

Oliver Scheiding, René Dietrich, Clemens Spahr (eds.)

A History of American Poetry  
Contexts – Developments – Readings

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Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning

Oliver Scheiding, René Dietrich, Clemens Spahr (eds.)

# A History of American Poetry

Contexts – Developments – Readings

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Ed. by Oliver Scheiding, René Dietrich and Clemens Spahr. -

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## To the Reader

The mecca Art is a babel city in the people's Shinar  
with a hundred gates  
and busybody roads  
that stretch beyond all dates . . .  
(Melvin B. Tolson, *Harlem Gallery*, 1965)

Looking at literary studies today, ours seems to be an age of handbooks and companions. An increasing number of guidebooks seek to provide students with continuously new surveys of the developments of American literature from the colonial period to the present (for the most recent examples in American poetry, see Bendixen/Burt 2014; Ashton 2013, Larson 2011). Editors and publishers justify their reassessments of American literature by pointing to the ongoing revisions of the canon, authors, and periods as well as the changes in our perception of literary history. Our view of American poetry in particular has been stirred deeply by current trends in literary and cultural theory, suggesting that we review America in light of a “global flow of people, ideas, texts, and products” (Fishkin 2005, 24). The reconceptualization of America in terms of transnationalism and globalization not only challenges earlier assumptions of origination and periodization in literary studies, it also raises questions about what counts as ‘American’ literature (see Levander 2013; Scheiding/Seidl 2014). Most recent anthologies, handbooks, and companions therefore reconsider American poetry by acknowledging the diversity of poetic practices, voices, and traditions that exist in the Americas across time and space. Moving beyond narrow generic classifications, scholars position American poetry in complex local and trans-local contexts to demonstrate the simultaneous existence of multilingual and multiethnic poetic practices effective in any given historical period (see Marcus/Sollors 2009; Ramazani 2009).

Prevailing handbooks emphasize the dialogue between poetry and social life in both the private and public spheres, rediscovering a wide range of popular poetic forms that have, so far, been neglected (see Chinitz/McDonald 2014). In a similar manner, our handbook shows how the innovative potential of American poetry has resulted in an extremely fluid canon. Setting aside normative principles that have been used to classify American poetry according to strict formal principles, nationalist premises, or rigid period concepts such as Romanticism or Modernism, current handbooks propose ways to engage poetry with present scholarship conducted in gender, race, material and media studies (see Nelson 2012; Fredman 2005), and the history of the book, to name just a few prominent fields of activity in literary and cultural theory. In addition to the revisions of the modernist and postmodern canon, these approaches have also severely changed our way of understanding early American poetry. The former Anglo-centrist focus on colonial poetry with its intellectual center in New England has been greatly expanded by exploring the multilingual and communal poetic traditions in both the Mid-Atlantic colonies and the South. Present anthologies show that the writing of poetry in regions besides New England, with its highly productive manuscript and print culture, also results from transatlantic networks of friendship, particular local institutions, and print markets meeting the needs of different communities at different times. Studies in the field of print cultures

have similarly changed the ways in which we look at Native American literacy. Concurrent studies and textbooks reveal an unbroken tradition of verse in Native American literature that reaches back to the foundation of Harvard College in the 1630s and continues throughout the eighteenth into the nineteenth century—thus being effective long before the so-called Native American Renaissance of the 1970s (see Parker 2011).

Studying the expansive nineteenth-century periodical market discloses new forms of female agency in writing and publishing poetry, and it becomes clear that the multiple forms of lyric expression exceed by far the popularity of the novel and influenced reading habits and writing practices. Similar observations can be drawn from reexamining the period of High Modernism and its representative poets such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Poetry appears less an elitist and more a cultural practice; it is not only encountered in the Modernists' little magazines, it abounds in a variety of material forms that derive from the poet's engagement in worldly affairs: verse written on greeting cards, advertisements, song lyrics, scrapbooks. But canon revisions are not restricted to earlier literary eras. While contemporary American poetry is often associated with specific movements that range from Confessional poetry to Language poetry as well as the poetic innovations among Latino, African American, and Asian American poets, it has found new outlets in various academic and non-academic poetic communities and their creative projects (see Beach 1999). Since poetry remains a site of cultural meaning, it is necessary to shed new light on the collective dimension of poetry and rediscover the writing of poetry as a political and social force in American intellectual life.

To capture the dynamic field of American poetry, current handbooks adopt a twofold approach that offers the reader both critical accounts of single poets and specific readings of representative movements and contexts. Following such an overview of major and emerging poets from the "beginnings" to the present, the editors of *The Cambridge History of American Poetry* (2014), for example, intend to show that poetry embodies the diversity of the American democratic experience in multiple ways. Interspersed thematic chapters on particular schools and settings fulfill the task of balancing literary analysis and literary history. *A History of American Poetry: Contexts—Developments—Readings*, however, offers a slightly different strategy in explaining to students the fluid canon of American Poetry. The guiding principle of this handbook derives from a belief in a context-based close reading. Placed in its specific historical context, a poem's formal, aesthetic, and thematic choices need to be understood before we can fully apprehend its cultural, political, and social function. The handbook's emphasis on "Contexts—Developments—Readings" proposes an interpretative method that allows both novice and expert readers to encounter and investigate the formal patterns and historically varying practices of poetic writing that define American poetry. Instead of producing content-based readings of representative authors and texts, *A History of American Poetry* asserts that the developments of American poetry are best understood as the result of aesthetic, linguistic, and rhetorical choices that occur in, and comment on, specific historical, ideological, and material contexts.

The method of reading and presenting poems is based on three principles:

1. Each chapter contextualizes the relevant practices of poetry in conjunction with prevailing poetics, literary conventions, and aesthetic norms that dom-

inate specific periods and are condensed in the formal experimentations of the poetic texts under discussion.

2. Each chapter will focus on two poets set into dialogue with each other, presenting paired readings of one representative text from each author. The poetic texts and authors selected for each chapter answer the canon revisions in American literary history over the past years. In addition to a number of familiar texts and names that are necessary for students to understand basic developments of poetry, the handbook offers chapters on multilingual colonial poetry, nineteenth-century Native American poetry, and contemporary experimental poetry.
3. Based on both textual analysis and dense contextualizations of poetic practices, each chapter reads poetry as sites of social and historical meanings condensed in the poem's form. In doing so, the handbook offers readers a wide spectrum of genres, styles, and conventions while tracing the changing practices of poetry from the colonial period the present.

Given the plurality of schools, movements, and settings, it is impossible to synthesize past and present developments of American poetry and provide one comprehensive narrative. An introduction that tries to do so would not be able to capture the dynamic of American poetry in all its facets over the last three hundred fifty years. We therefore decided to refrain from constructing one exemplary story, and want the handbook as a whole to serve as one way of tracing the creative vitality and diversity of American poetry. Until 1950, this history largely follows most handbooks and companions in dividing the field of poetic production into the major areas of poetry before 1800; Nineteenth-century poetry; and Modernist poetry until the 1950s. In order to account for the manifold innovations of poetry since the 1950s, the handbook further adds the less widespread division between postwar poetry/postmodern experiment, and contemporary developments up to the present (whose range the handbook can only suggest). Additionally, instead of offering a single chapter on High Modernism or Romanticism, the handbook examines the plurality of these canonical periods, drawing the reader's attention, for instance, to the "Modernisms" that mobilized the practices of poetry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Nicholls 2009). And in light of the multiple ethnic voices that have helped to constitute American poetry, it seems futile to offer an all-encompassing chapter on "ethnic poetics." Instead, the handbook contains numerous chapters on African American and Native American poetry in different historical periods as well as discussions of the more recent Asian American and Latino American poetry that analyze the diversity of ethnic poetics from the colonial period to the present.

Offering the reader diachronic readings of representative poetic texts and authors from the early Americas to the present, this handbook answers the student's need for fresh and informative readings of canonical and non-canonical poems. The thirty chapters engage revisionary trends and thus unfold a critical history of American poetry that challenges conventional interpretations and provides insightful new readings of well-known poems and writers as well as introductions to poets and texts that may be more unfamiliar. The paired readings of poems in each chapter also invite synchronic and interconnected lessons that make readers compare, for example, communal conventions in colonial poetry to collective poetics in contemporary performance poetry. The handbook

encourages readings across and against literary periods, while annotated paired readings and additional reading suggestions should inspire students to analyze poems as particular sites of historical and political meaning. Being both a manual in terms of current theoretical directions in literary studies and a guide to practical criticism, *A History of American Poetry* helps students to further explore the diversity and multiple poetic traditions that make up American poetry in its intersections with historical contexts and other literatures.

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Mainz, July 2015

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