
REVIEWS

Alison Hawthorne Deming, ed. *Poetry of the American West: A Columbia Anthology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. 328p.

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“Location, location, location.” Not only is this phrase a mantra for the real estate industry, but it is also a focal point for any work that intends to represent the American West. Since the nineteenth century, the American West has been constructed as an ideal paradise and as a living hell. Deming’s anthology draws together a wide range of poetry that displays these two competing and contradictory views of the West. The extent of her selections both chronologically and geographically is impressive: chronologically, the earliest works come from the fifteenth century (Nezahualcoyotl’s “Flower Songs”) and the latest represent some of the best (and now relatively canonical) American poetry from the twentieth century (Ginsberg, Momaday, Clifton, and Soto); geographically, the poems take as inspiration locations ranging from Mexico City to Washington to Kansas. Deming’s anthology does not run the risk of diffusing the idea of the American West; rather, she presents one particular narrative of the American West — for Deming, the West is and has always been a locus for the struggle between humanity and Nature. In these selected poems the American West becomes a utopia in its own right — a location that is nowhere and everywhere, a place that is all things to all people, but overall and always has its own backbone, a resilient naturalness. I wonder about the ambiguity of “the American West.” Don’t we see the American West as an overdetermined location, idea, thing? Aren’t there poets who write about the West that aren’t Nature poets? Deming’s selection of poems does capture a certain sense of openness and possibility, a sense that Larry McMurtry recalls in *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*, his recent reflections on being a writer of the West. Like McMurtry, Deming gives us access to the American West as a place, a possibility, a location; it is, however, a place where Nature is writ large and the urban, the human, and the linguistic act of writing poetry seem small, tiny reflections of the magnificent.

Deming sets two goals for her collection: she hopes to create “a reference book, [a] collection [that] provides many points of access for those seeking a path into the unfamiliar terrain of western poetry” and “a story about the West that ... is

instructive for our present predicament” (xvi). The scope of the anthology provides many perspectives and points of entry for readers; however, the omission of writers such as Bob Perelman and Naomi Shihab Nye does leave the work feeling a bit less contemporary than one would like. Nye and Perelman, of course, are very different poets, who each write about aspects of the West that are not fully explored in Deming’s collection. Since the West is often seen as a place rather than a time, a sort of continual present, one would expect a fuller representation of contemporary poets. Deming’s agenda, the story that Deming is trying to tell in this collection, is not, however, about the present. Rather she is concerned with establishing the history of the West in a poetic tradition. That is, her choice of poems tells us quite a bit about the poetic story she would like the West to be, to have been, or, perhaps, to become. “On the Civilization of the Western Aboriginal Country,” a poem by Philip Freneau (1752-1832), speaks of the West as

Strange to behold, unmingled with surprize,
 Old heights extinguished, and new heights arise,
 Nature, herself, assume a different face, —
 Yet such has been, and such will be the case. (13)

Freneau’s grounding of the West in Nature and his conceptualization of the West as ever changing and yet ever the same is an essential element throughout Deming’s collection. The story Deming tells us is one rooted in history and Nature. While beautiful, this vision of the West seems somewhat limited — what about the words and the scenes from along the edge of the West? What about the poetry of L.A.? of San Francisco? of Seattle? of the urban centers that look toward the Pacific as well toward the Rocky Mountains? What about the poets who read William Gibson as well as Gary Snyder? They do not appear on Deming’s radar.

Still, I should not dwell on the absence of the urban in Deming’s collection. It is a powerful and moving collection that shows how both Nature and history are enshrined in poetry of the American West. A stanza from James Galvin’s haunting “Western Civilization” can perhaps capture this double strain of the West as historic and natural:

Now the vast, dim barn floats like an ocean liner
 Whose doldrums are meadows spinning into brush,
 And everywhere you look Wyoming hurries off. (280)

The West here is the West of the past and a West where nature conquers humanity by wearing down all the attempts of civilization. It is a stunning image that occurs over and over again in this collection. Joy Harjo’s “Sonata for the Invisible” also hints at these themes. She writes, “They illustrate different dances to the crowd, who were fooled into thinking there’s nothing left, but songs are a cue as

to what walks among us unseen” (283). Deming’s concept of the West then is one that implies meaning in Nature; songs and poems are means of accessing “what walks among us unseen.”

Although I do not share Deming’s vision of the West, I wish that I did. If I were going to teach a course on Nature Writing, I would include *Poetry of the American West: A Columbia Anthology* on the reading list. If I were going to teach a course on poetry written in the American West, I would have to look at other collections as well. Deming’s work does provide many points of access to poetry of the American West. The problems I have with the collection are that all of these points seem to lead to the same vision of the West — the West is a historic force of Nature, the West is a location where humans are dwarfed by the Natural. I can imagine a different collection of poetry from the American West, one where the urban and the natural would exist in a greater tension, where poets would write about neon as well as bald eagles. Still the West is many things to many people and Deming’s work articulates a clear sense of one of the possible ways of reading and representing the American West. ✿