

# 9/11 Poetry Anthologies and the Protest of American Exceptionalism

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## Anthologies and the Passing of the American Century

In February 1941, shortly before the United States entered World War II, *Time-Life* publisher Henry Luce called on the country to become more involved in the war so that Americans could “exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit” (20). When he made this bid, Luce surely did not anticipate the long standing effects of such a policy. Sixty years later, the United States would find itself reeling from terrorist attacks that, in the opinion of some, stemmed from the United States actions abroad, particularly its presence in oil-rich Saudi Arabia. The United States had grown confident in its ability to exert its will around the world, despite the setback of the Vietnam War, and on 9/11 the nation seemed to face one of the consequences of its foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Recently, critics have re-assessed the belief in the importance of what Luce presents as the time for the “American Century,” including Andrew Bacevich, who sees the ideology of an “American Century” as “a mythic version of the past that never even approximated reality and today has become downright malignant.”

But even long before 9/11, the idea of the American Century as Luce envisioned it was hard to accept. Certainly the Vietnam era signaled the immense problems with such an approach, and like the literature of protest from that era, the post-9/11 years have similarly witnessed a resurgence of the poetry of protest. In this way we can see poetry assuming a social position where it enters into dialogue with the dominant cultural ideology, a belief in American exceptionalism as Luce promotes it that permitted Vietnam to happen in the first place. William Spanos has recently argued that the United States’ response to the 9/11 attacks provided the country with an excuse to resume “its errand in the global wilderness that had been interrupted by the specter of Vietnam” (x). In Spanos’ view, the culture had sought to suppress memory of Vietnam in the years after the conflict and 9/11 provided a definitive event that could allow the country to turn from Vietnam, only to forget its lessons.

The literary era that Vietnam coincided with—postmodernism—can be seen to grow out of 1960s counterculture and reached its terminus, at least according to N. Katherine Hayles and Todd Gannon, sometime in the mid- to late-1990s (99).<sup>2</sup> Many critics contend, however, that postmodernism came to end more specifically with the events of 9/11. As Brian McHale has persuasively argued, 9/11 brought the real tragedy

that postmodernism, particularly in its forms of architecture which often constructed simulated ruins, had been rehearsing for some time.<sup>3</sup> If postmodernist art is seen as playful, derivative, and indifferent to the particulars of history, as Fredric Jameson has suggested, its ensuing era has been solemn and all too aware of the effects of history.<sup>4</sup> If postmodernism represented the luxury of a culture that could produce art works that played with the divisions between high and low culture and embraced the kitschy products that only an economically rich and highly technologically advanced culture could produce, then 9/11 represented a sense of failure of that culture and the passing of an age of American self-assurance represented by Luce's phrase. The terrorist attacks symbolized a repudiation of American hegemony that Luce had so forcefully advocated.

Among forums for literary discussion, the poetry anthology provides a compelling case study of the concerns of the culture that produced it. Here I want to focus on anthologies that capture the views of writers in the period immediately following 9/11. Most of the writers express the outrage Bacevich portrays in their view of the Bush administration's actions in Iraq. The notion of American exceptionalism promoted by Luce is thus critiqued as it continued under Bush's leadership and the poetry anthologies offers us an exemplary model of literary artists' reaction to the dominant ideology.

To be sure, the anthology held a place of importance in twentieth-century poetry overall. Poets early in the century, such as Yeats and Pound, worked as anthologists, and the decisions made by these writers helped to reinforce or create canons. Pound, for example, worked tirelessly on anthologies from early in his career with the intention of promoting a different aesthetic than the literary world had adopted up to that point.<sup>5</sup> One of the taste-setting, Victorian-era anthologies Pound wished to displace was Palgrave's *The Golden Treasury*, which Marjorie Perloff has shown to be representative of the tradition against which modernists reacted (*Dance* 176-181). Among postwar poetics, Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* (later revised as *The Postmoderns*) was paradigmatic in establishing groupings for contemporary poetry associations: the Beats, Black Mountain, New York, and so forth. The more recent *Postmodern American Poetry* edited by Paul Hoover emphasized the experimental side to current poetics and picked up where Allen's anthology left off.

Of course the anthology in the last century was important not only as a taxonomic or pedagogic tool, but it also worked as a site for cultural changes.<sup>6</sup> Feminist issues were the seeds of *No More Masks!*, recently celebrated at the National Poetry Foundation conference in June 2008. The book worked to bring attention to women's place in American poetry. In terms of cultural perspectives, Jerome Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred* argued for a wider engagement beyond Eurocentric poetics, focusing on Asian, African, and Oceanic poetry. His ensuing volume *Shaking the Pumpkin* highlighted Native American verse. Both collections helped to shift focus to multicultural poetics away from an American-centric view. In the 1980s, the anthology became the battleground for the canon debate with such collections as the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* evolving out of the discussion and helping to expand and reshape which texts would be presented for classroom use and thereby redefining what "American" literature consists of to start with.<sup>7</sup>

More recently, the period immediately following 9/11 saw an upsurge in the number of poetry anthologies printed, many of which were intended to respond to the terrorist attacks and the ensuing war on terror. The anthologies thus represent an effort to speak for the culture and in this way poetry seeks to assert its place in public dialogue. In this essay, I want to explore the anthology phenomenon as a way to identify some currents

in recent poetic practice. In terms of the political significance of these anthologies, the format of the anthology allows poets to speak both collectively but also individually. In this way, the Bush era witnessed a return of the poetry of protest evocative of the Vietnam years.<sup>8</sup> Judging by this new post-9/11 poetry, poets have left behind the detached irony and playfulness of postmodernism and have embraced a poetics of social engagement. And yet one must also acknowledge that the marginalization of literature has impeded the social impact of these collections. I will return to this issue in my conclusion.

The post-millennial anthologies can be divided into two main categories: those appearing in direct response to the events of 9/11 and those intended to raise voices contrary to the Bush Administration in the time leading up to the invasion of Iraq, both of which, again, show a discontent with the continued policy of American exceptionalism. In this essay I will survey books in each category, as well as identify prevailing attitudes or characteristics in the poetry presented in them. Suffice it to say now, the verse is as various as the books which print it—at times pensive, at others angry, but always tense, reflecting the uneasy anticipation of the country in the years immediately following the attacks. The anthology, then, might be viewed as a useful gauge to measure the literary temperament of the United States as the nation entered the century following its rise to ascendancy. The anthologies also reflect the uncertainty of the post-9/11 era in which the direction the country is headed in is not entirely clear. As the United States continues to seek a way out of Afghanistan, and Iraq persists as a teetering independent country, the very concept of American exceptionalism has seemed to reach an end. Indeed, as these anthologies show, there is the growing sense of an end of an era.

### **Anthologies in Response to 9/11**

An intriguing characteristic of the post-9/11 anthologies is that these books are all supported by smaller presses. The poetic voices are thus coming from semi-marginalized sources, not receiving mainstream publishing company sponsorship. This fact emphasizes the populist nature of these volumes, which helps to reinforce the social act of poetry and its function of speaking out against injustice. One of the first collections to appear was William Heyen's *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond* from Etruscan Press, which was conceived in the days following the terrorist attacks. Verse appears alongside prose in this volume as the editor seeks a wide ranging response to the event. The book contains such pieces as Mark Jarman's prose recollection of eating at a Waffle House with his family after he learned of the 9/11 attacks and his children transfixed only on the country music celebrities in the booth nearby them. Here we see the complacency in American consumer culture, as figured by the celebrities, meeting with the horror of the attacks. The piece furthers the mission of the collection to provide a snapshot of the impact of the terrorist attacks on individuals' lives. Heyen's own introduction to the book mirrors the emotions of fear and anxiety the attacks provoked:

we must understand that the September 11<sup>th</sup> hijackers were filled with such hate for American aspirations and were of such fanatical . . . fervor that they would with a sense of great fulfillment have killed all 280,000,000 of us, every man, woman, and child, if they'd been able. Theirs was not the flower, but the hellfire of the human mind. Such mania evokes new dimensions of fear and realization and commitment in us, disrupts and challenges the romantic American imagination as perhaps never before, and demands from us a different retaliation, an intricate move toward world justice for each star and

or stripe on every Old Glory now or to come. (xii)

There is a fascinating mixture of anger, bewilderment, and patriotism here, reminiscent of the response of mainstream America directly after the attacks in which flags could be seen flying from almost every house, from almost every car that passed. Heyen, on one level, reproduces a form of American exceptionalism, where responsibility for American actions and their effect on others is not taken. His word “retaliation” in particular is intriguing. The editor appears to see his anthology as a way to strike back, although surely it is beyond the reach of literature to do with words what the terrorists had done with planes. The most art can seem to do in this context is give a voice to the perceived victims, here certainly those who perished in the attacks, but also their families and the nation at large. In this way the writers “retaliate” in the only way they can: through their art to give voice to the bewildering and often conflicting emotions that accompanied the shock of 9/11. Jarman’s piece certainly captures that spirit as it meets head on American superficiality and the results of American foreign policy.

Heyen broaches the important question of who has a right to speak on the tragedy (xi). This is a central question in 9/11 literature: do only those who were directly impacted by the attacks have the right to speak of the grief and devastation wrought by the terrorists’ deeds? Is it an act of appropriation for writers to assume the voices of characters intended to represent those involved in the events of 9/11? The strategy almost universally adopted is that poets decide to write in their own voices, without elaborate personae.<sup>9</sup> This, of course, is a strategy native to lyric poetry anyway, but in the post-9/11 era the approach of speaking for only one’s own experience appears the most reasonable thing to do. Fictionalized accounts run the risk of seeming insensitive or exploitive.

Some of the poems in Heyen’s book share with Jarman’s essay an unvarnished quality, such as Ishmael Reed’s diatribe against the Bush Administration, “America United.” The poem casts a caricature of Bush: “He said he would bomb Afghanistan / as soon as Condi showed him where it was / on the map” (323). The poem clearly plays to the familiar themes of Bush’s boorishness and war mongering, but seems one-dimensional when read next to Lucille Clifton’s pieces, which, in their characteristic understated elegance, explore a complexity of emotion. Clifton offers a series of poems dated for each day in the week following 9/11, pieces that contain such moving imagery as “all of us gathered under one flag / praying together safely” (81), as well as probing questions such as, “is it treason to remember // what we have done / to deserve such villainy // nothing we reassure ourselves / nothing” (82). In this way, Clifton’s poems present the conflict of feelings that many experienced after 9/11. They also unite the personal with the public, as in the last poem of the series in which the speaker worries over the world her newborn granddaughter has recently entered.

This merging of the personal and public persists throughout the anthology, and indeed throughout much 9/11 verse. Alike Barnstone’s “Making Love After September 11, 2001” imagines “ghosts of the people killed crowded into our room” as the speaker and her lover enjoy a moment of intimacy. The speaker indicates these ghosts “wanted / to be flesh against flesh, wanted to hold / the beloved and pleased body close again” (35). The couple cannot escape the dead, even in the most personal of moments, bound in an act which of course is intended to lead to procreation. In this sense the dead who crowd the room envy the speaker’s ability to create life, and thus the tragedy of those lives cut short by the terrorist acts is all the more poignantly felt.

In comparison to *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond, Poetry After 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets* offers a more focused perspective from a geo-

graphically centered group of writers. *Poetry After 9/11* carries such pieces as Pulitzer Prize winner Stephen Dunn's "Grudges," a villanelle that appears in his subsequent volume *The Insistence of Beauty*, the title poem of which again addresses 9/11. As I have argued elsewhere, these poems show Dunn thinking deeply about our feelings of indignation and horror at the events, at the same time they turn a reflective eye back on us and ask where we stand when it comes to issues such as irrational fear and hatred. "The Insistence of Beauty" explores the way the speaker uses the experience of watching the terrorist attacks on TV to reevaluate his old prejudice against the role of the sentimental in high art. The speaker decides that "the sentimental, / beauty's sloppy cousin" deserves reconsideration; he asks rhetorically, "Doesn't a tear deserve a close-up?" (87). Much 9/11 verse represents just such a turning away as Dunn's poem from the aloof and ironic attitude that dominated modernist and postmodernist approaches to literature and culture at large.<sup>10</sup> In the place of irony we find a desire for genuine feeling, even for such previously tabooed emotions as sentimentalism.

One of the most interesting poems in any of the 9/11 anthologies, or the anti-war anthologies to follow, is Norman Stock's "What I Said." Here the speaker captures the anxiety and fear and anger intimated in Heyen's note for *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*. The poem's form mimetically reflects the confused emotions that course through the speaker's mind. Here are the first few lines:

after the terror I  
 went home and cried and  
 said how could this happen and  
 how could such a thing be and  
 why why I mean how could  
 anything so horrible how could  
 anyone do such a thing to us and what (34)

And the poem goes on. The "ands" and "coulds" at the ends of the lines push the poem along, replicating the feeling of panic and lack of reason in the speaker. This quality is confirmed by the end of the poem in which the speaker declares, "I said and I said this is too much to take no one can take a thing like this / and the terror yes and then I said let's kill them" (34). The sense of inconsolability and hysteria the poem communicates early on is confirmed by the end in which the speaker can find no other conclusion but to inflict upon the terrorists what they have done to us. And yet the poem also doubles back on itself. Is simple revenge really the answer, despite the intense feelings we wish to act upon? Do we not stoop to their level by simply wanting to destroy them? The piece's unique representation of these very different parts of the 9/11 experience helps it to stand out as an exemplary poem. It was reprinted in *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature* edited by Michael Meyer, which shows how 9/11 poetry has begun to enter teaching curricula and thus might be seen to seek to represent our more collective experience.

That is not to say that all of the poems in *Poetry After 9/11* address the event directly. The editor explains that the book reflects the authors' state of mind or attitude after 9/11, that it does not contain only poems directly responding to 9/11 (ix). Such is the case with Jean Valentine's lovely poems, which only vaguely refer to the attacks. In "In the Burning Air," for example, the speaker mentions that in "the burning air" there is "nothing," but then the poem proceeds to offer images of the ground level in which a woman with tools of domesticity around her—a spoon, a "broken bowl"—stands, apparently shocked by the events of 9/11 (29). Such poems draw on the power of

the event, but refuse to address it directly and for some readers this tendency lead to disappointment with the book. Shortly after the book's release, a customer on Amazon.com wrote, "As the editors proudly note in the forward, few of the poems make any direct reference to the atrocity, and only two mention retaliation, and that in a negative way. Instead, these curdled by irony bards spin blank, meterless lines of . . . whatever comes to mind, apparently." I would disagree that these poets are "curdled by irony bards"—as I have remarked, these poets are very engaged and avoid irony in general—but this customer's response does speak to the dissatisfaction many in the general public have felt in recent decades with the self-involved nature of poetry. One might say that this customer holds on to Lucian ideals of American exceptionalism, that outrage is all we should feel about the attacks and not a complexity of emotion that most poets, who tend to adopt Bacevich's side of the argument, favor. Such an attitude from the customer underscores the distance between poetry ensconced in the academy and that which might speak to a larger public. If an event as important as 9/11 fails to produce poetry that appeals to a wider readership, what chance does poetry have of regaining the place of importance in society it once held?

*Poetry After 9/11* and *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond* can be viewed as attempts to offer a literary response to cataclysmic events in United States history, despite the dubiousness of some readers. The anthologies that follow attempt to stem another crisis: the implementation of the Bush Administration's foreign policy of preemptive action in Iraq. In this way, the books devise their own kind of preemptive strategy, although it is one that proves ineffective in the face of Bush's determination to root out what the world later learns to be non-existent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. In the pre-Iraq War anthologies, the tone naturally becomes more heated and the poems are more stridently political than those found in the 9/11 collections. The books engage the self-assured supremacy that informed Luce's argument about the place of the United States in the world. In this way, they represent as convincingly as anywhere the passing of the American Century in the eyes of American writers themselves who express contempt for the United States' continued foreign policy of forcing its will on others.

### Anti-Iraq War Anthologies

*An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11* edited by Allen Cohen and Clive Matson bridges the 9/11 collections that seek to come to terms with an altered world and the anthologies to follow that protest the inevitable entrance of the United States into Iraq. Like the other 9/11 anthologies previously mentioned, this book was printed in 2002, but its title clearly states its resistance to the idea of retaliation for 9/11. In the introduction, the possibility of an invasion of Iraq is mentioned (i). Cohen describes the book as an effort to provide "a different historical record of these monumental events" in comparison to the Bush Administration's clear desire for military action (i). The book's cover is particularly striking: it evokes 1960s iconography in the form of an eagle, composed of a patchwork American flag, who is shown flying away with a peace symbol with a city aflame in the background. In this way, the book deliberately draws to mind the poetry of protest of Vietnam. Like William Spanos' view that 9/11 allowed Bush to pursue a pre-Vietnam mindset, *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind* thus expresses the notion that we are pursuing the wrong course, repeating Vietnam, as it were, in Iraq.

*An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind* began its life, like the others to follow it, with a call for work on the world wide web. The call responded in over 800

poets sending in poems (iii). Such an overwhelming response again highlights the use of these anthologies as a way for a collective body to speak out, as well as the function of the post-9/11 anthology as a populist mode of discourse. The reliance of this book, and the others to follow it, on the web reveals an interplay between print and electronic media that is particular to this era. The impressiveness of such a large number of respondents testifies to the widespread resistance to war among poets, of which the book promises a glimpse.

Unlike *Poetry After 9/11* and *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*, the focus in *Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind* is on political rather than personal responses as the poets address the assumptions of American exceptionalism. Devorah Major's "America on Terrorism," for example, cites "Vietnam warriors" who "would come and go leaving / chemical forests, massive graves" and thinks about the country in the time of terror (24). Allen Cohen's "Whatever Happened to the Age of Aquarius?" speaks of "the American world empire" (63). Carl Stilwell's "On Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" evokes Whitman and a poet who was deeply involved in Vietnam protests: Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg's "Howl," seen by many as an important postwar statement against American complacency and homogeneity, is echoed in Stilwell's poem: "walking on Brooklyn Bridge as you try to describe flames and smoke / ascending above starless dynamo in Manhattan machinery of night" (37). While most 9/11 poems, as I have indicated, find their speakers speaking from a personal position, Opal Palmer Adisa's "Last Thoughts 9/11 Voices" breaks this rule and seeks to give voice to those who experienced 9/11 firsthand, including a fireman, a security guard, and some anonymous individuals of both sexes.

A number of collections follow which look to intercede after the United States made it clear it intended to take action in Iraq. These books derive largely from the efforts of one person: Sam Hamill, a poet and the editor of Copper Canyon Press, an independent poetry publisher that has promoted some well known poets. Hamill represents a desire to bring poetry in connection with politics. He was invited by Laura Bush to the White House for a symposium titled "Poetry and the American Voice" that centered on the works of Whitman, Hughes, and Dickinson scheduled for February 12, 2003. Like Bracovich, Hamill takes to task the very notion of American exceptionalism. His response was to write to fellow poets asking for anti-war poems that he might deliver on the day of Bush's event. The press reported that actions such as Hamill's led to Bush's cancellation of the event. Noelia Rodriguez, Bush's spokeswoman, explained, "While Mrs. Bush respects the right of all Americans to express their opinions, she, too, has opinions and believes it would be inappropriate to turn a literary event into a political forum" (Left).

Hamill established a website, *Poets Against War* or *PAW*, in January 2003 to which poets could submit poems of protest. 1,500 poems arrived within the first four days of Hamill's call, and on March 5, 2003 an anthology of 13,000 poems by 11,000 poets was presented to the Bush Administration and Congress, as well as "several other national governments around the world" to represent the poetry community's opposition to the invasion of Iraq. According to the website, March 5 also saw 120 poetry readings or discussions undertaken across the world in countries such as Great Britain, Canada, Australia, Germany, Italy, and Mexico to further the protest against the war.

Although such a large number of poets had submitted poems by the time Hamill began assembling a book version of the anthology—which bears a similar name to the website (this time emphasizing poets against *the* war)—only 174 poets are represented in the collection. While the limitations of print publication no doubt play a

role in the number of poets Hamill could include in the book, it is interesting to note how the electronic medium reinforces the democratic ideal of multiple voices whereas the print medium emphasizes the process of selection. We must ask, then, if Hamill's decision to print the book, despite his best intentions, works in hegemonic ways to limit voices rather than to raise them, particularly since poets continued to contribute poems to the website. According to the site, as of September 2004, 22,000 poems had been received. The website carries a section that lists poems by "prominent" poets who include Robert Bly, Brenda Hillman, W.S. Merwin, Rita Dove, and Adrienne Rich, among others and this too tends to rank certain voices over others.

Nevertheless, Hamill's collection begins a practice that is picked up by later books: selections are usually accompanied by the age of the poet, and often a brief biography. This age factor highlights the populist ethos of the volume, where contributors run the gamut of ages 8 to 97. Some writers, such as George Bowering, offer a "statement of conscience" rather than a poem. While the reader does not expect as much out of such a "statement" as a poem, the statements are often very flat, such as when Bowering begins by saying, "Someone, please introduce the idea of God, if not Christianity, into the Cabinet of the USA, and tell these eerie people that killing children is wrong, that the U.S. becomes every day more and more frightful" (41). The Canadian poet ends his piece by asking Americans not to use "your weapons of mass destruction on my world" (41). While Bowering's sentiment is no doubt held by many, his strange word choice, particularly calling the Bush Administration "eerie people," strikes a wrong note. There is, in other words, a hastiness to certain of the statements, which perhaps reflects the sense of urgency certain writers felt in the need to speak out, but which leave aesthetics by the wayside.

While Hamill's anthology shares work by both established and unknown poets, *100 Poets Against the War* is generally more literary in its focus. The book started when the editors of the British website [www.nthpostition](http://www.nthpostition), inspired by Hamill's efforts in the United States, made a similar call for anti-war works. The editors originally trimmed the 1,000 responses they received down to 100 poets and launched a free chapbook that could be downloaded. The editor of the print version of the project, Canadian writer Todd Swift, reports that as of the time of the printing of the book, early 2003, 50,000 copies had been downloaded (xvi). Swift asks for the reader's indulgence for any errors that may have crept in due to the rush to get the book out before the war started (xiii). There is with this book and the others, then, a sense of hastiness to print, precipitated by the feeling that the world needed a response by writers to the history-changing events. *100 Poets Against the War*, like Hamill's anthology, shares the belief that it is important to raise voices in protest to the impending war. The editor acknowledges that his book will not likely stop the war, but does contend that "such poems witness to the presence of opposition to illegal violence at a time when many in power would like to pretend to the moral high ground" (xvii-xviii). A curious feature of the book, in light of its title, is that it contains more than 100 poets, as the editor points out.

Other volumes include anthologies of more local interest. *Raising Our Voices: An Anthology of Oregon Poets Against the War* is very grassroots, with its ISBN printed on stickers adhered to the copyright page and back cover. One can only surmise that a rush to publication necessitated such a measure. This book again prints the ages of its contributors and carries some very political verse. James Merrill once memorably remarked that "the trouble with overtly political or social writing is that when the tide of feeling goes out, the language begins to stink" (72). Some of the verse in the book bears this perspective out, such as Paul Cooke's "war and duct tape," which evokes



the familiar protest song “War” by Edwin Starr that carries the refrain, “war, / what is it good for? / absolutely nothing.” But Cooke’s poem, as Merrill intimates, fails to generate interest on a linguistic level and concludes with a series of one word lines that hardly respect the art of lineation, not to mention a lack of pronoun agreement in number between “their” and “one”: “duct tape. / what is it good for? / too many uses to name / although one might use it to / seal their mind from truly / thinking / about / what / we / were put / here / for. // war?” (32-33).

*DC Poets Against the War* also cites Hamill’s work as inspiration and carries on the practice of publishing poets of a variety ages, who run from 10 to 80 according to the introduction (11). The book survives into a second edition in 2004, printed on the eve of the Presidential Election, in which the editor points out “poets are witnesses” and promotes the idea that poetry is related to democracy (11). As with Swift’s statement for *100 Poets Against the War*, the editor, Sarah Browning, evokes the tradition of the poetry of witness. Browning predicts that many would vote for John Kerry, but not without some hesitation. A couple of essays attached to the end of the book look at the political situation and one of the writers, Danny Rose, makes the case that a vote for Kerry represents a protest vote (117). Interestingly, the volume also turns out to be one of the most experimental. As we saw with Paul Cooke’s poem, message rather than aesthetics often assumes primary importance in the political poems which populate these anthologies and matters of form and experimentation therefore tend to be an afterthought. Such is not the case with this anthology where interesting poems such as Michael Willett Newheart’s intensely rhythmical “shok & aw shok & jive” illustrate an edgy approach to form and a linguistic playfulness (with humorous instructions such as “[clap hans sway bak & 4<sup>th</sup>]”) while also clearly condemning the measures adopted by Bush (85). “Shock and awe” is of course the strategy promised by the Bush Administration in the lead up to the war, and Newheart takes liberties in punning on the phrase.

Wartime America inspired another volume in the years following the commencement of military action in Iraq: *American War Poetry*, published by Columbia University Press in 2006. This anthology covers the American colonial period up to the Iraq War and includes such classic poems as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride,” Walt Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!,” and “Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead.” This book is certainly the most literary, least populist of the collections under study here. It underscores the discrepancy between the anthology as a mouthpiece of the people, a political tool, and the anthology as a pedagogic device. But it publishes political statements nevertheless, such as Hayden Carruth’s “On Being Asked to Write a Poem Against the War in Vietnam,” which lists the speaker’s many poems against war but concedes that despite the poems, “not one / breath was restored / to one // shattered throat . . . but death went on and on / never looking aside” (290-91). Among the book’s more recent contributors, Brian Turner, an Iraq veteran, offers the poem “Here, Bullet.” This is a moving contemporary piece that operates as an apostrophe to a bullet by a soldier. The soldier begins by saying, “If a body is what you want, / then here is bone and gristle and flesh” and concludes, “Bullet, / here is where the world ends, every time” (366). In the poem we see the Iraq War from another perspective: from one risking his life in combat. In this way the poem may be a more effective anti-war statement than the poems of outright protest found in previous anthologies.

### Conclusion: On The Efficacy of the Anthologies

Ultimately we must ask, what is the cultural value of these books? To be sure, the voice of the people is represented in Hamill's collection and those he inspired. The anthologies present a number of poets, both canonical and marginal, raising voices in opposition to the powers that be. And yet nothing happened or was averted as a result of the anthologies; one finds the absence of real political change coming about because of the literary consensus these collections seek to represent. Thus we appear to live in an age in which literature can still be used to serve a political function, but as a result of a number of factors, including the entrenchment of literature in the academy, poetry also appears so far removed from the center of culture that its influence might be seen to be limited to preaching only to the converted, which these books can be viewed to demonstrate.

W.H. Auden famously declared that "poetry makes nothing happen," but he was also quick to point out it is "a way of happening, a mouth" (248). So, too, do these anthologies make nothing happen: the terrorists were not deterred, the Bush Administration did not stop its headlong plunge into Iraq, despite 11,000 voices or 22,000 voices to the contrary. Laura Bush's symposium on poetry was cancelled, but that was of little consequence. Nevertheless, the anthologies do provide a "mouth" for the hundreds of dissenters. In this way, they promote the essential function of a democracy. They give us a voice.

There are a number of ancillary issues one might consider when thinking about these anthologies. There is, for example, the fact that I mentioned earlier: these books are printed by small presses. Is this, then, an example of small press opportunism, recognizing a need in the market and responding to it to satisfy the bottom line? Or is it a reflection of an authentic populism? Of course, these questions are unanswerable. The cynic would be tempted to think the books are simply attempts to make a profit on a tragedy. On the other hand, people like Hamill are willing to put their time and efforts into raising a multitude of voices, and in this way there is a place in the poetry for the "genuine," to borrow a term from Marianne Moore (36).

I began this essay by mentioning that 9/11 is seen by many as a turning point, away from the postmodernist tendencies of the postwar era, in which irony in particular is seen as a defining characteristic. The literature of 9/11 largely eschews irony; its use would seem insensitive to the loss of so many. Irony surfaces only when anger pushes poets into sarcasm, as in Ishmael Reed's anti-Bush poem. The anti-Iraq War poetry is reminiscent of Vietnam War poetry in its fervent denunciation of the government, but the current protest is not as widespread or as sustained. There are certainly some individuals who make political statements, such as Jennifer Karmin's performance "4,000 Words for 4,000 Dead" in front of the Vietnam War Memorial in Chicago on October 3, 2008 intended to draw attention to the number lost in Iraq. The 4,000 "words" were collected from submissions of the poetry community. In this way, the lost individuals are recovered in the words of the living. In another example, Susan M. Schultz, the literary scholar and editor of *Tinfish Press*, would regularly send links to photos of signs she erected outside the United States base near her home in Hawaii to the University of Buffalo Poetics Listserv as a way to make her political voice heard.<sup>11</sup> But these are relatively isolated incidents rather than representative of a culture-wide event. Still, they show the poetry community engaging in cultural affairs in a way it had not done since Vietnam.

Overall, when we consider the impact of the poetic outpouring after 9/11, we must conclude that the impact is small indeed. Poetry's distance from the center of the cul-

ture surely has something to do with this limited influence. According to Sarabande books, one of our best contemporary small presses in the United States, only 2,500 volumes of poetry are published a year and 98% of them are published by independent presses.<sup>12</sup> If this is a test of literature's value in the United States, then poetry fails. Yet these books—the 9/11 anthologies and those against the Iraq War—*will* stand as an historical record of people in response to their world and their government. Even if the literary voice is small, even if it is politically weak, it is a voice nevertheless and should not be undervalued. In this way, the measure of success is that the voice lifted in conflict exists at all and that it carries on, despite an awareness of its own circumvented reach.

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## Endnotes

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1. William Spanos puts it this way: however horrific, the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were, as the symbolic significance of American power of these chosen sites clearly suggests, the consequence in large part of a very long history of what Said has called Western Orientalism, a history of representation / domination of the Orient culminating in the United States' ubiquitous indirect and overt economic, cultural, political, and military deprivations over the last half-century in the oil-rich Middle East in the duplicitous name of stabilizing a recalcitrantly backward and unstable world. (249)

2. See DeKoven for an account of the emergence of postmodernism from 1960s cultural currents.

3. After discussing simulated ruins in postmodernist architecture, McHale writes, long before the actual catastrophes of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, we have been *imagining* such catastrophes—staging them, rehearsing them in our imaginations and in our art-works: in apocalyptic movies, in paintings, even in works of architecture. As many commentators have observed, what was especially shocking about 9/11 was *not* so much that it caught us by surprise, but that it *didn't*: we had already seen such disasters before, at the movies and on television; in *The Day After* and *Independence Day* and *The Towering Inferno* and, yes, even *Planet of the Apes*. We had composed scenarios of the end of civilization, and life among the ruins, not only in popular science fiction novels but in demanding literary novels like Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, which is set in London under the rocket blitz and in the war-ruined cities of Germany, but which obviously and self-consciously refers to the projected future ruins that our own cities would be reduced to if the intercontinental ballistic missiles, the heirs of the Nazis' V-2 rockets, were ever launched.

Throughout the entire second half of the twentieth century, we have been living in the ruins of our own civilization, if only in our imaginations. Is this another version of postmodernism? I'm not sure; perhaps it's a foretaste of what comes *after* postmodernism. Maybe on 9/11 history finally caught up with our postmodern imagination of disaster, and we are now living in the aftermath of postmodernism [ . . . ]

4. See Jameson's influential study of postmodernism for an articulation of these qualities of the era, especially his first chapter.

5. See Nichols for an account of Pound as anthologist.

6. One of the leading late twentieth-century poetry critics, Marjorie Perloff, wonders about the value of anthologies as teaching tools. See her “Why Big Anthologies Make Bad Textbooks.”

7. Pace offers an overview of the gender and ethnic biases in 1980s anthologies. She argues that at the time, “The textbook canon exhibits an exceedingly narrow spectrum of the intellectual and emotional story of life in our country. It presents, for the most part, a homogenized ideology that buttresses the existing power structures” (38). For an evaluation of an anthology that sought to right this balance, see Lauter’s piece, which details the desire of the editors of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* to present more than a white-based canon. For another anthologist’s perspective on his attempt to balance canonical works of poetry with more varied multicultural selections, see Ramazani (276). Along the lines of poetic canons, Abbott demonstrates that the emphasis on high modernism as the achievement of modern poetry in postwar anthologies is the deliberate work of critics rejecting earlier populist views of the function of literature and thus illustrates the ideologically driven nature of the anthology creation process.

8. An influence on my thinking about 9/11 and pre-Iraq War poetry in the present essay is James F. Mersmann’s study *Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry Against the War*. An important distinction between my approach and Mersmann’s, however, is that whereas his focus is on the poetry of war, here I am looking at poetry in the time leading up to war. Nevertheless, like the Vietnam poets who Mersman notes benefited from the presence of the verse of World War I and II and could thus start from a different point, the pre-Iraq War protest poetry I discuss later in this essay benefits from the body of Vietnam poetry.

9. This characteristic reflects the verse of Vietnam, about which Mersman points out, “the voice is nearly always the poet’s own” (25).

10. See Wilde’s classic study of the differences between modernist and postmodernist relationships to irony.

11. Jennifer Karmin’s posts, as well as Susan M. Schultz’s, can be found in the University of Buffalo Poetics Listserv archives, housed at <<http://listserv.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A0=POETICS>>. For Jennifer Karmin’s announcement for “4,000 Words for 4,000 Dead,” go to <<http://listserv.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0809&L=POETICS&P=R30337>>. For a link to Schultz’s “sidewalk blog” on the popular social networking site *Facebook*, follow <<http://listserv.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0709&L=POETICS&P=R2677>>.

12. See the Sarabande Books catalogue for these and other numbers (2).