



Anne Lovering Rounds

City University of New York

Anthology and Absence: The Post-9/11 Anthologizing Impulse

ABSTRACT

The decade after the attacks of 9/11 and the fall of the World Trade Center saw a proliferation of New York-themed literary anthologies from a wide range of publishers. With titles like *Poetry After 9/11*, *Manhattan Sonnet*, *Poems of New York*, *Writing New York*, and *I Speak of the City*, these texts variously reflect upon their own post-9/11 plurivocality as preservative, regenerative, and reconstructive. However, the work of such anthologies is more complex than filling with plurivocality the physical and emotional hole of Ground Zero. These regional collections operate on the dilemma of all anthologies: that between collecting and editing. Every anthology, and every anthologist, negotiates the relationship between what is present and what is missing. In light of some of the emerging and established scholarship on the history of the English-language anthology, this article reads closely the declarative paratexts and the silent but equally powerful canonical choices of several different post-9/11 poetry anthologies. In so doing, the article comes to suggest the ways the anthology's necessary formal incorporation of absence and presence, rather than its plurivocality alone, connects collections of New York's literature to the fraught discourse of memorialization and rebuilding at the site of the World Trade Center.

After 9/11, poetry literally covered New York City. Dennis Loy Johnson and Valerie Merians, editors of the 2002 anthology *Poetry After 9/11*, vividly describe a city of poems

stuck on light posts and phone stalls, plastered on the shelters at bus stops and the walls of subway stations. In neighborhood newspapers the letters-to-the-editor pages were full of them. Downtown, people scrawled poems in the ash that covered everything. And on the brick walls of police stations and firehouses, behind the mountains of flowers and between photos of the dead, poetry dominated. (ix)

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Johnson and Merians sought to channel this poetic plurivocality: to recreate the anthologizing they saw the city itself perform. Motivated by a similar spirit, City Lore, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving New York's cultural heritage, performed a related task, preserving many of the poems and other writings left throughout the city (Aptowicz 255). Poetry scholar Ann Keniston also aptly describes the effect of 9/11 on a newly collective national aesthetic landscape in which

poets . . . began prolifically to write poems responding to the attacks. Many websites were set up where amateur poets could post their poems; Sam Hamill's website *Poets Against the War* . . . had received nearly thirty thousand poems when it closed in 2010; and nearly a fifth of the poems in *The Best American Poetry 2003*, edited by Yusef Komunyakaa, related to the attacks, New York City, or other public or historic events. (659)

The 'Twin Towers' fall elicited a desire not only to write about or for New York but also to collect such writing. One voice was not enough. It must be plural; it must be anthologized.

Many literary anthologies of New York writing appeared in the decade following 9/11. They range from slender paperbacks and a book in the Knopf Everyman's Library Pocket Series to a hefty 1050-page volume, and their intended markets extend from academic to trade readerships. Some include only living poets; some are diachronic; some feature both poetry and prose. Those published closest to 9/11 are explicitly intended as sources of solace and strength; others are broader reference texts. But each of their editors has either explicitly posited or indirectly implied a new need for anthologizing in the post-9/11 cityscape. The anthologies under consideration here—*Poetry After 9/11*, *Manhattan Sonnet*, *Poems of New York*, *Writing New York*, and *I Speak of the City*—

variously reflect upon their own plurivocality as preservative, regenerative, and reconstructive.

The work of such anthologies is more complex than filling with plurivocality the physical and emotional hole of Ground Zero. These regional collections operate on the dilemma of all anthologies: that between collecting and editing. The anthologies closest to 9/11 claim to create a newly holistic narrative around the city: to fill a void; to heal with multiple voices. Even the more general anthologies suggest that 9/11 has given special relevance to accumulating city writing. Each of these books offers an implicit or explicit theory about literature's ability to preserve and reconstruct New York in the face of tremendous loss. Generic convention necessitates the incorporation of absence into such meaning-making: every anthology and every anthologist negotiates the relationship between what is present and what is missing. By reading closely the declarative paratexts—including prefaces, forewords, and other moments of editorial metacognition—and the silent but equally powerful canonical choices of several different post-9/11 poetry anthologies, I would like to suggest the ways the anthology's necessary formal incorporation of absence and presence, rather than its plurivocality alone, connects collections of New York's literature to the discourse of memorialization and rebuilding at the site of the World Trade Center.

Popular poetry anthologies in Victorian England had titles like *The Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics* and *A Thousand and One Gems of English Poetry*. During this period, “the cultural value of poetry was frequently expressed in metaphors of accumulation and wealth” (Houston 365). Post-9/11 anthologies of New York writing endorse this sentiment and also send a message about the value of accumulating their regional literature. The message is that, gathered from various sources, writing—and poetry especially—has the power, if only belatedly, to rebuild what was lost.¹ The editorial and production choices of the first edition of *Poetry After 9/11*, for example, strongly suggest this. The book's cover image of the Lower Manhattan skyline includes the Twin Towers, and after the foreword and introduction, a single poem appears as a frontispiece before the bastard title page: David Lehman's “The World Trade Center.” Through its title alone, Lehman's poem begins to give back the Towers—even if, as he writes, “I never liked the World Trade Center. When it went up I talked it

¹ Cf. Keniston: “Poetry suddenly seemed crucial to the national experience of processing the attacks. . . . Poetry, including the kind of occasional and politically motivated poetry that may earlier have seemed aesthetically suspect, offered a crucial intervention in a national dialogue widely perceived as lacking reflection and temperance” (659).

down / As did many other New Yorkers” (1–3). The speaker describes how, after the first World Trade Center attacks in February 1993, his “whole attitude toward the World Trade Center / Changed overnight” (16–17). The poem’s concluding lines draw us into a stunning experience of vision:

. . . I began to like the way
 It comes into view as you reach Sixth Avenue
 From any side street, the way the tops
 Of the towers dissolve into the white skies
 In the east when you cross the Hudson
 Into the city across the George Washington Bridge. (17–22)

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For the editors of *Poetry After 9/11* to take this poem as prefatory material, with its declarative title and its means of placing us in the presence of the Towers, is a defiant statement of rebuilding. The Towers “dissolve into the white skies,” but the poem and those it foregrounds in the anthology reveal them. Pre-9/11 view is translated into post-9/11 reconstruction.

Manhattan Sonnet, an anthology of contemporary Indonesian prose and poetry in English translation, seeks to project a double solidarity in response to 9/11—not only around Indonesian national literature, but around the Indonesian experience in New York City. In her foreword, Adila Suwarmo describes why the Lontar Foundation put together the short anthology: “Because we believe that words can heal and that true peace will only be found through communication we offer this book as salve for the wounds of that wonderful city” (viii). The Towers no longer stand, but “communication” is present in the form of writing. In Suwarmo’s therapeutic logic, the more utterances the book can gather, the more it can heal, and the anthology is recuperative partly because its writings can be “put together.”

Perhaps the most frequently lamented aspect of the composite literary anthology is its tendency to promote browsing—extensive rather than intensive reading. As Barbara Benedict has argued in an eighteenth-century context, the practice of extensive reading is tied to the anthology’s perpetuation of literary consumerism. By collecting a variety of literature, anthologies heighten the sense that it is a commodity readers can skip over at will. According to Benedict, eighteenth-century anthologies and miscellanies also

establish the concept of contemporary “taste” itself by presenting in one book works from many current authors . . . [S]pecializing in fresh, topical publications, literary anthologies thus exploit opportunities of print by representing social power to the reader as the mastery of current literary culture. (211)

While they might encourage skipping and dipping, anthologies also make big promises. Benedict's link between topical publication and lexical mastery is useful for thinking about the New York literary anthology, because the topos of New York itself is the big promise of these books. Each imagines and names the city differently: "Manhattan," "New York," or "the city." *Poetry After 9/11* offers an extremely specific, historically rooted vision of place; along with *Manhattan Sonnet*, it presents exclusively living authors. Many of its poems locate themselves in Manhattan, on 9/11. In contrast, Elizabeth Schmidt's *Poems of New York*, Stephen Wolf's *I Speak of the City*, and Phillip Lopate's *Writing New York* are diachronic. Their motivations are not particularly political—unlike *Manhattan Sonnet*, which is dedicated to "the innocent victims of terrorism the world over"—and they include texts about 9/11 as part of a broader continuum of representations of New York. Schmidt's first inclusion is Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." *I Speak of the City* begins with a poem in translation from Dutch, Jacob Steendam's "The Complaint of New Amsterdam to its Mother." Lopate opens with excerpts from Washington Irving's *A History of New York*, claiming in a headnote that the history's "ironic, disenchanting voice set the tone for much New York literature to come" (Lopate 1). An anthology that opens with Whitman, Steendam, or Irving obviously has a different aura from a collection of contemporary voices. Diachronic New York anthologies draw attention to a tradition of representation, whereas one subtext of *Poetry After 9/11* is the contemporary, as evidenced in the poets' biographies in the book's back matter: "She lives in the East Village"; "He lives six blocks from the site of the World Trade Center" (Johnson and Merians 108). Yet through the inclusion of writers living or dead, through slenderness or weightiness, these anthologies link the collection of literary representations to a kind of mastery over New York.

They often do so by remarking on the preserving power of the literature they collect. Stephen Wolf introduces *I Speak of the City* by calling it "a testament to the city's spirit, preserved and newly created in the most ennobling expression of the human heart" (xxxix). In Wolf's view, it is implied, the "city's spirit" would exist without written expression, but it would not be lasting: "*Preserving what has vanished*, poems speak from Ellis Island . . . atop a skyscraper's thrilling observation deck and deep in teeming tenements, or sidewalks, in taxis . . ." (xxx, emphasis added). In the foreword to *Poems of New York*, Elizabeth Schmidt also argues for poetry as a means of temporary mastery over the changing city. More than Wolf, Schmidt dwells on 9/11: she describes the way she personally witnessed the fall of the Twin Towers, and she names this the impetus for her collection, "New York continually reminds us that time passes.

New buildings go up and old ones come down” (Schmidt 20). But in this sometimes violently changing urban environment, poetry provides constancy: “Poets who have written about New York are masters at preserving, and allowing us to cherish, moments of life in this theater of chance and change” (20). Schmidt and Wolf stop just short of declaring that anthologists, too, are “masters at preserving.” Poems preserve; anthologists collect these objects of preservation.

Schmidt’s and Wolf’s anthologies make New York navigable. Both books—the slender, guidebook-like *I Speak of the City* and the pocket-sized *Poems of New York*, with its place-keeping ribbon—are eminently portable. Both frequently feature only one poem (and at most three) by a given poet. The city might be a “theater of chance and change,” but organizing its literary representations allows us to control our place in it. If the city is ephemeral, its poems can be permanent. To anthologize them is to assert mastery over an unstable, vulnerable environment, a city in which 9/11 could occur; or, as Johnson and Merians put it, “[t]he ashes have blown away; the poems have not” (x). In their paratexts and in the production choices that resulted in books-as-objects, Wolf’s and Schmidt’s works similarly endorse the argument that the anthology performs the work of the poem on a larger scale. Poems preserve; anthologies encompass and organize. They allow not only readerly mastery over current literary culture but mastery over death.

Phillip Lopate’s later, larger, transgeneric, and diachronic anthology *Writing New York* (2008) also supports this ideology. When Lopate discusses 9/11 in a postscript, he notes that it was not the first large-scale catastrophe to cause radical change to the New York cityscape. This view matches the anthology’s broad scope: among so many city narratives, 9/11 appears as part of a continuum, not an all-defining event. Yet Lopate is highly aware of his publication’s context. He notes the changes in the cityscape since the anthology’s first edition, and the literary response to those changes; the first such change he names is the terrorist attack of September 11. Lopate addresses the same issue that the more explicitly 9/11-motivated anthologists do, namely what it means to write about the city and what it means to anthologize such writing.

On this subject, his thoughts echo the framing remarks of *Poetry After 9/11*: the ashes have blown away, but the poems have not. Agreeing with Robert Moses that “New York is just too big, too complex to be served by any one writer,” Lopate hypothesizes that “the only way to undertake a literary portrait of the city would be piece by piece, through a full-scale anthology of the best New York writing” (xvii). Then he declares: “This volume attempts such a literary record” (xvii). For Lopate, a single writer

cannot preserve the whole city, but multiple writers can approximate this task; the paucity of writing on the subject, not the tension implicit in the very idea of creating a comprehensive literary record, is the main problem of representing New York. If New York is big and variable, anthologize bigger. While he acknowledges what he has had to leave out, Lopate presents *Writing New York* as functioning on the theory of a treasury: a little is good, a lot is better.

In other contexts, critics have addressed a constellation of problems around anthologies' omissions, selections, and absences. Alan Golding has described Federalist editor Elihu Hubbard Smith's various exclusions and "silent criticism" at work in the 1793 anthology *American Poems* (Golding 286). Jed Rasula has suggested a conspiracy in poetry anthologies of the 1990s to silence the Language poets. Rasula asks, "Are we witness to an academic delusion? Or is there a conspiracy on the part of anthologists and publishers to deny the existence of Language poetry?" (Rasula 262). Without editorial acknowledgement, omissions provoke readerly anger, and this coercive yet silent form of criticism causes even the selected writers to be skeptical of inclusion. The poet David Antin's remark that "[a]nthologies are to poets as the zoo is to animals" underscores the ambiguity with which anthologies are fraught (qtd. in Price 2). They are totalizing, conservative, and authoritative: we see this in everything from canon-determining Norton volumes to a multi-media project like Capitol Records' 1995–96 *The Beatles Anthology* that comprised three double-CD box sets with flubbed takes and rare versions of songs, thus preserving a rich recording backstory. At the same time, anthologies are fragmentary and selective. There is more to Walt Whitman than "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"; anthologies featuring only "The Day Lady Died" give readers only part of a portrait of Frank O'Hara. Behind each choice lies an editorial assumption about which parts can stand for the whole—more fundamentally, an assumption that parts can stand for the whole. Without editorial acknowledgement and readerly understanding of these assumptions, anthologies risk magnifying a single performance into an entire literary-historical narrative.

As we can learn from scholarship like Rasula's and Golding's, which investigates how the silences of anthologies speak, the notion that collecting regional texts is purely conservative is disingenuous—that "piece by piece," in Phillip Lopate's phrase, writing can eventually cover all of the changed, changing city of New York. At the same time as they rally diverse poets around a single city, the anthologies I have mentioned curtail the length of each entry. One or two poems per poet, ten or twenty pages of prose: these accumulative bodies are populated with absence. Destined to contain gaps, at once heteroglossic and omissive, anthologies are themselves only

part of a topic they can never fully encompass. In collections about New York, just as in collections of national literature, that topic—"Manhattan," "New York," or "the city"—is evasive and mutable. An evolving built environment, a space of living crowds, New York is always enfolding disintegration and death. Before, on, and after 9/11, this is the paradox of its community-making.

If we want to make the comparison between the collecting city and the collecting volume, then, perhaps this is the basis on which to do so: like the five-borough city, the anthology is an amalgamation, but one that subsists on absence. Leaving out poems to make a collection is apt for a city in which "something missing" has become a recognizable, even definitive, part of the total skyline: an absence that seems to persist even as the Freedom Tower has risen to completion.² Both New York and its literary collections are mosaics of presence and loss.

In January 2004, a jury voted Michael Arad and Peter Walker's "Reflecting Absence" the winning design in the World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition. Arad and Walker's memorial is part of Studio Daniel Libeskind's "Memory Foundations," the master plan for the entire complex. "Reflecting Absence" features two recessed pools in the footprints of the twin towers, and a plaza with rows and clusters of trees. Visitors gradually descend beneath this plaza, eventually standing behind a thin waterfall, facing out at another pool circumscribed by the victims' names. The architects described the memorial plaza as "a mediating space" belonging both to the city and to the memorial. In their words,

[l]ocated at street level to allow for its integration into the fabric of the city, the plaza encourages the use of this space by New Yorkers on a daily basis. The memorial grounds will not be isolated from the rest of the city; they will be a living part of it. (qtd. in Young 158)

Walker and Arad address the difficult double purpose of memorialization: to preserve a sense of loss, but also to put something in its place.

This dynamic between preservation and progress came up frequently during initial discussions of site planning, and in public forums held by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation. James Young, a member of the jury that chose "Reflecting Absence," describes the city's "gridlock of competing agendas" during this time: commemoration of the dead, and

² David Lehman captures this disorienting sensation of present absence in the last lines of "9/14/01": "we've taken this hit, and in case you forget / all you have to do is / look up and it's not there" (20–23).

the need for renewal and economic recovery (Young 144). After the city had chosen Libeskind's "Memory Foundations," the jury for the following memorial competition continued to face the difficult question of what was to be remembered, and how. In the jury's opinion, Arad and Walker best met the different agendas set forth for the memorial contestants. As the jury wrote in its final decision, "[n]ot only does this memorial creatively address its mandate to preserve the footprints, recognize individual victims, and provide access to bedrock, it also seamlessly reconnects this site to the fabric of its urban community" (qtd. in Young 159).

The literal architecture of "Reflecting Absence" and the literary architecture of the New York anthology address versions of the same questions: what is to be represented here and how? How can we read absence, and how should we fill it? "Reflecting Absence" cannot replace the Twin Towers, but instead repeats their narrative in a changed cityscape. It asks us to begin to fathom that change; to take with us the idea of the void as we reconnect "to the fabric of . . . urban community." In the same way, post-9/11 literary anthologies of New York take pride in the positive capability of their assembled representations; but at the same time, the space within and between entries reminds us that these anthologies ultimately send us back out into the mutable New York, literal and literary, from which their own representations are drawn.

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