

# TWO ANTHOLOGIES INSTITUTIONALIZING INNOVATIVE AMERICAN POETRY: RON SILLIMAN'S *IN THE AMERICAN TREE* AND DOUGLAS MESSERLI'S «LANGUAGE» POETRIES

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## RESUMEN

Dos antologías de poesía innovadora americana publicadas en los años ochenta del siglo xx, *In the American Tree* (1986) y «*Language*» *Poetries: An Anthology* (1987), confirmaron una ruptura de esta poesía con el Modernismo y una ligazón de carácter multidisciplinar que les confiere un carácter singular por sus relaciones con el marxismo, el formalismo ruso, la poesía zaum, el postestructuralismo, la desconstrucción, Gertrude Stein, la Escuela de Frankfurt, Louis Zukofsky, Wittgenstein o el postmodernismo. En este ensayo presento el escenario histórico y aquellas prácticas que siguieron los editores de ambas antologías para compilar a los diferentes colaboradores. Estas dos antologías se han convertido en referentes obligados para todos aquellos que se acercan a esta poesía innovadora, siendo respaldada tanto por la academia como por la iniciativa editorial privada.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía innovadora americana, antologías, Ron Silliman, *In the American Tree*, Douglas Messerli, «*Language*» *Poetries: An Anthology*.

## ABSTRACT

«Two Anthologies Institutionalizing Innovative American Poetry: Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree* and Douglas Messerli's *'Language' Poetries*». Ron Silliman's and Douglas Messerli's anthologies, *In the American Tree* (1986) and «*Language*» *Poetries: An Anthology* (1987), definitely broke with Modernism and wed American poetry to various poetic approaches and disciplines, like Marxism, Russian Formalism, zaum poetry, post-structuralism, Deconstruction, Gertrude Stein, Frankfurt School, Louis Zukofsky, Wittgenstein, or Postmodernism. My characterization of this historical scenario and communal practices proclaims the value of these anthologies as a consensual vehicle to extend the influence of these poets on diverse contemporary scenes. Both anthologies can thus be considered as decisive referential collections because they definitely helped to widen the public audience and were backed by publishers with academic and commercial weight. Many readers, no doubt, were drawn to difficult issues so characteristic of this kind of poetry.

KEYWORDS: Innovative American poetry, anthologies, Ron Silliman, *In the American Tree*, Douglas Messerli, «*Language*» *Poetries: An Anthology*.

While the language poets were definitively consolidating their new poetic theories and formal practices in the mid-1980s, the compilation of two anthologies:

*In the American Tree* edited by Ron Silliman (1986) and Douglas Messerli's «*Language*» *Poetries: An Anthology* (1987) marked a turning point in recent American poetry. Both collections gave orientation and visibility to their systemic models, and led readers into a discursive contextualization of the aesthetic principles of this new tendency. To briefly understand their particular way of configuring poetry and poetics, it would be fruitful to quote Walter Kalaidjian's view of their generic stratum, as «[theorizing] textual practices resistant to the discursive norms of affirmative bourgeois culture» (323). Indeed, these language poets were investigating the political implications in literature, through which they extended their comprehension to specific philosophical schools and literary theoreticians. All this was developed mostly through small presses —Tuumba, Roof, Burning Deck, Potes & Poets, Big Sky, or The Figures— and little magazines like *Tottel's*, *Toothpick*, *Lisbon*, & *the Orcas Islands*, *This, Roof*, *Joglers*, *Hills*, *La-Bas*, *A Hundred Posters*, *L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e*, *Oculist Witnesses*, *Qu*, *Miam*, or *Sentences*. The publication of these two anthologies should therefore be considered a climactic impact on American literary milieu and the final recognition of this poetic tendency.

The issue of historicity was not problematic since these authors' compositions were all published in the 1970s and early 1980s, and their institutionalization was based on the commonly accepted principle that «poetry offers a social practice hypersensitive to its grounding in language» (Silliman, «Poetry» 62). According to this view, the normally simple task for any anthologist compiling the work of these poets need only chronicle a new tendency in American letters and present their texts to a wider audience. Indeed, both Silliman's and Messerli's anthologies were presented as actively committed to gathering the most representative authors engaged in heightening the perception of language itself —its materiality and social concerns. For Hank Lazer, both collections are representative of the greatest poetic upheaval since the publication of Donald M. Allen's *The New American Poetry* in 1960, and that these anthologies culminated the avant-garde poetic explorations of these poets since the early 1970s and what matters are the theoretical and practical distinctions they prompt. Among these, Lazer mentions 1) the unofficial status of their development outside conventional verse culture, 2) the centrality of theory, 3) their operating as «oppositional literary practice» rather than signalling a re-evaluation of Modernism, 4) the continuous decoding of the sign and issues of representation, and finally 5) reconsidering the political dimensions of any literary activity (Lazer 37).

Robert L. McLaughlin affirms that commercial publishers in the United States have in general supported serious literature «only when economic conditions made it profitable to do so», and the presence of alternative publishers make a difference in propitiating and holding the readers to new aesthetic visions «to change the world» (185-186). However, on this occasion both Silliman and Messerli were successful in convincing the University of Maine at Orono, through the National Poetry Foundation and especially Carroll F. Terrell, and also a commercial publisher like New Directions, to publish material usually ignored by official verse or Academia and the corporate market. In the marketplace where these anthologies are still working well, sales figures as of October 2004 are impressive for a poetry anthology. Indeed, *Tree* has gone through two editions and estimated sales figures

are around 100,000 sold copies. Messerli's collection is not far from these figures too. These sales reclassify these oppositional practices from poetry for minorities into the category of voices really concerned with a new society in which experimental artistic forms really matter.

The publishing industry supported both Silliman and Messerli in editing anthologies, which definitely broke with Modernism and wed poetry to various poetic approaches and disciplines, like Marxism, Russian Futurism, zaum poetry, post-structuralism, Deconstruction, Gertrude Stein, Frankfurt School, Louis Zukofsky, Wittgenstein, or Postmodernism. Douglas Messerli had been the editor of little magazines like *La Bas* (1976-1978) and *Sun & Moon* (1976-1981) in College Park, Maryland. In 1976 he founded Sun & Moon Press —supported by the Contemporary Arts Education Project— and by the late 1970s and early 1980s, he propelled the American poetic scene with chapbooks by some language poets like Charles Bernstein or Ray Di Palma. His editorship has been also extended to other well-established fiction writers like Djuna Barnes, Russell Banks, or an anthology of contemporary American fiction (1983). More recently by 1997, on settling in Los Angeles, Messerli became the publisher of Green Integer, comprising a more international scope to cover «Essays, Manifestos, Statements, Speeches, Maxims, Epistles, Diaristic Notes, Narratives, Natural Histories, Poems, Plays, Performances, Ramblings, Revelations, and all such ephemera as may appear necessary to bring society into a slight tremolo of confusion and fright at least», as announced on the credits page of these books. Writers like Gertrude Stein, Gérard de Nerval or José Donoso co-exist in this series with other artists writing on their own aesthetics, like Robert Bresson, Jean Renoir, or Sam Eisenstein. Messerli's editorship has been completed with his work in the anthology, *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry, 1960-1990* (1994), and in the two volumes of *The PIP Anthology of World Poetry of the 20th Century* (2003).

For an innovative poet engaged as Ron Silliman is in renewing poetic modes, and in focusing on the centrality of language as cultural critique, his editorship of different poetry samplers and anthologies previous to *In the American Tree* has always shown his desire to promote the hybrid, the lurking crisis of the social dimension of language under the umbrella of the critical approaches followed by the language poets as mentioned above. The experience acquired in his little magazine, *Tottel's* (1971-1981), published in Oakland and conceived as a newsletter for friends and free of charge, consolidated his refined complex view of a new generation of poets that has become the salient feature of recent American poetry. His experience as anthologist began with co-editing with David Melnick a sampler of poets for the *Chicago Review*, «Fifteen Young Poets of the San Francisco —Bay Area» (1970), in which he gathered 15 poets «now producing important work, who, for the same reasons [of geography], are apt to be overlooked» (71). Maybe his inner desire for reaching national attention motivated Silliman to insist on promoting a new anthology, «The Dwelling Place: 9 Poets», (1975), appearing in *Alcheringa*, a magazine published under the auspices of Boston University. On this occasion, he significantly selected poets who decentered conventional reading practice and «clustered» around such magazines as *This, Big Deal, Tottel's, Doones, Toothpick,*



*Lisbon & the Orcas Islands*, «Called variously «language-centered», «minimal», «non-referential formalism», «diminished referentiality», «structuralist». Not a group but a tendency in the work of many» (104). The usefulness of an anthology for the visibility of this poetic tendency has its initial steps in the edition of «Realism: An Anthology of 'Language Poets'», (1982), published in *Ironwood*, that clearly displayed a sense of community, as well as a valuable list of names to be later included in Silliman's definitive anthology *Tree*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the supplementary essay written following a creative line by Kathleen Fraser, «Partial Local Coherence/Regions with Illustrations: Some Notes on Language Writing,» built up a growing reputation for this group incorporated into a mixture of commitment to displacement and curiosity with non-referentiality, «The excitement of their collective project spread, audiences have grown and have sometimes taken on the quality of discipleship. In a typical audience you can find ten to thirty faces from the central group, plus ten to fifteen established poets who are interested but not affiliated, plus a growing number of young writers, students and community people sniffing-out the *new*, whatever its form. There was, there is the excitement» (135).

On the bright side, it can be said that Silliman's anthologies always show a multidimensional system through which to represent multiple poetic voices, particularly unified by a generic framework of critical approaches. This diversity is recurrent in a sampler published after *Tree*, «Political Poetries: A Bay Area Sampler», in which the authors are not so much interested in experimenting aesthetically as in challenging the political status quo judged as racial or economic discrimination. Silliman refers to the political and social motives for this anthology in his introductory essay to this sampler:

The eight poets whose texts are sampled here were selected to suggest some of the diversity of current writing by poets who align themselves with progressive political movements. Together, they appear to share few assumptions beyond the poet's traditional presumption that sound is integral to meaning—none of the works here should be read silently—although meaning itself is subject to rapid and radical shifts, sometimes from word to word. Categorized in terms of the debate over identity, these poets could be said to range from positions of relative essentialism (Bernstein, Dorf, Herrera) to radical social constructionism (Perelman, Scalapino). («Poetry» 65)

We should also consider that this trend of merging avant-garde language poetry voices was a common practice within this tendency, especially incarnated in the early 1980s by Charles Bernstein. He edited anthologies of these poets like «Language Sampler» in *The Paris Review* (1982), or «43 Poets (1984)», published in *Boundary 2* (1985-1986), which culminated in the publication in 1984 of *The L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e Book* (1984), co-edited with Bruce Andrews. The gathering to-

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<sup>1</sup> We should notice that this sampler's publication coincided with the construction of *Tree*. By then, Silliman had a clear idea of the material and contributors to include in *Tree*.

gether of avant-garde voices associated in some measure with the language group was rapidly extended to other poets perceived as a continuity of the language poets' heritage. In this sense, new anthologies publicized their concerns as is explicitly visible, to name just a few, in James McCorkle's *Contemporary American Poets-Critics* (1988), Andrew Ross's special issue of *The Minnesota Review*, «Re-inventing Community: A Symposium on/with Language Poets» (1989), or Charles Bernstein's editions of *Live at the Ear: First Audio-Anthology of Postmodern L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e=P=o=e=t=r=y* (1994), and «99 Poets/1999» published in *Boundary 2* (1999). Other collections proceeding in the same line are *A Poetics of Criticism* (1994), co-edited by Juliana Spahr, Mark Wallace, Kristin Prevallet and Pam Rehm, and *The Art of Practice: Forty Five Contemporary American Poets* (1994), co-edited by Dennis Barone and Peter Ganick, with Silliman's revealing afterword on the innovative American poetic scene in the late 20th century. Paul Hoover's edition of *Postmodern American Poetry* (1994) widened the audience for this literary fashion, since it was published by the influential Norton. Edward Foster induced specific readings of this poetry in *Primary Trouble: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* (1996). Christopher Beach presented a collection focused on these poets' poetics in his *Artifice of Indeterminacy: An Anthology of New Poetics* (1998), and co-editors Lisa Jarnot, Leonard Schwartz, and Chris Stroffolino, *An Anthology of New (American) Poets* (1998), selected authors who have «a renewed interest in the continuity of traditions of writing, a critique of the dire economic and social conditions which surround us, and a sincere approach to the fact that we have much to learn from each other and from our individual poetical practices» (Jarnot 2).

In a similar way and through the same years, international sympathy was gradually accruing for this tendency with the publication of new anthologies. In France, Jean Pierre Faye edited a special issue of the magazine *Change*, entitled «Language Poetry Movement» (1982), followed by «Etats-Unis: Nouveaux Poets» in *Action Poétique* (1989), edited by Emmanuel Hocquard and Claude Royet-Journoud, who later also edited the anthology *49 + 1: Nouveaux Poètes Américains* (1991). By the 1990s, critics like Jerome McGann were issuing samplers of language poetry in English magazines. McGann's «Postmodern Poetries» comprised language poets from America and England in the magazine *Versé* (1990), and Maggie O'Sullivan focused on the feminine voices of this group in her anthology, *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative poetry by Women in North America and the UK* (1996), constituting a collection of previously dispersed names from a whole generation. Though in Spain this kind of poetic practice was practically unknown in the 1970s and early 1980s and only followed by an elite, editions like «Recent American Poetry and Poetics», co-edited by Larry Price & Manuel Brito and published in the scholarly journal *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* (1989), Esteban Pujals' *La lengua radical* (1992), or Manuel Brito's editions of his book, *A Suite of Poetic Voices: Interviews with Contemporary American Poets* (1992), and «Poética americana contemporánea» published in *Nerter* (1999), have brought the language poets to a new public interested in innovative formal approaches. In Japan, the magazine *Gendaishi Techo* compiled a multi-authored collection centered on this group in 1988, with texts in English and the corre-



sponding translations in Japanese, presenting a curious dialogic exchange between the visual effects of this language and the appropriately metaphorizing abstrusiveness of language poetry itself.

My characterization of this historical scenario and communal practices proclaims the value of these anthologies as a consensual vehicle to extend the influence of these poets on diverse contemporary scenes. Both Silliman's *Tree* and Messerli's *Poetries* can thus be considered as decisive referential collections because they definitely helped to widen the public audience and were backed by publishers with academic and commercial weight. Many readers, no doubt, were drawn to difficult issues so characteristic of this kind of poetry. Beginning with the problem of non-referential writing, deconstruction of the subject, resistance of the form, and continuing with a critical position mediated, as seen above, by a widely ranging exploration from Russian Futurism and Marxism to Roland Barthes's post-structuralism. While also seeking «to close the gap dividing poetry and the world, while preserving the vital dialectic between political and cultural change» (Kalaidjian 323).

Let us turn to Silliman's and Messerli's intellectual resolutions when presenting this oppositional aesthetics. Drinking from the same waters, their projects entered directly into the concepts of otherness, objectification —relating words to objects, discursive practice of poetry, absence of final signification, textual resistance of the signifier, death of the author, and ideology. In formal terms, the lack of narrative structures, experimentation with the line and the sentence, as well as the frequent use of parataxis, created a strong sensation of emptiness, omissions and obscurities. The effect is much like that of unstable writing, far from the fertility of human actions. Meanwhile, Silliman was completely aware of these problematic issues in his introduction to *Tree*, inclusively saying that this kind of poetry also succeeds in furthering a paradoxical proximity between the text and the reader, «It is intriguing that an art form be perceived as a threat, a curious verification that poetry remains important business, and a testament to the power of the writing involved. Yet, if the collective thrust of these poets to a possible or normative reader is that you must change your life, this anthology offers no single prescription as to how this can be best accomplished» (xix-xx). However, Messerli grounded his anthology on a more generic thought in his introductory essay to *Poetries*, tending to rely on the inherent recognizability of language as a mediating factor between the text and the author, «What I call «portmanteau poetry» —poetry that, revealing its message to the reader, is used up and closed until the reader again seeks much feelings or knowledge— such poetry is rejected in favor of the production of a living document of the author's engagement with the reader and the world through language as the agent of their shared thinking» (2-3).

Since both anthologists' fullest methodological approaches were formed by perennial blossoms —multiple relational possibilities in the process of constructing these anthologies— we should succinctly start by their common Heideggerian insistence on the condition of language as an inherent part of the human being:

Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their being from out of their

being. Such saying is a projecting of the clearing, in which announcement is made of what it is that beings come into the Open as. (73)

The challenge for the language poets was to make explicit that words were not only objects in themselves, but also partaking in a social practice. Words, and by extension poems, virtually contain a social subject whose writing characterizes diverse analytical formations, «Poetry, in this sense, is a test case for the creation of alternative social formations» (Silliman, «Poetry» 63). In fact, these anthologies were capable of presenting the impossibilities and difficulties of language, paradoxically re-emphasized by the presence of language, coinciding with Paul de Man's refusal of a language whose main romantic aspiration is to commune with nature, «Critics who speak of a «happy relationship» between matter and consciousness fail to realize that the very fact that the relationship has to be established within the medium of language indicates that it does not exist in actuality» (*Rhetoric* 2). However, the denial of this link outside language corresponds with de Man's insistence on the multiplicity of interpretation and the significant and decisive role of the self, which is defined through its own defeat, «the radical negation of self is in fact its recuperation» (*Allegories* 136). Though the pertinent idea here is the continual mediating of the self and world. Silliman goes further and defends that language makes man social, crediting «the strong correlation that exists between «aesthetic value» and social identity» («Poetry» 63).

Following this socially and culturally activist attitude, the construction of these two anthologies, especially in the case of Ron Silliman not only reflected the emergence of a new aesthetics, but also a regional wide presence of the anthologized authors throughout the United States. Many of them were from the major urban areas like New York, San Francisco or Washington D.C., but others lived in smaller communities, with individuals documenting a new poetic approach through numerous publications. People like Alan Davies in Dochester (MA), Michael Waltuch and Barrett Watten in Iowa City, Bob Perelman in Cambridge (MA), Robert Grenier in Gloucester (MA), Ron Silliman in Oakland (CA), Barry Alpert in Silver Spring (MD), Jed Rasula and Ron Barnard in Bloomington (IN), or Michael Wiater in Seattle (WA). Constructing this kind of anthology was a way to readily see how these poets were working and to check how this poetry of resistance could be considered by a wider audience. Being amply and nationally distributed, and addressed to common readers, teaching profession, students, or diverse communities of poets, the publication of these anthologies was a cultural, political, and economic gesture, since it was to introduce a new sequence of intellectual ideas into encapsulated and over-stated rules of Academia and the publishing industry. They openly dared to clear up the real significance of this poetic mode up to then unseen in the reality of the market.

Nowadays we should particularly heed the construction of these two language poetry anthologies, which have transformed the recent American poetic scene and acquired a reasonable amount of power in the academic milieu of American universities. Ron Silliman's *Tree* can be considered the most evidential paradigm for this kind of poetry and poetics. It was published by a poet fully involved in the



genesis and articulation of this tendency, and his meticulous task has been praised by most of the critics.<sup>2</sup> *Tree* is the largest anthology devoted to the work of the language poets to date. It contains 628 pages with an inclusive approach, since Silliman bridges primary work and critical writings. In this sense, this anthology can be seen as an extension of these poets' diverse practices in the 1970s and early 1980s. One of the most significant details is that Silliman divided this volume into two parts. The first part presents the creative work of thirty eight poets and is subdivided between East and West—not only limited to New York and San Francisco as major cultural centers but also including poets from other diverse regions of the United States. In the second half of this book, «Second Front», 129 pages collect pieces that show the broad applicability of more than 23 poets—if we consider that Bernadette Mayer co-authors her essay with members of the St. Mark's Church Poetry Project Writing Workshop, 1971-5—writing on poetics.<sup>3</sup> To combine complex fields so as to demonstrate the consistency of these poets' new attainments, Silliman created two sections to foreground more clearly the poetic, social, and cultural development of the practice offered<sup>4</sup>. The remainder of this volume is completed with a «Contributors» section, drawing these poets' literary evolution historiographically. We can't forget to mention that the same formal and structural presentation of this anthology shares many indications about form, meaning, and context developed by language poets. A very clear example of this are the two introductions for this book: Firstly, Kit Robinson's poem, «In the American Tree,» in which the second stanza enigmatically poises transformation and discontinuities, «Flipping out wd be one alternative/ simply rip the cards to pieces/ amid a dense growth of raised eyebrows» (xiii); and, secondly Ron Silliman's preface, «Language, Realism, Poetry,» explores the continual functional relationships among poets from different areas and his own motives for selecting poets with a critical insight. I should also notice that a certain academic halo was provided to this anthology,

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<sup>2</sup> Two specific reviews on this anthology and illustrative examples for this consideration are Ken Edwards, «It's our good fortune that it falls to Ron Silliman, one of the most intelligent and perceptive poets of the tendency, to edit it» (87), and Jerome McGann who reacts in the same terms highlighting Silliman's achievement, «Silliman is one of the most highly respected writers in the circles of the Language Movement» (6).

<sup>3</sup> Ron Silliman openly points out in his introductory essay the main point at the level of poetics developed in these essays, «The nature of reality. The nature of the individual. The function of language in the constitution of either realm. The nature of meaning. The substantiality of language. The shape and value of literature itself. The function of method. The relation between writer and reader. Much, perhaps too much, has been made of the critique of reference and normative syntax inherent in the work of many of the writers here, without acknowledging the degree to which this critique is itself situated within the larger question of what, in the last part of the twentieth century, it means to be human» (xix).

<sup>4</sup> Silliman himself recognizes that to construct an anthology under these parameters is too complex, «Anthologies are not facts, but individual viewpoints over complex fields of information» (xxiii). The final impression is that he tries to reduce his obvious individual partisan view, storehousing strict creative literary production and its theoretical foregroundings.



since it was published by the National Poetry Foundation at the University of Maine, Orono guaranteeing that these practitioners definitely entered into conversation with Academia.<sup>5</sup>

Douglas Messerli's method of compilation in *Poetries* followed a different procedure. He just selected primary work by twenty poets, with no section on poetics, though including bibliographical references on the authors and supplying lists of collaborative work, selected journals, anthologies, and group translations. The New Directions commercial printing of this anthology provided an ideal opportunity to be read by heterogeneous audiences potentially converging in these poets' new approaches. All poets included in Messerli's anthology appeared in Silliman's, with the exception of Jackson Mac Low's primary work, although Silliman included Mac Low's essay, «Language-centered», in the «Second Front» section devoted to poetics.<sup>6</sup>

However, coincidentally and symptomatic of the Americanness principle, both anthologies did not include poets working in the same poetic line but living in other countries such as Steve McCaffery or Tom Raworth.<sup>7</sup> Messerli's anthology presented writings with the same concerns established by Silliman in his academic anthology, piling up poems to illustrate the latest transformations in the contemporary American scene. Within this context both Silliman and Messerli possessed the ability to make this innovative writing accessible for both untrained and well-read audiences.

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<sup>5</sup> In this sense, being the director of the University of Maine Press, the key man to support both the National Poetry Foundation and the publication of *Tree* was Carroll F. Terrell.

<sup>6</sup> Silliman justifies his position on this matter in his introductory essay to *In the American Tree*, «Two articles were written by persons who do not appear in the first two sections of the books, Jackson Mac Low and Nick Piombino. Mac Low's presence violates the above-mentioned principle of not including persons whose mature style and public identity were firmly established prior to the publication of «On Speech» [by Robert Grenier]» (xxii). This paragraph also shows Silliman's thoughtful criteria for selection. In this sense, this kind of methodological statements are dispersed everywhere in his introduction.

<sup>7</sup> Silliman attributes reasons of space for these exclusions and he mentions at least 86 other poets associated with this line of poetry whose writing could also have been selected for his volume —characteristically enough, among them he specifically proposes Douglas Messerli. The curious thing is his allusion to other artists who could potentially be participants in his project, despite working in other disciplines. These are «the filmmakers Abigail Child and Henry Hills, playwrights Eileen Corder and Nick Robinson, or novelist Kathy Acker» (xx). At this point, I should indicate that Silliman was also lucky to find a man like Carroll F. Terrell who supported the publication of such an extremely large anthology focused on an elitist poetic tendency.



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