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CONFERENCE REPORT

Conference Report

'Work, Performance & Poetry' Symposium, Northumbria University, 16–17 April 2015

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The fourth annual Northumbria University poetry symposium, organised by Jo Lindsay Walton, Ed Luker, and Ian Davidson, aimed to explore the relationships of work (in its many forms) to poetry and poetry performance. Aptly, the events of the symposium, which included papers, performances, and readings, took place in a project space on the first day and a cinema room on the next, calling attention to the inherent performativity of conference papers and furthermore blurring the formal distinctions between papers on poetry and poetry performance. Indeed, all of the events which I attended were stimulative and frequently entertaining, and I found myself wondering to what extent my enjoyable experience of the symposium (so far from the definition of work as drudgery) was borne from my physical proximity and live engagement with the panellists and performers. I was reminded of Richard Price's insightful comment that associations between people beyond the printed page – one example being what he calls 'body presence solidarity' – are a significant aspect of what constitutes poetry.¹

April 16th

Unfortunately, due to various reasons including extortionate train fares (privatisation of the rail as impediment to poetry solidarity?), I was unable attend the first two events of the symposium, a panel discussion on performance followed by a poetry reading and performances, held in the evening at the Northern Charter in Newcastle's city centre. My comments on this panel discussion are therefore drawn from the panellists' paper abstracts.

Nicola Singh's paper entitled 'Where and when is whose voice uttering whose thought through whose mouth and what for?' aimed to explore performance writing

as a technique wherein the artist performs the text rather than merely reading the text out loud. To consider how the unique context of a performance, i.e. the presence and characteristics of a performer's body and voice, affects the impact of the work, Singh presented the paper through a vocoder. Her abstract discusses how the work 'sit[s] somewhere between a story, catalogue, demonstration, lyric, poetry and research.' Singh's performance-paper, which comes out of her practice-led PhD in Fine Art, sounds (possibly literally) intriguing, and the paper's focus on the correlation between writing's visual and verbal aspects was a thematic interest in the next day's proceedings.

Tim Turnbull's paper, 'Poetry in the Theatre: The Irresistible Rise of the Solo Show', sought to describe how and in what conditions the one-person poetry show has developed as a concept over the last ten years in the UK. Turnbull cited such practitioners as Hannah Silva, Luke Wright, and Claire Pollard, as well as organisations producing and promoting the format such as Pinned in the Margins and Jaybird Live Literature. The paper's abstract raises some interesting questions about the relationship between the format of the solo show and their poetic content – not only in the final product but as affecting compositional processes – and whether the burgeoning popularity of the solo poetry show is symptomatic of attempts made by venues and festivals to commodify poetry into neat, one-hour slots with often hefty entry fees.

Lisa Matthews used her collaboration with poet Gillian Allnut as a site for reflection in her paper 'The quiet-space: can page-poets perform?'. Drawing a distinction between 'page-poet' and 'performance poet', Matthews's project aims to find correspondence between Allnut's minimal textuality and her own (in her words) 'visceral and overtly queer poetics.' The two have already produced a poetry event using audio-visuals, and are currently developing participatory workshops exploring various performance techniques which bring 'page-poetry' to the stage. I wondered whether the contradistinction between 'page-poet' and 'performance poet' can be problematic, seeing that many poets intentionally write for *both* page and performance space. It may also be misleading to equate poetry written on the page to quietism (I can think of plenty of 'page poets' who write clamorously).

Nathan Walker gave a paper entitled 'Writing Actions: Durational Writing in Performance'. Walker reflected on two of his own performances using language as material, NAPE and SCAW, which entailed live writing through, in his words, 'graphic mark making and phonic mouthings.' In the abstract Walker aimed to argue that these performances, though presented in the context of performance/visual art, can be of interest to contemporary experimental poetics through its exploration of duration, repeated tasks, and live writing. The project calls to my mind poet-turned performance artist-turned-architect Vito Acconci, who borrowed tactics from conceptual artists in his early poetic output.

Following the group discussion were short readings by Rhys Trimble, Camilla Nelson, Catherine Graham, and nick-e melville; a performance by Mathew Cunningham and Lyndon Harrison; a screening of a film by Lucy Beynon and Lisa Jeschke, and a poetry reading by Tom Pickard. No doubt the panel presentations provided much food for audience thinking when engaging with the performances.

April 17th

The day's symposium, held at Northumbria University, began with opening remarks from co-organisers Ed Luker and Jo Lindsay Walton. Luker stated that the aims of the conference were to investigate the various intersections between work and poetry (/performance), such as poetry about working; the non-poetic work of poets; recuperation and counter-recuperation of avant-garde poetics; transformations between work and play; poetry's relation to the labour of resistance; and gendered and otherwise divided labour in the rendering of individual experience. Walton emphasised the multiple definitions of 'work', and expressed hope for a plural and diffuse conference which would make itself available to 'virtuosity in connection making.' Certainly the fact that the panels had no titles left the task of identifying the organising principle in the attendees' court, and perhaps even lubricated the (often virtuosic) link-making during the post-panel discussions. I'd like to note that each panel was followed by thought-provoking discussions in response to the presentations, but I have not summarised them here.

Panel One: Ed Luker, Holly Pester, and nick-e melville

In Luker's paper "Truly free labouring" | truly free love, Rob Halpern's *Music for Porn*, Halpern's verse-prose book was considered as a lyrical interrogation of contemporary US political and social economy, in particular through Halpern's evocation of the figure of the dead soldier as an abstracted and ambivalent love object. Luker took as his starting points Freud's idea of eros, and Marx's concept of 'truly free labour' as non-alienating work, as binding agents of civilisation. For both theorists, freedom and ethics are borne from a certain degree of the denial of erotic compulsions. Luker argued that this opposition between libidinal desire and rationality, the necessary ingredients in Freud's and Marx's configuration of efficient society, is imploded in Halpern's work which responds to US military invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan; here, socially prohibited homosexual desire becomes transferred into the eros of nation-building as growth and expansion.

Luker's mention of Marx's idea of artistic composition as bodily strain was picked up in Holly Pester's paper entitled "Hooked on Poetry" – Cathy Wagner's *Nervous Desire* and the Posture of Performance'. Pester began by suggesting that the 'hook' of the poet's neck often witnessed at poetry readings is a visual reminder of the poem's production at the desk where the poet had laboured, head bent down. A looped montage of images of various 'hooked' bodies (including Jeff Hilson performing poetry, lap-top 'yoga' positions, and Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers*) offered often humorous counterpoints to Pester's imaginative meditation on the poet's performing posture as communicating the material memory of the poem's composition. The idea of the poet's body was further expanded through an analysis of Cathy Wagner's *Nervous Desire*, where the poet's (female) body is evoked both as the producer of work and object of work's subjection. Pester quoted a passage:

Poem a blister formed through friction, swelled atoll, sucked fluid from the body of the host. I made no money from my poems but they stasused me²

Here, the poem is situated as a device and environment to speak about the relation of art to labour. The body of poems may secure the poet her autonomy and prestige as artist, but it comes at the expense of concealing labour: the poem, formed through friction, gives no physical remuneration/sustenance for the poet. Pester's excavation of the poet's performing body hence offers a countermeasure to the conceived split between mental and physical labour in poetry.

With nick-e melville's paper 'The Corpus of Kenneth Goldsmith', the body in/of poetry wholly emerged as the panel's theme. The title is an astute play on melville's intention of 'dissecting' Goldsmith's controversial new body of work, 'The Body of Michael Brown', a re-working of an autopsy report of the black teenager who was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. melville condemned Goldsmith's poem not so much as an act of *appropriation* (a term which plays into Goldsmith's defence: 'I always massage dry text to transform them into literature'), but of expropriation, carrying a stronger implication of dispossession. A rich, white, privileged conceptual artist has insensitively seized a tragic event from a black American family in order to increase his own cultural capital. In his searing critique, melville likened Goldsmith's editorialising of the autopsy report to bodysnatching, and linked Goldsmith to Dr Robert Knox of Edinburgh, the first man to perform an autopsy on a black cadaver (sold to him by the murdering duo Burke and Hare) for the purposes of 'scientifically' illustrating the inferiority of black people. Although criticism of Goldsmith's recent poem is rife, melville's paper stands out because it not only examined the poem as an exemplification of endemic racism in the US, but offered specific examples from the poem (a very brief clip of which is available online) to demonstrate how Goldsmith's institutionalized art can be understood as part and parcel of the machinery which seeks to break down and rearrange disenfranchised bodies.

Panel Two: Lila Matsumoto, Christopher Earley, and Joe Luna

My paper, 'Ulises Carrión and "Other Books and So": Towards a new economy of poetry', discussed the contributions made by the Mexican poet and artist Ulises Carrión in

creating a space for literary studies in the field of artists' books between 1973 and 1978. Carrión explored, through the writing of theoretical essays and through praxis, the ways in which artists' books could challenge traditional ideas of the poem within a book; crucially, he experimented with not only the form of the book to challenge conventional ways of encountering and reading poetry, but also with the attendant forms of its dissemination. Recognising that art and books have traditionally circulated in separate realms, he established Other Books and So, a gallery, shop, and venue for performances, workshops, and collaborative projects focused on artists' books and bookworks. The centre was a materialisation of Carrión's aspiration to establish a new economy of poetry which entailed a greater role for the poet in the making and distribution of books not limited to the domain of art and literature, but within culture at large.

Christopher Earley's paper 'The Poet and the Engineer – Writing Infrastructure and Matter' began rather enigmatically with a discussion of climate change, and of how through the use of models, climate scientists have created flattened concepts of 'the global' which belie the complexity of earth's atmospheric conditions. Earley argued that an aspect of the committed poetry of J.H. Prynne (the aha! moment of the paper's structural relation to its content), as demonstrated in his 2011 work *Kazoo Dream Boats: On What Is*, is to navigate the movement and breaks between explanatory levels of scale in scientific discourse. Earley demonstrated how a close reading of a paper entitled 'A Closer Look at Pore Geometry', which Prynne lists in his 'Reference Cues' at the back of the book, reveals glimpses of an infrastructure which ignores or elides environmental concerns for maximal profit from the capture of hydrocarbons. Earley suggested that Prynne's poetry, in prompting us to engage with contradictions in other disciplines – and in 'keeping with the trouble', aptly quoting Donna Haraway's symbiotic approach to thinking about climate change – extends the idea of 'poetic work' into other disciplines and discourses, while at the same time being attentive to the limits of that extension.

A print-out of Joe Luna's paper, 'Poetry and the Work of Sabotage', was distributed to the symposium participants alongside the presentation, giving an interesting dimension to the presentation which stated in its opening paragraph: 'The poem

sabotages prosody by appearing to present a finished product, when really what it proves is that the product of poetic thinking is always infinitely defective.' The paper embraced as its starting point Lisa Robertson's statement that the poem is a 'prosodic gift' which resists, or sabotages, institutional and economic hermeneutics; poems are 'commodious anywheres' (Robertson again) in that they continuously evade the determination of their language as fixed thought, and are thus free to be taken up by anyone. Luna took to task Agamben's notion of the poem as existing only to be philosophised, and located the difference between Agamben's and Robertson's understanding of poetry as an epistemological one. Robertson's poetics, Luna argued, are never 'complete' inasmuch as her lyrics actively refuse fixedness; this leads perhaps to an understanding of poetry not as mere discursive mode but an embodiment of social life in its multifarious tonalities and textures.

Panel Three: Nat Raha, Nell Perry, and Juha Virtanen

With 'Queer labour in Boston: The work of gay liberation, *Fag Rag* and John Wieners', Nat Raha gave an account of John Wiener's involvement in the gay liberation movement in Boston in the 1970s, in particular with the gay male anarchist publishing collective *Fag Rag*. The magazine addressed intersecting issues of gay sexuality, race, and cultural production, and published critique of prison and psychiatric incarceration, the latter about which Wieners was particularly vocal. Earlier and contemporary poetry by Wieners (who was named the magazine's 'chair of speculative history') were featured in its pages; *Fag Rag* also gave Wieners opportunity for textural explorations of gender, as witnessed by pieces in which he signed off as Jacqueline Wieners. The extent of Wiener's gay rights activism has been largely overlooked both critically and archivally except by the gay liberation presses, which is revelatory, Raha argued, of the heteronormative attitudes of publishers and archivists who value the poetry but not the context of Wiener's political activism. Discussing 'queer labour' as an expansion of Marxist feminist conception of social reproduction – acts or activities which enable the realisation of a non-heteronormative world – Raha discussed how recuperating Wiener's activism in the broader criticism of his work would allow for a questioning more generally of what we constitute as poetic labour.

Nell Perry's paper, 'Loss, beyond the Freudian Economy', proposed a recasting and broadening of the ways that literature of loss can be read and theorised. Perry argued that Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', which explains mourning as a performed work and melancholia as an unproductive and excessive perversion of that work, has not only dominated Western theoretical conceptualisation of bereavement, but has monopolised discourses of elegy. As Perry demonstrated through examples of abundant finance metaphors used in past and contemporary elegy scholarship, the framing of mourning within the model of capital and capitalist values has led to the understanding of normal and appropriate versus abnormal and inappropriate mourning, as correlated to successful or unsuccessful acts of investment, expenditure, and exchange. Perry listed Anne Carson and Susan Howe as two poets whose works challenge and reject this (male-dominated) interpretive framework of grief in literature; it would have been interesting to see a close reading of these two authors' texts to substantiate Perry's thought-provoking reappraisal.

Juha Virtanen opened his paper "'CAPITAL CORRUGATED LINE": Work of Graffiti in the Work of Ulli Freer' with Lefebvre's invocation of the capitalist city which instils its 'radical phallic authority' through the organisation of space (e.g. the menagerie of corporate buildings dominating London's skyline, anti-homeless spikes). Graffiti is the desecration crime *par excellence* against the capitalist body politic; however, as Virtanen demonstrated through examples of uneven judicious sentencing for graffiti inscribers after the passing of the 2003 Anti-social Behaviour Act, graffitiists have been officially sanctioned when they adhere to bourgeois sensibilities of income and work. By this logic, graffiti is only a menace if it is anonymous and unproductive, as opposed to the celebrity-branded 'graffiti art' of Banksy which has effectively been folded into the culture economy. Ulli Freer's *Burner on the Buff*, Virtanen argued, acknowledges graffiti's potential to be commodified, but the poetics nonetheless remains committed to its transgressive potential. Through a close analysis of Freer's book, Virtanen suggested that Freer's work not only deals thematically with graffiti but aspires to embody graffiti in its desecration of capitalist authorities.

Panel Four: Ben Hickman, Danny Hayward, and Lisa Jeschke

In his paper 'Figures of Inward: Language and "Labour"', Ben Hickman gave an informed and droll critique of Language poetry's theoretical underpinnings. Two aspects of the 1970s New York-based poetry movement were put on trial: its claim to political activism via the conflation of linguistic and economic structures, and their self-professed avant-gardism. Hickman contextualised Language poetry's emergence with a brief sketch of the U.S. economic and political situation in 1974/5: the worst recession since the Great Depression, the dismantling of the welfare state, and increasingly neoliberal governmental measures favouring the corporation. Language poetry was a measure to fill the political vacuum created by muted opposition from Left and labour organisations through the understanding that society's primary oppression occurs through the 'profit' model of grammatical structure: hence the conception of the 'de-commodified poem'. However, as Hickman argued, Language poets' declaration of 'doing' work by imploding conventional grammar, and their claim to create open texts which actively resist capitalistic profit margins, in actuality cloaked an anti-political, elitist idealism.

Danny Hayward's scheduled paper on Brecht was replaced by an impassioned review and endorsement of Lucy Beynon and Lisa Jeschke's play 'David Cameron: A Theatre of Knife Songs'. As Hayward sketched out, the play is a half-hour production consisting of several sections which take contemporary English politics and German literary history as its source materials, played out through monologues, songs, and a dance routine by a 'pop duo' consisting of a 'professional' performer and a (near-silent) 'unskilled' contracted dancer. Hayward argued that the announcement by the 'professional' halfway through, 'So to conclude, I don't think raping David Cameron would work. Besides, I sort of love him', lies at the heart of the play's exploration of the annulment between desire and reality, a split symptomatic of so-called autonomous art sanctioned by liberal western societies. The questioning of the efficacy of committing sexual violence against the prime minister is thus the play's radical critique of ambivalence and complacency characteristic of cultural attitudes, and its modus operandi of embodying, through exhaustion, belligerence, mordancy, and

contemptuousness, the dire political circumstances which have rendered the majority of the population exploited and powerless.

Picking up on Hickman's scrutiny of Language poetry, Lisa Jeschke opened her paper, 'Women/ Work/ Songs in J.H. Prynne's *Field Notes*', with a passage from a letter by Prynne to Steve McCaffery in 1989. In it, Prynne takes to task Language poetry's claim to reorganise labour through the model of the 'liberated reader' free to form significations on their own accord. For Prynne, the conceptualisation of labour as the readers' productive engagement with a purportedly language-centred (rather than ideology-centred) writing can be likened to the supermarket experience where the concealment of labour engenders false sense of emancipation in the consumer. Countering the dominance of reception theory in the 1980s, Prynne's theory of poetic production positions poetry itself as an act of labour, the drawing out of specific and concrete historical and material conditions which underlie it. Through attentive readings of Prynne's lectures and commentaries, Jeschke sketched out Prynne's model of aesthetics which considers a poem *as* work and not merely objects of consumption awaiting activation by the reader. Jeschke's close-readings of Prynne's commentaries of Wordsworth's poems were effective, particularly in highlighting the feminist dimensions of Prynne's methodology of reading Wordsworth's lyrical poems where the imperial, male subjective I/eye is actively dismantled.

The panel component of the day was concluded by a brief response by Ian Davidson, who reflected (quite correctly) that the concept of work and poetry has offered a rich area of exploration, as evidenced by the wide range of papers which looked across many spectrums of work as manual, embodied, and intellectual. In this way, the concept of work in poetry opens itself up and would benefit from conversations with other disciplines, such as political philosophy and economics. One conversation which didn't come up, Davidson noted, was one about work specific to poetry: the act of working on or polishing a poem. The floor was then opened up to general discussion; one particularly interesting line of enquiry concerned what *doesn't* constitute work, if definitions of work are legion. Is the notion of work, for instance, necessarily linked to monetary compensation? Have we done enough to distinguish the

work of manual labour? And is there a distinction to be drawn between something that is work and something 'like' work?

After refreshments, Jennifer Cooke and Samantha Walton gave a performance entitled 'We'll Invoice You' which explored feminist critique as affective labour, especially at its intersection with poetry and creative practices. Cooke and Walton investigated the concept of the 'feminist killjoy' (coined by Sara Ahmed) through examples from feminist blogs and personal anecdotes. Their performance made clear how the internet is serving to make visible, proliferate, problematise, and provide materials for everyday feminist critique and creative work, such as the production of online invoices and PayPal accounts (e.g. The Womansplainer) which satirically claim financial compensation for 'services' for labouring against insidious discrimination. Their performance was followed by short readings by myself, Juha Virtanen, and Ed Luker.

Closing the day's events was Camilla Nelson's performance installation 'The Poetry Factory'. Six symposium participants, who had been selected beforehand as workers in the factory, assembled in the centre of the room: typist, reader, chewer, two breathers (who dried the masticated texts), and security guard; Nelson, as the foreman, controlled the pace and direction of the production via the ringing of a bell. The transposition of text-making to factory setting was at once fascinating and disturbing, with the regular beat of the typewriter and mechanistic movements of the factory workers in vivid contrast to the reader's utterances which become more and more irregular as the texts were worn away. Unbeknownst to me at the time of the performance, questions on pieces of paper were being circulated among the audience, one which (to my knowledge) provoked an 'insurgence' by some members of the audience who took away the tools of the factory (bell, chair, typewriter), hence putting a stop to the production and performance. 'The Poetry Factory', along with the performances, readings, papers, and discussions of the symposium, demonstrated categorically that the link between 'work' and 'poetry' is not merely a metaphorical one; rather, the prism of labour allows for committed and inventive explorations of poetry's relation to the division of labour, to the fleshly body, and to contested and utopian models of work's management and ownership.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Notes

- ¹ Richard Price, "To Shake the Torpid Pool": poets' pamphlets and the role of little magazines', *PS* (prose supplement to *Painted, Spoken*), 6 (2009), 15–23 (p. 16).
- ² Cathy Wagner, *Nervous Desire* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2012), p. 1.

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