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Book Review: Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, *A Social Biography of Contemporary Innovative Poetry Communities: The Gift, the Wager, and Poethics* (2017)

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Gareth Farmer reviews Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, *A Social Biography of Contemporary Innovative Poetry Communities: The Gift, the Wager, and Poethics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

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A poet is invited to read at a small press event; they are encouraged to bring any pamphlets they would like to sell from the tiny stall. The poet sets a price of £5 for each hand-made pamphlet, feeling slightly coy about it, and theirs are piled alongside those by the organiser's press. When the poet is asked how they might receive their money from the sale of their goods, they answer: "You can keep it; it's a gift for your press." But is this an altruistic gesture? Are there expectations attached to this apparent act of communality or solidarity with the non-profit press? Is this a type of ethical practice of gift giving that expects nothing in return, or is it a complex act of poetic activism and reciprocity? It is probably all these things. As Elizabeth-Jane Burnett writes in her fascinating *A Social Biography of Poetry Communities: The Gift, the Wager, and Poethics*: 'poetry gifts [...] operate partway between inalienable possessions and reciprocal gifts which are offered in exchange for varied returns consistent with the practitioner's specific motivations.' (10) The book, as Burnett succinctly puts it, 'explores a range of recent innovative poetry practices for what they reveal about the operations of marginal poetic exchanges within a culture dominated by global capitalist economies; the multiple locations of meaning within these exchanges; and the pivotal role of responsibility in this work.' (40) By responsibility, Burnett means the activity or 'wagers' of extending and returning gifts within poetic economies and ecologies. This wide-ranging and engaging book offers, in Burnett's words,

case studies from North American and UK poetry communities [that] are conceived of as metaphorical "tribes", who, while sharing with Melanesian and Polynesian tribes some motivations for, and operations concerning, gift exchange, do so from their own specific positioning within an advanced global capitalist economy and prevailing Western conceptualisation of personhood. (2)

Melanesian and Polynesian cultural practices, particularly as they are entwined with sense of self-discovery, personhood (the 'dividual' as Marilyn Strathern has outlined in *The Gender of the Gift* (1988))¹ and community, are repeatedly used – non-exploitatively and carefully, one might add – as alternative ways of conceiving avant-garde or innovative poetic practices and the ways in which gifts, wagers and mutual risk taking make up much of the innovative poetic worlds.

Avant-garde artistic movements, and poetic communities in particular, exist on the margins of broader cultural and literary practices. Their identities and positionalities rely on a critical distance from what is generally understood as mainstream culture. Innovation and experimentation in poetry requires a putative synthesis of what is taken to be a particular practice, for example, lyric poetry or capitalist exchange,

and a concomitant breaking down and reconstruction of these conventions to make something different. Like Fredric Jameson's conception of 'parody', these practices often require a dominant idea of, for example, lyric poetry or 'the market', to provide an understanding of the deviation that this new practice represents.² To innovate means to reconceptualise and reformulate the too-readily accepted algorithms of contemporary artistic and economic practices, making strange and rearranging them to combat, challenge or renew modes of communicating. If we take mainstream culture as in lockstep with dominant processes of global, capitalist productivity, then avant-garde artistic movements – now perhaps more than ever – are either deliberately or necessarily representative of other types of interpersonal and inter-aesthetic exchanges. These 'gift exchange' economies or ecologies, which run parallel and contrary to our contemporary, Western defaults of markets and contractual exchange, are those on which Burnett focusses. The book has its conceptual foundations in ethnographic work on gift exchanges, including the now widely cited essay by Mauss, "Essai dure le don" (1924) and his concept of 'potlatch', in which often excessive gifts are sometimes aggressively given to receive future honour, esteem or *quid pro quo* benefits. However, the focus of Burnett's book is not those poetic economies and ecologies that simply run alongside advanced market economies, offering small but arguably compromised concessions to the broader forces (like charities, for example), but rather, as she explains:

this book differs in its interpretation of the way that the gift's circulation "feeds" the creative impetus. In the poetry scenes explored here, the focus is not purely on the returns of the outer gift but also on the inalienable possessions: those aspects of poetry that cannot be given away to be redistributed but stay instead with the author. (8)

The ideas of 'inalienable possession' and those aspects which cannot be given away are somewhat numinous and opaque in this book. These elusive things are in the same conceptual zone as the gnomic but nonetheless critically illuminating concept of the 'aura' sketched by Walter Benjamin in his oft cited, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. It is never fully clear what they are, but as methodological or conceptual drivers they propel this book. In very simple terms (not fully serving Burnett's argument): poets, presses and audiences of innovative poetry often tacitly agree to a dynamic and dialectical exchange of 'affective, cognitive and relational' (13) information or knowledge which are often opaque, non-refundable and cannot fully be reincorporated back into any metric of profit, loss or even investment. As Burnett puts it:

In poetry terms, the inalienability of the gift can be linked to the unintelligibility of the poetic act. The reader or audience member may strive to return the gift by accessing its meaning but can, perhaps, never fully return it to the poet since they will bring different interpretations to the exchange, including the possibility of a failure to offer any interpretation, or to act, at all. In this sense the poetry act, particularly one that does not draw on established literary conventions to convey meaning, can perhaps never be fully given or returned. (9)

All the poetic practices and communities Burnett focuses on rely, as she puts it, 'to varying degrees, upon reciprocal returns' (13). The opening chapters do a lot of the theoretical frame working, while the main chapters of the book explore the oscillations and pitfalls of actual and conceptual reciprocity through a range of Anglo-American poetic practices. The third chapter begins these explorations by tracing the 'dissident subcultures' (46) of spoken word, or 'slam', poetry of the New York Bowery Poetry project, founded by Bob Holman in 2002, and its non-profit organisation Bowery Arts and Science. The chapter outlines Holman's and others strong social and cultural mission to nurture and promote poetry communities and describes how their infrastructures, funding models and income streams have cannily adapted to changing and often brute economics over time. In this chapter, as in others, Burnett draws on correspondence, archives and interviews with her poets – here Holman – to demonstrate that, as she puts it, 'slam [is] a manifestation of the poetic economy [...]: its operations at a grassroots level, its resistance to commercial trappings [...] and the elusiveness and ephemerality of its live performance'. (51)

Chapter four, on the American poet, Anne Waldman, her involvement with the New York Poetry Project at St Mark's and the Buddhist-informed Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, outlines the uneasy relationship innovative educational programs and poetic projects have with institutions of power and finance, particularly as one model migrates to another US state and embeds itself in different communities. Burnett suggests that Waldman's 2006 book, *Outrider*, exemplifies a desire to, as she puts it, 'bring a consideration of the whole polis onto the page' (84), that is using a variety of modes – poetry, interviews, the use of archives, outlines of performances and alternative (to mainstream) publishing models – to foreground the communality of poetic production. Burnett's key argument and emphases throughout the book comes to the fore here, which is that performance poetry is aligned with an activism designed to critically highlight infrastructures surrounding the creative arts. Walden calls these practices, 'Infrastructure Poetics', where, as she (Waldman) writes: 'one is working and building communities ... and feeling the need to represent a larger Voice'

than the individual poet's.' (87)³ Such work is tied by Burnett to Spinoza's ethics on 'the importance of relational exchanges in initiating subjective growth' (92), which extends to relationships between students and teachers, audiences and poets, and poets and publishers. Burnett outlines a form of collective consciousness-raising through solidarity and (almost) selfless poetic exchanges.

Chapter five draws parallels between practices in the US and Bob Cobbing's Association of Little Presses, Poets Conference and Writers Forum, illustrating poetry's circulation through performances and community-building activities with few financial incentives attached. The incentives are to 'promote new kinds of practice' (100), benefiting poetry and poets rather than large presses and corporations. What is clear from this chapter is Cobbing's tenacity in working around funding structures and in enabling and ennobling new presses, writers and practitioners to emerge, using cheap printing methods and shoe-string budgets to quickly circulate and celebrate new works. But, as with the case of Better Books on Charing Cross Road, and as Peter Barry outlines in his excellent *Poetry Wars: British Poetry in the 1970s and the Battle of Earl's Court* (Salt, 2006), many such ventures were torpedoed when they got in the sights of arts councils ideologically entwined with mainstream financial markets. But, tenacious as they are, the community-spirits and DIY cultures encapsulated by Cobbing's activities, continue to spring up from the ashes, enabled by a sort of underground sharing of equipment, labour and time. As Burnett outlines, the affective kinetics of such poetic practices resonate out, inspiring ever-more innovative publishing and poetic projects. Burnett writes engagingly about how Cobbing's sound poems and poetic scores outflank publishing conventions and demand different spaces for their realisation, both in actual space and in the minds of audiences, creating, in the words of Benedict Anderson, 'imagined communities' resisting mainstream contemporary cultures.⁴

Chapter six concentrates on feminist performance practices, particularly how the body in performance 'carries with it the weight of social inscription' (131) that the performer and audience are invited to re-evaluate. Burnett writes that these performance artists – Alison Knowles, Johanna Drucker, Fiona Templeton, Carla Harryman and Caroline Bergvall, to name only a few – 'are figured as individuals who seek subjective and social change through interactions with audience members' (133), as well as readers. All the works discussed in this chapter interrogate what constitutes poetic activism, using, as Burnett suggests, the gift exchange mechanisms to require engagement from audiences. The optimistic formula seems to be that these performers will actively challenge social and cultural representations of the female body, requiring an audience to respond in unexpected ways. The gift of the performance activates

what might be called a critical reciprocity, enabling alliances and social and cultural solidarities that are unsanctioned elsewhere. In this sense, the ‘potlatch’, or excesses which might benefit the economic status quo are recalibrated as returns on communal solidarity. Burnett draws on a range of Anglo-American performances, plays, theatre companies, conferences, texts, bodies and voicings, to illustrate the proto-Brechtian ways in which these works produce networks of reciprocity. Drawing on Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked, The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 1993), Burnett, a little mystically, suggests that ‘performance is an important method of poetry distribution’, where ‘live art as uncommodifiable combines with the personal transmission that occurs during performance to engage the audience in the cultural work of meaning-making rather than the financial work of profit-making.’ (158) This may be true, but the stronger suggestion throughout this book is that ‘meaning-making’ and ‘profit-making’ are very difficult to disentangle once rent on a performance space and the necessity of performers making a living are taken into the account books.

The final chapter, ‘Ecopoethics and the Task of Environmentalism’, explores many of the worries that poets and poetry communities share: how can I/we really activate change? Is poetic activism a form of evasive narcissism? How might difficult innovative poetics, whose readerships are already captivated by the same ideologies and formal proclivities, offer gifts to engage environmental consciousness? And, what, really, is ‘poethics’ and who does it serve? As Burnett suggests: ‘collaboration between poetic and visual arts economies [...] may present opportunities for wider audience engagement’, but, as she concedes, ‘[w]hat matters is the quality of the exchange and the receptiveness of communities involved’ (164), and, as we all know, receptivity for hard-core, defamiliarising experimental writing is hardly equivalent to a polite night at the theatre. Burnett describes several UK ecopoetic practitioners and projects – Harriet Tarlo’s ‘Clouds Descending’ (2008–9), Amy Cutler’s curated ‘Time, The Deer, is in the Wood of Hallaig’ (2013) and her own curated ecopoetic project, ‘Skylines’ (2009), for example – that wrestle with such problems. The production and creation of what Roger I. Simon describes as ‘difficult knowledge’ in these projects, with deliberately complex, contradictory and challenging materials and perspectives, is another way of engaging an audience in a collective critical thinking required for changing attitudes toward our interdependence with our environments.⁵ This chapter, as others, not only introduces a wide range of exciting, cross-disciplinary and transatlantic aesthetic practices (such as, for example, Burnett’s own *Swims* project (2014)), but also draws on a variety of interesting critical theory, making it a good primer in many of the issues prevalent in contemporary poetics, in particular how challenging it is to maintain poetic activism,

poethics or any kind of ideological agenda in the teeth of socio-political and economic resistance from neo-liberal institutions.

One last point is worth making. The prices of these academic books preclude their easy access by those poets, presses and other interested parties who might perhaps benefit most from their insights. Burnett eloquently describes the precarious but precious conditions of aesthetic practices, relationships between poets and audiences as well as between publishers, poets and their readerships. In the conclusion, Burnett is right to draw attention to the luxury of engaging in poetic projects and the necessity of holding down tenured academic roles to fund projects, many of which rely on the un-paid gifts of free intellectual, affective and physical labour. As with the types of access and privileged issues described above, the economic ecologies of our contemporary publishing world will make it difficult for most people to read this book. But these are compromises that we, as academics, must make (my book was published in the same series), running alongside and negotiating the realpolitick of academic publishing and keeping our jobs. However, this obvious aside should not detract from the generous gifts of insight offered by this book, a wager on which will pay back handsomely.

Notes

- ¹ Marilyn Strathern, *Reproducing the Future: Essays on Anthropology, Kinship and the New Reproductive Technologies* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Burnett cites this text and writes: 'The theory of the individual [...] suggests that a person's identity can be determined by that person's relations with another.' (15) As Burnett's footnote outlines, this was not Strathern's coinage and was developed by ethnosociological academics.
- ² See Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in *Studies in Culture: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan (London: Arnold, 1997), pp. 192–205.
- ³ Anne Waldman, *Outrider, Essays, Interview, Poems* (Albuquerque, NM: La Alameda Press, 2006), p. 72. Cited by Burnett, p. 87.
- ⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). Discussed by Burnett on p. 121.
- ⁵ Roger I. Simon. Afterword: The Turn to Pedagogy: A Needed Conversation on the Practice of Curating Difficult Knowledge. In *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*, ed. Erica Lehrer, Cynthia E. Milton and Monica Eileen Patterson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Cited by Burnett on p. 165.

Competing Interests

Gareth is a former co-editor of the Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry.

