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Reply To Marjorie Perloff's "Janus-Faced Blockbuster"

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In an age of critical recognition for the contingency of aesthetic taste, it is bracing to read an assessment so unself-consciously spoken from the mountaintop as Marjorie Perloff's review of Cary Nelson's new anthology. (I will say right off that I am on the Advisory Board for Nelson's anthology. Though I made suggestions, Nelson chose the poems.) Perloff believes that her taste is the taste, but there are many ways to value a poem besides her way.

Perloff begins by complaining that the anthology is too heavy. It may seem trivial to respond to such a complaint, but the point is that she uses imaginary trivialities to mask her fears about the real conditions of aesthetics. "[T]he book," laments Perloff, "which weighs in at almost five pounds, is heavier than my three-pound Dell Latitude laptop." Actually, if my scale can be trusted, it weighs 3 pounds, 1.6 ounces, non-contingently, unless you hold the laptop in your right hand, the book in your left hand, and let your contingent prejudices tally the pounds. Perloff also dislikes

Nelson's book because "Today's undergraduate . . . has little familiarity with poetry and may well be intimidated by it." Isn't that a reason to bring poetry to students, rather than to give up?

For Perloff, the crux comes down to Nelson's large-scale inclusion of "poets of color" and poets on the left. That "would be perfectly acceptable," she says "if the Oxford Anthology were upfront about its political agenda." Then she complains that the back cover is upfront about its political agenda, and that when the back cover says that the anthology includes canonical poets and recently rediscovered "women, minority, and progressive writers," it offers "something of a trap, implying as it does that . . . there were not sufficient numbers of women or minority writers among" the canonical poets. Well, there weren't: no trap there.

Perloff complains that Nelson included the poets he likes but not enough of the poets she likes, and that therefore his taste is biased. Of course his taste is biased, like everyone else's, and he never pretends otherwise. The pretender to objectivity is Perloff, not least when it comes to black and Indian poets. She complains that Melvin Tolson, an African American, gets many more pages than Frank O'Hara, a white, without noting that she has written a book on O'Hara or that Tolson gets more pages partly because of Nelson's innovative commitment to long poems (and without noting that O'Hara gets eight poems and Tolson gets only two). More reasonably, she complains that "Of the twenty-five poets born after 1946 . . . twenty-one are poets of color," and the other four she identifies with various beleaguered groups, which to her amounts to the same thing. As usual, Perloff's math is wrong, since it's actually nineteen out of twenty-three, but I agree that Nelson's choice of minority poets for almost all the more recent **[End Page 181]** poets was a bad idea, and I told him so when I reviewed a draft of his table of contents.

But when Perloff quotes minority poets from the anthology in confidence that quotation will prove them terrible poets, she only proves what a feeble reader she is, quoting inaccurately and wrenching her quotations out of context. Quoting four lines from a 301-line poem by Adrian C. Louis, she makes two transcription mistakes. She quotes twelve lines from a 134-line poem by Ray A. Young Bear, making nine errors, even dropping an entire line. (Often, when Perloff quotes Nelson's headnotes to make fun of them, she misquotes them. She even gets the title of the anthology wrong, calling it the *Oxford Anthology*, though there is no *Oxford* in the title.) Still going after minority poets, Perloff picks out a poem "by the African-American poet Georgia

Douglas Johnson” and makes condescending fun of what she calls its “chug-chug iambic pentameter,” but “chug-chug” isn’t iambic and neither is Johnson’s poem. My object here is not to defend the poems that Perloff attacks—an easy task for any practiced critic—but to point out that such rear-guard defenses of a supposedly neutral aesthetic taste are anything but neutral, not only because they land, uncoincidentally, on the backs of women and minority poets, but also because they repress the cultural embeddedness of aesthetics and so have to trump up pointless or inaccurate arguments to make their case, willfully ignoring the rethinking of aesthetic history and the contingency of literary taste that for most critics are now our stock in trade. Indeed, the point in my own question about Nelson’s selections was not that the recent poems were chosen merely for the poets’ colors, but that someone who has little understanding of literary judgment, poetry, or the history of aesthetic taste might suppose that he chose them that way, even though he couldn’t have. There are many more African American and Native American poets than Nelson included. Perloff herself laments that Nelson chose the black poets that he likes instead of the ones that she likes, without mentioning that the ones she favors belong to the more-or-less-language set of poets that she writes about. His taste is biased, but hers is truth.

[The following text does not appear in the print edition of this article]

She also complains that Nelson includes Genevieve Taggard, then admits that Taggard is in the Library of America anthology that Perloff helped edit but explains that her anthology is bigger and “include[s] every poet of every persuasion so as to fill out the historical picture.” Every poet of every persuasion? I don’t have a scale that can weigh that one.

It’s one thing to say something ludicrous that’s not true and another to say that someone else says something ludicrous when that person never said it. Sloppy quotations aside, Perloff puts words in Nelson’s mouth, sneakily without using quotation marks that might catch her up. “And there is something condescending,” she writes, “about the claim that we should call Young Bear’s text poetry just because he’s a Native American.” Of course, Nelson never says any such thing, and the words “claim” and “just” offer a grotesquely question-begging version of what he would never say. Unlike Perloff, I’ll put my cards on the table; I’ve written on Young Bear’s poetry, and I suggested it to Nelson. Though I wouldn’t choose the same poems, I admire Nelson’s adventurousness in choosing such long poems, including the

difficult one that Perloff mangles with misquotation. And I am not alone: Young Bear's work has attracted lavish praise and is a favorite with students as well, and much the same could be said for the other poets whom Perloff writes off as if Nelson's taste were just the taste of a crank.

Lastly, Perloff complains, improbably, that "the book is ugly," but I like the sharp typography, attractive cover, and firm but flexible binding. She even complains that the accompanying web site "makes the task of reading the poetry in question [in question?] even more forbidding" because it includes scholarly essays! Should we close libraries for the same reason? The web site is for those who choose to use it. It doesn't hurt anyone. It is a library of literary information and commentary unparalleled, so far as I know, by any other web site.

Demagogically, Perloff tries to make people angry by complaining that Nelson ignores aesthetics in favor of cultural criteria, when really the issue is that for Nelson and many of the rest of us, aesthetics and culture, while not the same, have much to do with each other. There never was a universal language of non-contingent aesthetic taste. Instead, there are many languages of aesthetics, which to many of us makes poetry more interesting than anything ever dreamt of in Perloff's universe.

Robert Dale Parker
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

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