

KATHY GOODKIN

Review of *Hick Poetics*

Hick Poetics: An Anthology of Contemporary Rural American Poetry, eds. Shelley Taylor and Abraham Smith. Jackson, Wyoming: Lost Roads Press, 2015.

Approaching *Hick Poetics*, I wondered: must critical discourse about poetry written by rural Americans and of rural America be rooted in critical discourse about the pastoral? Once we read the subtitle, can we avoid reading *Hick Poetics* as belonging to this lineage or—as the pastoral isn't monolithic—these lineages? In light of this question, it's logical to consider whether *Hick Poetics* should be reviewed in conversation with another relatively recent anthology, *The Arcadia Project* (Ahsahta Press, 2012), a comprehensive collection of postmodern pastoral work. G.C. Waldrep, one of *The Arcadia Project*'s editors, is also a contributor to *Hick Poetics*. He writes elegantly in the introduction to his work in *Hick Poetics* of the attempt to write poems at the intersection of his "experience of 'the liminal countryside'" and "the life of the imagination," which might well also describe postmodern pastoral concerns.

As I read, however, I determined that the pastoral is only one lens through which to read this wonderfully diverse collection, and a lens that need not be limited by antiseptic academic vocabulary. In his introduction to the book, editor Abraham Smith writes of "theocritus pissing on virgil and virgil pissing on spenser," and so on. This articulation offers us one understanding of hick poetics: a poetics that consciously extends from multiple traditions at once, both colloquial and literary. A poetics that culls what it wants or needs equally from all registers, that privileges the representation of primary experience, that presents *hick* as a dynamic identity category. These poems (often) grapple with the stigma of regionalism, sometimes self-consciously acknowledging and reinventing the conventions of multiple traditions, sometimes eschewing them.

Many of the forty-one poets in the anthology bear out this interpretation of hick poetics. As one example, Ada Limón's "Field Bling" is a poem that combines humor and vernacular language with a heart-

stopping volta to utterly disarm the reader. In the establishing shot, the speaker walks "to the edge / of the road and [stares] / at all the fireflies." The poem continues:

I call them,
field bling.
I call them,
fancy creepies.
It's been a long time
since I've wanted to die,

The turn from the lighthearted "field bling" and "fancy creepies" to "It's been a long time / since I've wanted to die" is arresting. Despite the short line length and the increased number of lines, the way the poem relies on the volta makes me read it as a sonnet. Limón combines this convention with a sharp but informal inventiveness to surprise the reader, effectively fusing the best of several traditions and modes.

Any examination of *Hick Poetics* also likely requires addressing the eponymous conceit. The word *hick* is apt to be a sticking point for some readers. The editors' introductions acknowledge the issue. Regardless, the conceit does provoke several questions: how does the anthology define the often-derogatory *hick*? While the subtitle clarifies "contemporary rural Americ[a]" as the location of the poets and/or poems within, common use doesn't designate all rural Americans as *hicks*. Is this anthology an attempt to reclaim the pejorative? (Editor Abraham Smith writes that it is.) How then should the reader read for the hick-ness (hickitude?) of these poems or poets? And how is the reader positioned? If readers don't self-identify as hicks, do we become voyeurs? Are we exoticizing the hick-ish other? Are we reading to be titillated, to point classist fingers and marvel?

Here again, the anthology succeeds in its multiplicity. It refuses to offer a unified representation of *hick*, which would only exacerbate the potential for stereotype, and limit the ways we can read across the poems. By multiple metrics, these hick poets are a diverse bunch. They represent identity along many lines: gender, culture, race, sexuality, regional affiliation, et al. In terms of poetics, they write long lines, short lines, stanzas, stichic poems, and prose poems. Additionally, established writers like Juan Felipe Herrera, Juliana Spahr, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Jim Harrison (among many others) share the space with emerging poets. The egalitarian approach allows us to mostly avoid the issue of the readers' positioning.

This doesn't mean that the collection doesn't address the potential problem of othering that comes with loaded designations like *hick*. In their introductions, several poets express the difficulty of writing about hick poetics without falling into stereotype. Rather than avoid the challenge, however, many of the poets play with it consciously. Some of the poets' introductions, such as Danielle Pafunda's "Dilettante Hick," examine identifiable hick tropes as they frame their work. Pafunda writes "This is a story of whiteness. It's largely hetero and there's class conflict, but everyone's pro-union."

Others blend "hick" tropes with diverse idioms. Gillian Conoley's "I am writing an article: Johnny Cash" juxtaposes content drawn from varying registers of Americana with the "who what where when how" conventions of Journalism 101:

did you become a long pendulous cipher listing leanwards out
the door

with one hand turned to dusk, the other down, free

pine

trees.

pretty nightgown to sleep beside. daybreak's

got film to track, a when where to walk out

of, to bring one's instrument and not repeat

Conoley's hick poetics challenge the potential for caricature by fusing the iconography of the Bible Belt (the poem is nominally about Johnny Cash, and also includes the line "Christ newly staked and writing / in the heart") with the metapoetic considerations of how to render time, events, and sensations on the page. The poem makes references as varied as Mallarmé and the American folk song "Factory Girl."

Ultimately, the diversity of these poems and poetics resist the trap of spectating. There is enough range for almost any reader to participate in the work. We are encouraged to consider the multiple modes and lineages of the poems, and to appreciate their individual textures, too. If, as editor Shelley Taylor writes, hick poetics are meant to "[take] back this idea of the pastoral—ours to begin with anyhow—," the "us" represented by *Hick Poetics* is an extraordinarily inclusive one.