

Abstract: Behind Enemy Lines: *The New American Poetry* and the Cold War Anthology Wars

The New American Poetry, a poetry anthology edited by Donald Allen and published by Grove Press in 1960, is perhaps the single most influential American poetry anthology in history. It not only brought some of the most important poets of the 20th century to international prominence, but it also created an editorial model that numerous prominent future anthologists would follow, and helped establish the image of American poetry as divided between competing camps of free verse and formal poets, or rebellious and academic poets, battle lines that were drawn when the anthology was published. At the same time, Allen's anthology established the United States as the center and the source of innovative anglophone poetry, despite the fact that such poetry was being written in numerous English-speaking countries during the post-war period. The origins and the legacy of this important anthology are complex, and have deep resonances in the way we think about poetry even today. Considering these facts, the time is right for a critical reexamination of *The New American Poetry*, utilizing information about the Cold War that has only recently come to light, as well as new ways of thinking about national and transnational literature which have been developed in the past two decades.

My dissertation examines American poetry during the post-war and Cold War period, focusing on *The New American Poetry* and the ways this influential anthology continues to frame the popular and critical perception of American poetry. Examining the crossroads between politics, social life and literature during the Cold War, my dissertation puts Allen's anthology into its proper context and reveals the ways in which Allen was influenced by the volatile climate of nationalism and politics that pervaded every aspect of American life during the Cold War. Reconsidering the dramatic influence that Allen's anthology has had on the way we think about American poetry and the way we anthologize it, and recontextualizing *The New American Poetry* as a document of the Cold War not only helps us come to a more accurate understanding of how the anthology came into

being, but also encourages new ways of thinking about anglophone poetry as a whole, in the 20th century and today. Two questions are central to my study: why was Allen's model of American poetry so effective, and are the anthology's divisions and conflations still useful for critics today?

Some of the largest debates in American poetry in recent years have been centered around the general perception of avant-garde or innovative American poetry, from World War II until today, as being primarily the work of white males, to the exclusion of women and writers of color. Critics including Cathy Park Hong have pointed out that the current perception of the American avant-garde stems directly from *The New American Poetry*, which includes only four women and one poet of color. This is just one important way in which Allen's anthology and its continued influence is ripe for reconsideration, and it also shows that recontextualizing Allen's anthology will have vast repercussions for our understanding of the American poetry of the last 60 years. My dissertation does not suggest that Allen had nefarious intent in the lack of diversity in the poets that he included, but instead shows how this was in some ways an extension of the social climate of the times. This is just one way that recontextualizing *The New American Poetry* as a Cold War anthology will help us come to a clearer understanding of it and of American poetry in general. While successfully introducing many valuable poets to a wider readership, Allen's book set questionable precedents of race and gender that persist more than 50 years later. Illuminating the nationalist roots of the work and its origins in Cold War culture complicates and enriches the critical conception of American poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Beginning from this point, the discourse on American poetry in this century will hopefully broaden to embrace transnational sensibilities and engage with the important contributions of minorities and women.

Nationalism is another topic that has come up in recent literary debates and this too can be fruitfully examined in the context of Allen's anthology. Nationalism was pervasive during the Cold War, when debates about poetry were often also debates about politics, and one's conception of American poetry revealed a great deal about one's conception of the country. The 1950s was the

decade during which Flag Day was established and clearly the American flag – which appears on the cover of Allen’s anthology as well as in the work of important artists of the era like Jasper Johns – was a powerful symbol during this period. Allen’s anthology, from its cover to its title to the poets who were and were not included, is rooted in Cold War American nationalism in ways that might surprise readers who think of *The New American Poetry* as a font of liberal, rebellious poetry reacting against the constraints of the conservative, conformist post-war American society. While this perception is not altogether false, the reality – like everything during the Cold War – is much more complex. By reexamining and recontextualizing Allen’s anthology, this dissertation seeks to bring that complexity back into the critical discourse on post-war American poetry, which for too long has been mired in arguments about form and supposedly competing camps of “cooked” and “raw” poetries, to use Robert Lowell’s now-famous terminology from 1960.

Herein lies one of the most nuanced and interesting aspects of Allen’s anthology, an aspect that has been obscured even as the book has continued to have a significant influence on poetry anthologies, popular perception and the critical discourse. Ultimately, Allen’s anthology consists of radical countercultural poems put into a conservative, national framework. The book is both liberal and conservative, evincing some of the most conservative and nationalist American tendencies of the Cold War, when American art and culture was often used as a weapon of cultural warfare. Allen was directly influenced by a conception of American culture that was largely manufactured to act as a counter-example to what was perceived to be the more conformist and restrictive tendencies of Soviet culture. Just as the Soviets used problems with race relations in the United States as evidence of the flaws of capitalism, so too the CIA used integrated jazz bands – whose tours to Soviet countries they funded – as examples of the equality Americans enjoyed. The same can be said for American art during this period, which was often used as an example of the freedom of expression afforded to Americans, in contrast to the rigidities of Socialist realism. *The New American Poetry* is

very much a part of this cultural Cold War, even as it contains some of the most innovative and liberated American poets of the 20th century.

The first chapter of my dissertation, “Raw Americans: The Persistence of *The New American Poetry*’s National Binary Model of Anglophone Poetry,” establishes the framework for the study by examining the material success of Allen’s anthology and its influence, both on subsequent American poetry anthologies and on the way we think about anglophone poetry. Four effects of the anthology are explicated. The first is the establishment of a division in American poetry between innovative and traditional. The second is the conflation of American poetry with innovation and British poetry with tradition. The third effect stems from the anthology’s inclusion of few women and poets of color, which has contributed to the sense that innovative American poetry has mostly been created by white men. The final topic of the chapter is the book’s nationalism and the way it claimed poetic innovation for the United States, rather than the English language in general.

The second chapter, “A Great Bomb: *The New American Poetry* as a Cold War Anthology,” examines the social, historical and political context in which Allen created and published his anthology to argue that *The New American Poetry* is rooted in the Cold War. The chapter highlights some of the crucial divisions and anxieties of literary production in the period, including debates about whether poets belonged in the academy, and the myopia of mainstream critics concerning poets not affiliated with universities or major presses. The chapter also shows how violent political rhetoric crept into American life during this period, including discussions of poetry, as American culture was used as propaganda, a weapon of the Cold War. Of central importance here is *The New American Painting*, a touring exhibition of abstract expressionist paintings that was secretly funded by the CIA in 1959 and inspired Allen as he developed his anthology.

The third chapter, “The Community of Love: *The New American Poetry* and Revolutionary Relationships in Cold War America,” examines Allen’s description of the community of love as the

most important unifying quality of his book. Tracing the subversive political connotations of this phrase back to their roots, the chapter uses Allen's words as a starting point for a consideration of the changing nature of relationships in Cold War America and reveals that while many of the poems do not appear to address political issues, they do in fact express radical approaches to marriage and relationships that put them at odds with the country's prevailing conservative tendencies. Examining the specifically communist and communalist connotations of the phrase the community of love, the chapter reveals the complex ways that Allen and his anthology interacted with Cold War culture, politics and society.

The fourth chapter, "This Thing Is Most National: Nationalism and Assimilation in *The New American Poetry*," investigates the nationalism of Allen's anthology, as manifest in the title and cover image of the American flag as well as Allen's introduction and editorial policy. The chapter argues that these elements fit *The New American Poetry* into the renewed sense of nationalism in the US during the Cold War. Of note here is how Allen's definition of "American" shifted and contracted during the time he was editing the book, partially due to the influence of Charles Olson. The chapter also argues that by following up on the initial success of this anthology with other publications using similar titles and cover images, Allen created a consensus about innovative poetry as specifically American while at the same time suggesting that formal poetry was old fashioned and tied to the British tradition. Reading the book from the transnational perspective allows us to recalibrate many of the anthology's large claims, precipitating revisions of our ideas of US and British poetry alike.

The dissertation concludes with an afterword, "Problems with the American Avant-garde Canon," that brings the debates surrounding the book and the American avant-garde up to date by looking at the legacy of *The New American Poetry* today. Issues of race and gender in the avant-garde have recently invigorated the discourse and critics have argued that the roots of the current racial and sexual homogeneity of lauded experimental American poetry lie in *The New American*

Poetry. The contemporary relevance of these issues suggests that the time has come for an examination of the anthology's Cold War context to show how Allen's conception of American poetry was conditioned by the very culture he was pushing back against.

Several recent critical studies have recontextualized and complicated the way we perceive American culture during the Cold War and the way in which politics and culture interacted, often in surprising ways. Books concerning these topics that have influenced this dissertation include Edward Brunner's *Cold War Poetry: The Social Text of the Fifties Poem* (2001); Francis Stonor Saunders' *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (2001); Alan Filreis' *Counter-Revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry 1945–1960* (2008); Lorin Glass' *Counterculture Colophon: Grove Press, The Evergreen Review, and the Incorporation of the Avant-Garde* (2013); and Douglas Field's *American Cold War Culture* (2006), among others. These books have made invaluable contributions, and yet the absence of studies of Allen's anthology in the context of the Cold War remains a curious lacuna.

Alongside this recent reconsideration of the Cold War, anglophone literary criticism has been invigorated in the past two decades by the emergence of transnational studies, which suggests that geographic and political borders are not usefully applied to literature and that doing so obscures the international flow of information and inspiration, a theory that has influenced my arguments about Allen's anthology at several key points. One important text that should be mentioned in this regard is Clifford James' *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997). James' ideas about the way that inspiration and influence travels fluently across geographic, political and linguistic borders have been influential for my thinking about the ways that Allen both perpetuated and was influenced by the Cold War emphasis on American nationalism, and how his editorial decisions limited and normalized the rich development of post-war anglophone poetry that had its roots in countries and languages around the world.

Due to the fact that my dissertation often takes what could be termed a transnational point of view on Allen's anthology and the poetry written in the United States in the years following World War II, it would be useful to include here a more general note on the way that I use terms like "American poetry." One argument of this dissertation is that breath-based and colloquial poetry was not exclusively the innovation of American poets in the years following World War II. So when dealing with English-language poetry that was not restricted to the United States, the adjectives "anglophone poetry" or "English-language poetry" are typically utilized. And while the transnational standpoint of the thesis would suggest that the terms US or American poetry are misleading, limiting or even meaningless, these are at times utilized here to refer to the general category of American poetry which is taken for granted by most readers. In such cases these usages should be understood as convenient signposts when the distinction is not essential for the argument. The following chapters provide alternatives for the obfuscating simplicity of raw versus cooked, academic versus avant-garde and American verse versus the rest of the world, terms that have become too common in discussions of poetry. These clichés, left unquestioned, obscure our understanding of the crucial intersections of poetry, politics and culture.

In addition to the books mentioned above, *The New American Poetry* appeared in several studies towards the end of the 20th century concerning the now-infamous "anthology wars" that Allen's book helped kick off, and numerous critics on both sides of the formal divide have expressed opinions about the role of Allen's anthology in the debate between free verse and formal verse. While these studies are illuminating, no one has yet considered Allen's anthology at length from the point of view of nationalism and the Cold War culture wars. This is the important contribution I believe my dissertation will make. I hope my discoveries and conclusions will help point the discourse in new directions that are both accurate and illuminating for discussions of the poetry of the past and the future.

My research methods include archival research in the Donald Allen archive at the University of California in San Diego, as well as at the Poetry Collection at the University of Buffalo and the Charles Olson Collection at the University of Connecticut. The correspondence of Donald Allen and many of the poets included in the anthology provides a foundation for my arguments in several chapters, offering first-hand insight into the social, literary and political climate in which Allen created and promoted *The New American Poetry* while also showing how the editorial process unfolded in real time and how the anthology was received by Allen's contemporaries. My use of contemporary reviews of the anthology also helps in this regard. In addition to this archival research, I conducted interviews with several key figures in American poetry of the 1950s and '60s, including Donald Hall, Joanne Kyger, Robert Pack and Edward Field, all of whom provided in-depth insight into the poetic politics of the era. These interviews, combined with immersive research into the literature, art, films, dance and music of the post-war period, helped me to come to a more complete understanding of the social and artistic milieu in which Allen conceived of and edited the anthology, the milieu in which the poets in his anthology wrote their poems, and in which critics and readers responded to the anthology's publication and promotion of alternative voices in American poetry.

The continued importance and influence of *The New American Poetry* is beyond dispute. But only recently have some critics begun to question the complex and perhaps problematic framework Allen's anthology created, for anglophone poetry and the concept of the American avant-garde, both in the 20th century and today. It is my hope that this dissertation will make a valuable and lasting contribution to the discourse surrounding Allen's anthology, post-war American poetry and the concept of American poetry as a critical category. My motivation is not to dispute the importance of Allen's anthology nor to cast doubt on the positive nature of his motivations but rather to suggest that the reality in which he created his anthology was much more complex than is often assumed. With the recent critical reinvestigation of the cultural warfare of the

Cold War and the complex ways in which works of art formed intersections of culture and politics it is high time that Allen's anthology was reconsidered. I hope this dissertation will take its place alongside other recent publications that have added complexity and nuance to our understanding of American culture during the Cold War and how formative the period has been to our current perceptions of art and what it means to be American.