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The Laboristics of Conferences.

The problem with academy-based poetry conferences and the valuation structures they contribute in creating, is that they aid in further tightening already-existing interlocking national poetic bureaucracies. When such bureaucracies become more tightly tethered to each other, the resulting amalgamation can exacerbate class privilege and power in the domain of culture.

The two main institutions that tend to interlock are – 1, the largely symbolic capital of what can be called “aesthetic volunteerism”, i.e., the by and large “stable” poetry reading series such as the St. Mark’s Poetry Project, Beyond Baroque, Small Press Traffic, Poetry Society of America, etc; and 2, the more potentially direct-economic “academic poetry” circuit, which includes on-campus reading series, poetry teaching posts, and university publishing prospects.

The first, “aesthetic volunteerism” is, of course, in a misnomer in cases where paid positions are part of the structure (i.e. St. Mark’s Poetry Project, the Poet’s House in Philadelphia, Small Press Traffic, Woodland Pattern), but for the most part, “volunteerism” accurately describes a stream of poetic activity that bubbles up from a baseline of poetic community participation. The main actors of this kind of scene can range from the nearly anonymous audience member to the ever-hungry scenester on the prowl. Functions can range from food and drink vendors to audio-visual helpers, all the way up to samizdat journals registering the activity. These “scenes” can generally be entered via a public avenue without much entrée, let alone registration dues and fees. The level of commitment required of the participants, varies widely from week to week.

The second, “academic poetry circuit” carries with it potentially large stakes (it should be noted, stakes for an increasingly proletarianized, *exploited* stratum of teaching “professionals”) that is, “J” “O” “B’s”. “J” “O” “B’s” have the potential to produce life structures, structures that in turn might produce more ample conditions for *yet more and more* Productivity (live it, babe). And since these stakes exist in conditions of extreme scarcity (i.e. the never-ending tenure track recession, or rather, depression, for thousands of knowledge workers), the tendency for this stratum of workers to engage in *commercial behavior*—is increased. One common example is the teacher-student sponsor system. Mutual critical-aesthetic valorization can remain—just that, bi-directional feeder systems that go on unexamined and unchecked, to the detriment of those not hooked into that (quote)“informal” (formal) system.

Another example of potential-to-real “power” accrual is profile building by the creation and chairing of academic poetry panels (over 70 panels today). Besides the cred bump an organizer (or co-organizers) might get by recruiting peers, the overall impact that panels can have on the mapping of aesthetic discourse can be can be marked. Of course, not everything can be reduced to nomenklatura making and “gifting”. Actual inclusion of non-academia industry based poets (such as myself) get a real opportunity to engage in and

contrast the shared challenges of Laboristics of Poetics. Incidentally, AWP, I would describe not so much as a showcase for writing programs, but rather, a chop shop of those programs. Stolen parts are swapped at symbolically bargain prices. The sheer mercantile activity on the floors of AWP seem more honest to me (less dressed up) than conferences that purport to *flout* logics of exchange.

Two other minor “arms” (or “poetic streams of activity”) that have the capability of feeding into interlocking national poetic bureaucracies, but from more distant locations, are - 1, the somewhat irregular, but highly proliferative coffeehouse and bar reading series in thousands of medium-to-small cities around the country (though these can also exist in major urban centers), and 2, what are called “house readings.” As to how these two streams of poetic activity relate to “interlocked bureaucracies” can be hard to trace.

The coffeehouse/bar phenomenon can act on (as they say) “its own” *for* its own, or it can potentially act as a feeder stream to a larger, more institutional scene (or both). The local coffeehouse/bar scene can be a very active testing ground for diverse reading styles where writers steadily develop an acute sense of the performance potentials of public spaces. A groundswell of exploration occurs at this not-yet-national terrain that is often rewritten at the national level by either direct (un-cited) *appropriation* of its development, or straight up erasure.

The “house reading”, in turn, can also act as a feeder or adjunct to other poetic spaces, or can act on its own. In places where few public places exist (perhaps in extremely remote rural areas) the house reading might be something of a necessity, but for the most part it is not a necessity. On the upside, the house reading can be a place of healthy, small community self-nourishing activity; on the downside, it requires some sort of (private) *entrée*, even of a minimal sort (to someone’s abode, no less), and so it risks having the potential to become a preferred members-only club (in the worst case, for those nostalgic for an illuminati-mode of poetic wizardry).

So, the initial proposition as to how academy-based poetry conferences have the capacity to contribute to politically regressive valuation structures, can now be restated as a question: In what way do the various modes of poetic activity (majoritarian “bureaucratic” and minoritarian “independent”) function at an academy-based poetry conference? How does that event summon for itself and metabolize already-organized forms of aesthetic (quote) “power” that leads to an “exacerbation of class privilege?”

The three coeval concepts of *location*, *activity*, and *transposition* might help to shed light on the political-aesthetic self-representation of the four main streams of poetic activity (“aesthetic volunteeristic”, “academic”, “coffeehouse (slash) bar” and “house”). That is to say, that each of these four streams – apart from what their respective temporal elements might think of them (like me and you), each stream has a *think* (a labor think) of its own making.

“aesthetic volunteerism” - tends to think of itself as a guardian of cultural *location* (even if the physical location of the reading series changes) and thus it acts as a regulator of that location’s reception parameters, sometimes called “tradition”. Individual poets’ labor activities—what they might portend to the world-at-large—in the main, gets muted; the transformative potential for each on-site performance can lapse into pre-conditioned results. And unless that muted potential gets addressed head on, performances can become (in a

matter speaking) mainly “additions” to the “series”. Another way to put it is that “aesthetic volunteerism” tends to think of itself and thus act as some kind of tender of a poetic after-life crypt, where “useful” objects for the poetic after-life are haphazardly, but ritualistically arranged, one upon the another. Some might call this “outrider tradition”, but it is crypt tending. And crypt tending is a form of labor—of *necessity*, it’s fair to say even, given the abyss of poetic appreciation in the U.S. I myself at times have aimed to become a brass trinket in an airless vault in an abstract pyramid of quarried from trans-personal (quote) “contributions to the community”.

“academic” – again, outside of people’s thinking *within* academia, dreams of *itself* as being at the governing center of aesthetic valuation transposition, that is, of *moving* cultural “locations” from their originating regions of activity to steady-state places of referentiality. Danger here is that formative poetic “activity” is un-moored from any potentially embarrassing determinative field (i.e. unpaid domestic labor supporting “the practice”) and is (quote) “free” to do labor for transpositional governance, i.e. a re-cut of the canon, a re-dope of the sub-sub canon. In other words, “academic” tends to think of itself as fatigue-heroic. Fatigue-heroic sighs deeply when pulling that one book off the shelf that didn’t yank one hundred other books on either side of it. But the ensuing anxiety is regularly shored up by “academic’s” two most trusty friends, “pay” and “check.”

“coffeehouse (slash) bar” – thinks of *activity* as the one and only one thing. Its pietistic attitude towards activity is as fervent as “academic’s” reverence towards “transposition” and as venerating as “aesthetic volunteerism’s” is towards location, a *fetish*, in other words. Here there is no cultural-material after-life to pine for, and its canonic transposition potential is kept in check by barrelfuls of *subter*-locational “keepin’ it reals”. This is a way of saying that “coffeehouse (slash) bar” tends toward the manufacture of four-inch thick tempered steel public toilet encasements. These self-cleansing “scenes” cost only a few cents, but use two dollars and fifty cents worth of cultural power per disbursement. Loose nuts on the encasement eventually lead to a compromise in the encasement’s structural integrity, and thus, “coffee-house (slash) bar’s” uneasy “exit to the outer world.”

“House” – its dreamwork, entails a *suspension* of “location”, “activity”, and “transposition”, a slip sliding into a sort of rabbit hole of Tonight’s The Night. Whatever lingering suspicions House had of itself as being are dissolved by psychosexually extruded antagonisms that end up as the improbable half-dressed “ethical” confessions of democratic yesteryears. That is, House tends toward the tragic in pastoral-elegiac mode. By midnight, “House”, has come to think of itself as *Chateau de Poete Maudite Brillante*. And though the *Chateau* is essentially a shopping cart in a vast parking lot of American of ultra low readership, *Chateau de Poete Maudite Brillante* balks at quietly rolling away according to the given grade of the parking lots design. I’ve softened up on House readings.

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But it is what each of these four different modes of poetic activity think that the *other* four might think that *they* are—unto themselves, and, what those *other four* might actually be trying to (quote) “do”—to the four others, that makes for a monsterology of positioning. “Theory” of “poetry community formation”, is a mild tale compared to a *monsterology* of positioning. And it is within this 16 dimensional identity-forming schema where questions about the class political valences of academic poetry conferences can be explored. The exacerbation of class

privilege and power in the domain of culture as facilitated by academic poetry conferences can be abbreviated thusly:

To “coffeehouse / bar” – “academic” is a giant floating space station in the middle of deep space, shaped like a top, pointed at both ends, rotating and with a million windows—no one at the windows; the landing bays are semi-active, however. The landing approach is difficult. “Coffeehouse / bar” never quit makes it to the 24th floor after-after party, even though “Coffeehouse / bar” however is the *stuff* of the 24th floor celebration: how poetry survives year after year in the hearts and minds

To “house” (usually too drunk to discern anything up close in any detail, nevertheless) – “academic”, appears as a 6 foot 11 inch purple velveteen rabbit to deal with—the morning after. But tomorrow morning is in fact when an on-campus visit gets secured over coffee. That is, house gets a campus visit “academic”

To “aesthetic-volunteerism” – “academic” – is a four-headed, eight-mouthed, titanium-toothed ghoul who wants to know how the lighting can be best adjusted to minimize its fangs’ glare. That is, “aesthetic volunteerism” is turned on by being frightened, faux frightened.

But it is what “academic” “thinks” of these four modes of poetic activity that determines the aforementioned class oppressive potential (again, not what *individual* “people” might think, but the mode of poetic activity itself; such are the ghostly movements of historical-materialist mysteries ...*ye know not what ye thought ye knew*).

“Academic Poetry Conference” – thinks of “coffeehouse/bar”, as well, lower class shit. Thus the special attention paid to coffeehouse/bar’s off-shoot hot products, with some amount of inappropriate attraction... followed by retraction.

“Academic Poetry Conference’s” – view on “House”, on the other hand, varies by a just a twitch. But a twitch can become a spastic embolism in the medulla oblongata of a starry night sky when told to your face that your poetry is “curiously grounded”.

“Academic Poetry Conference’s” *dealie* towards “aesthetic-volunteerism” – is a *dealie* more complex indeed. In this relationship, the almost-truth of the unity of “location”, “activity” and “transposition” asserts itself like this:

Poetic *activity* wills to make poetic location, *location*; while location on the other hand (and at the same time), *punks* activity; yet *transposition* remains the sole provenance of – transposition.

It’s very perplexing, yes, and it’s also connective, and it causes commotion, and speculation.

Poetry is industrial and has sectors.

It can tend towards antagonism between sectors and its actors, *and*

It can also tend towards the solidaristic end of things.

