

J U L I A N A S P A H R

## Astonishment and Experimentation

Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue, eds., *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002.

---

W

---

hat is most obvious about contemporary poetry in the United States right now is its large range of forms and tonalities and concerns. Depending on whom you talk to, either the death of Robert Lowell or the publication of Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* was the death knell of the national poet. An argument could have been made for Allen Ginsberg when he was still alive, but the fact that this argument rarely got made was a sign that not many people felt there was a need for a national poet. About the middle of the twentieth century, poetry moved from a genre where one man proclaimed his genius and everyone listened to a genre that many people use for complex, multivalent, poly-affiliated reasons. I sometimes attempt to argue that there are mainly two sorts of poets right now: the various formally concerned poets (lyric poets, New Formalists, language poets) and the various identity-category poets (much of spoken word and slam; Chicano/a; Bamboo Ridge; cowboy poets; Hawaiian poets; Dark Room Collective). But even this bifurcation breaks down. Contemporary poetry is impossible to map finally. The lines of connections and bifurcation are too extreme and personally variable to be easily represented. And not only that, this impossible map is getting more and more impossible all the time as new technologies mean more work gets published.

This unruly range makes many nervous, especially my colleagues who went to graduate school in the 1970s. Too much to read, they grumble. Or they worry about how to evaluate all this work when publication is no longer the clear marker of value that it once was. But the most interesting critical work being done on contemporary poetry takes this range as the location of all the excitement. This work sees contemporary poetry as less a place of formal rules and more a sort of decentered linguistic laboratory that reflects the everyday complications of the times. And this work explores the mix of languages and cultural awarenesses that has come about as a result of global interconnectedness and continually shifting populations, and how this mix has led to significant differences in poetic forms from the sixties on. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue's *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics* is one such book.

*We Who Love to Be Astonished* is divided into four sections. Most of the essays are close readings of one or two writers and their work. The first section, "Formal Thresholds," has essays on Kathleen Fraser, Rae Armentrout, Alice Notley, and Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge that for the most part explore how these writers rewrite dominant genres or forms. Susan McCabe's essay on Alice Notley, for instance, explores how she rewrites epic in *The Descent of Alette*. The second section, "In the Margins of Form," has essays on Denise Chávez, Harryette Mullen, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Joy Harjo that all discuss how these writers challenge conventional margin/center dichotomies. AnaLouise Keating on Chávez and Hogue on Mullen, for instance, both address how these writers "expand representational practices and restructure underlying knowledge systems" (8). The third section, "The Visual Referent/Visual Page," through essays on Norma Cole, Ann Lauterbach, Fanny Howe, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Erica Hunt, and Alison Saar looks at how these writers either examine images or turn their pages into works of art so as to challenge conventional representational practices. Hinton, for instance, begins her essay on Fanny Howe and Hejinian by noting that these writers "challenge the way in which we chronicle women's lives" (140). Alan Golding examines how Susan Howe's "visually exploded page and use of space relate to her examining and decentering of a frequently patriarchal author-

ity" (152). The final section, "Performative Bodies," looks at how Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Kathy Acker, Anne Waldman, Tracie Morris, and Jayne Cortez use performance in their work. Heather Thomas, for instance, looks at how Waldman approaches "gender as the play of masculine and feminine forces within an individual, a community, and culture" (203). A poetic afterword by Rachel Blau DuPlessis that is a homage to women's writing concludes the collection and ends, "Exfoliate rupture generation by generation. / How many changes will it take to change poetry?" (253). Because many of the essays in this collection talk about how women writers reconfigure, reexamine, and re-present the conventions, DuPlessis's final homage with its outward-reaching gesture is a welcome ending.

*We Who Love to Be Astonished* is distinctive for how it expands the terms "experimental" or "postmodern avant-garde" to include writers who often get seen as writing merely and / or mainly about identity: Chávez, Cortez, Harjo, and Morris are included with essays on emerging canonical figures such as Fanny Howe, Susan Howe, Notley, and Waldrop. That said, the one limitation of this book is that it is almost as if no one informed any of the authors, or even the editors, of this larger, reconfigured map and how it might change their work. Hinton and Hogue, in the introduction to the collection, play, I assume inadvertently, into the often made yet endlessly wrong argument that innovation is a white-only tradition when they write about how their collection places "essays about white women's innovative writings in dialogue with essays about women writers of color" (6). Yet even if one accepts the distinction (and even though I think the distinction is not true formally, I have to admit its limited social truth), the dialogue isn't really evident. Critics who write more on identity and critics who write more on experimentation mimic each other's arguments in this collection. Both are clearly fluent in the current vocabulary of academic discourse. But it is as if they almost willfully refuse to talk with each other. AnaLouise Keating, for instance, talks a lot about how hard it has been for her to read Chávez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* because of its "narrative lack" and yet never mentions fellow author Ron Silliman's work on how disjunction might cultivate new possibilities of reading in his *The New Sentence* (78). Jonathan Monroe writes on Waldrop's and Harjo's concern with "Native American history and Native American communities," and

Lynn Keller writes on Waldrop's "ambivalent relation to colonial conquest and cultural dominance," yet with the exception of Monroe quoting Harjo, neither turns to a Native American author or critic for additional elucidation or support (90, 105). So while *We Who Love to Be Astonished* provocatively suggests new formations and directions and redefines what it means to be experimental and performative, in the words of Hinton and Hogue in their introduction, "The need to acknowledge—indeed, to expand—the connections continues" (4).

But that caveat aside, the wider grouping and inclusiveness of this book is indicative of how writing about contemporary poetry is changing. And it is this that makes this book such an important and crucial one. I'll buy the argument that *We Who Love to Be Astonished*, as the introduction notes, "offers for the first time a series of critical essays devoted to American women's postmodern writing" (6), but I also am pleased to note that this collection is just one book among many of the last few years that give much-needed attention to contemporary women's writing. Within the last year or so, Ann Vickery's *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing* (Wesleyan UP) and Megan Simpson's *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing* (SUNY P) have been published. Elisabeth Frost's *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* is tantalizingly forthcoming. Shortly after *We Who Love to Be Astonished*, Wesleyan published *American Women Poets in the Twenty-First Century* (edited by Claudia Rankine and myself). Shortly before, the journal *Differences* published a collection of essays with Steve Evans as editor. All of these books and journals are necessary replies to earlier critical work that acted as if experimental writing was something done well only by white men. Together, these collections—along with Mary Margaret Sloan's anthology *Moving Borders* and the online journal *How2*—should finally make it impossible for critics to continue to write the history of experimental writing and not include women, women of diverse races and ethnicities and sexualities and social positions. And it should also make it impossible not to acknowledge women as major practitioners and expanders of this tradition.

*University of Hawaii at Manoa*