has been (arguably) contemporary—and therefore *new* in the sense Culler discusses—without being (arguably) experimental. This division suggests an aspect of the experimental that is exactly what Swenson and Burt and Fulton have argued for—a poetics that can borrow stylistically from either camp of American poetry because there is purely aesthetic groundwork in both camps.

Altieri also points out that we can't simply rob the techniques of the experimental and become experimental. Instead he proposes that "we shift from a concern with stylistic features to one investigating a possible shared sense of overall purpose" (Altieri 631). If his solution is true, all the shared tricks and tropes of the experimental and the hybrid do not mean that the hybrid has adapted experimentalism. Instead, it means they have borrowed an aesthetic that may or may not have a "shared sense of overall purpose" with the experimental. Therefore, we might—Swenson and St. John might—read hybridity into Hass's work (Not "Happiness" but his later works), but that hybridity may exist on a stylistic level, an intentional level, or both. In other words, a poet whose work means to tie social change to aesthetic experimentation is more likely, in Altieri's view, to be experimental and avant-garde than a poet who practices stylistic shifts alone because the readership of poetry has moved more comfortably into a place where some techniques are no longer as foreign and daring as they once were. Their difficulty and newness has passed into some regularity as the millennium drew to a close.

This is not to argue that the techniques of a poet like, say, Michael Palmer (anthologized in *American Hybrid* as well as classic anthologies of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets like Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree* and Douglas Messerli's *Language Poetries*), match up with Hass. They do not. Certainly nothing in "Happiness" is directly comparable to any techniques in Palmer's oeuvre and not even in Hass's later poems that rely more obviously on techniques borrowed from L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets do we see these techniques used with the same intentionality and purpose. Patrick Pritchett says of Palmer, "His abstract, hermetic lyric is intensely concerned with how poetic language must resist naïvely reporting experience as that which just happens, taking up instead the more difficult task of investigating how language shapes and complicates experience" (127). Hass does none of this. The narrator of "Happiness"

is, in fact, “naïvely reporting experience as that which just happens.” In “On the Way to Language,” Palmer begins: “The answer was/ the sun, the question// of all the fragrances undressed/ by the rats in the Pentagon...” The poem resists the clarity that Hass is lauded for. Even the first two short stanzas frustrate any attempts at a traditional reading. The obliqueness of the short lines create what Marjorie Perloff calls an “enigmatic and parabolic” effect; we might even suggest Burt’s sense of the elliptical. The poem does rely on a plural first person narrator at times—“(we had to sell that car)...We’re not ashamed/ of our immense wealth”—but it is hardly narrative. If anything, the “we’s” seem like ghostly interjections in a poem otherwise dominated by disconnected statements about objects and seasons. Through a host of formal techniques, Palmer, I believe, achieves his goal of reaching a poetic and cognitive dissonance. And, obviously, in some very direct ways, these techniques are not a part everyday traditional poetry (at least not by the younger Hass who writes “Happiness”). However, the idea that we might produce poetry like this has been, alongside a growing acknowledgement that there is more than one way to confront the primacy and danger of subjective experience. That is, it is *both* less surprising to read a poem with Palmeresque technique *and* possible that the disruption he means to create can be accomplished in different ways.

Altieri puts it thus:

Work can meaningfully offer itself as avant-garde as long as the density and scope of refusals in the aesthetic realm create hope that the emerging forms of aesthetic consciousness can also modify what counts as the social imaginary—and, hence, can provide possibilities for changing how societies function. (632)

The reverse of this, of course, is that work might borrow technique from the experimental without the hope of “changing how societies function.” In those circumstances, the work is



hybrid without being experimental. As Julianna Spahr writes in the “Introduction” to *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, some poets “turn to modernist techniques for political reasons and [some]...do so for aesthetic reasons” (Spahr 4). The purely aesthetic shift is what I would label Millennial Poetics. Though many of the practitioners of Millennial Poetics mean to spark social change, the formal elements of that purpose are often secondary to, rather than the fabric of, the pursuit. We might, then, recognize an experimental- and traditional- hybridity within the larger Millennial techniques. This, too, is in keeping with concepts of how we might look at genre. Hass’s recent poetry, for example, though far more traditional in style than Hejinian or Mackey, might share a “density and scope of refusals” making it move toward a more experimental than traditional poetics. Altieri, however, would not go so far. At best, he would suggest Hass’s work is “non-avant-garde contemporary work...that provides an active and often unrecognized challenge to the avant-garde's ambition to speak for contemporaneity” (633).

This is, to some extent, what a Millennial Poetics means. Millennial Poetics are works that attempt to “speak for contemporaneity”—or at least the contemporaneity that existed from the late 1900s into the early 2000s. The aesthetics of these various Millennial Poetics represents how American poetry means to confront contemporary issues—sometimes resisting the status quo, sometimes engaging in it, sometimes (in other words) experimental, sometimes rear-garde. In all cases, the stylistic techniques used once belonged primarily to one camp or another but are now tools available to any poet. Of course, they always were, but now these techniques have found a place where readers, critics and poets recognize, utilize and hybridize these formal disruptions.

## “Time and Materials”

The poetry of Hass included in *American Hybrid* does pull from a greater reservoir than his traditional background might seem to allow. And, Hass, though lauded as a poet of crystalline acuity, has actually often been praised for his syncretic convergences. About his fourth book, *Sun Under Wood*, for example, Michael Hoffman writes:

You can go through the whole book observing various strategies of invalidation. In "Happiness" it's the way the word appears in italics, as something Mr. Hass was writing in a notebook (contrast Malcolm Lowry's poem of the same title); in "Our Lady of the Snows" it's an ending -- eccentrically cemented by rhyme -- that comes out of nowhere; in "Dragonflies Mating" it's a sequence that never adds up; "My Mother's Nipples" has the goofy, campy refrain "les nipples de ma mere"; "The Gardens of Warsaw" turns the snow from Joyce's story "The Dead" into rain; "Sonnet" isn't one; "Faint Music" begins as an assignment: "Maybe you need to write a poem about grace"; "Jatun Sacha" plays maddeningly on the syllable "ing"; "Frida Kahlo: In the Saliva" is a found poem from the artist's notebook; "English: An Ode" is a paper chase full of etymology and dictionary definitions that ends with a deliberate and unacknowledged mistranslation of a line of Spanish that begins it; "The Seventh Night" is a highly stylized conversation in front of a slowly dismantled stage set. In "Interrupted Meditation" an old European voice attacks the poet -- "you can express what you like, / enumerate the vegetation. And you! you have to, I'm afraid, / since you don't excel at metaphor" —and the ending is dubious self-consciousness:

I'm a little ashamed that I want to end this poem  
singing, but I want to end this poem singing -- the wooly

closed-down buds of the sunflower to which, in English,  
someone gave the name, sometime, of pearly everlasting.

That "someone" was Mr. Hass himself, in an early poem with the woefully ironic title "The Garden of Delight." Practically his whole table of contents has been set up, condemned to malfunction and interference. (2-3)

Of course most of this focus on heterogeneity remains praise for the merger of one traditional technique with another. Hoffman does not argue for the hybridity that Swensen argues for. But he does suggest a discomfort with traditional, Romantic, lyrical verse. And, Hass continues to evolve as a poet; the first poem Swensen and St. John include in their anthology comes from Hass's most recent collection of poems *Time and Materials*. They argue that in it "words break up and break down to form lines such as 'In rogres f ever hing at xists.'...Often his signature meditative tone and pace is complicated—even troubled—by issues of cultural collapse and linguistic indeterminacy, situating his aesthetic versatility in the liminal zone between modernist practice and the recursive play of postmodernism" ("Robert" 179). Clearly, some of the technique Hass is employing here is a greater borrowing from a more extreme experimental voice than anything he produces in *Sun Under Wood*.

"Time and Materials" was the titular poem of Hass's most recent collection when *American Hybrid* was published (since then, Hass has published a new book, *Apple Trees at Olema*, 2010). It is also the first poem included in Hass's section of *American Hybrid*. It starts directly enough: "To make layers, / As if they were a steadiness of days:// It snowed; I did errands at a desk." Small actions performed by the narrator fills the entire first section. These actions fit under the subheading: "To make layers" and function as those layers. The layers are a combination of things the narrator can control: "I did errands at a desk," "my tongue / Tasted of

the glue on envelopes,” “Made love, made curry, talked on the phone” and things beyond the control of the narrator but with his ken: “It snowed,” “sunlight on red brick, bare trees.” Though there is a sense of the elliptical in the first section—a sense of unfilled space crafted by the sparseness of the words through their directness, their simple construction with verbs like *did* and *was* and with fragments and prepositional phrases—the poem, thus far, pulls largely from the repertoire of the traditional poet. None of the parabolic irrationality of “On the Way to Language” exists in the gaps in this first section.

What’s difficult in the poem is easily overcome with a second or third reading. Working towards unity, the first section explores the layers and multiple, simultaneous ways of living we all experience. The technique Altieri might call contemporaneous but not avant-garde. And, if the poem ended after the first section, we would be hard pressed to recognize it as hybrid. Of course, the poem doesn’t end here.

The second section, in fact, is the focus of Swensen and St. John’s commentary in the headnotes. They point to the line, “In progress everything exists” as an example of the poem’s delving into the experimental. However, the anthology compilers are a bit disingenuous here. While this line does exist in the poem, this is the third iteration of the line. The actual second section reads like this:

The object of this poem is not to annihilate

To not annihilate

The object of this poem is to report a theft,

In progress, of everything

That is not these words

And their disposition on the page.

The object of this poem is to report a theft,  
In progress of everything that exists  
That is not these words  
And their disposition on the page.

The object of this poem is to report a theft  
In progress of everything that exists  
That is not these words  
And their disposition on the page. (180)

On first glance, it may seem the poem engages in technical flourishes associated with the experimental. However, the lines Swensen and St. John pull out of “Time and Materials” to focus on in their introduction is made completely clear in the stanzas that precede it. Still, the work practices the stylistic moves that Swensen and St. John suggest are experimental even if most actual practitioners of the school would disagree. Swensen and company would argue the straightforward lyric of the first section is “juxtaposed” to the second section’s “rupture” and “fragmentation” (Swensen “Introduction” xxi). The repetition of the stanzas in the second section are meant to provide the feeling of “a theft / In progress,” but also challenges the “linearity” of most traditional poetry.

The remaining four sections continue to lean into an experimental mode. Linearity disintegrates. The first stanza in the third section is constructed around a list of infinitives concerned with painting followed by the action of painting itself. In this way, the section looks back on what it accomplished earlier—attempting to create action in the stillness of words (or

paint) on the page. It is also fragmented from the first section's description of day-to-day life and the first section's more linear, subjective rendering of events. The point of view is blurred and continues its shift away from the first person into a more objective third person narrator. Of course, all the sections of the poem fall under the heading "Gerhard Richter, *AbstraktBilden*." The poem's ekphrastic expression helps readers organize the lines and sections in light of Richter's work. The sixth section, for example,

Some vertical gesture then, the way that anger  
Or desire can rip a life apart,

Some wound of color. (181)

seems less surprising in light of Richter's work. Too, the opening lines—"To make layers, / As if they were a steadiness of days:"—echoes Richter's approach to visual art. Nevertheless, in spite of a possible key for reading the poem, it is difficult to deny the employment of various experimental techniques in this poem, and even more difficult to deny that this is one of Hass's most experimental works. And yet, it is not as engaged in dismantling the logic of the lyric as writers like Susan Howe might be. A light, aesthetic burglary occurs, nothing on the scale of grand larceny. It is not comparable to Hejinian or Armantrout in style or politics, but it does—especially for a poet of such lyrical pedigree—borrow, and is allowed to borrow because of the changing perception of the previous camps models of American poetry. In other words, it's hybrid, or Third Way, or you name it. The poem is, even if the poet is not. In this way, Swensen and St. John are able to include poets of vastly different schools as antecedents rather than practitioners of a Millennial Poetics.

Ron Silliman explores this process in his blog, writing:

Hybrid poetics operates on very different principles. Rather than representing a revolt from within either literary tradition, it seeks to ameliorate the borders betwixt the two, to operate perhaps as if no chasm in aesthetic & cultural values gave rise to these traditions, as if, in fact, they didn't always already represent something very real. (par. 4)

Undeniably, the concerns that bifurcated (or, more accurately, pluralized) American poetry long ago are “something very real.” However, might the “ameliorate[d]” borders be real, too? Hass and company are not Howe and company. They have different “aesthetic & cultural values,” but if we read the anthology as laying out the poems that have blurred the lines between one literary tradition and another, it is possible to see how a new poetics is born of primordial stew of these older representatives of their various schools and traditions.

That is, if we take the long view, looking back at this point in poetic history, we are likely to read numerous important young poets working not in one specific tradition or another, but pulling from both. And, though *American Hybrid* does not provide us with these poets, it does provide fertile ground for these poets to dig in. Silliman puts it like this: *American Hybrid* “is an attempt at a comprehensive anthology of ‘Third Way’ poetics by poets representing both of the major traditions that feed into the hybridization process. This fact alone ensures the book’s historic importance...codifying what hybrid poetics might actually be” (par. 1). Though Silliman is skeptical of the product, we might still see it as a sourcebook for a Millennial Poetics. There are, for example, poets like Hass dipping toes into the experimental mode, and poets like Barbara Guest planted right beside him. Hass, sixty-eight at the time of *American Hybrid*’s publication, and Guest would have been eighty-nine if she hadn’t died three years before the publication, can hardly be imagined as voices of a bold, new poetics. They might, though, be reasonable, established seeds for a newer generation of poets, like Donna Stonecipher and Rebecca Wolff,

brought up reading both Hass and Guest side by side in spite of the elder poets' positions on opposite sides of Silliman's chasm.

This does come at a cost. Silliman's chasm is not a cavity of purely stylistic aesthetics. As he points out, it is constructed of "aesthetic and cultural *values*" (emphasis mine). The values bear ethical weight. Doyens of the experimental mode worry about the complicity of the traditional mode in producing refined and hegemonic saccharine that does little to open audience's eyes to the complexity of language or the consumer culture that positions what they see as the subjective self. Traditionalists doubt fragmented, irrational playfulness disrupts and seek clarity of message instead. A poem that fleeces techniques from each camp, it seems, hardly bridges any values chasm. On the other hand, if Millennial Poets (poets of a younger group than Guest, Ashbery, Howe and Hass) believe, as Altieri does, that some of the experimental mode was not entirely successful in resisting cultural pressures and that traditional mode remains dominated by a subjective self that does not represent all of American society, then they might—having grown strong on a diet of both and more—seek to ameliorate this fissure or abandon the model entirely by blending technique. Unmistakably, such attempts do not guarantee any more success than previous camps, but that does not mean this is not a growing category of American poets. Swensen puts it this way: "The product of contradictory traditions, today's writers often take aspects from two or more to create poetry that is truly post-modern in that it's an unpredictable and unprecedented mix" ("Introduction" xxi). What she does not do, however, is highlight who and what constitutes the "or more" poetry. She acknowledges it exists but does not present much in the way of poets who practice the truly "unpredictable and unprecedented mix" that is Millennial Poetry.



### **“...White of Forgetfulness, White of Safety”**

With these caveats in mind, we read the second poem of Hass’s included in *American Hybrid*, “...White of Forgetfulness, White of Safety,” in a different light. The poem’s hybridity is not at stake; rather, its potential as a resource for Millennial Poets is. The poem is constructed as a series of free-associated images bound, seemingly, only by the narrator’s memories. The title of the poem is lifted from lines in Louise Glück’s poem “Persephone the Wander.” In the original, the lines “White of forgetfulness, / white of safety—” occur as a meditative interruption in an otherwise linear poem. The two lines form a stanza and alongside two other instances of divergence mark the only moment in the poem that moves away from its didactic tone. Hass takes this moment and expands on it with his own meditations. His narrator does not continue the struggles of Persephone or women, but instead moves the action from Greek myth to Christian. He does begin with a nod to motherhood, but otherwise departs quickly from Glück’s story. Each stanza of Hass’s poem opens an interpretive gap which allows for some (minor) indeterminacy. However, for a student of poetry brought up on the possibility of such space, the poem may afford the pleasures of both the traditional and experimental aesthetic—though it would be impossible to imagine the poem as a work of experimental literature. It is more Wallace Stevens in its flitting imagery than it is like Gertrude Stein. The poem, through a narrative sense of phenomenological links, blends math and motherly love with the religious sentiment of a Catholic schoolboy’s memory. It opens with two stanzas, each a statement of seemingly unrelated images:

My mother was burning in a closet.

Creek water wrinkling over stones. (181)

The poem moves from these lines to a memory of “Sister Damien, in fifth grade.” These lines two, are constructed of images, though now they are more closely tied to a referent. A math teacher, Sister Damien and the images she evokes in the narrator slowly decenter by becoming mathematical concepts and memory. The lines are jumpy and not unified in the traditional sense of the word. Soon her role as evoker of memory, math teacher and nun get blurred together.

Witness:

In the picture of the Last Supper on the classroom wall,  
All the apostles had beautiful pastel robes,  
Each one the color of a flavor of sherbet.

A line is the distance between two points.

A point is indivisible.

Not a statement of fact; a definition.

It took you a second to understand the difference,  
And then you loved it, loved reason,  
Moving as a swan moves in a millstream.

I would not have betrayed the Lord  
Before the cock crowed thrice,

But I was a child, what could I do

When they came for him?

Ticking heat, the scent of sage,

Of pennyroyal. The structure of every living thing

Was praying for rain. (182)

So, what is experimental in the poem and what is traditional? Does that matter? On some levels engagement in techniques from both traditions opens up the sense that the chasm is neither as deep nor as wide as critics imagine. On other, very real levels, such belief erases the work of poets who attempt to resist the dominant voice in mainstream poetry. Let's consider the stanza that begins "In the picture of the Last Supper." The imagery of the stanza is direct and uncomplicated. Though the stanza juxtaposes the stanzas directly before and after it, its meaning can be directly discovered. There is even a sense of boyhood innocence in the shift in register from the holy artwork to delicious sherbet. True, this could be read as an attempt to make fuzzy the liminal space between high and low art—as the avant-garde will often attempt to do—, but that seems less the intention of the line than recapturing a child's view of the complicated world—a view that sees the abstraction of mathematics on par with the abstraction of religion or adult concerns.

That is, though we might find numerous instances of the technical flourish in the experimental mode, the intention is not to dismantle traditional poetic expression. Hass might be concerned with the ability of the purely Romantic voice to capture contemporary concerns, but he is not willing to riot against it. Even his most experimental voice tends toward unity (if a fractured unity) instead of fragmentation. But if Hass, a septuagenarian poet of renown, a

Pulitzer Prize winner, employs, now and again, a style somewhere on the admittedly shaky bridge over the Experimental-Traditional Chasm, it's reasonable to presume that other poets might see this as simply another skill set to learn and practice. In "Teaching the 'New' Poetries" Marjorie Perloff puts it like this:

[P]aradoxically, the poems of, say, Bruce Andrews or Harryette Mullen are, at one level, more accessible to students than are those of W. B. Yeats or Ezra Pound. For however scrambled a new "experimental" poem may be, however non-syntactic, non-linear, or linguistically complex, it is, after all, written in the language of the present, which is to say the language of the students who are reading it. (235-6)

While Perloff is discussing the average student of poetry today, not the average poet, the point remains that for Millennial Poets the accessibility of the experimental isn't too far removed from the accessibility of traditional writers. I would go further than Perloff and argue that Mullen and Andrews are not less experimental or hybrid, but that our world is more receptive to such experimentation as the millennium transforms the population from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to the 21<sup>st</sup>. Everything from popular television shows to genre fiction to country music has added some degree of postmodernism into their formulas; the mobile internet world has created cybernetic youths as likely to read their culture paradigmatically as syntagmatically. Disruption is every day. Isn't it natural then that poetry would lead the way linguistically and go further still? And, might not this be magnified when a poet of typically traditional style exercises some experimental urges practicing a complexity students have already been prepared for through popular culture? After all, though Robert Hass and Rae Armantrout are decidedly different poets with polar stylistic agendas, "...White of Forgetfulness, White of Safety" arguably shares more commonality with Armantrout than with Glück.

In Perloff's article she cites Armantrout as "a leading and, we might say, established language poet" (236). Perloff then provides a close reading of Armantrout's poem, "Direction." Her analysis of this poem might be easily translated into an analysis of Hass's poem. Here is the poem:

Direction

Age as a centripetal force.

She can't hold the fictive  
panoply of characters  
apart.

Is that scary?

Origin's a sore point.

(When the old woman sheds tears,

I say, "What's wrong?"

as if surprised

the way Peter denied

he knew Jesus in the bible.

But Jesus too  
refused to recognize his mom.)

We want a more distant relation

like that of Christmas tree ornament  
to fruit. (60-61)

Perloff says of the poem that it is constructed of “short free-verse lines and small stanzaic units...largely casual, colloquial diction and phrasing...[and] everyday references” (238). The same can easily be said of Hass’s poem.

Of course, that’s not the experimental analysis of the poem. Perloff also points out the poem has “less continuity” than its influences, that “[t]here is no positioned observer, whose insights are detailed, one by one.” The poem, she later says, is not univocal. No poems are. And is therefore open to many readings. All of these observations might easily be applied to “...White of forgetfulness, White of Safety.” True, Hass’s poem has more continuity than Armantrout’s. There is the sense that the first-person narrator in the second to last stanza of “White” is the same narrator from the poem’s first stanza, the same narrator who is seemingly lost in memory about “Sister Damien, in fifth grade.” But, stanzas like “Creekwater wrinkling over stones” and “The doves in the desert, / Their cinnamon coverts when they flew” are harder to identify as belonging to a single “positioned observer.” Armantrout maybe more disjunctive, but both poems are elliptical. But this isn’t meant as a who’s more experimental exercise. The answer to that is Armantrout. The rest of her book, *The Pretext* is in keeping with her reputation

as a language poet. Still, it is reasonable to presume that as resource a poet reading Hass's "...White of forgetfulness, White of Safety" might need some of the same skills as a poet reading "Direction." However, a prepared reader, a student of both schools, cannot replace the intentions and cultural circumstances of a writer. The skills required to read Armantrout may help read poetry from any time or place, but that does not indicate that any such poem is experimental or hybrid.

While there are obvious problems with such an easy erasure of intention, there is also the simple elegance of the acknowledgement that language is the most mutable material of reality. Some experimental voices—those perhaps better labeled as avant-garde—mean to point out the danger of how the pretty word can obfuscate oppressive realities. They mean to say the lyric poem and the ad campaign, the sonnet and the political speech, are crafted out of the same dubious lexicon. Poets and critics of this vein are troubled by the use of the experimental voice in noticeably mainstream poetry.

Yet, the adoption of these experimental techniques by the traditional proves on some levels how easily such confusion can transpire. And, while there is reason to be concerned with this appropriation, that does not change the fact that it has happened. That is why conferences like "Where Lyric Meets Language" held at Barnard College in 1999 focused so heavily upon the socio-aesthetic concerns of the avant-garde instead of the purely aesthetic. The publication of *Time and Materials* by Harper Collins is enough for many adherents of the avant-garde to dismiss Hass's work as mainstream and therefore incapable of addressing the voices often silenced by corporate poetry. Altieri, at least, seems to have softened his stance against poets like Hass. But, many other critics remain concerned by this hybrid voice.

This might mean whatever shape Millennial Poetics takes, so long as it sees no ethical difficulty pulling from the mainstream and the experimental simultaneously, it cannot be a socially driven aesthetic like the avant-garde. This does not mean that Hass cannot write progressive poetry, but it might mean that some of the teeth of the avant-garde have been pulled when their techniques grace the pages of a Harper Collins, Pulitzer Prize winning collection. Again, the award is not the issue (or not wholly the issue). In fact, in 2010, Armantrout won the Pulitzer, too. As has Ashbery. And that's the point; these icons have become source material. We should not presume that poets using a blended experimental and traditional voice do not mean to evoke social change, but we can no longer rely on the use of disjuncture and decentered narration as proof of a social agenda. Equally, we must question the effectiveness of these techniques if they are so easily employed elsewhere for other reasons, for no reason.

### **“The Yellow Bicycle”**

The last two poems Swensen and St. John include of Hass's in their anthology, “The Yellow Bicycle” and “The Garden of Delight,” borrow more from the traditional school than the experimental. Though they both play with disjunction, and “The Yellow Bicycle” shifts from short lined, brief stanzas to a long, near paragraph, they are more unified than either “Time and Materials” or “...White of Forgetfulness, White of Safety.” They are also less overtly political than the only other poem of Hass's in *American Hybrid*, “Rusia en 1931.” Read closely, line by line, the poems allow readers to witness a harmony controlled by a sentiment or a theme that ties together even the most random lines of the poems.

About writing “The Yellow Bicycle,” Hass says,

I set myself the task of writing a bunch of small poems in each of which the



phrase 'the yellow bicycle' occurred. At a certain point it started to feel like 'schtick' to me you know, and I thought it would be interesting to put something up against the lyricism that in some way said 'no', and so this prose piece and the old woman saying 'no' to the lovers came into it. (Hass "Poem" par. 1)

The nature of the poem's advent, then, is a game of the Oulipo variety if not of its caliber or scope. Of course, this leaves out the allusion to Czeslaw Milosz—who Hass frequently translated—that is his motivation for playing around with the phrase in the first place.

That said, the poems can and should still be read as playing with experimental techniques. They may not be as bold as "Time and Materials" but they are not as traditional as "Happiness" either. What this means to the poems' socio-political concerns is a different matter. Swensen, in the introduction to *American Hybrid*, would have us believe that "While political issues may or may not be the ostensible subject of hybrid work, the political is always there, inherent in the commitment to use language in new ways that yet remain audible and comprehensible to the population at large" (xxi). Yet, one wonders what becoming "comprehensible to the population at large" might mean.

Is "The Yellow Bicycle" comprehensive? Audible? And if so, is it new, or does newness require at least some tone deafness—that moment you first heard a genre foreign to the Top 40, full of clashing, cacophonous sounds that you had to, with effort, rectify as music? Can we, in other words, claim "the political is always there" if the poem is not explicitly political and the language is not cold water? Can a poem by an established mainstream poet dabbled in experimental technique and enact a change in how we use language?

On one level, we might argue that its greater distribution may help make the point. On the other, we might recognize this as the last tone in the death knell of the avant-garde social theory

that critics like Paul Mann have been claiming since the early 90s. From a historical point of view, both options are compelling. Either Millennial Poetics, and all the mergers, fractures, and gaps that come with it, spell out the end of a great, nearly century long experiment with language, or it marks another significant turning point in American poetry akin to the rise of Modernism and the birth of language poetry.

Hass will never be a leader in experimental poetry, but it is conceivable that his appropriation of experimental style is an indicator of a moment when the great divide between the two camps of American poetry is, if not weakened, changed. The experimental will have to find new ways to challenge the established (something, of course, they are always trying to do anyway). The mainstream, now, has a deeper well in which to dip its pen.

## CHAPTER 5

### BEYOND THE ANTHOLOGY

#### **Whitewashing**

One consistent and persistent criticism that has been level against *American Hybrid*, and by extension the camp model of studying American poetics, is what Craig Santos Perez refers to as “whitewashing.” In no uncertain terms, Perez declaims *American Hybrid*, arguing that “‘*American Hybrid*’ should have [been] more accurately titled ‘White American Hybrid’” (139). He rightfully points out that in her introduction to *American Hybrid* Swensen cites numerous anthologies as locus of the “Legacy” of twentieth-century poetry, and of all the anthologies she references, “not a single one is an anthology of ethnic or native American poetry” (139). Reading over the anthology, he laments the dearth of Native-, Asian-, and Latino/a- American poetry included in it. Though, it is important that we mention the book does include a number of poets of color, including Nathaniel Mackey and his complex weaving together of cross-cultural, cross-racial, cross-historical threads (perhaps weaving is the wrong word here as it’s not so much a tying together as it is a bringing together, a cosmopolitan placing in the same room).

In fact, numerous African-American poets appear in *American Hybrid* (C.S. Giscombe, Nathaniel Mackey, Mark McMorris, Harryette Mullen, Claudia Rankine, and Reginald Shepherd) and in other anthologies of various titles that collect these Millennial Poetics. Native-, Asian-, and Latino/a- American poets do not appear as frequently if at all. (In *American Hybrid* of the 74 poets included, 3 are Asian-American poets. There are no Native or Latino/a poets represented.) Beyond that, we might ask, as Cathy Park Hong does in “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde,” how do anthologist represent marginalized poets in their anthologies? Of John Yau (another poet represented in *American Hybrid*), for example, she writes, “Even if racial

identity recurs as a motif throughout the works of poets like John Yau, critics and curators of experimental poetry are quick to downplay it or ignore it altogether” (1). The suggestion is that Yau and company are there because we can read their poetry as derivative of a white experimentalism and not a cultural heteroglossia.

In other words, even had *American Hybrid* managed to be a bit more inclusive in its representation, the traditions it claims to merge have a history all their own. That history often vanishes the presence of an American poetics which has frequently excluded non-white and marginalized groups from the conversation about the great camps of American literature. Perez literally blames Silliman and his clean binary of “quietude & avant garde” (140). Hong (a poet considered later in this chapter), suggests Kenneth Goldsmith is a better target and states quite directly, “Avant-garde poetry’s attitudes toward race have been no different than that of mainstream institutions” (“Delusions” 1). The finger pointing, however, obviously needs to extend beyond just Goldsmith, Silliman, and Swensen (even if Swensen was a student of the Silliman). The real question is, do Millennial Poetics continue a history of “a white poetic legacy, a white reading of twentieth-century American poetry” (139)? Perez thinks so. Hong believes this is true of all avant-garde poetics.

I think that question needs to be answered in at least two ways: (1) can stylistic hybridity, as it is described above, incorporate those traditions of American poetry that are often marginalized and imaged as non-legacy? Or is the hybridity talked about an exclusive one? A hybridity of white experimental and white mainstream poetics? And, (2) is the historically significant shift that occurs during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries not a bringing together of diametrically opposed camps but the demarcation of a greater polarity, one sundered by style *and* cultural/racial exclusion?

In order to confront these questions, we must address some key thinkers on the act of hybridizing cultures but also look at the work of numerous, contemporary poets of color—both those stylistically mainstream and stylistically more experimental (if we can now be allowed those loaded terms)—to see if this movement is the coming together of more than just a handful of writers in Iowa. Using Perez’s criticism as a leaping off spot, it behooves us to explore Asian, Latino/a, and Native American poets with the purpose of looking at what poetics are being blended. Is there a merger that is culturally stylistic as well as traditionally or experimentally? Without a doubt, this is a loaded area. Obviously, we cannot suggest that there is *an* Asian-American style any more than we can suggest there is *a* White-American style. But, we can look at camp and tradition. Who are the influences of Asian, Latino/a, and Native poets writing today? What camps have they donated to and borrowed from and what landscape served as the ground for their development? Does hybridity include cultural hybridity, or should we be looking only at the stylistic mergers? In terms of experimental poetics’ goals of resistance and disruption, what is left out of the “camp” merger if we leave out voices that have long resisted the hegemonic status quo from a non-white stand point? This also forces us to ask the question, now that in the light of Culler’s ideas of genre, the new makes us redefine the old, what voices were left out of the old camps? As Hong points out later in her essay, why is Jean Toomer’s *Cane* not a classic of the avant-garde but Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* is?

### **Representation vs. Tokenism**

The first and greatest mistake that will be made is an attempt to provide a monolingualistic or monocultural representation of any of the above groups, or to assume these three groups are monolithic and representative of all of the multiplicity of American voices in poetry. If we discuss and carefully read Joy Harjo, why not Sherman Alexie? If we look for the hybrid in

Martin Espada, why not in Sandra Cisneros? Why Cathy Park Hong and not Li-Young Lee? Or why any of them and not Kamau Brathwaite? And what do we do with those poets that fit into more than one category? Who, among any of the possibilities, represents Asian-ness? What could that possibly even look like? There is no pan-Asian, pan-Native, pan-Latino/a voice. And, even if there were, we'd need to look for how such a voice blends first with an imagined pan-American voice and then where it fits in the camp of traditional versus experimental. This is a task that is not achievable.

In the "Foreword" to *Debating Cultural Hybridity* (2015), Homi K. Bhabha explores the reasons for this and points out how *hybridity* itself, as a term and as an action, has been co-opted into a homogenizing force—a claim that might justly be levied against Swensen and St. John's anthology and against many critics seeking to define a new American poetry at the Millennium. Bhabha writes: "Despite the heavy play on 'diversity', the global dream of hybridity is at heart the familiar national creed of *E pluribus unum*, dressed up in the motley mix-and-match garments of different cultural traditions and practices" (x-xi). Perez's and others' claims of exclusion regarding *American Hybrid* take as their locus this need for a unified vision of poetry—at least as the vision stands now. Such a unity, arguably, undercuts—at least—cultural hybridity. It also forces critics to search for representative voices for minorities, a dangerous and inaccurate practice. However, if we are seeking a poetics adopted by Millennial Poets, we might explore the connections between cultural hybridity and poetic hybridity—ways in which minority voices might employ a combination of merged culture and merged poetics. Again, we will not identify a monolithic style or practice. The difference here is theory as opposed to praxis. Millennial Poetics examined as credo not movement or group.

For this reason, the best that can be done here, now, is to explore examples not to find *the* voice or *the* edicts of a particular cultural poetry, but instead to look at the possibility that Millennial Asian-, Native- and Latino/a- American poetry is also a part of Swensen's new "center of alterity." This cosmopolitan approach reads select poetry not with the goal of uniformity but rather with the idea of identifying where in the diverse room these voices fit or dissent. It wants to track if Swensen and St. John's theory of hybridity is by nature exclusive, or if, instead, the anthology overlooks (intentionally or otherwise) poets who might help the next brood of American poetry. This is why the chapter below will not look at works already included in the anthology.

There is good reason to believe that the voices tracked in this chapter intend to be engaged in intentional acts of hybridity. About xicano poetics, for example, Alfred Arteaga contends in "Locating Poetry" that, "We fashion poetry from the cultural fragments that surround us, from the bits of privilege denied us, from the lost roots and live foliage" (1). Yet, while this is certainly *an* act of hybridity, is it part of *the* merger critics like Swensen and company are talking about? Would it be possible to "fashion poetry from the cultural fragments that surround" them while maintaining, for example, a completely experimental mode? In other words, we must be careful not to confuse cultural hybridity with poetic hybridity. Yet, too, we must not dismiss the idea that cultural hybridity by its nature may urge a poem towards a hybrid poetics. If we take "non-linearity, juxtaposition, rupture, [and] fragmentation" (Swenson xxi) as tools of the experimental, even something like a traditional sonnet written with "lost roots and live foliage" in mind may lean toward experimental techniques if not experimental politics. In fact, if experimental poetics is a poetics of dissent in general and not in form alone—which critics like

Charles Bernstein insist it is—, then on some levels all works of “poetry from the cultural fragments that surround us [xicano poets], from bits of privilege denied us” are experimental.

Perez’s claims—not in so many words—is that *American Hybrid* overlooks too many of these voices to stand as a representative text for hybrid poetics. I claim inclusion is what Millennial Poetics should do. If this is true and if Millennial Poetics means to include groups typically dismissed from either camp, it becomes the job of this chapter to identify poets excluded from *American Hybrid* that might adhere to a 21<sup>st</sup> century vision of American poetry that both fits the model Swensen and St. John lay out and goes beyond it. In other words, because there are no representatives of Latino/a poetry or Native-American poetry in the Anthology, we need to investigate if that is an accurate map of the cultural landscape of Millennial Poetics. And, because only about 4% of the poets in the anthology are Asian, we must ask if this representation is token or accurate.

The poets that are included in this chapter represent voices that might be imagined as hybrid using the criteria set up in the previous chapters or as resource for that hybridity—again relying on previous concepts of resource (poets of enough acclaim and prestige that their readership is broad and diverse). Joy Harjo is a good example of such a poet. Finally, this section will look specifically at the voices Perez’s claims are not included in *American Hybrid*. In doing this, I acknowledge I too will leave out many potential Millennial Poets. However, I will also include at least two poets, Cathy Park Hong and dg nanouk okpik, who embody a more complete idea of what Millennial Poetics is and should look like.

It makes sense to start with voices who stand as resource and then move onto those who absorbed and mutated. Alfred Arteaga’s claims about poetry make his work a better place to start than most.



## Arteaga

Arteaga's first poem from *Cantos* provides fertile ground for such investigation. The poem is part of a series of four poems, "Cantos Primeros" that open the book. The poem itself begins in a straightforward, what I would call, mainstream voice. While the first stanza does not insist on a subjective and singular narrator, it is constructed of linear imagery connected directly to the title that does not require overcoming any real difficulty to understand. A hint of collage and stream-of-consciousness lives in the stanza but hardly enough to stump an invested reader of poetry.

### **PRIMERO**

*Primero. Arrival*

*Arrival*

First, the island.

The cross of truth.

Another island.

A continent.

A line, half water, half metal. (lines 1-7)

By the time, however, we move into the second stanza, the poem begins to fracture. Still linear, still easy to comprehend, the poem adds complexity with the addition of another language. In this way, "Primero" returns to a Modern sense of the avant-garde reminiscent of Eliot and obviously Pound. Of course, there are also vast differences. Eliot and Pound, unlike Arteaga, do not use the voices that represent their hybrid identities. They are not engaged in cultural

hybridity as much as they are poetic appropriation. The structures of power related to the conquest and enslavement of the America by Europeans, for example, are not a part of the style or trouble of "The Wasteland." And Arteaga is likely not seeking a uniform whole with his fragments and slivers. The Modernists steal/appropriate from other cultures (often marginalized cultures) rather recover voices spoken over by mainstream, white American/European poetics. Yet, like Pound and Eliot, the Nahuatl that follows represents not just a linguistic shift, but a historical allusion, in this case to Túpac Amaru's famous last words, "Mother Earth, witness how my enemies shed my blood":

An island of birds, "Ccollanan."

An island of birds,

"Ccollanan Pachacutec!"

Sounds above an island, in

the air, trees, "Ccollanan Pachacutec!"

Female sounds. "Ricuy

anceacunac yahuarniy richacaucuta!"

An island of female birds, imagine

the sounds, the air, the trees, at times

the silence, the slither in thorns. (8-17)

As the poem continues, Arteaga begins an even more complex weaving of culture and language. In the next stanzas, the narrator alludes to Joyce's *Ulysses* (and by extension *The Odyssey* itself and the complexities of that fantastic voyage) and the Bible and adds Spanish to the mix of languages the poem speaks in. It references numerous historical events that surround the

conquest of Mexico and the racial hybridization forced on the Aztecs by the Spanish conquistadors looking for “light-skinned women.”

But what of the poetics? About elliptical poets, Stephen Burt says they challenge “unease, their resolve neither to play by the rules nor to scrap them, extends from self and voice, through form and tradition, to grammar...the elliptical self, uneasily social, grows only uneasily grammatical—each distortion or shock to the syntax *means*, usually, some shock to the self” (45). We might reverse this, too. The “uneasily social” by means of cultural hybridity, might urge an uneasy grammar. What begins as a third person narration of place slides into a personification of America all in a haze of parataxis. Yet, the parataxis is not burdened by undue juxtaposition or loaded with rupture and fragmentation in the style of an experimental poem. For a good portion of the next three to four stanzas, the poem is linear and digestible. Does this mean the work is not hybrid or elliptical? In Burt’s estimation of the term, “the Elliptical fast-forward and cup-up is *way* less likely to represent speech, or stream-of-consciousness” (44). Arteaga seems closer to a representative poetics:

So perfect a shape, right  
angles, the globe yields to so  
straight a line, look. One  
line, zenith to nadir, heaven,  
precipitation. The only other,  
straighter still than that horizon  
we see at sea, perfect: paradise.  
That horizontal line, from  
old to new, he knew would yield,

yes, so perfect a move, he  
knew, yes, so perfect a shape  
yes.

Trees caught his thoughts.  
Birds and onshores brought them  
from the boats. She knew those  
thoughts, heard those songs.  
Could there be one more island?  
Birds, sounds, perhaps pearls,  
gold? Eden-Guanahaní, perhaps  
another? "O my Marina, my new  
found island. License my roaving  
hands, and let them go, before,  
behind, between, above, below."  
West.

América, América. Feminine  
first name, continent named  
for him. América.

Here, Santa Fe. Here, the true  
faith. I claim, in the name of  
the father. Land of thorns,

in the name of the son.

The edge of this world  
and the other, is marked  
in water: ocean, river, wave to  
her, she waits on the other  
side. Aquí, se llama la Juana,  
de apellido Juárez, india,  
prieta y chaparra, la que le encanta  
al gringo, al gachupín. (18-56)

By this point, however, we must ask, “Is this not rupture?” “Is this not a juxtaposition of culture and language?” The poem has slipped into four lines of Spanish and, as it continues, the poem begins to hop between languages, allusions, registers, and histories. It becomes more difficult to read this as a straightforward narrative. There is an instance on a multicultural literacy reminiscent of Modern art but with the added concerns of a post-colonial hybridity. Burt might acknowledge at least a part of this as a function of the Elliptical. He points out that “Ellipticist poems treat self and voice more or less as synthetic cubism treated shapes and things” (46). That is, the poem comes together as a cubist painting might, not in a way imagined as purely mimetic, but in manner more appropriate to the construction of a multicultural, multilingual poem.

Island of cactus, genus  
Cuauhtémoc. Island of rose,  
land of thorns. Pedro de  
Alvarado, an eagle, la

región transparente, a  
night of smoke. Marina  
Nightear, an ocean contained  
in one woman, as it was in  
the beginning, world  
without end, fallen  
eagle.

So feminine a shape. So female  
a bay. Another shape: gliding  
birds. Another: touching trees.  
True name of woman, Vera Cruz,  
body of woman. "He named me  
Xochitepec, yes so we are all flowers  
of the mountain, all a woman's body,  
that was one true thing he said in  
his life." Above, birds,  
leaves, above so woman a form.  
Las quince letras: not the seven words:  
Contestó Malintzin, "yes  
I said yes I will Yes." (57-80)

The poem goes on, shifting between languages, flirting with different styles and, too, craft some unity and logic in the repetition of the bird imagery and the insistence on the female pronoun for the land. It concludes thus:

The edge of this world  
and the other, is marked  
in metal: on this side America,  
on this side América.  
Nights they spill from  
San Diego and Los Angeles  
threading the steel mesh  
como nada, los verdaderos  
alambristas, buscando el cuerpo  
de mujer, buscando,

Xochitepec. (107-117)

Yet, in spite of the poem's obvious cultural hybridity, the question of whether the poem is poetically hybrid remains uncertain. Yes, there is a merger of techniques, but are the techniques that are blended here representative of the two camps that Swensen and St. John are so eager to proclaim are representative of American poetry? Though not always straightforward, I would be hesitant to suggest the poem is experimental. But here, too, the lines meant to circumscribe Hybrid Poetry are thin, fuzzy and leave room for the liminal.

"Primero" does not fracture like experimental poetry often does. Unlike Fulton's ideas of fractal poetry, this doesn't contain moments of lucidity amid greater indeterminacy. Though it is a mosaic of languages, allusions and histories, they work together in a way that would be

difficult to label as experimental. If, in fact, the poem was entirely in English, would anyone claim it was hybrid? But, of course, it is not entirely in English. And, it means to present a diversity of readings in the poem. It means to be English, Spanish, Nahuatl. Is this enough to make it hybrid? In some sense of the word, of course. Josef Raab and Martin Butler, in their "Introduction: Cultural Hybridity in the Americas" from *Hybrid Americas*, piece together a differing concept of hybridity, one not too far removed from Swensen and St. John's concerns and one that practices some of the same techniques though on different levels. They write:

*Hybridity* has been employed to describe and analyze “diverse linguistic, discursive and cultural intermixtures,” as Harald Zapf points out, cautioning that “*mixture* should not be understood as homogenizing fusion but rather as a connection of different parts” (302).

*Hybrid*, according to Elisabeth Bronfen and Benjamin Marius, may be defined as “everything that owes its existence to a mixture of traditions or chains of signification, everything that links different kinds of discourse and technologies, everything that came into being through techniques of *collage*, *sampling*, or *bricolage*.” (1)

Raab and Butler, through Zapf, Bronfen and Marius, point out that the hybrid is non-homogenizing, a mixture that includes techniques like collage, sampling or bricolage—all skill sets that the hybrid of Swensen and St. John’s imagination employs. And, all skills that Arteaga uses in his poem. The work samples Joyce and history texts. It lays this ideas side by side not to fuse them, but to see them as part of a larger collage. Though Swensen and St. John might not have Arteaga in mind when they constructed their anthology, though Burt might not imagine him as an Elliptical poet nor Fulton think Arteaga is fractal, though "Primero" is a bit more traditional



than experimental, it is hybrid in its cosmopolitanism. It is Millennial in its approach to accepting a mixture of traditions, cultures and styles as a way of communicating in the hybridized 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Yet, Arteaga is interested in producing such a poetics. While the difficulty inherent in his poetry suggests a desire to blend the experimental with the traditional (even while favoring a more traditional approach), can we count on this same hybridity of form/content across a wider swath of intercultural poetry?

### **dg nanouk okpik**

Dg nanouk okpik's 2012 collection of poetry, *Corpse Whale*, makes a good lookout point for our exploration of the panorama of cross-cultural poetics in America in the Twenty-First Century. Her work has been described as stereoscopic,

that is to say, as a *device by which two photographs of the same object takes slightly different angles are viewed together giving an impression of depth slightly wide as in ordinary human vision*. By which I mean, this book is concerned with a multiplicity of identities that encompasses and expands beyond the case of mixed cultural origins [okpik is an Alaskan Native, Inupiat–Inuit, and raised by an Irish and German family], and insists on keeping us from comfortably settling in to either the single dimension of either a first- or third-person person perspective. (McCallum par. 1)

The implication here is of a hybridity, though a hybrid of what is not quite spelled out in this review. Nevertheless, McCallum does point to many of the areas of concern for poets practicing Millennial Poetics. That is, okpik's work resists the subjective self as the centerpiece of all lyric expression. She challenges pronouns while simultaneously resisting a white-washed view of an American, Western, male, species-centric landscape. Dorine Jennette puts it this way:

okpik merges multiple times, persons, and types of beings (human, plant, animal) in speakers whose identities defy usual (Western, English-language) understandings of the possible. As okpik juxtaposes her wildly simultaneous speakers against the constant presence(s) of the landscape, she develops a lyric sensibility that feels constant in its presence, as well, so that *Corpse Whale* acquires the feel of one voice speaking through many mouths. Okpik overlaps pronouns, times, places, and creatures to build a layered consciousness that delivers an invigorating read. (par. 1)

A few things are worth noting in this review. First, Jennette use of verbs (*merges, juxtaposes, overlaps*) suggests exactly the activity that Swensen and company believe is paramount to a contemporary poetics. Jennette also suggests “a lyric sensibility” suggesting a relationship between some experimental techniques and the traditional mode. Both reviews seem to argue that this “stereoscopic” poetic is a good. That is, the fusion of techniques and voices mark *Corpse Whale* as a work worthy of praise and attention because it is attentive to the zeitgeist. It is both daring in its admixture of pronouns and personalities and lyric in its pronouncement of them. Too, Perez would likely be happy with okpik’s inclusion in anthologies of hybridity as okpik represents a perspective that is not wholly, well, anything. Okpik’s work is culturally and poetically hybrid.

For this reason, Perez’s concerns about the whitewashing of *American Hybrid* spells out a major oversight in Swensen’s, Burt’s, Fulton’s, Sheperd’s agendas. These critics want to believe that a Millennial Poetics is one that confronts “the model of binary opposition” that was at one time but “is no longer the most accurate” method of characterizing American poetry (Swensen xvii). Perez and Hong mean to demonstrate that such a model never existed, or if it did, it did at the cost of glossing over the role and historical significance of marginalized voices. Moreover,

poets like Arteaga and okpik underline the difficulty in representing this Millennial urge with its ability to collage, appropriate, lyricize, resist, pluralize, chorus, conform and coadunate.

In her “Response to ‘Hybrid Aesthetics and Its Discontents’” in *The Monkey and the Wrench*, Swensen attempts to address this concern, arguing that critics of her anthology “conflate synthesizing and hybridizing, disregarding their important distinction: in a hybrid, the heterogeneous elements remain distinct,; in synthesis, they do not” (149). And, while Swensen does include poets like Nathaniel Mackey and Myung Mi Kim, the anthology’s mission and contents veer toward a reading of hybrid as the convergence of two styles not multiple voices. The focus of hybridity (even allowing it to represent “heterogeneous elements [that] remain distinct”) is trained on technique not culture with the presumption that these threads can/should be separated. The danger of such a focus is that it undermines the very claims of the experimental—form is politics. The nod to a mere handful of marginalized (and frankly lauded) poets as proof of the anthology’s inclusivity suggests the history and resource provided by poets in the book is a white history. It makes an a priori claim about form ignoring a history of experimentalism that built its code-switching, genre-bending collage from places of racial difference not in spite of it.

A careful reading of okpik, I believe, will demonstrate how extensive the intertwined nature of cultural and technical hybridity has become. As in Arteaga’s, okpik’s poetry does not blend styles outside of its culture, but instead with the intention of revealing how the culture is hybridized socially and stylistically, each with profound effect. Consider, below, how her poem “An Anatuq’s Marionette of Death” utilizes multiple languages, voices, pronouns, cultures and traditions without setting up a tent in either the traditional or experimental camp, but equally without ignoring them.

## I. Musk Moth Larva

He hooks the grapnel, *aablak*: on the depression between her/my shoulder blades—the gouged ache of tethered, threaded muscles tear. Where her/my every breath compresses, the *Anatkuq* inches out my/her madness through his hands. She/I contemplate/s his work in dolls. She/I watch/es, seated high above on a shelf, over the table, above the fire: she/I remember/s him as he scraped, soaked, and dried the tiny dolls, knowing she/I was one of them.

Once, on the third of the month, on the shelf in a stilled pose, he grabbed her/me in a tweaked burst—played with her/me, and drove out of her/my spine a hair-winged caddis fly, then threw her/me to the ice in one swift motion, returning to his table to pin the wings on cardboard, labeling the insect in pencil script:

musk moth *ink* larvae. (91)

The use of the third/first pronoun in the poem above positions the speaker as both the subject and object, a technique that, while experimental in its nature, radiates particular significance for a female, Inuit writing in English who might justifiably feel excluded from the traditional with its historically white and colonial primacies and the experimental with its historically white and male primacies.

A careful and thin line should be drawn here. The experimental, as opposed to the avant-garde, has never been exclusively anything. Yet, nevertheless, the techniques of the experimental often earned their status as experimental for their resistance to the mainstream as opposed to their employment of transcultural logic. Even when Modernists and other experimental poets stole from African and Asian styles, they were often, if not always, employing the techniques as

a form of marginalized resistance to the status quo (though not necessarily, even rarely, their own marginalization as ethnic subjects) . The process was far more assimilation than adaptation. In “An Anaktuq’s Marionette of Death,” okpik attempts a convergence as opposed to a merger. A collision of techniques here perhaps gives a different weight to the pronoun usage than if it had simply existed in a more obviously experimental poem. Long strings of assonance (*tethered, threaded, breath, compresses*) hold long, narrative lines together alongside brief flirtations with alliteration and internal rhyme. But this euphonic free verse play is disrupted here and there by Inuit words and the either/or pronoun of the doll/speaker.

In the narrative, the doll-maker—a man—practices not only his shamanic arts, but lepidotery as well with all its Victorian echoes. In this way, everything in the poem becomes polyvocal and unresolved. The narrator is the doll, the speaker, and a woman. The *Anaktuq* is a shaman, a man and a practitioner of a problematic Linnaean labeling system. Everything in the poem, arguably, is part of a chain of backslashed signifiers crowded into an otherwise traditional poem. Like Arteaga, then, okpik constructs poems from more than one or two monolithic histories and poetics, but unlike poets like Joy Harjo, she does not, in the above poem, use the oral historic voice. That is, her work leans more into an experimental/traditional hybrid with content and language that speaks of a mixed cultural past. For this reason, in part, it seems acceptable to label her as a Millennial Poet and stylist. Poets like Sherman Alexie and Joy Harjo, on the other hand, do not, on the surface at least, seem as blended and make more sense as precursors and resource than practitioner of Millennial Poetics.

## **Harjo**

Another poet not included in *American Hybrid*, but arguably as much a resource for Millennial Poets as Robert Hass, is Joy Harjo. Harjo, unlike okpik and Arteaga, is a Native

American poet more deeply rooted in what we might call a traditional poetics. Readers rarely suffer any great difficulty entering her poems. She writes with straightforward imagery and directness. She does not typically wield extra languages, complicate pronouns or cultivate indeterminacy. She is totemic and Romantic at times but does not shy away from the concerns of her Creek ancestry in the modern day. If she is a hybrid poet, it is a cultural hybridity coupled with her insistence that poetry is a frozen orality. In fact, she is a singer and musician as much as a poet and author. It is difficult to imagine that Swensen or St. John would want to include Harjo in *American Hybrid*. She is not Burt's idea of an elliptical poet nor Fulton's idea of a fractal poet. So, does she belong with Millennial Poets at all? In some very real ways, the answer is no. Her style and general poetics are not in keeping with what much of the rest of this volume have been addressing. It would not take an expert in poetry to see the obvious differences between Harjo and, say, Harryette Mullen or Michael Palmer. However, if that same rubric were used to compare, say, Robert Frost with Ezra Pound or Gertrude Stein, one might wonder how it would be possible to call all of them Modernists. Too, the insistence of Swensen and St. John to look at poems not poets should probably extend to Harjo, too.

The question remains, though, why include her here at all? Arteaga and okpik might stand as representatives of a native poetics—and, if not, certainly there are plenty of poets that might make a stronger case. In fact, there are. And, that's the point. Harjo's mainstream recognition and traditional stylistics serve as a sounding board for a cosmopolitan poetics of the Twenty-First Century. That is, even if there are no poems of hers that fit squarely in the center of a new poetics, we might ask what role she—and poets like her—serve as a resource? In some ways she is the third spoke on a wheel that includes Ashbery and Hass. That is, for the Millennial Poet, voices like Harjo and Arteaga represent fertile ground, a source for finding technique and

style, but also for finding stories and histories otherwise unavailable in the two-camp canon of American poetry. For proof of this, we might consider that Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr write that they considered using Harjo in their anthology *American Women Poets in the 21st Century Where Lyric Meets Language*, a text already discussed as one concerned with a Millennial Poetics. Each of these poets (Ashbery, Hass and Harjo) represents an area of seismic activity for poets looking to create works that operate outside of the politics of the two-camp model. In other words, if Ashbery represents the avant-garde and Hass the mainstream, Harjo might represent what is typically thought of as the underrepresented. She is arguably the most important voice in Native-American (mainstream) poetry in the last century. Widely read and anthologized, she exists in both a broad potential and accessible canon, making her a prospective candidate as resource for many of the poets that will come to represent Millennial Poetics.

But Harjo may be more than that, too. She has been a consistent voice of memory, memory in a specific form that Tracey Watts calls ghosts; Watts claims Harjo's ghosts "crack open the sense of closure that history assumes and recast its figures in terms more relevant to the present and more sustainable for postcolonial Native American communities" (109). Specifically, Watts is addressing Harjo's poem "New Orleans" from *She Had Some Horses*. The poem, an undemanding narrative, evokes the memory and ghost of DeSoto. It would be impossible to read "New Orleans" as even attempting an experimental mode. Yet, as Watts points out (borrowing in her assessment of Harjo from Jeffery Weinstock's *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination*), "ghosts are particularly useful for projects that seek to dismantle official narratives because they interrupt 'the linearity of historical chronology' (5), making room for the emergence of alternative perspectives that question the way that history has been told" (109). So, while the style tends toward the traditional, the content might bend toward

a sense of hybridity. In “New Orleans,” Harjo is neither daring in her reproduction of history nor condemning. Though she is not reproving, she is also not silent or forgiving. She writes about “remnants of voices” of her Creek ancestry, about the absence of particular knowledges by “The man behind the / counter,” about “voices buried in the Mississippi mud,” about “stories here made of memory,” and about DeSoto, his death and his ghost which the narrator says she has seen “having a drink on Bourbon Street,/ mad and crazy/ dancing with a woman as gold/ as the river bottom.”

Though the style does not ask a reader to confront a broken history, the act of poetry itself may. Watts, again:

Poetry offers itself as a fitting genre for a story that arrests history, especially when we consider that its form and structure can challenge narrative coherence. Poems might be understood as a “dense sight” of haunting, to use Avery Gordon’s term from *Ghostly Matters*. Gordon turns to a theory of haunting to ameliorate the failure of “available critical vocabularies . . . to communicate the depth, density, and intricacies of the dialectic of subjection and subjectivity . . . of domination and freedom, of critique and utopian longing” (8). She identifies the site of a haunting as a “dense site,” a point at which “history and subjectivity make social life” (8). (110).

So, as a resource, Harjo’s poem might urge a challenging of, at least, historical “narrative coherence.” This is not to argue for the poem as hybrid or Millennial, but instead to suggest poets engaged in reading Harjo might recognize how the content is suggestive of a nonlinearity. How the act of ghost-making might be one way to place side by side history, language, subjectivity, objectification and the present. But there are other ways (stylistic ways) that poets like Harjo might also spell out their roles as antecedents of a Millennial Poetics.



As Mackey engaged mythopoetically in the crafting of his work, Harjo has, too. Works like “Eagle Poem” and “Trickster” hint at the memory of an oral culture on paper. They are not experimental, but they are not the voice of white American either. They are a threshold for poets and students looking for voices that have been lost or spoken over. Both poems, totemic in nature, evoke a cultural locus not centered in white America but not separate from it either. “Trickster,” with its easy simile of crow to narrator, fits a simple, traditional pattern but spells out a complicated historical past.

Crow, in the new snow.

You caw, caw

like crazy.

Laugh.

Because you know I’m a fool,

too, like you

skimming over the thin ice

to the war going on

all over the world. (72)

Yes, the poem addresses a common sense of loss of control in a modern world. It rhymes, is alliterative and imagistic. But, this brief poem is also layered with the myth of the Trickster in Native-American (in particular Creek) culture. It spells out, again, how difficult, how impossible it is to identify a voice, a singular vocabulary or subjective position for the contemporary world, a world inhabited by ghosts, myths, legends.

In “Eagle Poem” Harjo explores prayer, binding it through metaphor to the natural world and offering yet again the possibility of an encrusted history of language and poetry. “To pray

you open your whole self/ To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon.” It is pagan Romanticism like Wordsworth, but it is more than that, too, as it is not solely a privileged looking back at nature with a fondness for yesterday and its recorded pantheon. This is a history of disruptions, breaks, and gaps that arguably Harjo does not do enough to highlight. The inclusiveness of the poem may seem to elide that history of lacunae with lines like “We see you, see ourselves and know/ That we must take the utmost care/ And kindness in all things./ Breathe in, knowing we are made of/ All this” (85). But, again arguably, the fact of the poem as prayer, as song may highlight the stoppages, interludes, and disconnections—not so much that the poem itself becomes disruptive, but enough that the sense of hybridity infuses the poem.

The argument here is that the greater the resources, the more abundant the quantity of marginalized voices, the more insistent poems became at the turn of the century. It is difficult to argue that Harjo is dg nanouk okpik’s immediate influence, but it is easy to see how her influences might exist in the world alongside Harjo and, say, Susan Howe.

But there is danger here, too. The danger comes in the act of reducing Harjo, okpik or Arteaga to static hyphenates—authors and people who get reduced and confined to their ancestry even as I have done above. On one hand, any poetic history that whitewashes or flattens through the traditional and hegemonic formal elements presumes a subjective position that does not account for the craquelure fresco that more accurately reflects our complicated post-colonial history and language. On the other, an insistence that all works of minority or hyphenated poets are, by virtue of their authorship, hybrid or experimental forces a static reading of these poets that does not, arguably cannot, enact or inspire change.

A Millennial Poetics, I believe, means to combat this through a direct acceptance of history, language and culture as incomplete and simultaneous, a poetics that finds source

material in all locations. It steals styles and acknowledges difference. It separates itself from the experimental and especially the avant-garde by not reading the traditional as the enemy but as supply. It separates itself from the traditional by refusing a singular subject position or narrative, acknowledging a plurality of voices and insisting on a fractured (or fractal) retelling of grand-narratives. Most of Harjo's poetry, therefore, while not what might be defined as Millennial Poetry, is ore.

### **Hong**

On the other hand, poets like Cathy Park Hong—whose first collection of poetry, *Translating Mo'um*, was published in 2002—fit the bill nicely. Her work is replete with code-switching, juxtaposition, shifts in register, humor. Most of her work, however, maintains a subjective, first-person narration. Her language flits between complex and scientific diction and everyday phrases and slang. In other words, she has managed to conjoin a multitude of styles and subjects making her a more than suitable candidate for Swensen and St. John's next anthology even though she is not included in the work. She is a Millennial Poet with some very direct concerns about the power of either the mainstream or the experimental to affect the status quo. She writes: "Poetry's current aesthetic styles bear a closer resemblance to an oscillating Venn diagram and there are plenty of indie press and magazines that have outright and rightly reject these ossified two poles" ("Delusions" 1). Uncomfortable with the idea that mainstream poetry can represent marginalized voices, she also expresses her concern that experimental poetry, for all its claims about change and resistance, has failed to be the vanguard it promised to be. In the conclusion to the same essay, she argues, "The avant-garde has become petrified, enamored by its own past, and therefore forever insular and forever backwards. Fuck the avant-garde. We

must hew our own path” (2). Her fairly direct statement of the need for a new model in the new millennium might stand as the beginning of a Millennial manifesto.

It is worth noting, here, that the order of the works (poets) in this chapter is for convenience. As I move into an exploration of Hong’s work, it is not to suggest that Korean-American poetry—or even broader, Asian-American poetry—is the best exemplar of a Millennial Poetics. Or, that Latino works make the most sense for conversations about languages and multiple voices. Instead, I hope that a recognition can be reached that does not suggest all poetry in this chapter is interchangeable, but at the same time does not suggest that each of these poets can only be read in the ways enunciated here. Some of what I will suggest about Hong makes perfect sense for okpik too, but not for Harjo or Arteaga. And, none of these poets, obviously, are soloists for a culture or subculture. I mention this now, as I move into the final poet for the chapter, so that readers might see the difficulty in suggesting that hybridity is a purely stylistic poetics. Poets need to be read in their contexts but also with presbyopic knowledge.

While the world is not—as Thomas L. Friedman might suggest—getting flatter, it is getting wider. The local world in particular is larger than it has ever been. It might be easy to imagine that changes in publishing have made the world smaller, but the truth is access to a plurality of voices makes a heavy din. We may be close, but there are more of us. Therefore, we need to be careful not to presume that because a poet’s works shares some stylistic similarities with other poets, they are of the same school or camp. Hong, for example, has a lot in common with the other poets of this chapter, but that doesn’t mean, without context, we can lump her in the same group. Therefore, if Perez’s criticism of Swensen and St. John is correct—that is if *American Hybrid* excludes what should be included, we need to ask what inclusion should look

like. At some point, inclusion simply looks like lack of discernment. If Arteaga, okpik and Hong are all hybrid, does style supersede content and culture?

This is a more difficult question than it might seem at first glance. Hong and Perez have suggested that race trumps style, that poets of color who practice experimental and hybrid poetry are often left out of anthologies and discussions of origin. Taking Marjorie Perloff to task, Hong points out that the work Perloff has lauded as “*the* anthology of the avant-garde,” *New American Poetry* (both the 1959 edition and the updated 1982 edition), “includes a grand tally of one minority poet” (“Delusions 1). Her overall complaint (and Perez’s, too) isn’t that this is just Tokenism, but that it erases the true origins of the experimental movement which includes (according to Hong) groups like the Black Arts Movement and the Harlem Renaissance and individuals like Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Amiri Baraka, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. When anthologies leave out not just representatives of marginalized groups but progenitors who happen to be people of color, they risk constructing camps and groups and movements and genres that appear white but are born otherwise. Hong, for example, is a poet who clearly questions both the mainstream and experimental approaches to poetry. Her absence from the anthology, along with the absence of Arteaga, Harjo, and okpik—or other possible voices like Cha’s—disappears the history of Millennial Poetics. However, inclusion, too, comes with a risk. If all of these poets are recognized as hybrid, do we, in such categorization, injure a complicated reading of their works? That is, does/can/should hybrid or Millennial Poetics supplant each of these poets’ roles as unique and uncategorized artists and as voices for their various cultural groups?

While that question is not easily or lightly answered, it might be possible to suggest that some poets’ stylistic choices encourage a reading of their poetry as cosmopolitan and hybrid.

Harjo, for example, and Li-Young Lee don't often veer into a sustained Millennial Poetics. Here and there their poems may slide into the elliptical, may practice the techniques of the hybrid, but on the whole, they have situated themselves outside of the category of poets engaged in attempting to find a Third Way. Obviously, therefore, it would be a mistake to read Harjo as engaged in these poetics, but equally obviously it would be a mistake to exclude her from any conversation about cultural hybridity or contemporary Native-American poetry. Hong, as opposed to Lee, utilizes techniques borrowed from experimental poets. Like Lee, though, she also practices intentionally and unintentionally a cultural hybridity that is an indissoluble aspect of her poetry.

Hong, a graduate of Iowa, often mixes Korean with English in her poetry. Unlike Arteaga, however, she almost always provides readers with, if not a translation, a guide to the unfamiliar words and phonemes. She also tangles scientific, linguistic, French, and vulgar words alongside fragments and juxtapositions to produce poems that attack readers on multiple fronts. Yet, she also engages in some typical Asian-American themes like the friction of generations in an immigrant population.

"Zoo," the first poem in her collection *Translating Mo'um* (2002), for example, begins:

*Ga* The fishy consonant,

*Na* The monkey vowel.

*Da* The immigrant's tongue

as shrill or guttural. (13)

The literal, verbal and figurative gaps in these early stanzas encourage a readerly indeterminacy. We seek to fill the gaps left on the page, but must come to terms quickly with the fact that this is

not a possibility. The need for translation combined with the metaphoric action of the poem create fissures not readily or neatly filled. Yet, as the poem goes on, there is a sense of a singular if splintered subjective speaker and the conceit of linguistic distance to human-animal distance and the dangers of such hegemonic and hierarchal thought. The masterful sewing of dictions and registers in the poem stitch codes together so that the voices of musicology, zoology, linguistics, English, Korean, nationalism and family become so intertwined that the poem seems unified in spite of its quick jumps and surprising abutments.

Overture of my voice like the flash of bats.

The hyena babble and apish libretto.

Piscine skin, unblinking eyes.

Sideshow invites foreigner with the animal hide.

Alveolar *tt*, sibilant *ss*, and glottal *hh*

*shi*: poem

*kkatchi*: magpie

*ayi*: child

Words with an atavistic tail. History's thorax considerably cracked. The Hottentot click called undeveloped.

Mother and Father obsessed with hygiene:

as if to rid themselves of their old third world smell. (13)

The poem, in its structure and its content, asks readers to find links that are simultaneously available and incomprehensible. It shifts between the clinical, historical, racist and personal in a quick succession of stanzas that also includes a list of Korean words and their English translations, each word of which draws the reader's attention to a different aspect of the poem beginning with the self-reflexive fact that it is a poem, "*shi*," moving on to the titular subject of the poem through "*kkatchi*," and concluding with self "*ayi*" or "child" which cannot be understood fully until the poem continues. And, when we come to "*ayi*" it is *child* not *me* or *I* or even *Cathy*. There is a distancing here that does not remove the subjective voice and personal pronoun that recurs four times in the poem, yet does not insist on that reading either. After all, the line reads "Mother and Father obsessed with hygiene," not *my* mother and *my* father. The clipped, parataxis here binds "Mother and Father" with the more dispassionate language of linguistics that permeates the poem: "Alveolar *tt*, sibilant *ss*, glottal *hh*" and later "Labial *bs* and palatal *ts*." In other words, it is hard to fail to notice the families of techniques in the poem. And, though no poet would call herself a Millennial Poet and no group refers to themselves as Hybrid Poets, it seems clear that Hong is seeking a borrowing poetics to guide her work.

In "All the Aphrodisiacs," "Body Builder" and "Hottentot Venus" she uses the same tools. By the time she writes *Dance, Dance Revolution* (2008) she has imagined the Desert, a place of over 300 languages and dialects. The story of the Desert is told by the Historian. Again, we see how she means to combine not just the techniques of experimental poetry and traditional poetry, but the voices of Diaspora, hybridization, and immigration. To be understood, Hong must be read in the light of at least these two bright lamps: culture and technique. Truly, Okpik and Arteaga must be as well. Swensen and St. John's whitewashed anthology might make it easier to



identify styles and camp mergers, but it erases the process by which, and the reasons that, many minority poets look toward a new poetics to describe their experiences—experiences that include but are not limited to the dominant American experience that has arguably drove both experimental and traditional poetry for years.

And, while these concerns have existed for years and have been explored by both camps, often label “identity politics,” some contemporary writers are displeased with the results. They see the attempts of the experimental to move past the mainstream techniques that so clearly excluded minority groups as having suffered the same fate. Millennial Poets are concerned with the idea of erasing identity as much as they are with the idea that identity is purely linguistic. Hong’s “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde” speaks toward these concerns:

Even today, avant-garde's most vocal, self-aggrandizing stars continue to be white and even today these stars like Kenneth Goldsmith spout the expired snake oil that poetry should be "against expression" and post-identity." James Baldwin wrote that "to be black was to confront, and to be forced to alter conditions forged in history ... it is clearly at least equally difficult to surmount the delusion of whiteness." The avant-garde's "delusion of whiteness" is the specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian, when in fact such wholesale pronouncements are clueless that the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like voice to alter conditions forged in history. The avant-garde's "delusion of whiteness" is the luxurious opinion that anyone can be "post-identity" and can casually slip in and out of identities like a video game avatar, when there are those who are consistently harassed, surveilled, profiled, or deported for whom they are. But perhaps that is why historically the minority poets' entrance into the avant-garde's arcane little clubs has so often been occluded. We can

never laugh it off, take it all in as one sick joke, and truly escape the taint of subjectivity and history. But even in their best efforts in erasure, in complete transcription, in total paratactic scrambling, there is always a subject—and beyond that, the specter of the author's visage—and that specter is never, no matter how vigorous the erasure, raceless.

(1)

Hong clearly pulls no punches. She also speaks directly towards Millennial Poets' concerns. While she addresses here the experimental voice, the implied criticism of the traditional, the "authority" that the avant-garde resists, exists here, too. Beyond this, she confronts the simple binary opposition of the two-camp model while simultaneously rejecting the notion that a "post-identity" poetics is possible or desirable. Further, she brings to the foreground Millennial Poets' concerns with how these two-camps have categorized and sanitized race, gender, and nationality. While not every Millennial Poet will agree with her (and undoubtedly Swensen and St John would not), her concern is yet another volley against what she and others perceive as a stifling two-camp model, a model they would argue is unsuited to address 21<sup>st</sup> century concerns.

## AFTERWORD

Ultimately, whether Millennial Poetics proves to be a movement of any importance, a movement that resists or restructures perceived previous models of American poetry does not matter as much as the fact that it is difficult to argue that a growing dissatisfaction with the labels and factions of the last century exists. This dissatisfaction creates poems seeking a new rubric, often by borrowing from antecedent practices all over the aesthetic and political spectrum. Poetics often get tired, cannot withstand the failure to meet the promises they made in their infancy. Most groups rise, flare, and atomize. The Beats came and went. The New Formalists. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. Conceptual. Confessional. If Millennial Poetics gains enough traction to be seen as a movement, it too will evaporate and with it some of the ideals it seeks. But this does not mean it is not worth exploring the urge that created it.

Imagism led to the avant-garde. The Confessionals share DNA with the Beats. And, every one of these borrowings, splices, refusals, and resistances helps expose the history, politics, and aesthetic beneath them. Millennial Poets are concerned about the state of poetry now. Whether that concern is justified matters less than that it exists. The desire to be new is coordinate with the desire to be different. Neither represses the desire to be heard and to change the world. Millennial Poets do not want to simply work in the vein of those groups that came before, so they mine them for ore. The process is sloppy at times. At times it dangerously glosses over the politics behind the performances. But we should not presume this means Millennial Poets are apolitical or naïve. They are dissatisfied with the mainstream and the experimental. They want to begin the next thousand years with a poetry all their own even if it is built from what looks to critics like the ruins of the past. Hong and okpik, along with other poets coming of age now, do not see themselves as producing a weaker alloy of previous literatures. They see and

recognize faults in the works and camps that came before them. They mean to rectify these with a new poetics, one cognizant of a greater sum of voices than those loud participants in the largest camps of the previous century. Only time can tell if this group grows from its chrysalis into something beautiful (or ugly) and new. Whatever the case, its practitioners and its critics do contemporary poetry a grave disservice if they read it as a poor recipe with the simple directions: one part mainstream, one part experimental. It is time we start recognizing the poetry for what it is, whether or not we endorse it.

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