

Ron Silliman describes Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945–1960* as "unquestionably the most influential single anthology of the last century." Published in 1960, this anthology was the first to gather the works of a new generation of 'anti-academic' poets who emerged after World War II. The poetry of the anthology departs from that found in the academic anthologies of the day, and includes work by Black Mountain, San Francisco, Beat, and New York School poets. *The New American Poetry* helped me identify a poetic trajectory that describes (more than any other poetic bible) where I as a poet come from and where I am headed.

But in 1968, the New American Poetry meant nothing to me as I wandered through the lives of Keats, Shelly, Byron, and Blake in Mrs. Halperin's 11th grade English class in Miami Beach. "Beauty was Truth," I was sure of it, as I consumed, along with "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the popular music of my day. I dug the Romantic vision because it resonated with the 60's vision, but the poetry of the Romantics seemed a bit like old stuff.

Then one afternoon Peter Schneider, a misfit friend from my home city of Miami Beach, played me recordings of Ginsberg's *Howl* and Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind*. Something changed. "Truth" was still "Beauty," but weirder. What were these strange languages, voices, and songs without a band? What kind of poetry was this? Songs like the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby" and Phil Ochs' "Crucifixion" were startling. The songs from Donovan were often lyrically abstract, but I understood them all in a way. Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, on the other hand, were sometimes so direct, they were unintelligible. Their poems obsessed me, and belonged to me. Their language was fresh, new, and mysterious, and I embraced it. Poetry offered me the possibility to sing my own songs., but I still looked to Bob Dylan for inspiration with his surreal flashes of imagery in songs like "Desolation Road" and "I Want You." That was poetry for me too. It didn't matter if it was poetry or song, I wanted to write like that.

But having grown up in Miami Beach, I was late to the 60's scene. I did make it to San Francisco before graduating high school, and stepped into the "Wild Kingdom" I had only previously seen on TV. I witnessed the flowering of the counter-culture, walked among beatniks and hippies, and saw Allen Ginsberg play harmonium with a psychedelic rock band. I had finally transgressed, made my pilgrimage to City Lights Bookstore, and found "The Wild Kingdom" real and alive. I became part of it—appropriately middle-class, alienated, and wanted nothing more than to become a poet. But there were no specific signs that said: *The New American Poetry This Way*.

In college, I found out that I was not a poet at all. I attended a poetry workshop with Howard Nemerov and according to him, I had the entirely wrong idea about god knows what—heroes, subjects, politics, everything. I began digging deeper into the meaning of language and read "esoteric" writings like *The Hobbit*, *The Little Prince*, and *Technicians of the Sacred*. It became obvious that there had to be some kind of connection between how I approached poetry and how I lived my life. I was on a path.

Forest Reed, a great English teacher at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, gave me some hints on how such poetry was possible. He was a Pound scholar in love with poetry. Every day he would take on the personality of each poet he taught: T.S. Eliot, Wallace

Stevens, Robert Lowell, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, mostly poets included in *The Norton Anthology*. But Reed also hinted at the infinite possibilities and experiment of poetry in *The New American Poetry*. I was unaware at the time that poetry had divisions and boundaries, institutions that trained a slew of poetry professionals, and devised literary canons that exploded when you crossed from one boundary to another. For me, poetry was a diversity of voices exclusive of gangs. I learned from all the poets I was reading. I had my favorites of course, and most of them were “The New American Poets.” But still, there was room for Plath’s “Tulips,” Stevens’ “Blackbirds,” Frosts’ “Birches,” and Chinese poets like Tu Fu and Rexroth’s translations. I was too wide-eyed to understand that there was a literary revolution taking place. For me, poetry was an ideal, not a machine.

I tried to write like the poets I liked, but I could only write fragments. It started to bother me and lock me up, since it seemed like I needed to write “whole” poems like “Birches” and “Tulips” that could be in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Then poets Ed Dorn and Robert Creeley came to UNC-Chapel Hill to talk and read their poetry. They spoke about Black Mountain College and a new poetics I had never heard of, and hardly understood. At that time, there was a bootlegged copy of Dorn’s *Gunslinger* being passed around. I got a hold of it, and it blew my mind. It was narrative, but not confessional, with language that jumped off the page. I immediately signed up for a one-on-one meeting with Ed Dorn. I told him how I couldn’t write a poem, and that all I could write were fragments. And he said to me, “What’s wrong with fragments?” So I began to work with my fragments. See Ezra Pound and Charles Olson. I learned how fragments in juxtaposition can tell stories, or how a single, short line could exist on its own as a complete poem, like William’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” or Whalen’s “Early Spring.” I didn’t have to lead the reader with elaborate exposition or narrative. I just had to take it down. My fragments would somehow add up. There was still no sign of New American Poetry, but I did find a copy of Philip Whalen’s *Like I Say* in a used bookstore, which I tried to read, but couldn’t understand.

I got a good idea of the New American Poetry when I met Joanne Kyger in Pacifica, CA., after moving there in 1975. I met her through Margo Patterson Doss, who wrote in her column about the Sheldance Bromeliad Nursery I had just started up. Joanne asked me if I had ever read Donald Allen’s anthology. She talked about breath, space, projective verse, and Charles Olson, reinforcing my understanding of the movement of thoughts through the mind. how I could speed them up or slow them down, or as she said, “If I was really lucky, have no thoughts at all.” That’s when I finally got an idea about New American Poetry. Then I read her *The Japan & India Journals*.

Joanne helped expand my ideas about the journal and encouraged me to keep writing them. And she encouraged my involvement with ecology and environmental activism on the Pacific coast. She helped me understand the idea of community, and supported the idea that poetry and activism can go together.

I learned a lot from poet Michael McClure as well. See *Meat Science Essays*. He visited the nursery after hearing about the bromeliad collection from Luis Baptista. This all seemed right, nature and activism and poetry. I thought, isn’t that what the poetry and poets I liked were about?

McClure heard from ornithologist, Luis Baptista, about the bromeliads on the hill. McClure came out to visit. We became friends and spoke about art, political activism, and poetry as we hiked the hills around the nursery. I learned from both Joanne and Michael, and from their friends (at lunch, through gossip), that there was a lineage, a New American Poetry, bigger than the Beats, Black Mountain, Objectivists, or any generation of New York School poetry and more inclusive and expansive than the San Francisco or Berkeley Renaissance. There was an all-of-it-world-of-poetry, disparate, desperate, and diaphanous voices, all rolled up into one diverse and inclusive realm. That was my milieu.

And later, Joanne introduced me to Philip Whalen, who explained that there is more than an anthology of New American Poetry, a defined poetics to look back upon, more than a named, dead and dusty verse. All that we were doing, saying, creating, and celebrating was a small “part of the huge stream of evolving language.” Then David Meltzer, my teacher and thesis advisor as “a returning student” at New College, taught me more about the poetics of New American Poetry, such as erotica, pop and jazz music and the mystery of language, signifiers, tradition, and the Hermetic. And I eventually became Philip Whalen’s editor, and learned how to read him. His work taught me to not take myself so seriously. Philip Whalen helped me develop my capacity for caring, and to accept that Idealism was only an Ideal and that was okay.

Eventually, I really came to understand The New American Poetry. I attended the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa in Boulder, Colorado. Most of the curriculum there was born out of the New American Poetry. William Burroughs brought Joyce to Punk and Comic Book to Political Exorcism; Amiri Baraka taught race and jazz; Anne Waldman rejoiced, obsessive and elegant, breath sweeping and tenacious; and Allen, Allen, showed me line, verse, line, and shared his dream of meeting Ma Rainey; writers from all over, who taught, learned, and heard the same possibility of meaning in poetry recognized a freedom, the inside and outside as one consciousness, dharma, karma and practice, serious, playful, and rooted, always meaning something but never too much to atrophy. Naropa became a spiritual home for New American Poetry, for me, more than just a bastion of Beatitude. My poetry friends were part of that home, walking, living, breathing embodiments of New American Poetry, my sangha, a home for my experiment with myself, my consciousness, a place to gossip and share the story of a vast agreeable and sometimes disagreeable tribe. I learned that poetry was more than a product, a religion, a god, a piece of nothingness, the quotidian, a fragment, that there was no Beat Thing or New American Poetry really, and the closer I lived in my breath, and looked and learned, in my breath, and space, there was only practice, lots of practice, a life time of it, an art that would never be resolved, the beauty and horror of that unresolvedness, impermanence and poetry, experience, “a continuous nerve movie.” Finally, it is too much to say, what was or is my experience of New American Poetry. The signs are never so clear, and I’m still learning.