CHAPTER 6

Contemporary American Poetry, Literary Tradition, and the Multitude

It is almost impossible to establish coherent narratives when confronted with the infinitely diverse field of contemporary American poetry. One influential attempt to categorize this field has been to divide contemporary poetry into two schools. Hank Lazer argues that American poetry today falls primarily into two “opposing poetries”: an experimental, avant-garde poetry—most prominently that of the language school—and the poetic mainstream, which he criticizes for its “frequent misidentification of poetry with self-expression” (Opposing Poetries: Issues 1). While for Lazer, experimental, language-oriented poetry constitutes “innovative, and thus truly revolutionary or transgressive, contemporary writing” (Opposing Poetries: Readings 86), Jennifer Ashton claims that “lyric and antilyric poetries alike have remained committed to the liberal (and now neoliberal) value of self-expression” (219), and that, in fact, strikingly absent are truly transgressive forms of poetry that “resist the human capital model (and with it the omnipresence of self-expressivity in the lyric)” (229).¹

As convincing as these narratives are as an explanation for various contemporary poetries, they fall short of accounting for an oppositional poetics which, whether emerging in an academic or extra-academic context, affiliates itself with, and defines its imagination through emergent social and political movements. The poets discussed in this chapter identify sites of resistance in which the production of a global poetic subjectivity in opposition to the neoliberal consensus occurs or can potentially occur. In this chapter I consider Mark Nowak’s documentary poem Coal Mountain Elementary (2009), Anne Waldman’s experimental Iovis-trilogy
the melodic hardcore band Strike Anywhere’s adaptation of the revolutionary Romantic tradition as poetic projects that rewrite the cultural and social movements of the past into the imagination of a future global movement. Nowak’s poem is modeled on Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead”; Waldman’s epic poem incorporates the Beat tradition with elements that can also be found in language poetry; and Strike Anywhere’s rhetoric as well as their explicit references to Percy Bysshe Shelley develop a contemporary revolutionary Romanticism. In order to imagine a collective poetic subjectivity that anticipates a new global social movement, all of these poets define their projects by reconsidering historical periods in which poetic expression was connected to political activism and therefore fulfilled a social function.

These poets’ and lyricists’ vision of global solidarity engages particular areas of oppression and resistance in the hope for a larger coalition. In order to understand the poetics of global solidarity that drives the projects of Mark Nowak (b.1964), Anne Waldman (b.1945), and hardcore punk band Strike Anywhere (founded in 1999), it is useful to refer to the most influential attempt to conceptualize new forms of oppositional movements, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s idea of the multitude. For Hardt and Negri, the imperial order will inevitably produce new forms of resistance, all of them partaking of the multitude. While the multitude is “a class concept” (Multitude 103), political activism is no longer organized by unions or political parties, but rather emerges in shifting, often strategic coalitions. Since exploitation no longer occurs only at the level of the working classes but extends to immaterial labor, the multitude is potentially constituted by all those “who are inserted in the mechanisms of social production regardless of social order or property” and thus capable of forming “a radically, plural and open body politic” (Commonwealth 39–40). If viewed critically, such an idea can become an enabling utopian horizon. As Hardt and Negri state in Commonwealth, the most important of their three volumes, “[t]he multitude-form is not a magic key that opens all door, but it does pose adequately a real political problem and posits as the model for addressing it an open set of social singularities that are autonomous and equal, capable together, by articulating their actions on parallel paths in a horizontal network, of transforming society” (111).

Importantly, Hardt and Negri argue that the conflict between those in power and the multitude “should be understood in terms of not only wealth and poverty but also and more significantly the forms of subjectivity produced” (Commonwealth 39). Global capitalism has successfully created a collective subjectivity that is based both on a sense of class solidarity from above and an exclusionary, competitive individualism that seeks to rule out