

“EXQUISITE HYBRIDIZATIONS” AND THE GENTRIFICATION OF FORMS Andrea Actis

I am persuaded by the idea of an American poetry based upon plurality, not purity. We need all of our poets. Our poetry should be as various as the natural world, as rich and peculiar in its potential articulations. The purpose of this anthology is to celebrate these exquisite hybridizations emerging in the work of all our poets. Let the gates of the Garden stand open; let the renaming of the world begin.

—David St. John, “Introduction,” *American Hybrid* (xxviii)

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most and beautiful and more wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

—Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (459-60)

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In a glossary accompanying the sixth and following editions of *The Origin of Species*, Darwin’s entomologist colleague W. S. Dallas, who, as Darwin gratefully notes, “endeavoured to give the explanations of the terms in as popular a form as possible” (463),¹ yields a definition of “Hybrid” as the synthesis of two terms—as “[t]he offspring of the union of two distinct species” (469). If we turn to the *OED*, the first entry for “Hybrid” will extend its definition to mean “(less strictly) varieties; a half-breed, cross-breed, or mongrel,” and further down establish it as “[a]nything derived from heterogeneous sources, or composed of different or incongruous elements; in *Philol.* a composite word formed of elements belonging to different languages.” However, if we turn to a cultural *interpretation* of the term—one emerging from social discourse and beginning to account for what one Russian linguist called “the social *multiaccentuality* of the ideological sign” (Vološinov 23, emphasis original)—we might run into something like this:

HYBRID. Postmodernism’s key notion, maybe the notion that sustains most postmodernism’s quackery. Through the illusion of hybridism contradiction is obscured, turned commodity. Not able to recognize and accept the other in its complete otherness, we turn it into hybrid, i.e., half me, similar to Us. (Not Other). Not Either/Or but always proper. Property. Not completely stranger. ‘Mixed’. In denial of otherness we constructed ‘hybrid’. We have naturalized the ‘hybrid’ category so much, that the mere mention of this category as purely cultural, artificial, contextualized (in imperialistic epistemology)

¹ *The Origin of Species* was first published in 1859; the sixth edition came out in 1872, and with it monthly sales of Darwin’s text grew from 60 to 250. See Adrian Desmond and James Moore’s study *Darwin* (577).

seems a ‘menace’, an evil return to ‘Nationalism’ or ‘Pure’. Using the ‘hybrid’ category we have remained Hegelian. We arrive to syntheses. (Isn’t that wonderful, daddy?)

First published in a special “Dictionary” issue of the Minneapolis based journal *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics* (15/16, 2004), this aggressively symptomatic reading of the “Hybrid” category of cultural forms (only half of which I reproduce above) is archived on the blog of Tijuana artist, poet, and critic Heriberto Yopez. The entry was recently linked to from the more widely read blog of poet-critic Ron Silliman, an early practitioner and theorist of Language writing—that school (as it is sometimes called) or tendency (as it is otherwise called) or praxis (as it has tended, historically, to imagine itself) of poetic innovation and cultural critique that began to surface in the U.S. in the early 1970s, “incorporat[ing] but also announc[ing] a breach” (Silliman “Introduction” 4) from such recent earlier movements as the New York School, the Black Mountain School, Beat poetry, and the San Francisco Renaissance. Responding, broadly, to critical theories of language and subjectivity, to what was viewed as poetry’s potentially counter-hegemonic position in advanced-capitalist knowledge markets, and to the government’s “misuse of language” during the Vietnam War (Spahr 71), Language writing emerged as a neo-*avant-garde* cultural formation, a decidedly socialist and *social*² movement that sought to render problematic, or to at least defamiliarize,³ any identity-centered model of writing—or of reading—that relied on notions of meaning as transparent, transcendent, or individually and immediately containable. Today, with Yopez, Silliman is “skeptical” of what he diagnoses as “the utopian notion that hybridism will somehow, some day, heal the broader cultural and political rupture between aesthetic conservatives & progressives” (to put things less polemically than Yopez does) (“Wednesday” par. 13). Yet hybridism is precisely the order through which an

² “If there has been one premise of our group that approaches the status of a first principle, it has not been ‘the self-sufficiency of language’ or the ‘materiality of the sign’ but the *reciprocity of practice implied by a community of writers who read each other’s work*” (Benson et al, “Aesthetic Tendency” 271, emphasis original).

³ The Russian Formalist concept of *ostranenie*, or defamiliarization, has been redeployed as a device by many writers associated with the Language movement, notably Lyn Hejinian. “The function of art,” she theorizes, “is to restore palpability to the world, which habit and familiarity otherwise obscure; its task is to restore the liveliness to life. Thus it must make the familiar remarkable, noticeable again; it must render the familiar *unfamiliar*” (“Stages of Encounter” 208). Here Hejinian is deliberately ventriloquizing Viktor Shklovsky, who wrote in 1917 that “[t]he purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known,” that “[t]he technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (12). Hejinian cites Shklovsky in several chapters of her book *The Language of Inquiry*.

imagined “best” of American poetry (the products of “conservative” and “progressive” poets alike⁴) has most recently, and quite sexily, been handed over to an American public already receptive to narratives of the so-called “end of history”—to narratives of a synthesis of History’s “fundamental internal contradictions,” which Francis Fukuyama (remaining Hegelian) has moreover perceived as the culmination of liberal democracy’s “evolutionary process” (xi, xii).



Published in March of 2009, *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry* is a relatively slender and, as the varsity typeface of the cover titling might mean to broadcast, a highly teachable collection of recent work from seventy-four poets, presented in alphabetical order⁵

⁴ To distinguish between aesthetic “conservatives” and “progressives” is problematic in itself and would require another paper, or book, to properly justify. But I would wager, for now, that is less problematic to distinguish between conservative and progressive *writers* than between conservative and progressive aesthetic forms.

⁵ Silliman makes no bones in referring to alphabetical organization as “the weakest editing strategy known to humankind. Actually,” he adds, “it’s not an editing strategy at all, but a marker of the abdication of one” (“Wednesday” par. 9). Most reviewers of *American Hybrid* have at least questioned this aspect of the anthology, if not critiqued it as nevertheless, or even especially, ideologically fraught to the degree that Silliman does. Most reviewers also take issue with other criteria established (disclosed and otherwise) by the editors: “Nearly half of the hybrids have some California (often San Francisco) connection,” reviewer Stephen Ross observes, “while many others are or have been associated with power centres of the experimental American poetry scene like the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and the SUNY Buffalo Program in Poetics. Many of the poets hold academic posts, and only poets with three or more books were eligible for inclusion” (par. 7).

with a half-page of introduction and biography preceding each. Co-editor Cole Swensen, herself a poet and onetime student of Silliman's,⁶ begins her ten-page introduction by addressing what she wants to historicize as "[t]he notion of a fundamental division in American poetry"—what "Robert Lowell famously portrayed...in the 1950s and 1960s as a split between 'the cooked and the uncooked'" (xvii).⁷ A page later, Swensen characterizes this "split" more radically as one that "marks two concepts of meaning: one as transcendent, the other as immanent" (xviii).⁸ Swensen also cites the American writer and translator Paul Auster, who has argued that "most twentieth-century American poets took their cue either from the British poetic tradition or from the French"—the former apparently lending to certain American poets "a pastoral sensibility... emphasizing the notion of man as a natural being in a natural world, informed by intense introspection and a belief in the stability and sovereignty of the individual" (xvii); the latter apparently lending certain other poets (including, Swensen notes, "the Language poets") "the urbane modernism of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarme, and Apollinaire..., moving from there into an increasing emphasis on the materiality of the text as developed by the early twentieth-century avant-gardes...and fueled in part by the belief that meaningful change in the arts requires dramatic rupture" (xviii). However, while Swensen does concede that "many American poets throughout the twentieth century would not fit neatly into one mode or another," the gist of her narrative is that most of them would. More problematically, though, her overall project remains content to describe, in flatly empiricist terms, what these modes have *looked like*—how "the perspective of a hundred years," as she puts it, "reveals an overall pattern in which this split leads through various modifications, infiltrations, and permutations to the 'anthology wars' of

⁶ In the same blog post quoted above, Silliman refers to "[his] student in 1982 at San Francisco State University"—i.e., Swensen—as "already an awesomely talented young writer, capable of adapting from one form to the next, regardless of the mode's origins" ("Wednesday" par. 4).

⁷ In his acceptance speech for the National Book Award for Poetry in 1960, Lowell made the claim that "[t]wo poetries are now competing, a cooked and a raw. The cooked, marvelously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar. The raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience are dished up for midnight listeners. There is a poetry that can only be studied, and a poetry that can only be declaimed, a poetry of pedantry, and a poetry of scandal. I exaggerate, of course. Randall Jarrell has said that the modern world has destroyed the intelligent poet's audience and given him students. James Baldwin has said that many of the beat writers are as inarticulate as our statesmen" (par. 2).

⁸ In elaborating this distinction between "immanent" and "transcendent" poetics, Swensen posits that "twentieth-century American poetry offers both a model of the poem as a vehicle for conveying thoughts, images, and ideas initiated elsewhere—a model that recognizes language as an accurate roadmap or system of referring to situations and things in the real world—and a model of the poem as an event on the page, in which language, while inevitably retaining a referential capacity, is emphasized as a site of meaning in its own right..." (xvii).

the late fifties and early sixties” (xviii).⁹ Reviewer Stephen Ross has pointed out how Swensen and St. John have “cast *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry* as the final battleground in the anthology war” (par. 3), though I would argue that in doing so they also posit the end of a particular cultural history by celebrating what they suppose to be the completed, evolutionary synthesis of poetic forms in a fearless, post-everything kind of America.

As the initial paragraph of Swensen’s introduction wants to make clear:

This anthology springs from the conviction that the model of binary opposition is no longer the most accurate one and that, while extremes remain, and everywhere we find complex aesthetic and ideological differences, the contemporary moment is dominated by rich writings that cannot be categorized and that hybridize core attributes of previous “camps” in diverse and unprecedented ways. (xvii)

We might ask, first of all, whether “the contemporary moment is dominated” by *any* kind of writing (whose moment/market could this possibly be?), and secondly whether is it conceivable for the term “hybrid”—an *American* hybrid, at that—to function any way but categorically. Less surprising, maybe, is that Swensen would need to characterize a “dominant” writing as “rich” and, in effect, mysterious—or that the cover designer would elect to place an American flag in the heroic hybrid’s tiny fist. “Poetry is eternally marked by—even determined by—difference,” Swensen allows, “but that very difference changes and moves”; hence the hybrid butterfly, whose fortuitous cross-breeding and fortitude might inaugurate a kind of “difference” that America (the Mosaic, of course, not the Melting Pot) can believe in (and even elect to presidential power). “At the moment,” Swensen continues, “[difference] is moving inside, into the center of the writing itself”—a “thriving center of alterity,” she earlier calls it (xx)—“fissuring its smooth faces into fragments that make us reconsider the ethics of language, on the one hand, and redraft our notions of a whole, on the other” (xxvi). Such figurations of literary change in the United States, immaculately borne by the flag-waving, hybrid lepidopteron, bring to mind not only the kind of rhetoric that could easily have surrounded Germany’s reunification in 1989 after decades of East/West, Soviet/Western, Red/Blue political oppositions and literal wall-maintaining, but more recently and traumatically a certain set of Twin Towers whose

⁹ Donald Hall’s (“cooked”) *New Poets of England and America* (1957) and Donald Allen’s (“uncooked”) *New American Poetry* (1960) are typically seen as representative anthologies of this period.

“fragments” have similarly forced America to “redraft” its “notions of a whole,” not only for itself but for a number of other, less “rich” nations as well. It cannot be hurting the anthology’s appeal, I would add, to have set the editors’ names in a faux seal-of-approval and thus given the whole thing an appearance of having (always) already won the National Book Award.

Poet David St. John, the other editor of *American Hybrid*, similarly begins his introduction (which is shorter and more brazenly jubilant than Swensen’s) by deeming ours to be “a time of extraordinary literary riches,” no longer worth situating, much less critiquing, within broader cultural and political schema:

Although I have always distrusted writers who run in packs, I welcome all literary partisanship as a gesture toward what I would call a ‘values clarification’ in poetry. However, let’s be frank. We are at a time in our poetry when the notion of the ‘poetic school’ is an anachronism, an archaic critical artifact of times long gone by. The most compelling new poets today draw from a vast and wildly varied reservoir of sources. Their choices concerning “voice” and stylistic possibility (as well as their attitudes toward aesthetic, theoretical, cultural, and political urgencies) are now articulated as compelling hybridizations. (xxviii)

Operating with a similar, but even stronger, teleological sense of literary history as Swensen and her vision of an “overall pattern” for American poetic forms (more simply here, “our poetry”), St. John goes on to declaim that he is

persuaded by the idea of an American poetry based upon plurality, not purity. We need all of our poets. Our poetry should be as various as the natural world, as rich and peculiar in its potential articulations. The purpose of this anthology is to celebrate these exquisite hybridizations emerging in the work of all our poets. Let the gates of the Garden stand open; let the renaming of the world begin. (xxviii)

Now, at no point in this paper do I wish to suggest that the actual poetry that appears in *American Hybrid* is anything less than “compelling,” anything but “rich and peculiar in its potential articulations”; all of it is, just as any other literary event can or must be. Whether held under our critical lenses or simply curled up with (more individually and immediately, some might say) on a rainy, post-9/11 afternoon, all literary forms can be opened up, and open us up to, a spectrum of knowledges, (re)cognitions, and affects. By extension, all literary objects—

Barthesian “texts” and “works” alike¹⁰—can be read/experienced for their “potential articulations” and deployed by readers of any given stance (or proclaimed absence of stance) towards virtually endless ends. In the case before us, St. John’s framing of these “exquisite hybridizations” and their emerging-from-the-ashes of so many binaristic “anachronisms” makes seductive appeals to the Norton Anthology reader’s common sense: “Let’s be frank,” he wants to have us admit with him—the future is friendlier *and* prettier than the past, so can’t we just move on? Insisting on a quite literal naturalization of the cultural apparatuses by which we have, till now, apprehended poetic forms, he makes the consideration of literary “partisanship” or “values” seem terribly uncool, basically incommensurate with the pluralism of the day, and baldly inappropriate for an encounter with “poetry that is truly postmodern in that it’s an unpredictable and unprecedented mix” (Swensen xx-xxi).

For Swensen and St. John, hybrid poetry appears as matchlessly well adapted to the sensibilities and “need[s]” of today’s American citizen. “Putting less emphasis on external differences,” Swensen will eventually argue in her introduction, “those among poets and their relative stances, leaves us all in a better position to fight a much more important battle for the integrity of language in the face of commercial and political misuse” (xxvi). But to register a poet’s ideological “stance” (or non-stance) as “external” to the forms he or she creates is to unassign form from content, or vice versa, in a way that can easily reify both. Although the editors of *American Hybrid* don’t actually use the word “freedom” in their introductions, freedom is everywhere being advertised: we need only scrap our old Toyotas for the “[h]armony between man, nature and machine”¹¹ that such a model as the new Prius delivers. As Swensen announces it: “With poetry’s position in academia leaning in two different directions, serious students are

¹⁰ In her essay “Bad Timing: (A Sequel): Paranoia, Feminism, and Poetry,” Sianne Ngai explains how “...most of the linguistic paradigms developed in late-twentieth-century theoretical writing that would seem to speak most directly to, for, and about avant-garde poetry (Barthes’s notion of the ‘writerly’, Derrida’s *différence*, Lacan’s insistence on the letter, etc.) were primarily generated through, elaborated by, and applied to readings of canonically traditional and ‘readerly’ texts.” As such, she argues that “[t]his genealogical circumstance suggests the limitations of relying entirely on paradigms like ‘writerlines’ as basis or support for the argument that qualitative differences exist (as I believe they do) between works produced within the material conditions that give rise to an avant-garde and works produced under the auspices of official verse culture.” As Roland Barthes himself made clear, “It would be futile to try to separate out materially works from texts. In particular, the tendency must be avoided to say that the work is classic, the text is avant-garde” (156); instead, he proclaims, “The difference is this: the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the Text is a methodological field” (156-57).

¹¹ Sales slogan for the Toyota Prius Hybrid (<<http://www.toyota.com/prius-hybrid/>>).

often exposed to both the conventional and the experimental; but unlike their elders, *they don't necessarily feel that they have to choose between them*" (xxiv, my emphasis). Instead, the "serious students," toggling no less ecstatically between these two classes of energy, have the freedom and formal "riches" to select both—or in effect *neither*—having emerged from history "hybrid" without any sense of responsibility for knowing the difference between, say, what emerges from "man" and what emerges from "nature," or for inquiring into how the "machine" plays *its* special role in how the forms of either realm are (re)produced. Lucky for them (and, no doubt, for the world of American letters), these serious students have transcended the burden of a struggle for existence, to borrow from Darwin's lexicon just as freely as Swensen as St. John do, between "conventional" and "experimental" formal species, "Not Either/Or but always proper"—or "Property," as Yopez would read it.

In *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*, critic Timothy Brennan surveys something he calls "the turn" of leftist academic politics, from the late 1970s through the early '90s, towards an ideological "middle way"—"a civic religion," as he presents it (iv), which is how I might begin to characterize Swensen and St. John's valuation of hybridity. Perceived as a turn from "politics" (cultures of "acting," whether from the left or the right) to "ethics" (cultures of "being," which abdicate "acting" for an ontological in-betweenness), Brennan theorizes this "turn" as a post-Vietnam "philosophy of concession...making the rush to the center appear a bold avant-garde leap" (10). As he reads it:

This politics of being has stood for a clear set of propositions, of course, although they are rarely presented as such. They instead assume the guise of inexorable forms of inheritance, although this assumption is not limited to university professors and their students. Too disconnected and amorphous to be called a group or a tendency, perhaps, the culture of the post-turn is surprisingly unified across large and varied constituencies. I am not referring, then, only to the academic humanities but to urban avant-garde theater circles, alternative publishing, and middlebrow journalism. Within these circles, everyone has been reading and reciting the same shared canon of venerated texts (primarily Foucault and Derrida at first, but now, in an exchange of forms, Gilles Deleuze, Hannah Arendt, and Antonio Negri). (xi)

As a professor of comparative literature and discourse studies, Brennan, writing in 2006, still sees it every day:

Even without being told, first-year graduate students come to seminars equipped with a prefabricated vocabulary about difference, ambivalence, and the performative, all mobilized as though the multiple and the dispersed were qualities whose credentials on behalf of freedom no longer needed justification. (7)

Brennan is skeptical, then, much like Yopez and Silliman, of any discourse which would proclaim that “Autonomy is [simply] about proclaiming autonomy” (175). He rejects the “Romantic view,” by corollary, “[that] prevents readers from noticing how the aura of such thinking in practice mystifies the reality of globalization, which is a vast enterprise set up to encourage capital mobility while domesticating labor.” In what he terms the “slippage from politics to ethics, the reader is made to pass through a realm of pleasure in which economics is beheld as an aesthetic artifact rather than a material calculus of scarcity and demand, utility and disutility” (177). Brennan is critical, for instance, of Hardt and Negri’s Autonomist-Marxist treatise *Empire*, whose “cosmopolitical” and “dreamlike desire of fluid social boundaries effectively blurs the crude imperialism of American realpolitik” (“Empire’s New Clothes” 366). Like Yopez in particular, Brennan observes in every case how political objections to the phantasmagoria of “fluid social boundaries” will inevitably appear to the “depoliticized intellectual” (likely to think himself quite *radically* political) (*Wars* 7) as not only rearguard, but as an epistemological “‘menace’, an evil return to ‘Nationalism’ or ‘Pure’” (to repeat Yopez again). But “the enemy of revolutionaries in the neoliberal age is not the state,” Brennan will finally conclude; rather, he argues that it is “the sovereign, freely experimenting, hybrid subjects of corporate utopia against whom the state (or one version of it, at any rate) continues to be the last refuge” (367).

Brennan cites the cultural geographer Neil Smith’s formulation of “combined and uneven development,” for example (177), as an alternative (clunky old Toyota though it may seem) to what he views as Hardt and Negri’s “auteurist or culinary devotion” to the Spinozan concept of the *multitude* and the Deleuzian-Guattarian *rhizome* (“Empire’s New Clothes” 366). In his analysis,

It takes no specialist to recognize that manufacture is being informationalized. This is common knowledge. It is quite another thing, however, to pose this informatization as an exhilarating sign of the sophistications of capitalism as it frees up the biopolitical sphere while facilitating the refusal of work—and then to further portray it as an anagoge of high theory performing its grand conceptual tasks. (*Wars* 177)

If we follow Brennan, it is not difficult to read the neoliberal ideology all over *American Hybrid*. Appealing directly to the kind of “prefabricated vocabulary” of “the multiple and the dispersed” that Brennan sees working against, or with flat indifference to, the actual field of global politics or the everyday struggles of those “Mexican day laborers, fast-food deliverymen, secretaries, maids, and auto mechanics...[whose] specificity tarnishes the aura of the ‘multitude’” (“Empire’s New Clothes,” 364), Swensen at one point presents “[t]he rhizome [as] an appropriate model, not only for...new Internet publications but for the current world of contemporary poetry as a whole. The two-camp model,” she submits,

with its parallel hierarchies, is increasingly giving way to a more laterally ordered network composed of nodes that branch outward toward smaller nodes, which themselves branch outward in an intricate and everchanging structure of exchange and influence...Such hybridity is of course in itself no guarantee of excellence, and the decentralizing influences...make it harder to achieve consensus or even to maintain stable critical criteria; instead, these factors put more responsibility on individual readers to make their own assessments, which can in turn create stronger readers in that they must become more aware of and refine their own criteria. (xxv)

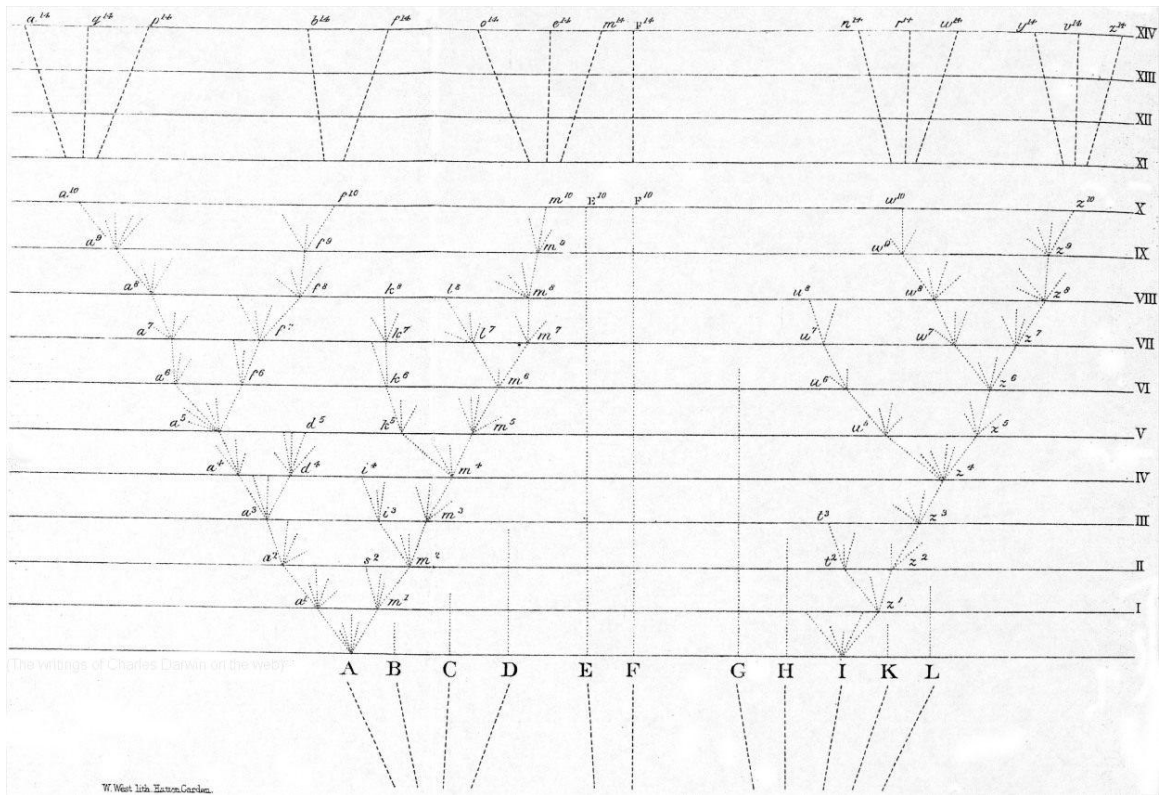
In a passage such as this, Swensen not only preserves the kind of perfect homology between literary structures and political structures that any critique of the social reflection model would deem vulgar, but in doing so ends up valorizing the very forms and movements of neoliberalism that keep capital (as “an intricate and everchanging structure of exchange and influence” in itself) branching ever outwards and thriving. This is a vision of a formally stateless (and Stateless) utopia—a “corporate utopia,” in Brennan’s terms—that seems deeply to undermine the very “battle for the integrity of language in the face of commercial and political misuse” that Swensen and St. John see hybridity winning. Capital happens, moreover, to like “integrity” very much, and whether it’s put on the shelf in a well-wrought urn or in a hybrid-holy grail makes no difference. By Swensen’s account, the hybrid poem “has selectively inherited traits from both of the principal paths outlined above,” and in a section named “The New (Hy)breed” she paints the following portrait:

Today’s hybrid poem might engage such conventional approaches as narrative that presumes a stable first person, yet complicate it by disrupting the linear temporal path or by scrambling the normal syntactical sequence. Or it might foreground recognizably experimental modes such as illogicality or fragmentation, yet follow the strict formal rules of a sonnet or villanelle. Or it might be composed entirely of neologisms but based

in ancient traditions. Considering the traits associated with ‘conventional’ work, such as coherence, linearity, formal clarity, narrative, firm closure, symbolic resonance, and stable voice, and those generally assumed of ‘experimental’ work, such as non-linearity, juxtaposition, rupture, fragmentation, immanence, multiple perspective, open form, and resistance to closure, hybrid poets access a wealth of tools, each one of which can change dramatically depending on how it is combined with others and the particular role it plays in the composition. (xxi)

But what exactly is the nature of this proclaimed “responsibility” now bestowed on “individual readers”? Did this supposed split—or caricature of a split—between “cooked and uncooked” poets and poetry ever really preclude a reader’s freedom to make his or her “own assessments,” to have his or her own situated or “nod[al]” experiences within the text’s field? Or from form’s perspective, to have its properties liable to dramatic “change” in its brushings-up or brushings-against other properties, materials, or individual readers? Does a perceived lateralizing of literary forms into a rhizomatic model translate seamlessly, we must also ask, into a flattening or dismantling of social hierarchies?

Below is the one illustration Darwin chose to include in *The Origin of Species* (which in its first few editions carried the subtitle *By Means of Natural Selection, Or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*). Meant to “aid us in understanding this rather perplexing subject” (159)—namely, the mechanism of natural selection—Darwin’s sketch reveals two originary species “increasingly giving way” (we might as well quote Swensen again) “to a more laterally ordered network composed of nodes that branch outward toward smaller nodes”:



According to Darwin’s annotations, “When a dotted line reaches one of the horizontal lines, and is there marked by a small numbered letter, a sufficient amount of variation is supposed to have been accumulated to have formed a fairly well marked variety, such as would be thought worthy of record in a systematic work” (162). By his observation, then, the process is such that

[t]he variations are supposed to be extremely slight, but of the most diversified nature; they are not supposed all to appear simultaneously, but often after long intervals of time; nor are they all supposed to endure for equal periods. *Only those variations which are in some way profitable will be naturally selected.* (159-60, my emphasis)

So forms, according to Darwin, however “diversified,” must be “naturally” “profitable” in order to survive, which should begin to make plain the risk in using Darwinian metaphors to organize and describe cultural phenomena (a practice sometimes called Social Darwinism). On one of the pages just quoted from, Darwin depicts a “profitable” environment as one in which “the modified descendants of any one species will succeed by so much the better as they become more diversified in structure, and are thus enabled to encroach on places occupied by other beings” (159); he is “inclined to believe,” moreover, and we will not be surprised to hear it, “that largeness of area is of [most] importance, more especially in the production of species, which

will prove capable of enduring for a long period, and of spreading widely” (150). In anthropological terms, of course, what Darwin is describing would be pure imperialism, but luckily he is careful to “have called this principle, by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved, by the term of Natural Selection, *in order to mark its relation to man’s power of selection*” (115, my emphasis). As a scientist, Darwin insists on the difference between natural laws on the one hand and the motivations behind “man’s methodical selection” on the other (148), keeping his eye objectively on nature’s “series of facts,” which “seem to be connected together by some common but unknown bond” (282). As we well know, Darwin remained “utterly ignorant...of the meaning of the law” (143), rather famously unwilling as he was to attribute any of his findings to something or someone like God. “All that we can do,” he suggests,

is to keep steadily in mind that each organic being is striving to increase at a geometrical ratio; that each at some period of its life, during some season of the year, during each generation or at intervals, has to struggle for life, and to suffer great destruction. When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply. (129)

With *The Origin of Species*, Darwin did let the renaming of the *natural* world begin—but by no means did he claim to be doing the same for any other signifying realm.

Perhaps the crux of the problem with *American Hybrid* is in its editors’ framing of their data—these poems which have so far seemed to defy categorization—in terms that want to be *simultaneously* normative and descriptive, both socially *and* scientifically geared up. In *Reading Capital*, Louis Althusser argues that “[w]hen we pose the question of the *mechanism* by which the *object* of knowledge produces the cognitive appropriation of the *real object*”—the kind of question that animates Marx’s (and typically marxist) analysis—“we are posing a quite different question from that of the conditions of the *production* of knowledge” (59). To be sure, Swensen does perform the latter kind of reading of American poetry’s recent history: she takes note, that is, of “the university [as] one primary force” in the emergence of (now allegedly “domina[nt]”) hybrid forms (xxiv), of the influx of internet publishing technologies as another such force, and of the proliferation of MFA and PhD programs in Creative Writing over the last forty years as a uniquely American structure that has “legitimized practice as a viable site of study [and] created

communities centered on a fusion of creativity and analysis” (xxiii).¹² However, as Althusser would predict for such an approach, the editors take in these hybrid phenomena as so many organless bodies, “solely as *products*, as results”; their “observation treats the knowledge *as a fact*,” in other words, “whose transformations and variations it studies as so many effects of the structure of the theoretical practice which produces them...—without ever reflecting *the fact that these products are not just products, but precisely knowledge’s*” (Althusser 61-62, emphasis original). The main lesson for Althusser in *Capital*, then, is in the way that Marx turns Hegel on his head (so Marx claims), reading economic history with a revised dialectics in an effort to reveal the laws behind its everywhere only “apparent” forces and products. As Althusser puts it, Marx thereby “regards contemporary society (and every other past form of society) both as a *result* and as a *society*” (65, emphasis original).

It is nothing new to look at Darwin’s methodology in the *Origin* alongside Marx’s in *Capital*; contemporaneous texts, each was radical in its respective motivation “to grasp things by the root,” as Marx helps us remember to define the term “radical” (“Contribution” 52). Devoting fourteen chapters to a radical revisioning of earlier scientific models of evolution in plants and animals, Darwin’s treatise is not unlike Marx’s undertaking to read earlier economic theories symptomatically, i.e., in search of a law or “mechanism,” as Althusser picks up on it—behind the natural and/or naturalized world and the ways in which others before him have scripted it. In an essay on “The *Origin* and Political Thought,” Naomi Beck notes that when Marx first read Darwin’s study in 1961, he declared in a letter to the socialist reformer Ferdinand Lassalle that ““Darwin’s work is most important and suits my purpose in that it provides a basis in the natural science for the historical class struggle”” (307). But she goes on to point out how, over time, Darwin and Marx could not imagine their work as being mutually translatable. “[Marx’s] goal was to change the world, not to interpret it in a different way,” Beck helps to show us, “while Darwin wanted to understand nature through careful observation” (310). Reading positions and exchanges of each theorist over the decade and a half following the *Origin*’s publication, she insists on

¹² Swensen identifies “the late 1980s and early 1990s” as “a time when the tension between experiment and convention had begun to break down. This was the result of specific historical developments,” she notes, “one academic, the other technological, that transformed two of poetry’s principal centers of force: academia and publishing” (xxii).

a difference in kind between science and politics..., one that Darwin was aware of. Political theories, by their very nature, have to be normative, since they aim to convince the listener or reader that the solution offered is beneficial, or at least more desirable than the existing alternatives. Therefore, by definition, they need to have a specific objective, be it a more equitable or prosperous society, a freer society, or some other goal. Darwin's biology was constructed in response to a different set of rules, those of scientific Investigation and explanation. In this sense it was not normative but descriptive. (312)

In support of these distinctions, Beck quotes an 1875 letter from Engels to Marx: “Of Darwin's doctrine, I accept the *theory of evolution*, but assume Darwin's method of verification (STRUGGLE FOR LIFE, NATURAL SELECTION) to be merely a first, provisional, incomplete expression of a newly discovered fact” (311). As Engels himself had observed ten years earlier,

The so-called ‘economic laws’ are not eternal laws of nature but historical laws that appear and disappear, and the code of modern political economy, insofar as the economists have drawn it up correctly and objectively, is for us merely a summary of the laws and conditions in which modern bourgeois society can exist. (qtd. in Beck 309)

Like modern political economy, culture is different—is necessarily *discrepant*—from nature, we might like to think it goes without saying. While Darwin was “able to reveal to us the truth about the organic world,” as Beck puts it, “he could not take us further” (310). In his “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre,” Althusser correspondingly insists that we must

avoid lapsing into an identification of what art gives us and what science gives us. What art makes us *see*, and therefore gives to us in the form of ‘*seeing*’, ‘*perceiving*’ and ‘*feeling*’ (which is not the form of *knowing*), is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*. (222)

Similarly, “[w]hat makes art works socially significant,” I would contend with Theodor Adorno, “is content that articulates itself in formal structures” (“Society” 327). Thus the “integrity” of any language is no gauge of its social significance in these terms, and would in fact strike many critics as a pernicious illusion. Adorno, for one, endorses a “‘contaminated’ language” over a “‘pure’ language,” the latter contaminated in its own way by what he sees as the reifying logic of capitalism and, in some cases, by the same “moral veneer” that has historically accompanied fascism (“Commitment” 87). According to him, it was precisely the verifiability, the “integrity,” of certain language modes in a post-war context—“[t]he combination of solid plot, and equally

solid, extractable idea”—that “won Sartre,” for instance, “great success and made him, without doubt against his honest will, acceptable to the culture industry” (79). Adorno elsewhere insists on the “heteronomous essence” of certain kinds of art¹³ (“Society” 337)—its semi-autonomy from blunt “social fact” or historical-economic determinism (320) and hence its capacity for simultaneous “affirmation and critique” (321).

Such an oscillating dynamic, I think, could productively be ascribed to, or at least tested out against, today’s American hybrids were it not for certain editors’ ignorance (willful or otherwise) of how these processes might inhere in, or be complicated by, any given linguistic arrangement. In his 1999 study *Oscillate Wildly*, critic Peter Hitchcock works through a Bakhtinian lens to “rewrite Marx’s opening of *Capital* under the sign of ‘oscillation’” (2), thus wanting to work out a revised model of base/superstructure relations. Hitchcock begins by admitting that oscillation as a metaphor for “a particular form and expression of materialist politics and theory” (2) might be construed by some critics to be “perilously indicative of ‘a cult of ambiguity and indeterminacy’ instead of more ‘aggressive’ modes of opposition that get cracking by ripping up capitalism’s brute realities of everyday existence” (4). For him, however, the concept of oscillation—which he distinguishes from any simple or empirical (i.e., non-dialectical) “principle” of oscillation (8)—is “provided by the relational zone among its theoretical components”; it “must have explanatory and not just descriptive or digressive power” (7). As a socially engaged aesthetic, I would wager to add, a *poetics* of oscillation would have to have relational or *articulatory* and not just negating power. In his “Notes Towards an Articulatory Poetics,” Jeff Derksen characterizes as articulatory the function of engaged cultural practices in the context of neoliberal globalization, appealing to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s definition of articulation as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (93). Significantly, Derksen reads what are commonly held to be “disjunctive” poetic practices as potentially or more properly *conjunctive*: “A poetics of articulation is not merely a semantic expansion of putting ‘the world’ into a text,” he argues, “but an attempt to *link* cause and effect, rather than catalogue the effects of bad history, or imperialism, or globalization” (95, my emphasis). Addressing the possible query, “But isn’t oscillation just a code word for something that has been materialist for some

¹³ i.e., non-kitsch, non-committed, or “authentic” art.

time: the dialectic?” (8), Hitchcock clarifies that oscillation, figured through a dialogic (a type of articulatory) imagination, is “not a gloss on Marxist principles but a tool for understanding their internal logic within current contingencies” (9).

But rather than attempting to understand superstructural formations in the context of past and present contingencies, Swensen and St. John, branding hybridity for the future, retain a transhistorical corollary between the processes of “affirmation and critique” and the appearance of “conventional” and “experimental” forms respectively. They posit further, like the good liberals they so clearly want to be seen as, that “[w]hile political issues may or may not be the ostensible subject of hybrid work, the political is always there” (Swensen xxi). Swensen will also assert, in the same sentence, that “the political...inhere[s] in the commitment to use language in new ways that yet remain audible and comprehensible to the population at large” (xxi), here as elsewhere wanting the category of hybridity to accommodate an impossible cross-section of functions—subversive *and* populist, autonomous *and* committed, non-commercial but readily consumable (for an equally impossible “population at large”)—without actually investigating how such functions themselves are historically contingent and invariably manifested with unique, if not always (or ever easily) retraceable, intentions.

In his “Base and Superstructure” essay, Raymond Williams gives us a similar insight: “There is a simple theoretical distinction between alternative and oppositional, that is to say between someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it, and someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light” (11). In this light, a significant elision in the conception and carrying out of the *American Hybrid* anthology is its editors’ failure or refusal to distinguish between “alternative” and “oppositional” poetic practices, or to attend, even more importantly, to the shifting determinations, meanings, and possibilities for different poetics over time and across space. In their introduction to the poet Jorie Graham (to give just one example), Swensen and St. John write: “Steeped in philosophy and the visual arts, Graham augments her stylistic hybridity with an interdisciplinary inclusivity reminiscent of Pound” (165), effectively washing away the question of any relation—reflective, rhetorical, disjunctive, or otherwise—between Pound’s active fascism and its historical articulations with “inclusiv[e]” (proto-hybrid) poetic forms. Although “it is often a very narrow line, in reality, between alternative and oppositional,” as Williams admits (11), these categories

have all the more need “to be recognized as subject to historical variation, and as having sources which are very significant, as a fact about the dominant culture itself” (10).

There is furthermore “a process” that Williams calls “the *selective tradition*: that which, within the terms of an effective dominant culture, is always passed off as ‘the tradition’, ‘*the significant past*’” (9). In too neatly synthesizing American poetry’s past formal articulations through, in, or of social content¹⁴—this for the sake of an exuberant “renaming” of our present “Garden”—the editors of *American Hybrid* rely on a selective tradition that removes from social agency and/or determination the very mechanism of “selection,” or intention, itself. As Williams warns us,

the selectivity is the point; the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded. Even more crucially, some of these meanings and practices are reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture. (9)

In a section named “Circumstances favourable to Natural Selection,” Darwin observes that “every hybridizer”—every man or woman, that is, who goes to the garden *intending* to create a hybrid from two distinct species—“knows how unfavourable exposure to wet is to the fertilization of a flower.” *American Hybrid* thereby does away with all “unfavourable exposure,” removing from the soil (the figurative “stigma”) of history and selecting only those specimens that it can easily cultivate. “[Y]et what a multitude of flowers,” Darwin goes on to behold, “have their anthers and stigmas fully exposed to the weather!” (141). In his essay titled “Polemic Greeting to the Inhabitants of Utopia,” poet-critic Bob Perelman brings us to the bind, which I will finish by quoting extensively:

Language as material, sonic utopia; and language as privileged site of coalition-building; saying no to hierarchies of taste and correctness; positing cosmopolitan and multicultural mixes: these hopes and positions are influential for good reason. They posit a wider democratic field of action for writing, and certainly they open up more intriguing compositional possibilities with respect to our positions in the contemporary social multiverse. The wide social field that is so often traversed *within* our writings, via sound, word, phrase, collage, does not mean that our writings circulate through anything like that

¹⁴ In his recent study *Reading the Illegible*, poet-critic Craig Dworkin insists we “differentiate between the politics *through*, the politics *in*, and the politics *of* the poem” (4). I agree with this, and insist that criticism perform readings of all three.

same wide field. There is—and has long been—a rather circumscribed place set aside for utopic embodiments, ideological demolition-derbies: the poetry corner, a large, seemingly infinite place with room for tremendous vistas of activity, ecstatic certainty, alienation and resentment, but where, all too often, as Bourdieu points out, one's competitors are only one's customers. (379)

To speak through and on behalf of the late Eve Sedgwick, it is “present theoretical vocabularies rather than the reparative motive itself” that continues to be the concern in my ever-increasing encounters with discourses of hybridity. Not the hybrid forms themselves that I'm paranoid about, it is the “sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary” (150) terms of their mediation into an *American* category that disquiets this particular Canadian.

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