

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76695-1 - The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945

Edited by Jennifer Ashton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

JENNIFER ASHTON

Periodizing Poetic Practice since 1945

The *Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945* is organized to represent the most important poetic developments in the period (between 1945 and the present) and to do so in the context of the social, political, professional, and, above all, aesthetic forces that shaped those developments. But in the discourse of literary history, the designation “Post 45” is a comparatively new attempt at the periodization of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and its canons are still in the making. The chapters of the volume are designed to provide a variety of vantages on the poetic production of the period, and the categories that organize them are thus not all taxonomically equivalent to one another. Although a certain number of the chapters are devoted to the major schools or movements in American poetry since 1945 – Confessionalism, the New York School, Language writing – recognizable as such either through an established body of criticism or through claims made and acknowledged by the poets themselves, other chapters take a very different angle of approach. Devoted to particular ways of being or becoming a poet or to important institutional formations that do not fit neatly within the terms of a movement or school, these chapters – for example, on creative writing programs in the United States, on discursive formations such as the idea of the “mainstream,” or on two instances (Allen Grossman and Susan Howe) of what one might call the career of the “academic poet” – are intended to fill out, in ways that a survey driven only by important movements could not, a detailed picture of the major poetic projects, formal innovations, and aesthetic legacies that have defined American poetry in the latter half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first.

Furthermore, although various dichotomies – between mainstream and marginal or avant-garde, between academic and nonacademic, between practice and theory – have played a significant role in the recent history of American poetry, the essays that make up this volume are concerned as much with understanding that history as the attempt to deal with a set of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76695-1 - The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945

Edited by Jennifer Ashton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ASHTON

common problems, as with the effort to taxonomize the solutions. The hope is that as students and scholars of the period read in and across this volume, they will become well acquainted with the range of aesthetic and philosophical questions that poetry of the last six decades has asked and the answers it has given: Who or what determines the meaning of a poem (language as a system of rules, as ideology, as inventive practice? the poet's intention? the material or historical situation in which the poem was produced? the reader's response to the poem?)? In what ways do poems seek to represent persons, whether it be the poet himself or herself, some other imagined speaker of the poems, or someone to whom the poem is addressed? What, if any, kinds of value can poetry bestow on persons or objects in the world? To what extent do poems belong to the world of experience that we inhabit, and to what extent should they be understood as categorically distinct from that world? In what ways do poetic uses of language distinguish it from "ordinary" uses of language? How ordinary is ordinary language to begin with?

Many of these questions are obviously abstract, but readers of this *Companion* will quickly see that they are asked and answered in the context of sometimes overwhelmingly concrete historical developments. The question of poetry's ability to confer value on persons, for example, is crucially reformulated by the actual genocides of the mid-twentieth century and by the potential for total annihilation made vivid by the invention of the nuclear bomb. The question of the poem's speaker and of its audience is also given a new valence, both by the rise of new social movements (such as the civil rights movement, feminism, and the mobilization for rights and recognition denied on the basis of other ascriptive and legal categories such as sexuality, disability, or citizenship status) and by the questions about the very identities that produce and are produced by those movements. And, more generally, the globalization of markets and the saturation of local cultures by marketed and marketable objects and ideas has given new meaning to many of the legal, scientific, political, and religious questions that have always been a subject of poetic discourse: Which uses of language count as public versus which count as private, say, or what sorts of ethical responsibilities acts of speech do or do not entail.

We begin a little over a decade before 1945, with an avant-garde movement that traces its lineage directly to two major modernist predecessors, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, and indirectly to a third, Gertrude Stein. Both Williams and Pound were important mentors to Louis Zukofsky, the coiner of the term "objectivists" and the major figure associated with it, and it is partially through the mediations of the poets who gathered, however briefly, under that umbrella that they and Stein have crucially influenced some of the avant-garde movements that are absolutely central to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76695-1 - The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945

Edited by Jennifer Ashton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Periodizing Poetic Practice since 1945

the period covered by this volume. Thus, while the Objectivists have one foot planted in the modernism of the preceding generation, they also anticipate the claims made by Charles Olson in his 1950 manifesto “Projective Verse” that would help establish the ideal of the “open text” as one of the foundations of postmodern poetry.¹ Mark Scroggins’s detailed, comprehensive account in Chapter 2 reveals the extent to which the influence of the objectivists, particularly as funneled through Olson, had expansive effects in the generations following, from Allen Ginsberg and the Beats, to Robert Duncan and the San Francisco Renaissance, to Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts movement, to the Language writers of the 1970s through the 1990s, as subsequent chapters on all four of these movements make clear.

Launched with the February 1931 “Objectivists” issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, edited by Zukofsky at the request of Harriet Monroe, the imagined project of the Objectivists as defined by Zukofsky was an explicit response to the Imagist project that Pound had announced in the same venue two decades earlier. But if the questions raised by Imagism focused on the role of technique in the achievement of poetry, the questions raised by Objectivism had to do with distinguishing such techniques from the ontology of the poetic achievement itself. Thus, whereas technique is, for Pound and Imagism, the “test of a man’s sincerity” and, in turn, of the poem’s success, “sincerity” (technique in precisely Pound’s terms, and as such a formal rather than a psychological category) becomes, for Zukofsky and Objectivism, subordinate to and ontologically distinct from the ideal achievement of poetry, namely the poem’s “rested totality”: its compositional integrity.² In this respect, the idea of the objective in poetry is never far from music – hence Zukofsky’s famous formula, the sign of the integral indicating “Lower limit speech / Upper limit: music.”³ Moreover, the role played by individual words in the poem imagined on the model of the musical composition generates another set of questions central to much of the poetry covered by this volume: How do we understand the relationship between the meaning of words and their phonic and graphic forms – or, more broadly, between the materiality of language and its communicative uses?

As crucial to a proper understanding of this movement as its formal principles are the left political commitments of its poets, a number of whom were actively involved with, if not signed members of, the Communist Party. At the same time there is a manifest anxiety in the work regarding the political efficacy of poetry. For Zukofsky and Lorine Niedecker this would take the form of a sustained critique of one of the major formal devices of poetry – metaphor – as an effort to test its adequacy to the representation of material poverty. In the case of Oppen, it would take the form of nearly two and a half decades of silence after the publication of his first book of poetry

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76695-1 - The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945

Edited by Jennifer Ashton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ASHTON

in 1934 – the refusal or inability to write during a long period of intensive political activism for the Communist Party and labor causes in New York, followed by a life of exile in Mexico until 1960. But for these poets, and indeed for the poetry that has come to be identified as Objectivist, the project of foregrounding the materiality of the word in the poem becomes an analog for the representation of the material conditions of objects and persons in the world. This same project would be taken up with no space for analogy, and no ambivalence, several decades later in the work of Language writers such as Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and Ron Silliman, who would argue that such reading and writing entails a kind of unalienated labor, capable of granting poet and reader alike direct access to the means of poetic production.

Published nearly two decades after the “Objectivists” issue of *Poetry*, Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” was in part an explicit response to the Objectivist project descended from Zukofsky and Niedecker. For Olson, the commitment to the objective involved a latent commitment to the subjective, which needed to be made patent as the quite literal vitality of the poem. Between typewriter and page Olson saw the poet’s own breath shaping the arrangement of the words in the poem, the resulting material form of the poem as the trace of the visceral presence of the poet *as subject*. Understanding the argument of the Projective response to Objectivism turns out to be crucial not only to extending the materialist implications of the latter and the legacy it drew from Pound and Williams, but also the extent to which something like “breath” would become representative of a bodily and performative engagement that was by no means unique to Olson – it was as central to the Beat poetry of Jack Kerouac and Bob Kaufman as to the California Renaissance of Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan or the Black Arts poetics of Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni.

If the musical model for the formal project of the Objectivists would have been a Bach cantata or, in homage to Pound, a Provençal chanson, the equivalent for the Beat movement is the “barbaric chant.” Drawing on Walt Whitman – indeed, making the poetry as well as the personality of Whitman more central to poetic thought than ever before – Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac, Diane di Prima, and other Beats represented a lifestyle as much as a poetics and a sustaining model for the counterculture of the late 1960s. The career of Ginsberg and the successive public performances of “Howl” effectively chart the transition from a Beat counterculture of individual rebellion – openly exploring sexuality (gay and straight), taking drugs, studying Buddhism and Hinduism – to a Hippie counterculture in which sex and drugs turn into communitarian enterprise. The inseparability of poetry, sex, spiritualism, and political activism that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76695-1 - The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945

Edited by Jennifer Ashton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Periodizing Poetic Practice since 1945

mark Ginsberg's own transition from Beat poet to Hippie are the hallmarks of the larger counterculture movement as well, as it became increasingly driven by organized protests against the war in Vietnam. But while chanted word plays its role in demonstration, it can hardly be said to have been invented by the Beats or the Hippies; the rhythms of the speeches of the civil rights protests of the 1950s and early 1960s – that is, the rhythms also of the black preacher's sermon – were essential to the emphasis on oral utterance in Beat poetry, as was the elevation of breath as the unit of the line in Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" and LeRoi Jones's (later Amiri Baraka) "How You Sound??" In this respect, a complete account of the movement must engage these influences as well as the consequences that Beat poetry's transformations of chant, in turn, had in the emergence of spoken word as a genre and slam contests as a format for its performance.⁴

Often understood as a reaction against the imperative to impersonality in the modernism of Eliot, Pound, and Moore, the thematic concerns of the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s that would come to be called "confessional" – psychological depression, suicidal impulses, domestic oppression or abuse, and alcoholism, for example – move into the realm of public utterance what might otherwise remain confined to the most private exchanges between family members, between analyst and client, or between priest and parishioner (hence the term "confessional"). Unlike the romantic vision of the poem as the spontaneous outpourings of the poet – not heard but overheard (to borrow from William Wordsworth and John Stuart Mill), and so produced by an ideally unselfconscious speaker – the speech acts of confessional poems are supremely self-conscious in their depiction of deeply personal thoughts and situations. As Deborah Nelson shows in Chapter 3, these poetic projects take place both in the context of an increased popular interest in what in everyday life does and does not count as private, even of (in the wake of McCarthyism) what is and is not properly accessible to the State. In this respect, confessional poetry must also be understood as itself a project of working out poetic definitions of the "personal" and the "private" as such, as well as their relation to one another and to poetic discourse more generally.

If the degree to which confessional poetry counts as personal is the degree to which it lays bare the most emotionally fraught or potentially scandalous desires and impulses of the poet, the poetry for which Frank O'Hara coined the term "Personism" in 1960 – namely, his own – challenged itself to make art out of the poet's most mundane desires and impulses. But the "I do this, I do that" statements about everyday activities that were O'Hara's stylistic hallmark were understood by him not so much as efforts to achieve a detailed sense of the particular person who was Frank O'Hara, but rather

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76695-1 - The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945

Edited by Jennifer Ashton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ASHTON

as a means of achieving – as Oren Izenberg has argued – something like the representation of personhood as such. Solicited for Donald Allen’s 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry*, Frank O’Hara’s Personism prescribed a poetics that is rooted, on the one hand, in the idea of impulse (“you go on your nerve”), and thus in the most personal and idiosyncratic of choices. On the other hand, in “opposing the personal removal for the poet” (an opposition O’Hara also identifies closely with the abstract canvases of Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell, and other contemporary painters), Personism aspires to “true abstraction.”⁵ For O’Hara, this commitment to abstraction – not through the impersonality of the poet but through something like his presence in the poem as the expression of personal choice (think also of Pollack describing himself as *in* the painting while pouring and dripping the paint) – is ultimately a way of distinguishing the poem and the work of art more generally from the experiential world of the reader / viewer. In Chapter 4, Charles Altieri brings an important and long-missing focus to the relationship among New York School poets, such as O’Hara, Barbara Guest, and John Ashbery, and painters of the same moment who were reviving figurative modes at a time when abstract expressionism was dominant. Altieri calls our attention to the work of Fairfield Porter, Larry Rivers, and Jane Freilicher to show how poets – precisely in their contact with these painters and their work – were developing new ways of imagining expressivity in art.

Taking place on the opposite coast at roughly the same time as the New York School was emerging as something that could be called a “school,” the California Renaissance was striking in its confluences with the Beat movement as well as the Black Arts movement. Indeed as Michael Davidson’s, Ronna Johnson’s, and Margo Crawford’s chapters all show, there is considerable overlap among the poets whose names are synonymous with these movements. But as Davidson makes clear in Chapter 5, the California Renaissance is also striking in that its scope extends well beyond the 1950s and 1960s; poets associated with the later developments of Language writing – Clark Coolidge, Lyn Hejinian, Michael Palmer, and Kit Robinson, among others – also rightly belong to it. It would be hard not to see the community of writers who collaborated on one another’s work, founded magazines and small presses, and gave readings together in the Bay Area during the 1970s and 1980s as an important extension of the poetic ideas of the “open text” (another legacy of Black Mountain) that became solidified in conversations among Kenneth Rexroth, Madeline Gleason, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Robin Blaser in the 1950s and 1960s. But the latter poets’ investigations of the material features of language as a kind of architecture of thought – taking on the shape of archetypal myth in Duncan and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76695-1 - The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945

Edited by Jennifer Ashton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Periodizing Poetic Practice since 1945

of something like raw information in Spicer – require discussion on their own terms. For one thing, at the time when the circle around Rexroth and Duncan was forming, there was as yet no vivid sense of the San Francisco Bay area as a geographical center for poetry, as there had long been for New York, and as there would be by the time the Language writers of the West Coast were coalescing into a community. In this respect, the geographical designation functions similarly to that of the New York School. But for the San Francisco Renaissance poets, there was also the added sense (a distinctively American one, it is worth noting) of a new frontier – or as Duncan might have put it, of “opening the field.” Or, to use a term that would matter even more to the next generation of writers in the Bay area, we might say that the place was in this instance foundational to the very idea of the “open text.”

Emerging contemporaneously with the Beat movement and with the poetic activity that came to be identified with the San Francisco Renaissance – and involving no small number of their poets – the Black Arts movement can be seen as a reinvention of the celebration of blackness in the Harlem Renaissance and of the questions of cultural aesthetics that it raised, but in the context now of a radical, even militant, politics. Indeed the movement is driven in part precisely out of a sense (articulated most vividly in Harold Cruse’s *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*) that the intellectual and artistic efforts of the Harlem Renaissance, whatever forms of recognition and respect they may have garnered for African-American culture, had been a political failure.⁶ LeRoi Jones – who would renounce his “slave” name in the late 1960s and rename himself Amiri Baraka, and whose 1967 anthology, *Black Fire* (coedited with Larry Neal), would effectively establish a Black Arts canon – charts his own career in terms of a renunciation of a more or less detached aesthetics for one inextricable from political action.⁷

The continuity between the Black Arts movement and its poetic predecessors is visible in Jones’s significant career as editor or contributing editor of several very important small magazines in the 1950s and early 1960s (*Kulchur*, *Yugen*, and *Floating Bear*, in particular). Here, in collaboration with Diane di Prima and others, Jones solicited work from a remarkably diverse range of poets, including Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson, Frank O’Hara, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, and Gary Snyder. Indeed, the significance of a number of the foundational statements of American avant-garde poetry in the latter half of the twentieth century – O’Hara’s “Personism” and Olson’s “Projective Verse” in particular – cannot be fully understood without reference to Baraka’s early poetic and editorial career and the later political transformations undertaken by him and by the Black Arts movement in general (and vice versa).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76695-1 - The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945

Edited by Jennifer Ashton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ASHTON

But if his 1959 manifesto “How You Sound??” alludes unmistakably to his correspondence with Olson, and if Baraka’s poetry, both early and late, manifests an emphasis on the body similar to what one finds in Olson and in much of the performance-based work associated with Black Mountain, the poetry of Baraka would increasingly insist on aspects of that body that in Olson were at best incidental. For Baraka, the vital source of the poem is not just a body, but a raced body, a black body. When Baraka points to the sounds made by John Coltrane and others who would represent the “New Music” in jazz (Pharoah Sanders, Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, among others), it is to imagine their art precisely as a kind of projection through the breath, but he would also insist that that projection sounded different to black listeners than it did to white ones. For unlike Olson’s “Projective Verse,” the wailing and shrieking bursts of the New Music solo are understood by Baraka not so much as a projection of the artist in his visceral particularity (à la Olson), but of the artist expressing, by means of his raced body, the collective protest of a people united by oppression, first under slavery, then under Jim Crow, and finally, after the de jure (if not de facto) abolishment of both, under the continued economic and social consequences of that history.

The point of the new Black Arts and theater collectives at the time – the Umbra Workshop, for example, or the Black Arts Repertory Theater School and others modeled on it such as Black Arts West and Black Arts South – in identifying and promoting a distinctively black aesthetic was not (or not merely) self-expression, or even collective expression, but political action and change: hence the anthemic function of works such as Baraka’s “It’s Nation Time!,” Giovanni’s “The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro,” or The Last Poets’ “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” written to be performed before an audience and to move people not only to shout back but to act.⁸ The call-and-response form that dominated these performances was a model for the Beat movement as it persisted through the antiwar protests of the late 1960s, as well as for the later spoken word performances and slam contests that would become increasingly popular toward the end of the twentieth century. In Chapter 7, Margo Natalie Crawford probes beneath the surface of poems by major spokespersons of the movement to reveal a dialectical movement between the personal and the social, the individual and the collective.

Arising in the context of second-wave feminism in the United States following World War II – in the midst of the best-selling publication of Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* (1963), the formation of a Presidential Commission on the Status of Women and of the National Organization of Women, the (successful) proposal to include discrimination on the basis of sex in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the (eventually unsuccessful)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76695-1 - The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945

Edited by Jennifer Ashton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Periodizing Poetic Practice since 1945

proposal of an Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution – the feminist poetry discussed by Lisa Sewell in Chapter 8 does not present anything like a unified front.⁹ But what the work has in common – and shares with the events listed earlier – is a broad critique of male hegemony, more specifically of patriarchal structures that were understood to have consistently misrepresented or altogether denied representation to women. For poets like Muriel Rukeyser or Alicia Ostriker, for example, the translation of this critique into poetic discourse meant thematizing, in rich detail, thoughts and feelings offering privileged access to experiences unique to women’s lives. Maternal bonds and conflicts, female friendship, and the struggle to voice those experiences using the forms of a male-dominated poetic tradition are among the recurring themes of their work. Poetry also becomes a means here of thinking through other identity categories as they relate to gender and sex. The major figure in this context is Adrienne Rich, whose feminist projects both outside and inside poetry would become synonymous with a wider critique of heteronormativity. And when that project is in turn aligned with a broader critique of white supremacy, we begin to see efforts to negotiate multiple racial or ethnic identities – for instance, African American (Audre Lorde), Chicana (Cherríe Moraga), Native American (Joy Harjo) – as well as the constraints of gender. The earlier poetry in Chapter 8 engages with feminism by thematizing various aspects of women’s experiences. The question of whether there is a distinctive form as well as content for women’s poetry emerges in a much more pervasive way in the 1980s and 1990s with the advent of various identity-based “innovative” poetics that emphasize linguistic experiment and rupture as strategies for combating ideological formations around race, gender, and sex.

The ecology movement in the United States ignites at roughly the same time as second-wave feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s. After the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, the question of the pastoral in poetry begins to be raised not as it had been in the modernist context – as a question about what counts as the alternative to the urban (as in Frost or the Southern Agrarians) or about how the urban might itself count as pastoral (as in Hart Crane or William Carlos Williams) – but in the context of a nature that is for the first time defined by the endangerment posed by human presence.¹⁰ In the work of poets like A. R. Ammons or Wendell Berry, ecology, specifically as it involves human uses and transformations of nature, becomes an allegory for a kind of poetic economy grounded in the metaphorical transformation of meaning. For a poet like Gary Snyder, meanwhile, the poetic technique of personifying nature as a means of communicating human thoughts and feelings becomes a project of granting nature itself the standing of personhood, with the poem as the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76695-1 - The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945

Edited by Jennifer Ashton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ASHTON

proper means of acknowledgment. In 1972, the legal theorist Christopher Stone asked the question “Should Trees Have Standing?” – asking, in effect, whether lawyers should be allowed to represent their interests in court.¹¹ The answer of Snyder and other poets in the strongest “ecopoetic” tradition has been that, whether or not the lawyers do, the poet will. In Chapter 9, Nick Selby situates the work of recognizable eco-poets alongside those whose work might appear less obviously ecologically engaged, even as he offers an incisive analysis of the theoretical frameworks that have emerged around ecopoetry under the name of “ecocriticism.”

From Olson’s “Projective Verse” and Jones’s “How You Sound??” and the poetic movements that extend from their moment of inception, we can see how impossible it would be to give a full account of poetry in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century without taking identity – racial, cultural, sexual – into account; however, one could as easily argue that the same applies to poetry from the preceding half-century as well. But from a purely material perspective, it would be equally impossible to give a full account of poetry in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century without taking up the development and proliferation of the MFA program in creative writing, and this would not be true for the preceding decades. Beginning with the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, founded in 1936, the institution of the workshop, while it certainly has its precedents and models in various writing groups and collaborative endeavors that have occurred throughout the history of poetry, nevertheless marks, in its remarkable proliferation throughout the academic system in the United States in particular, something distinctive to post-1945 American poetry. The phrase “workshopping a poem,” ubiquitous in poetic discourse during the period of concern in this volume, would have been unimaginable for most of the first half of the twentieth century and earlier. Hank Lazer’s treatment of the newly professionalized contexts of poetry asks us to consider both the constraints and the openings these institutional formations have created for poets. The remaining chapters of this volume are all inflected in some way by the role of academic programs in poetic discourse whether by virtue of an avowed antagonism, as in the case of rap and spoken word, or a kind of rivalry, as with the early Language movement, or by virtue of the kinds of choices that have developed in the context of the workshop itself (with the emphasis it places on exercises, disciplinary constraints, etc.).

The concept of the “workshop poem” could never have emerged without expansion of the academy in the latter half of the twentieth century, and neither could our idea of the “academic poet.” In Chapter 13, Oren Izenberg disables the pejorative connotations of the term and reveals how