

## *On Kontemporary AmeriKan Poetry*<sup>1</sup>

Another Tuesday – or maybe Thursday, some unspoken, poetic alignment of time and chance that tends to make it so creative writing courses are held on the T days – and you’re watching in on a discussion of John Murillo’s 2020 *Kontemporary AmeriKan Poetry* by a group of individuals who call themselves poets. You just call yourself you. Yet it’s the best poetry collection you’ve read in a while, an instant favorite, and you spend minutes counting syllables and allowing the words to color an internal setting. Hoping you could write like *that* one day, then damming yourself that you do because if all of yous wrote like Murillo or Scott-Heron or Hughes, who’d write like you? *There’s something to be said about the line break on page 8; Murillo seems to place weight on the opposite syllable of each noun – it shan’t go unfound how he mirrors his oppression through his use of sound.* Oh- really? Cool. You just think he’s grown up on rap – so did you. Which is why, in your own work, you’ve had to stop yourself from rhyming every other line; you don’t have permission to keep time like a one-man 90’s group. Anyway, you let their words soothe themselves, walking back in reeking of reefer, giving meaning to words like pontificate. Trying to do something useful, you’ve spent the hour rereading poems from the collection while they conversate. But all you hear is silence – save for the “what do you think about the state of contemporary American poetry” (Murillo 55), and suddenly you’re within the poem – thinking why its tale is the title of the collection. The collection, whose emotional center is a rule-breaking sonnet crown inspired by the shooting of two police officers in New York, in some Y2K year you can’t recall, by Ishmael Brinsley. The collection is built on challenging expectations and intentional attention to the deconstruction of what one says versus what one is. Why is this scene of a pompous parade of poets the one that takes the cake? Pontificate on that.

Anyway, you’re glad Murillo asked about the state of contemporary American poetry; yous got loads to say. But how? Sitting, with the blank space existing just to be the talk that the clock ticks to, you sit through this, and some chicken scratch you wrote from a previous reading ties it all in. In the titular poem on page 55, Murillo never actually answers the question – but neither have

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<sup>1</sup> Murillo, John. *Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry*. Four Way Books, 2020.

you. Or *have you*? You'll imbue this with grandeur that's unnecessary for a bit (well, the talent in the collection has earned it, but never mind that bit); Murillo argues that the state of contemporary American poetry is not about poetry at all. BOOM! Wait, did those talking heads come to that conclusion too? You shake away the thought; time to lock in.

In the poem, Murillo builds a scene of poets discussing awards and who's winning what and literary industry politics and everything except actual poetry. Wait, this is multi-layered: not only does Murillo himself never actually comment on the state of contemporary American poetry (acronym needed: SOCAP) outside the narrative, but the characters inside the narrative never do as well. Now it's heka obvious. You betcha it's not all that special having *got* this. Enough rambling; you've established that through abstaining from answering the question on SOCAP, Murillo answers the question on SOCAP. That is, he believes (as do you) that the poetry-literary sphere is much too commercial now, with more emphasis on notoriety and the CV than the pen. See also how he critiques this through lines 28-38. These ten lines relay what's on the telly while the poets are filling their bellies with deep chortles of bs jelly. Yes, he brings the atrocities of the world into the literary sphere and subtly condemns said sphere for its complacency on these matters. While "another / boy shot dead and black in some city" and "a Yemeni woman is burning / splashed with acid for loving who / she chooses" (Murillo 55), these poets – who some argue have a chance at lifting weight for political change through their words – are sitting in a dive bar "crowded around / an eight-top to order wings, shots, / and whatnot" (Murillo 55). And there's time and chance again because now you hear the professor saying something about how poets know the answers but don't fix the issue. How a poet sees someone hungry then writes about hunger. Maybe you're on the right path then.

Again, though, why is this the title piece? Well, just call Murillo and ask him; remember, you're buddies. No, but, seriously, other than to bring attention to the SOCAP, you'd take it a step further and say as a response to the chitter chatter the poets spat across the table in that dusky, dusty dive bar, Murillo spat this in their face. BOOM! An entire collection of contemporary American poetry not written for the notoriety. It is as if, as another response to their inquiry on the SOCAP, he gives them contemporary American poetry. *This is what you wanted? Well, here you have it.* You then start to make the connection between this titular piece and the whole of the

collection – specifically, how Murillo bends the rules and, in doing so, furthers the SOCAP. For example, in many pieces, Murillo creates parameters (sometimes simply through the titles), yet in the poem, Murillo steers away from those boundaries. You’ve bled the Contemporary American Poetry example on page 55 dry, so you move on to other things. Such as on page 67 in On Prosody, which, despite the title, is noticeably lacking in the sound and rhythm you’d find in a prosodic poem. Or, in the heroic crown of sonnets, where each sonnet fails to begin with the last line of the preceding sonnet and the crown of the sonnet, the last hoorah scene, fails to repeat the first lines of the 14 preceding sonnets precisely as they are. You hear that? Class is ending. The silence is less deafening as their words creep back in. You internally wrap it all up, leaving on this: Contemporary American Poetry, as the title poem, establishes the need for the collection Kontemporary AmeriKan Poetry and others who take similar risks and apply similar skills. The collection itself combats the meaningless aspects of the poetry industry today by giving the poets in the Contemporary American Poetry poem a collection that is fresh and current. A collection that does not succumb to the poetic rules of old but instead breaks down barriers. A collection that is flexible in form, meter, and rhyme, pulling from hip-hop culture, history, and current events alike. And is that in itself not what contemporary poetry is?