

Juliana Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity*

Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001. 224 pp. \$49.95 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

Juliana Spahr begins her book with epigraphs—many more appear at the start of each of the four chapters, and within the chapters, each one structured in multiple sections—from two nineteenth-century books, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). [93] *Everybody's Autonomy* addresses itself exclusively to twentieth-century texts, but Spahr begins with these epigraphs, it would seem, because the scenes they describe complement and contrast the central image of her book, one on the cover and again in the chapter on Gertrude Stein: a photo of Stein in Virginia in 1935, during her American lecture tour, completely surrounded by students who have so thickly cloaked Stein that the author's presence merely implies itself. As Spahr reads it, this image represents the writer's relationship with her readers—she is one with them—and the idea that reading happens collectively. The opening epigraphs also have people reading together, but in groups of only two or three. In the first epigraph, Frankenstein's monster tells of his formative moment of language acquisition, as an eavesdropper (the primary student is an "Arabian" woman, Safie). After learning to read, the monster realizes that he was different from all people and was therefore totally alone. Language acquisition threatens to alienate Douglass too: he records his being taught by his mistress to read, and his being told then that reading would ultimately leave him discontent, unhappy with his lot in life.

In *Everybody's Autonomy*, Spahr espouses a series of texts by American writers—women writers, with one exception—that she argues are designed not to leave readers feeling alone, especially marginalized ones: black slaves, freaks, and women. Books by Stein, Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, Harryette Mullen and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha are inclusive, she says, involving readers in the production of meaning; these texts encourage collective reading, as in a classroom, so that the experience of reading them is a shared one. Spahr claims that what is crucial about reading is "its role in community formation" (59). Model settings are the classroom, and the poetry reading. Throughout her book Spahr describes the positive experiences she has had teaching these books; she offers "student evidence" (43), and discusses strategies for how students can actively participate in close readings. The books discussed here are all known as "difficult," and have been passed over by many university professors as too complex for undergraduate students. Spahr points out, though, that "it is not unusual for non-traditional forms to be called 'complex' because they are different or

unusual, and then, in contrast, for traditional forms to be read as mimetic of thought patterns and thus easily understood” (143). A *different* language construction should not automatically suggest that it is (too) [94] “complex” for the young reader. Thus Spahr’s emphasis on the necessity of changing normative “thought patterns,” which depend on what and how you read.

The chapter on Mullen focuses on her struggle to ignore the voice that says she could be a black poet or an innovative poet, but not both. The former would use black speech rhythms, and include relatively straightforward descriptions of what it means to be a black woman in America; while the latter’s language is intertextual, and the writer’s identity is unstable, shifting. Mullen does both: she addresses race issues, even as she challenges readers with bricolage, and samplings from other texts—techniques that point, says Spahr, “to how meaning is tied to community and is necessarily collective. The creative economy here emphasizes talking differently through reuse and recombination” (103). In the end, Mullen wants her work to attract a diverse audience, both in terms of race and aesthetics. This chapter and the one on the Korean-American Cha most explicitly question the idea that reading leaves people self-conscious and aware of social problems but without the power to change them. During Spahr’s reading of Cha’s *DICTEE* (1982), she notes that just as a postcolonial writer attempts to dislodge “externally imposed ideas and ideologies, so Cha wants to dislodge dominant and externally imposed methods of reading” (125-126). *DICTEE* unsettles normal reading practices by mixing genres (poetry, letters, narrative prose, lists, photos, diagrams) and languages (English, French, Korean, Chinese). Readers must move through the text accepting that much—if not all—of it will resist being assimilated into a single “communication system” (140).

Everybody’s Autonomy is a book on Stein and four post-1970s American poets in the Stein tradition. There exist many versions of “Gertrude Stein”: the Cubist, the celebrity, the woman, the Jew, the lesbian, and the immigrant. Spahr chooses the last one in that list, arguing that Stein writes from an immigrant perspective, like Cha. German was Stein’s first language; her family was a part of the huge immigrant population from Europe that had relocated to the U.S. by 1900. For contemporary writers, says Spahr, Stein’s importance stems from her insistence that the English language had become, by the early twentieth century, both American and polyracial. Stein uses “alternate grammars” (45) that marginalized readers—especially those for whom English is a second language—respond well to because such grammatical (mis)usage dramatizes the experience [95] of using English differently, and yet authoritatively. Stein also transforms the autobiography genre. Her *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937)—as Hejinian’s *My Life* (1987) will do later—represents the individual as a social entity. Hejinian’s and Andrews’s work should, in fact, be read as “the literary translation

of the photograph” (78) of Stein in the crowd of students. In the chapter on Hejinian and Andrews (both “Language” poets) Spahr writes at length on their use of a “social language”; Language writing, Spahr asserts, “does focus on the human, but in a social context (rather than an individualistic one)” (78).

Spahr has written *Everybody's Autonomy* in a lucid and engaging style, which serves the fact of its being a polemic well. Too often, however, she forces her reader to suffer through observations on what is “especially troubling” (145) to her about certain older literary texts and contemporary criticism. Spahr’s comments move from the “undeniably racially troubling” (21) to “the difficult and ugly gender politics” (96). She engages with these texts, and obviously would never exclude them from syllabi because of their “troubling” or “ugly” aspects, but her affinity with writing “characterized by a utopian dogmatism” (54) does lead me sometimes to feel that her readings summarize and judge too quickly. As well, I question her claim, through Stein, “that it is the role of literature to demonstrate tolerance and respect for those moments” (47) when people misread one another. Spahr sticks too closely to this narrow definition of literature’s “purpose.” And I think more evidence needs to be brought forward in support of her intriguing contention that ESL readers will respond enthusiastically to “polylingual grammars” (47).

Polemical writing should be controversial, though, and in this regard the book ultimately succeeds by asking important questions about standardized reading practices in American universities, and especially when it comes to poetry. At one point Spahr mentions Andrews’s 1975 dissertation on the Vietnam war, and makes a connection between that work, Language writing, and (implicitly) her own book: “I wish to argue that as Andrews points out the claims that get made in the name of the public [that it supported the Vietnam war], so much language writing contests the claims that get made in the name of the reader” (75). Because Spahr begins with the idea that reading has a profound effect on identity, both individually and collectively, she would like the “narrowly [96] conceived values of beauty or lyricism [to be] replaced by the values of connection and generative thinking” (59) when poetry gets evaluated and taught. Reading then may leave you discontent, but not alone.

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