

In the Room of Never Grieve: New and Selected Poems, 1985-2003.
(companion audio cd included)
Anne Waldman
Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2003
\$30.00

Manatee/Humanity.
Anne Waldman
New York: Penguin, 2009.
\$18.00

Keeping the World Safe for Poetry

Reviewed by Todd Nathan Thorpe

It's tempting to direct the reader to the prefaces to *In the Room of Never Grieve* and *Manatee/Humanity* in lieu of providing a review since Anne Waldman's own lyrical, cogent prose clearly introduces the two books' intellectual, social, and spiritual ambitions. Both volumes are marked by a sense of worldly crisis and personal responsibility and each in its own way records an ongoing poetic engagement with the world.

Waldman's social activism cannot be separated from her poetry and her poetry is always found in community with others, whether poets, monks, musicians, or animals. As a poet who uses her "adamantine speech" to combat the mendacity of an increasingly corrupt and shallow public language, Waldman in the preface to *In the Room of Never Grieve* describes her poetry as a drive toward emancipation: "To reclaim the imagination, to free our language from the stench of manipulation, my voices tell me. Examine how the mind moves in language that seeks to create alternative ways to live, to survive, and to sing. These are the tasks, the disciplines" (i). This volume is the second new and selected collection that Waldman has published. The first, *Helping the Dreamer: New and Selected Poems, 1966-1988* (Coffee House 1989), remains a valuable book, and while both it and *In the Room of Never Grieve* excerpt poems from *Fast Speaking Woman* and *Skin Meat Bones*, they don't overlap. *In the Room* also includes two unpublished collections.

In the Room advances technologically over the previous volume including a cd of dynamic poetic performances in which Waldman collaborates with her son, Ambrose Bye, and other musicians. Bye's musical "soundscapes" amplify Waldman's strong poetic lyricism, producing a compelling aural experience. The cd, entitled "In the Room of Never Grieve," isn't simply a selection of readings, but rather, as Waldman describes it, "an overall serial composition." On the cd, Waldman's beautiful voice frequently leaps into song and explores language's emotional hues from anger to wry delight. It is a wonderful component of the book.

The single word that best emblemizes *In the Room* is *responsibility*. Waldman's social ambitions for her poetry require that her poetic language respond with love, fury, compassion, contempt even, but above all with a passionate acuity to the challenges faced by the planet's increasingly precarious inhabitants, to the lies told by the powerful and venal, and especially to the possibility for claiming a better world. Waldman describes her selection process in the preface as being motivated by "a sense of urgency," writing that she "wanted the most dynamic, most feminist, most oral/public interventions that include efficacious possibility." Her poems are frequently exhortations, as for example in "Science Times" where she writes:

Take up the battle for civilization, in ruins
 How death always surrounds you & new ploys for war
 Release my commando heart on this purblind delusion
 Release any intelligence you, I, we can on whomever
 you are talking to, I won't take sides but this
 maze of shadowy reasoning like Totalitarianism
 something to crash out of, blaze forth from,
 know what you're talking about, circle the enemy
 with compassion, pity the most evil, cultivate your
 bursting heart, free from homespun ropes, these thoughts (31)

The hortatory qualities of some of the selections seem to have the unhappy consequence of obscuring Waldman's extraordinary poetic tenderness and humor. For example, "Lines to a Celebrated Friend" from *Fast Speaking Woman* is not included, and it shows a gentle, almost teasing side to Waldman's poetry. She chides her friend Allen Ginsberg for his many appetites and his reluctance to say no to other people, to fame, and for not properly taking care of himself. "I love you in business, in exertion, in temperament, / in reconciliation, in gentleness," she writes, only to conclude, "For heaven's sakes Allen, pull up those baggy pants" (51). The poem's tone isn't at all urgent, even as it urges her friend to take a deep breath.

Perhaps I'm wrong about this quibble, given that *In the Room* includes such a poem as "Edwin Denby Speaking After Seeing a Show by the Artist Jane Freilicher, Spring 1983":

Her color is
 so marvelous
 Like cooking,
 it leaves
 a wonderful flavor
 in my mouth
 in my soul, my eyes. (61)

Or one could turn to "If Bernadette Mayer Were a Car," a prose-poem homage: "Bernadette Mayer takes noble risks in living writing. [...] Bernadette Mayer is a kind grammar" (344). These poems can feel like oases of beauty in a volume where a poem

such as “War Crime” articulates the emotional tenor: “*World askew. She arrives home to charnel ground zero, ancestral dwelling cordoned off, you need identity papers to get through*” (italics in original 443). As Waldman says, “*In the Room of Never Grieve* is very elegiac in tone” and in some ways this quality doesn’t do justice to her poetry’s full emotional range.

In the Room, however, does showcase Waldman’s formal versatility, with prose poems, anaphoric chants, open-field, and single-column, Williamesque forms all on display. The book also conveys a strong idea of the value of artistic collaboration for Waldman, a fine example of which are Jane Dalrymple-Hollo’s illustrations for “Go Figure.” Mina Loy provides the epigraph for “Go Figure” (“*Wounding our world with words...*”) just as she does for the book’s first poem, “She—Who—Must—Explicate”: “*There is no Space or Time / Only intensity. / And tame things / Have no immensity.*”

Manatee/Humanity could well have opened with this last epigraph of Loy’s, though it offers six of its own, ranging from William Blake to Lorine Neidecker and Kamau Brathwaite. The epigraphs are an example of the many voices inhabiting Waldman’s work. She is an original, synthetic poet.

The book has five sections, and the first, “{undercurrent},” acts as an introduction. Waldman tells us, “the poem is an investigation into and an improvisation upon some of the ideas and concerns of the Kalachakra layered with a vow of *take all the animals with you in your life, your poetry*” (3). The Kalachakra is a complex meditation focused on cycles of time and cycles of breath. For Waldman, the ritual opens up an immensity in which “the poem emerged as a kind of urgent discourse” (1). The immensity in question is the problematic condition of the natural world and the damage human thoughtlessness is wrecking on the planet’s hapless animal inhabitants.

The first book begins, “Study density of / maxed-out earth-planet-universe / Study our captivity, o humanoids / Zoom in on the bald cypress / or *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* (bald eagle stalker) / Consider our exile, depravity in a strange laboratory / Is it a cosmic contest / who is most backward barbaric bellicose greedy / psychopath?” (5). The accusatory tone might be problematic if it were used to promote a bad pastoral vision of a pre-technological golden age in which animal, planet, and human enjoyed a rural utopia. But Waldman’s poetry isn’t nostalgic; rather it’s oriented to a future that’s looking increasingly unlivable. The tone is somewhere between a jeremiad and a denunciation and is a fine instance of the sort of ecocritical poetry at home in the Beat tradition, such as Ginsberg’s “Sunflower Sutra” or Gary Snyder’s *Turtle Island*.

The poetry is formally innovative with the central book, “~inner~,” offering double-columned pages of text. The reader’s eye must shuttle between poetic text in regular font on the left side of the page in which the poetry reflects on the liaison of the imagination with the wild, natural world and poetic text in bold font on the right in which “she” imagines “she is counting coup,” that is, winning prestige in violent battle. The text eroticizes the struggle for connection, reversing in the process the typical gendering of the landscape as female and receptive to the masculine gaze of the capitalist landowner.

The divided page is an effective formal device that deepens the book's preoccupation with a crisis of connection between humans and their environment and its inhabitants. The poem's form suggests a fissuring of the ego, a necessary step to overcome the grave human-centeredness that is one of the causes of the world's degradation.

The fourth book, “~secret~,” ends in a three-page rush of words and phrases culminating in “what call in the night what call is answered what nuance what tantrum in the night what martyrdom of dreaming your own birth your own end of history or end of speculation of that end what call what alarm is sounding deep in the home?” (118). Waldman's poetry is indeed an “alarm ... sounding deep in the home.” The book ranges over deep evolutionary history into the present, asking that a benighted humankind renounce domination in favor of connection.

There aren't many (any?) instances in the poem of right living, however, and as humans dwell on the earth they must necessarily alter it. Inhabitation is not ever going to be carbon-neutral or without consequence for the natural world. Is the story of humankind on the earth simply a story of bombs and exploitation, a grim and cynical blot in cosmic time? How might a more complex account of technology (and isn't language itself a technology?) require that Waldman's poem reconsider the mutuality of nature and culture? Isn't home itself always a fusion of nature and culture? The too strict dualism is a philosophical shortcoming in a book so passionate about the need to stop environmental abuse.

Manatee/Humanity is a call to action, a call to change priorities:

“it=was=time=of=fossil=fuel=priorities=of=precious=business-time” (64). It is a profound meditation on the presence of humans in time on a planet suffering from overuse. It is an “urgent discourse” at a time when America's politicians prevaricate. *In the Room of Never Grieve* presents a poet rabble-rouser without qualms about language's ability to inspire action, to speak forthrightly to a popular audience, or to meaningfully intervene in the world. In both volumes, such confidence is a valuable contemporary manifestation of the Beats' countercultural, ecocritical ethos.