

Kenneth Sherwood
Indiana University of PA

for *Companion to 20th-Century American Poetry*.
Ed. Burt Kimmelman. NY: Facts on File, 2005.

Ethnopoetics

Ethnopoetics names an informal movement in poetry and scholarship. Coined by Jerome Rothenberg in 1968, Ethnopoetics refers, narrowly, to collaborations among poets, anthropologists, linguists, and literary scholars during the late 1960s and 1970s. Ethnopoetics has come to broadly designate writing that reflects: heightened awareness of the artfulness of oral and traditional poetics and the ways in which diverse verbal arts illuminate world cultures; innovative theorizing and practice of transcription/translation .

Anthologies edited by Rothenberg--*Shaking the Pumpkin* and *Technicians of the Sacred*--helped bring attention to oral poetry and other ancient literary forms generally neglected within literary and academic circles. The availability of ethnopoetic texts influenced the translation, study, and making of poetry by writers associated with Ethnopoetics, as well as some associated with THE BLACK MOUNTAIN SCHOOL and BEAT POETRY; more recent trends towards multiculturalism, POETRY IN PERFORMANCE, and cross-cultural poetics reflect the precedent of ethnopoetics. During the 1970s, *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics* balanced translations of traditional world poetry and contemporary creative work by poets including David ANTIN, George ECONOMOU, Robert KELLY, and George Quasha, Jerome ROTHENBERG, Armand SCHWERNER, and Gary SNYDER, some of whom were earlier associated with the short-lived DEEP IMAGE school. Anthropologists and linguists involved included co-editor Dennis Tedlock, Stanley Diamond, Dell Hymes, and Nathaniel TARN.

The marginalization of traditional world poetics prior to Ethnopoetics can be partially attributed to the poverty of available translations. An ethnopoetic translation requires more than mastery of the language. From the scholarly side, Ethnopoetics emphasizes the necessity of acquiring deep knowledge of the cultures and performance context of the poetry; in retranslating the 16th-century Mayan *Popol Vuh*, Tedlock not only learned the Quiché Maya language and collaborated with contemporary Mayans but apprenticed himself to an indigenous spiritual leader. Improving translations on the formal level as well, Ethnopoetics scholars developed influential methods of transcription and total translation that aim to carry over the qualities of oral performance to the printed page. By making the artfulness of traditional poetics more apparent on the page, this innovation formally influenced contemporary poets.

Two classic examples of the innovation inspired by Ethnopoetics are *Fast Talking Woman*, by Ann Waldman and *The Tablets*, by Armand Schwerner. Waldman's book of poems uses techniques of repetition and parallelism learned from the work of an oral poet, Maria Sabina. Ethnopoetics allows Waldman to craft poems that convey an appropriately chant-like power not possible using either traditional English prosody (rhyme and meter) or the looser, speech-oriented patterns of free verse.

Armand Schwerner's *The Tablets* appears, at first glance, to be an English translation of a recovered ancient text; in fact Schwerner has created a poetic fiction, conjuring up both the original and the "translation," complete with footnotes, indecipherable passages, and an imagined scholar/translator. As ethnopoetics enriches our understanding of traditional poetries in formal, philosophical and spiritual terms, it alters received ideas about the western canon and literary form thereby enlarging the domain of poetry. Moving beyond a canon centered on the "classics," writers influenced by Ethnopoetics study, absorb, and are influenced by a wider range of sources, including: Aztec, Mayan, Zuni, Navajo, Egyptian, Yoruban, Ashanti, Indian, Tibetan and other poetries.

Ethnopoetic scholarship involves analysis, translation, or transcription of texts gained from living traditional poets/singers/storytellers; or it may take up previously collected ethnographic texts and retranslate them to expose their aesthetic and culturally informative dimensions. Some of the most valuable ethnopoetic texts have entailed collaboration between formally trained scholars and traditional artists. *Finding the Center* presents an exemplary collection of poetic narratives performed by Walter Sanchez and Andrew Peyneta, two traditional Zuni tellers from New Mexico; Dennis Tedlock produced the book by making an audio recording, translating, and then transcribing the pieces for performance. The result is a book which allows one to read the works and feel nearly present in the performances. Also from the American southwest, *Yaqui Deer Songs/Maso Bwikam: A Native American Poetry* is a remarkable collaboration between scholar Larry Evers and singer Felipe S. Molina. It presents cycles of traditional songs in bi-lingual format, which one may read along with an audio cassette of the singing. Most powerful, however, is the way it conveys the sense of how the performers and native audience think of this art by contextualizing the songs with interviews and conversations between Yaqui singers and participants in the deer song performances.

As motto for ethnopoetics in all its facets, the first words of Rothenberg's first anthology--"Primitive means Complex"--serve as a simple measure of its continued influence. Valuing marginalized art--the so-called primitive, pre-literate, tribal, or uncivilized--ethnopoetics anticipates Multiculturalism. As an exploration of oral poetry and traditions, it resonates with the recent reemergence of PERFORMANCE POETRY. The intense, interdisciplinary collaborations of Ethnopoetics in its first phase have subsided, but a conversation between poetry and the new interpretive anthropology began with the advent of the journal *XCP: Cross-cultural Poetics* in 1997. In the work of individual poets, Ethnopoetic concerns continue to be reflected, as when: Clayton ESHLEMAN delves into the paleolithic imagination in *Hotel Cro-Magnon*; Cecilia Vicuña remembers lost threads of the Quechua in *Unravelling Words and the Weaving of Water*; Gary SNYDER imagines his place in North America through Asian art in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*; Nathaniel MACKAY converses with the Dogon in *School of Udhra*; Simon ORTIZ calls up the trickster in post-industrial America in *Woven Stone*; and Kamau BRATHWAITE forges a poetic Nation Language embodying the African *nommo* in *Middle Passage*. Whether captivated by the oral artfulness or some other feature brought to light by ethnopoetics, 20th-century poets working in this domain continue to share an excitement for the way it expands the vision of the possible for poetry.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics. 10 vols. New York and Boston, 1970-1980.

Rothenberg, Jerome, ed. *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas*. Albuquerque: U NM Press, 1986.

_____ ed. *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: UC Press, 1985.

Rothenberg, Jerome and Diane Rothenberg, eds. *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Towards and Ethnopoetics*. Berkeley: UC Press, 1983.
