

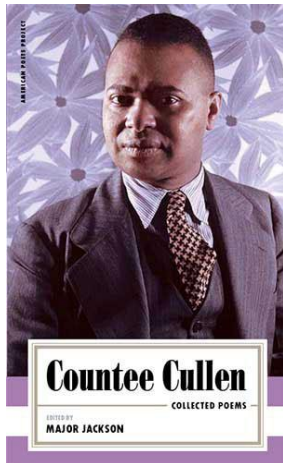
MARCH EXEMPLARS, 2013

Poetry Reviews by Grace Cavalieri

Countee Cullen, Collected Poems, edited by Major Jackson. The Library of America. 266 pgs.

This is the book that was needed to fill in pieces of the puzzle we call the Harlem Renaissance. Cullen is the first name we learn almost immediately from the era, but how many poems, besides **The Black Christ** can we name? Now we have them all, thanks to poet/scholar Major Jackson who brings his expertise to the book. This is Cullen's full poetic display, plus uncollected poems; and eight poems never before seen. The poems are characteristic of their time with formal cadence and predictable rhyme schemes but it's the content that stunned the literary world and still will. Race, sex, religion are boldly confronted while countenanced in lyricism and immaculate verse. The feeling we're left is contradiction of theme to language. There are some antithetical rhythms and some paradoxes, but mostly boisterous subject matter is rendered with elegance and a skrim of sadness. Color is the predominant and essential theme as Cullen pushes against every known convention to describe his heritage. These poems are seminal intellectual battles with irony and strategy within the lines.

Here is Cullen, a first rate writer with a fascinating life (at one time married to the daughter of W.E.B Dubois.) The biographical notes are fundamental reading; the Introduction by Major Jackson is a molecular structure of the life and discipline of an American voice we had not before fully retrieved.



Color

To Certain Critics

Then call me traitor if you must,

Shout treason and default!

Say I betray a sacred trust

Aching beyond this vault.

I'll bear your censure as your praise,

For never shall the clan

Confine my singing to its ways

Beyond the ways of man.

No racial option narrows grief,

Pain is no patriot,

And sorrow plaits her dismal leaf

For all as leif as not.

With blind sheep groping down every hill,

Searching an oriflamme,

How shall the shepherd heart then thrill

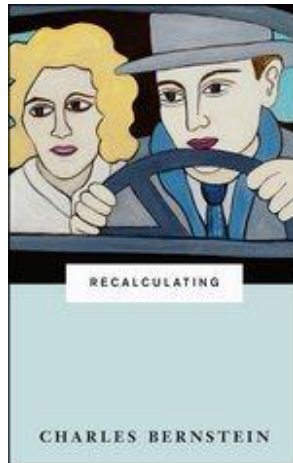
To only the darker lamb?

RECALCULATING by Charles Bernstein. Univ. of Chicago Press. 185 pgs.

Charles Bernstein's poetry is language that breaks thought into meaning in spite of itself. Poetry like the law depends on precedents. Bernstein likes to flaunt these and establish new patterns. Reading through I'm struck with his generosity in telling us everything, letting his brain register what it will, and done beautifully. He's also a philosopher and gives us bullets that stay –from Strike, 'every hope begins with a disappointment.' He also can be challenging and defiant as with the poem **The Most Frequent Words In Girly Man**, where there is a list of single words in a single vertical column for 12 pages. What makes this a poem? I'll be damned if I know. Autodidactic art?

I especially like the poem **Great Moments in Taches Blanches** with its list of 31 takes on the word "blank" and its coordinates; there are eight # 31's, and of course the last two are—you guessed it— are blank.

Bernstein is a stylist, a man on a quest, a trailblazer. His poems are a system of methodologies and theories, fueled by a set of dynamics that are intuitive and progressive. He recreates before he creates. One thing is true. Bernstein is wild with sensations and writes as if there's no eternity. I know better than to argue with that. Here is Bernstein as poet/trickster:



I WILL NOT WRITE IMITATIVE POETRY

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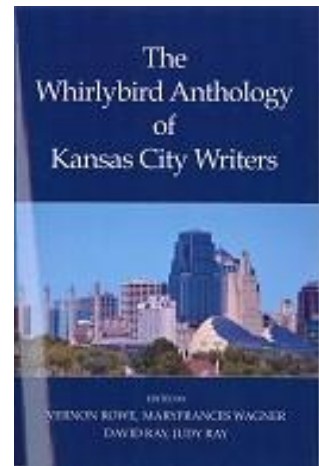
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The Whirlybird Anthology of Kansas City Writers , edited by Vernon Rowe, MaryFrances Wagner, David Ray, Judy Ray. Whirleybird Press. 241 pgs.

An anthology by definition is “a collection of literary works chosen by the compiler.” This describes the artifact but not the worth. This Kansas City collection is a discovery of new and remembered writers; its main value is as inspiration, and example, of how works are placed in juxtaposition. Single pieces are easy to love, but putting together disparate and unique features means that each one must help work shown before and after. These are the steps that make the journey. There’s always an agreement by editors about how to make poetry and prose the solution to a book length argument. This is the kind of book you’ll gobble like eating peanuts, once you start, you can’t stop. How intriguing to hold poetry and prose up against each other to create authentic curiosity in the reader about what comes next. Some 95 writers are represented here, Kansas City writers, eminent ones like Ernest Hemingway as well as newcomers. Versatile and glorious, to meet so many with a geographic kinship but each speaking separately. Of course we hear as many lives as there are writers, for anthologies are albums of rich elements—that might otherwise have been abandoned. I was glad to

bump up against old favorites, James Tate, B.H. Fairchild and new ones to remember like G.S. Sharat Chandra, now deceased:



Stillness

the house

sullen goats grazing on emptiness

drift mutely to the other side of day

the sun has cast his mid-day net

but doesn't move

to pull in the catch—

a chameleon

two stink bugs stiff after love

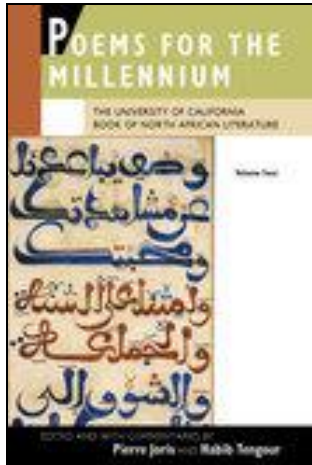
a towhee dozing over my patch of impatiens

stillness is making its point

knowing this

the wind plays dead

Poems for The Millennium, The University of California Press Book of North African Literature, Vol. 4 edited with commentaries by Pierre Joris and Habib Tengour. 744 pgs.



I'm not a scholar, and North African Literature (Judeo, Arab, Islamic,) is new to me, and it is only 3 months into the new year of 2013, but I'm willing to say this book is the most important contribution to world literature for this year, and probably more to come. It would be a casualty of history if this book were not on top of every canon. Volume 4 is a continuation of 3 past books. This has been in the plan for 75 years, and taken the past decade to produce. Most of the text is in English for the first time.

The writers are in chronological sections. The first writer presented is from sixth century Carthage B.C.E. and the last, Casablanca 1978. These poets and writers will give the heart sustenance in a new way—a record of humankind—a blueprint of humanity. Every page shocks with different energy. The Introduction explains the first 2 volumes, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, “experimental

poetries” of the 20th century, Volume 3 is experimentalism of 19th century Romanticism and now this, as the editors say ‘away from Europe and North America.’

I can only accept what I’m told about each of the authors— their lingual landscapes; the context goes to my brain, but what strikes me, beyond the tight purpose of historical reference, are these exalted verses, vibrant writings that stand on their own, even if we knew nothing more. The book was created with intentional force and matches the editors’ best expectations. The dedication reads *For those poets of the Maghreb and the Arab world who stood up against the prohibitions.*

Section I is **A Book of Multiple Beginnings**—excerpts from ten writers; the only one I’d known is Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis (Saint Augustine ;) its commentary explains how this Christian became part of the heritage, re: his North African roots. Twelve sections in the book start with **First Diwan**, called “**A Book of In Betweens: Al-Andalus Sicily, The Maghreb** “ (29 writings.) There are five Diwan (African word for anthology ;) sections of **The Oral Tradition** (three ;) I want to highlight the **Second Diwan (Al Adab, The Invention of Prose.)** I can’t praise too highly the value of this section—shifting patterns presented with such a cleareyed and finely balanced sensibility for almost 100% of us readers who would not know this material. **The Book of Mystics** includes the Sufi mystics. Other sections represent **Mauritania; Western Sahara; A Book of Exiles** (Diaspora, French, Italian etc.) **The Fifth Diwan; Make It New: The Invention of Independence II**— And more.

I understand listing the section titles does not let anyone into the book, but it does show the difficulty and effort in categorizing and organizing the history of North African writing—galvanizing groups from the time of hieroglyphics to 20th century—but yet it is accomplished here, making indelible mental pictures and vocal harmony that has thrived through time. Writer after writer, from antiquity and before, each linked by an extraordinary truth to tell. This is a book I'll never stop reading, with special gratitude for the editorial explanations throughout.

I've chosen 6 from 17 excerpts taken from Sidi Abderrahman el Mejdub (Tit Mill, early sixteenth century- Merdacha. Jebel Aouf, 1568:)

Some Quatrains

...

o my heart I burn you and if you want I will do more

o my heart you shame me because you like who doesn't like you

my weak heart can't bear any pain and by God you are barbarians

who supported me when I was strong and let me down when I grew weak

don't think of this time's tightness see how wide time is in God

difficulties wipe out the weak but men wipe out difficulties

o friend, be patient hide your burden

sleep naked on thorns wait for a brighter day

I made snow into a bed and covered myself with the wind

I made the moon into a lamp and went to sleep in the starry night

misery should be hidden away and covered under a veil
cover the wound with the skin and the wound will soon heal.

Very Honorably Mentioned.

Gargoyle 59, edited by Lucinda Ebersole and Richard Peabody. Paycock Press.488
pgs.



Nonfiction, fiction, poetry, artwork. I hope I take a cross country trip many times
over to read it. A closing page by Nin Andrews is a postit note:

This is just to say
I've rejected
your poems
that were in
my inbox

forever...

You probably thought

I was saving them

for a reason...

Grace Cavalieri is a writer. She produces "The Poet and the Poem from the Library of Congress" for public radio.