

# Presenting the Open Mic

## Contemporary Poetry Readings Under and Beyond Academic Surveillance

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I confess: even at the very first open mic poetry reading I attended in Albany, New York, in 2002, I understood myself to be acting as a field agent. In the years that followed, sometimes a few nights a month, sometimes a few nights a week, I would head west from my apartment toward a bar, restaurant, art gallery or bookstore jury-rigged for a poetry reading. There, alongside anywhere from three to ninety people—including state workers, nurses, a journalist, a massage therapist, administrative assistants, computer technicians and a retired judge, but rarely people affiliated with academia—I would listen to poems, and often perform my own.

The people who attended these open mics were odd creatures. They seemed to have infinite patience, applauding the most inane poems as heartily as the most aesthetically pleasing. They wrote, read and discussed poetry as if they did not know that they lacked the “credentials”; they listened as though there were room enough for the “bad” poems, the “great” poems and everything in between. They relished the opportunity to read their work as if they did not know that the walls had no ears, that no major publisher would swoop in to carry them off to the great halls of the gods. Or, as if they knew the work they enacted together existed only in the space and time of the gathering, and believed that value enough.

These open mics held a dual fascination for me, as an academic observer. My initial interest was merely in their existence: I felt a need to address the disparity between, on the one hand, the testimonies circulating within the American educational institution of poetry’s disappearance from the public sphere and, on the other hand, the apparent vitality of poetry in even this relatively minor city. More significantly, during the several years I spent moving, geographically and aesthetically, between the University at Albany, SUNY, campus and the downtown venues, I came to realize that the “local” poets and/as audiences were engaging with poetry in ways fundamentally other to their “non-local”(?) counterparts in the educational institution.

Below, I explore two particular contemporary manifestations of the poetry reading in Albany, the formal poetry reading and the open mic, to highlight what and how poetry is in each context. The formal poetry reading, a reading sponsored by a well-funded institution, held in a sophisticated cultural venue and featuring a recognized poet, relies on and reifies “poetry” as a cultural object, strictly regulated through a self-enclosed system of surveillance and isolated from a broader public paradoxically obliged to believe in the necessity of the work. The open mic, in contrast, enacts “poetry” as present, ephemeral engagement between people with and within their social context. In its implicit repudiation of institutional valuations of recognition and preservation, the open mic is not only necessarily “forgotten” by academic discourses; more significantly, its refusal of hierarchical mediation threatens the very system of sanctioned poetic culture itself.

The need for a juxtaposition of these scenes is, in a sense, historical. Through a series of decisively executed and perpetually mutating strategies of poetic warfare, the American educational institution became, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the most visible site of the production, reception and dissemination of poetry. Indeed, the conflation of real-time poetic work and the academy had become so apparent by the time Dana Gioia’s “Can Poetry Matter?” was published in 1991 that Gioia could explicitly presume that the complete withdrawal of poetry from the public sphere as not merely a popular narrative, but a lamentable, empirical truth.<sup>1</sup> The severe extent of the academy’s assumed authority over what and how poetry is, which warrants its inhabitants’ denial of poets and audiences beyond its borders, evidences the enduring effects of the New Critical coup and the proliferation of creative writing programs.

Jed Rasula describes the New Critics’ campaign: “they invaded the academy like guerrilla fighters, with a keener grasp of the features of the ambient ground (the textures of the poems themselves), thus possessing a greater mobility than their opponents, who were encumbered with the baggage of historical scholarship.”<sup>2</sup> Though “heavily outnumbered,” they won—and made themselves necessary. By writing and promoting “difficult” poems that required their expert explications, they gave themselves an integral institutional role. Their bid for a poetic monopoly included not only providing reading habits and laying the blueprints for composition, however. The New Critics also made brilliant use of a proven marketing strategy, as Pierre Bourdieu demonstrates: in the field of literary

production, one of the most effective methods for eliminating one's opponents is to deny their very existence.<sup>3</sup>

Focusing on Allen Tate's "Poetry and Politics," Joseph Harrington argues the logic of the New Critics' exclusions: "The poet-critic's textual formalism presumes the decline of the audience: disciplined craftsmanship and popularity are implicitly at odds. In fact, on this logic, in order for such craftsmanship to come to the fore, the popular prestige of poetry *must* decline—or at least be posited as declining."<sup>4</sup> The New Critical advocacy of craft, and the disinterestedness necessary to its appreciation, was exercised against an excess of poetries, in the first half of the century, that were overtly interested, that attempted to communicate to and influence a broader public. As the New Critics solidified their place in the academy, Harrington writes, "[b]oth fans and foes of Eliot and company sounded this note: people don't read poetry anymore because it isn't addressed to them."<sup>5</sup> The strategy of absenting audiences prior to their retreat proved successful; that is, audiences consented to the academic imperative, refusing the poetry and readings denied them—which is not to say they refused poetry altogether.

Whereas the New Critics infiltrated the academy from the outside, the creative writing program was born and raised with institutionally endowed legitimacy. If the originators of creative writing offered it as a humanist means of studying literature from the inside out and denied its ability to birth artistic genius, as Stephen Wilbers indicates of the Iowa Writers Workshop,<sup>6</sup> the program quickly changed to assume the work of producing certified writers. Creative Writing proceeded to seclude itself not only within, but also from the English department (a withdrawal from bodies of knowledge, including literature, that resulted in the production of what Donald Hall infamously termed "McPoems"). Owing to the tremendous amount of power circulating within the national network and the decades spent cultivating its borders, it is quite conceivable that the strategic rhetoric of absence is genuinely misunderstood, even by those deploying it, for the assertion of an unfortunate fact.

Of course, we can no longer refer to poets and poetry housed within the academy as, to borrow Bourdieu's terms, *a* position struggling for a monopoly of symbolic capital.<sup>7</sup> When Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* and Donald Hall's *Contemporary American Poetry* were published in the early 1960s, the anthologies represented a clear and present divide between non-academic and academic poets.<sup>8</sup> As poets from various non-academic positions infiltrated the

institution and multicultural poetics gained canonical recognition, the “academic” positions increased and diversified. The ongoing anthology wars still reflect the struggles of these entrances and assimilations, as agents continue to rely on what have become less definitive oppositions.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, as the struggle between inside and outside shifted into the academy, poets who declined to engage in the canonical warfare became increasingly spectral.

The academy, it is important to note, is not a passive host. Its poets have inherited not only the institution’s established legitimacy, but also its ideals: recognition and preservation. Cary Nelson critiques our tendency to graft the ends of institutional assimilation onto the production of literature: “literary history is often implicitly construed as a centuries-long competition to enter the official canon and be taught in literature classes, a concern that was often not central to writers or to their audiences.”<sup>10</sup> Institutional poetic production, however, does assume an *a priori* canonical orientation. The official state of contemporary American poetry represents a self-enclosed system of surveillance, in a sense, a perfected Foucauldian panopticon: “poetry” is under the guardianship of an institution whose literal borders redundantly perform those manifested within and through its subjects, certified creative writers hierarchically organized according to conferred publications, awards and degrees and spontaneously acting upon the desire for canonicity, measuring themselves and each other under the elusive gaze of the (ivory) tower.

The walls of this tower are, of course, somewhat porous: spoken word’s popular success (which both prompted and was heightened by *MTV Unplugged* spots and *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* on HBO) has stimulated a rise in scholarship on the genre; and while it may be difficult to imagine finding a basic introduction to cowboy poetry in classroom anthologies, it seems inevitable that there are poets currently writing and performing beyond academia who will earn their place on syllabi. Canonical recognition can, no doubt, be bestowed on poets operating beyond the educational institution. However, a tacit equation of surveillance and existence proves those poets who successfully refuse, by default or design, to submit to the central tower’s gaze not merely deviants or novitiates, but nonexistent. It is only through this equation that poets and audiences, heretically engaging in practices that have no relevance to institutional modes of recognition, could be deemed absent; that the narrative of poetry’s death in the public sphere could continue to be worthy of perpetuation or rebuttal.

In my conversations with Albany academics and townsfolk, the former were far more confounded by my claims that people beyond the university were engaging with poetry than the latter were by my reports of their supposed absence. This localized split between inside and outside the university is representative of a broader phenomenon, as is apparent in claims such as Joseph Epstein's, "Sometimes it seems as if there isn't a poem written in this nation that isn't subsidized or underwritten by a grant either from a foundation or the government or a teaching salary or a fellowship of one kind or another,"<sup>11</sup> and in Gioia's, "The first question one poet now asks another upon being introduced is 'Where do you teach?'"<sup>12</sup> Institutional poetic culture has the luxury of remaining ignorant of poets and audiences beyond its gaze. The reverse is inconceivable—which, fortunately, has little impact on civilian acts of poetic engagement.

The conception of poetry as isolated from the public and hierarchically organized by a self-enclosed system of surveillance is reinscribed in the formal poetry reading. In Albany, one of the most prestigious reading series is the Visiting Writers Series, hosted by the New York State Writers Institute (which, in addition to hosting a variety of events, is responsible for awarding the title of New York State Author and Poet). The Institute, housed in the University at Albany, frequently hosts its readings in the Performing Arts Center's Recital Hall, which seats almost two hundred and fifty people (when greater attendance is expected, readings are hosted in Page Hall, which seats eight hundred and thirty). The audience members of these readings enter individually or in small groups. They space themselves out in a room most often excessively large for the gathering, a room that has been set aside for gatherings like this, though not specifically for poetry readings. They speak in hushed voices until the houselights dim. A person with institutional credentials introduces the poet, typically by reviewing the poet's credentials and offering a brief, broad summary of the poet's styles and themes. The poet, from offstage or the front row and amidst applause, approaches the podium, on or beside which a beverage has been placed. While reading, the poet occasionally glances upward—not really toward anyone, though perhaps glimpsing a few silhouettes. During this time, there is little sound other than a few "ohs" and "ums," measured laughter at appropriate moments, and perhaps even a bit of awkward and contained clapping. The poet signals when the final poem or two will be read, and when the poet is done, the crowd applauds. During the question and answer session that follows, many of the questions are predictable:

when did you begin writing? how do you discipline yourself to write? what inspires you? who are your influences? In substance and structure, this exchange is not a dialogue, humble as the poet may appear. When the credentialed host signals the end of the question and answer session, there is more applause, after which the audience members leave as discretely as they came, some, after purchasing books and obtaining autographs.

This reading is structured according to a series of hierarchically motivated isolations. The event is held in a venue constructed to minimize intrusions from the social sphere, and it is clear from the setting—the darkened hall and lit stage, the fixed seats, the podium before which the poet stands and perhaps even the beverage allowed only to the poet—that the audience is there to witness. The active roles are assigned to the sponsoring institution, which has the right (if not duty) to perpetuate recognition, extends the invitation and payment to the poet, and offers its space to the public; and the poet, whose name and credentials are given in flyers, emails and web postings, and are repeated before the performance. Just as the venue and equipment are designed to transparently perform the detachment between the activity on the stage and the context beyond it, so the audience members apparently know how to perform appropriately as passive recipients of the cultural display—to sit still and remain silent during and between poems, to speak quietly before and after the event, even to cast cold glances at the one unwrapping a piece of candy.

The poetry reading, in this and other forms, remains the redheaded stepchild of academic discourse, and not surprisingly so. Within the academy, an institution that functions to preserve and disseminate bodies of knowledge, the English department takes as its primary object the text, the static object to which we may repeatedly return and which retains its integrity beyond any single engagement with it. The performance, in contrast, is based in speech, which, as Walter J. Ong so eloquently demonstrated, is fundamentally other to writing. Sound, he writes, “is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent.”<sup>13</sup> Additionally, whereas the printed text isolates the words from any context other than the text itself and encourages—requires, Ong argues—the isolation of the one reading or writing: “[s]poken utterance is addressed by a real, living person to another real, living person or real, living persons, at a specific time in a real setting which includes always much more than mere words. Spoken words are always modifications of a total situation which is more than verbal.”<sup>14</sup> The poetry reading,

delimited in time and space, is constituted by multiple people, an immediate physical and social context, and the broader historical moment. It is delimited in time and space. The trace of it, an audio or video recording, is a discrete (which is not to say more or less valuable) thing; the canonized reading, such as the October 7<sup>th</sup> 1955 Six Gallery reading, may be re-narrated, but never re-experienced. Though the formal poetry reading is by definition experiential and evanescent, its structure subverts the performative nature of the event. Ceremoniously displaying the recognition achieved elsewhere, under the system of cultural surveillance, it rearticulates the ephemeral and multiple experience as the exhibition of completed, isolated objects of a self-enclosed system before a faceless audience. That this model is reminiscent of a New Critical aesthetics is no coincidence; indeed, the contemporary formal poetry reading in a literal sense performs the aesthetics of ahistoricity, which suggests an inevitable failure in the event as such.

If the formal poetry reading is the redheaded stepchild of literary discourse, the open mic is the loony cousin whose name, we understand without instruction, should never be spoken at the dinner table. Anyone can read there, but anyone who is anyone on the literary scene knows not to bother. Irreverently heedless of the economy of literary recognition, the open mic offers the poet only a moment of performance alongside other poets, some of whose work, to be frank, is not all that good. (I have yet to hear an open mic attendee deny this latter point; when pressed, most responded by attesting to the social value of listening to everyone). Of course, to say the open mic fails to participate in canonical warfare, to succeed according to the goals of recognition and preservation, would be akin to saying a chair fails at being a door; the event practices a poetics of openness and engagement, and in doing so inherently refuses official, institutional surveillance.

Albany open mics are held, not in cultural sanctuaries, but in spaces set aside for poetry by, not before, the events. Without institutional support, they must utilize (or have the advantage of utilizing) spaces not constructed for cultural displays, such as bars, coffeehouses, galleries and bookstores. The setting is thus often cluttered with activities external to the “reading” in its most literal and limited sense—though it is more appropriate to understand such disruptions as part of the event’s composition, and, as Peter Middleton suggests, reminders that the poetry happens within a social context.<sup>15</sup> As the setting prohibits any illusion of the reading’s detachment from its context, so the equipment employed often refuses transparency: the amp buzzes, the chairs are unfixed and sporadically

unsteady, and if the venue's lights are dimmed, the reader must often shift awkwardly to find adequate light for the page. The explicit intimacy of the event with its physical context corresponds to the intimacy of the participants' bodies. In contrast to the comfortable distances between persons in a large hall, the open mic fills the space it uses (often a deliberate choice made by the host/ess). Participants arrive individually or in small groups and—partly because the space forces their close physical proximity, partly because several know each other through such events or elsewhere, and partly because some make the conscious effort to introduce themselves to new participants—socialize before, after and even during the event. Before the reading, there is no way to know who will read from who has gathered as audience; even the regular participants do not know who among them will choose to take the stage on a particular night.

As with the audience of the Writers Institute's Visiting Writers Series, the open mic audience's primary role during the reading of each poem is to listen. This point may constitute the extent of the comparisons we may draw (other than that they have gathered for poetry, and disperse). The beginning of the reading does not signal the audience's active passivity. During the reading of each poem, the audience members generally remain still—though they are variously prone to audible responses to particularly powerful phrases. The customary applause as each poet approaches and leaves the stage and the shifting necessary to allow for the poet's passage through the crowd demands the audience's physical involvement. Between poems, the host, poet and audience exchange banter, often concerning things only tangentially relevant (even entirely unrelated) to the poems. Of course, to even attempt to posit the audience as a single entity would be entirely nonsensical. We cannot refer to it as a group that maintains a fixed relation to the poet, for each member of the audience has the option of taking the stage, and each poet is variously a member of the audience and the one speaking before it; the open mic depends on these exchanges. Choosing not to sign up does not ensure one's name will not be spoken into the mic or called from the audience. A regular participant may be alluded to in a poem, the object or instigator of banter between poems, or called to the stage after another participant notices that the poet did not sign up to read. The audience members are positioned and position themselves as integral and active, as co-creators of the event.

In all levels of academia, the focal point of literary discourse is a site of authority. The text, for example, is an obvious authority: discourses around



William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All* work from and toward the text. In the classroom, the professor is another authorial center, as the one who holds the knowledge and to whom the students must defer. Influential scholars and editors function similarly as centers, as they determine what and how we read. If there is a center to the open mic reading, it is the person hosting the event. This center, however, is not a figure of authority, not gatekeeper, teacher or editor. The center opens a space, and the space invites dispersal; the poets, and their poems, have no responsibility to or for it.

The open mic exists outside the economy of recognition: poets cannot acquire literary capital here, and the communities do not include internal (or command external) mechanisms for the preservation of the work performed. In any given reading, to be sure, there are likely as many agendas as there are bodies. At the Albany mics, for example, some poets are pursuing recognition elsewhere, and offering books, chapbooks and broadsides for sale; some are promoting the local scene as one of literary significance and deserving of recognition; and some attend to pursue nonliterary ends, such as to promote their political agenda, for the social interactions, or to testify. However, in these spaces, poets and/as audiences gather without a common end other than the gathering itself. Every reading is a collage of poems that can never be replicated—"poems," as in the collection of texts, as well as the people, venue, and contexts through which those texts are enacted; here, no poem exists alone, without performance, without the company of other poems. The event, also, is not limited to the on-stage performances: people talk to each other about everything from poetry, work and the weather to local, national and global politics.

Particularly in Albany (which, though some may find it hard to believe this, is the capital of New York State), where the numbers are great enough for a diversity of poets and few enough to prevent their division into poetic factions, these open mics are, in terms of aesthetic style and value, remarkably diverse. In one night, listeners can be exposed to as many or more poetries as are offered in any given (editor-centered) anthology, for example, from new formalism and spoken word to dadaist performances and the "academic mainstream" lyric. The reading habits of the attendees, many of whom are poetic autodidacts, are likewise diverse. Over the past several years, I have logged more hours discussing poetry with people in these reading communities than with students and professors. One of the greatest difficulties for me has been engaging in conversations about poetry that do not

obey the laws of literary warfare. These poets' and audiences' literary knowledge has been spurred by the coincidence of conversations with other poets, available workshops and readings, and book purchases or loans between friends; significantly, even the most avid readers of poetry among them rarely delve into books *about* poetry. Not having been trained in or according to the struggles in the field of literary production, their conversations have exhibited no signs of illegality when moving fluidly between such poets as Lyn Hejinian, Edgar Allen Poe, Bob Kaufman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Mark Doty, Tracie Morris and Sandra Cisneros. It was a long time before I could hold the click of my tongue, and then even enjoy and learn from, their liberal border-crossings. As Marjorie Perloff implies, strip the pissing contests from the poetics, and the whole conversation changes.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, such poetic gatherings as this would not exist as they do without the cultural institutions that preserve and perpetuate poetry (or whatever "poetry" signifies in a given historical and cultural moment). They work beside, out of and against established sites of recognition and preservation. When an open mic reader chooses to spend her allotted time reading HD, she is making use of and perpetuating the institutions of literary production; when another is influenced by William Blake, Rita Dove or Pablo Neruda, he too is making use of and perpetuating those institutions. But the open mic does not take the institution's work as its own, and it is no more a mere parasite than it is the cell of a greater being. It practices a form of poetry that perhaps must necessarily remain beyond the institution's grasp: a social form of poetry. Held in venues that, by accident or design, allow for intrusions of the everyday world, the reading is experiential, a complex performance mutually constituted by speakers, listeners, texts, and physical and social contexts. As significant, its poetry is enacted for a here and now as specific as the time and place of the event: partly because the heart of the open mic is ephemeral engagement, and partly because the event does not aim for nor achieve formal recognition, there is no body of work, no cultural artifact that represents the performance beyond itself. There, poetry exists between people, *is* engagement.

Decades before becoming the United States National Poet Laureate, Donald Hall articulated what he perceived to be the benefits and dangers (with a severe emphasis on the latter) of the formal poetry reading. He concluded, "at the best moments, like great theater when actor and audience merge, the poet, saying lines labored over in solitude, reads them returning on the faces of the audience."<sup>17</sup>

Hall's ideal audience is emptied of any individual and collective subjectivity and becomes a reflection of the poet's words (even, the poet's solitary subjectivity labored into those words). Evident, here, is a conception of the reading commonly demonstrated in sanctioned poetic culture: as a unidirectional imposition of the completed text onto a passive audience. But the reading and listening public is always more richly diverse and complex than such binaries as poet/audience, town/gown and elite/masses (and for that matter, red/blue) permit. Just as one person's experience of a poem varies from one reading of it to the next, so no collected group of people collectively experiences a poem. Poetry exists precisely in the between: it is only on the page, apart from its audience, that the poem is a static object; enacted in and between people poetry is, and becomes.

The Albany open mic readings, as they refuse to offer themselves to observance by the sanctioned keepers of culture, represent merely a particular form of poetic engagement practiced in a particular city. The survival of poetry in the American public sphere is not at stake; like so many others, the Albany poets and/as audiences will write, read and perform poetry with little concern for the wars between Oceania and Eurasia or Eastasia (though with tremendous concern for the war in Iraq). At stake, rather, is the significance of institutional poetic production to that sphere. It is, then, to the tower's assemblage, rather than the public on whose behalf it intercedes, that William Carlos Williams' words need be directed:

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.<sup>18</sup>

*Rachel Zitomer completed her PhD in May 2006. Her dissertation focuses on performance-based reading communities in Albany, NY, arguing that, whereas academia's definitions of poetry are based on preservation, these communities enact a definition of poetry based on ephemerality.*

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- <sup>1</sup> Dana Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?," *Atlantic Monthly* 267.5 (May 1991): 94-406. Gioia himself acknowledges a heritage extending from Edmund Wilson's "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" (1934) through Joseph Epstein's "Who Killed Poetry?" (1988). Christopher Beach traces this narrative more broadly in his aptly titled chapter, "Discussing the Death of Poetry to Death." See Christopher Beach, *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry Between Community and Institution* (Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies), (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1998).
- <sup>2</sup> Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, *Refiguring English Studies* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), 79.
- <sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), 42.
- <sup>4</sup> Joseph Harrington, *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2002), 39.
- <sup>5</sup> Harrington, 42.
- <sup>6</sup> Stephen Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop: Origins, Emergence, & Growth* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1980), 44, 62, 72.
- <sup>7</sup> Bourdieu, 42.
- <sup>8</sup> Donald M. Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry* (New York: Grove, 1960). Donald Hall, ed., *Contemporary American Poetry* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1962).
- <sup>9</sup> See Marjorie Perloff, "Whose New American Poetry?: Anthologizing in the Nineties," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 26, no. 3-4 (1996): 104-23.
- <sup>10</sup> Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*, Wisconsin Project on American Writers (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989), 6.
- <sup>11</sup> Joseph Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?," *Commentary* 86.2 (1988): 15.
- <sup>12</sup> Gioia, 102.
- <sup>13</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 32.
- <sup>14</sup> Ong, 100.
- <sup>15</sup> Peter Middleton, "Poetry's Oral Stage," in *Performance and Authenticity in the Arts*, eds. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999), 221-22.
- <sup>16</sup> Perloff, 104-123.
- <sup>17</sup> Donald Hall, "The Poetry Reading: Public Performance/Private Art," *The American Scholar* 54.1 (1984-85): 77.
- <sup>18</sup> William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, Volume II (New York: New Directions, 1988), Book I, lines 317-21, 318.