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How to Cite: Carbery, M 2016 Contemporary Poetry: Thinking and Feeling. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 8(1): e6, pp. 1–16, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/biip.31>

Published: 13 December 2016

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

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CONFERENCE REPORT

Contemporary Poetry: Thinking and Feeling

University of Plymouth, Department of English & Creative Writing, 20–22 May 2016

Matthew Carbery

University of Plymouth, GB
m.carbery@hotmail.co.uk

The 'Contemporary Poetry: Thinking and Feeling' conference took place at the University of Plymouth, co-organised by Anthony Caleshu and Mandy Bloomfield. The call for papers listed a series of rhetorical questions designed as provocations, such as:

In what ways might poetry embody a process of thinking? What is the role of emotion in recent poetry? Can thinking be divided from feeling? Does a poetry of the head preclude a poetry of affect, and vice versa? Are these the terms of competing antagonisms or productive dialogues? What's the relationship between the intellect and affect?

The space between the overarching terms— 'thinking' and 'feeling'—proved open enough to accommodate discussions on a wide variety of topics; the weekend saw panels entitled 'Poethics', 'Ecopoetics', 'Contingency and Transformation', 'Poetic Exuberance', 'Post-Confessional Poetics', 'Embodiment' and 'Reworking Modernism', among others. Additionally, the conference hosted a series of diverse plenaries from a range of poet-critics: Redell Olsen, Matvei Yankelevich, Keston Sutherland, Holly Pester and Jack Underwood. I was thrilled to take part in the event, as both a chairperson and panellist, and my summary here will largely reflect my specific interests in contemporary poetics through the panels I was in attendance for.

The conference began on Friday afternoon, May 20th, with a series of parallel panels. I was grateful to chair 'Rewriting Feeling', with papers from Peter Gillies

(University of Plymouth) and Jess Cotton (University College London). Gillies delivered one of the first papers of the day, which addressed the aesthetic relationship between Charles Olson and Cy Twombly at Black Mountain College. Specifically, Gillies was interested in an intertwined 'poetics of paint' in the two bodies of work. In particular, he was keen to highlight the ongoing development of form in Twombly's work, underscoring throughout the 'improvisatory' nature of his compositions. '24 Poems to The Sea', for example, features what Gillies called 'frenetic notations' which seemed 'participants on the page'. This he drew alongside Olson's notion of composition by field, as expounded in 'Projective Verse'. Gillies also drew attention to the profound implications each artist garnered from maritime themes, especially, in the words of Robert Creeley, the idea that the sea is, like the canvas or poem-space, 'a location that was constantly occurring'.

Following Gillies was Jess Cotton, whose paper, 'Black Transparency/Radical Opacity' brought together American poets Anne Boyer, Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr. Cotton was keen to address the fact that, for these poets, 'opacity and transparency are not a duality', which she evidenced with reference to major collections by each writer— *Garments Against Women* (2015), *Citizen* (2014) and *That Winter the Wolf Came* (2015) respectively. In these works, Cotton saw similarities in the various ways in which 'opacities can coexist and converge', a theme prevalent in the paper itself through its bringing together of poets concerned with the semiotics of outward appearances, particularly those determined by skin colour and women's clothing. Cotton began by quoting an opening section of Boyer's *Garments*— 'Her misery doesn't require acts. Her misery requires conditions.' These conditions are not only the machinations of capital, as witnessed in shopping malls and thrift stores, but the garments which embody these conditions. In one section, Boyer writes of shopping for shoes with her daughter, where the latter at first appears to be 'weeping so that I might change my mind and buy the \$44 shoes, but soon she was unable to stop weeping.' The conditions of misery here seem both vague and familiar— 'at first' weeping over not getting the purchase one wants seems childish, but as Boyer continues: 'in the car I wanted to weep, too, but she said to me "I am still a child and

am learning to control my impulses and emotions.” It is a question of opacity— the outward appearance of the weeping child suggests want, and Boyer’s inversion establishes the consumer as a child-like agent similarly commanded by want. Drawing on this and Gillies’ ‘poetics of paint’, discussion following the panel circulated around the various meanings ‘surface’ takes on in works of poetry, and how ‘surface’ can embody both the opaque and the transparent.

In parallel with this panel, Camilla Nelson (Schumacher College) and Scott Thurston (University of Salford) co-presented a session entitled ‘Movement in Poetry’ chaired by Mandy Bloomfield. Nelson began by presenting a performance lecture based on her collaboration with Palestinian dancer Khaled Bargouthi ‘Reading Movement’ which began with a film of a recent performance of this work at Dartington Hall. Standing-in for Bargouthi, Thurston simulated various aspects of the dancer’s role in the performance by, for example, manipulating Nelson’s head while she was attempting to read from her notes. Later Nelson in turn started to manipulate Thurston whilst he was seated, writing into a notebook. These interventions were designed to make one aware of the embodied nature of reading and writing, and indeed of meaning – Nelson’s lecture setting the concerns of researchers like Mark Johnson in the context of eco-poetics: ‘there is a certain way of thinking that is elicited from us or in us by virtue of our inhabitation of our environment.’ Nelson’s enquiry was particularly concerned with how the way we read and write affects the way we understand and experience the world: if meaning is embodied, an important factor of this is the cognitive significance of emotion, or feeling, and for Johnson ‘emotions are processes of organism-environment interactions’. In this way Nelson addressed the concerns of the conference head-on whilst also using Judith Butler’s work in order to develop a complex, relational poetics of embodiment.

Thurston’s paper was also somewhat unconventional in that he began by inviting the audience down to the front of the lecture theatre whereupon he led the group in a short movement awareness exercise from Moshe Feldenkreis which focused on the theme of ‘swinging while standing’. This set the scene for Thurston’s brief theoretical summary of the thought and feeling binary, linking to the work

of Carrie Noland and Mark Johnson, before opening up more detailed attention to Daniel Stern's (1924–2012) work on the concept of vitality dynamics: a model for theorising how we experience the meaning of cultural products through a pentad of time, movement, force, space and intention. This part of the paper gave way to a duet with Nelson in which they improvised in movement to each word of a phrase from Reverdy (translated by Richard Howard): 'the limit of our chaotic movements in that narrow space already renewed.' Thurston used this example to discuss Stern's interest in collaboration across art forms as a way of exploring the transferability of vitality dynamics. Reciting a list of collaborations between poets and dancers in the last 30 years or so, Thurston introduced his own collaborative project with dancer Sarie Mairs Slee and showed a short piece of solo choreography – first giving the lines of poetry that it derived from, then showing the movement and then running both together as they are intended in performance. Following the presentation of these two unusual and interwoven papers, Bloomfield chaired a rich and lively discussion.

The following panel, 'Contingency and Transformation', was chaired by Camilla Nelson and featured presentations from Natalie Pollard (University of Exeter), Mark Leahy (Falmouth University) and myself. Pollard's paper— 'Metamorphosis, Mutability and Paul Muldoon'— addressed a number of ways in which 'mutation might come at some cost' in Muldoon's work. In particular, Pollard was interested in the entropic properties of decay and illness. Through a reading of 'The Humors of Hakone' from 2010's *Maggot*, she drew out the forensic intent of Muldoon's poetry, where the poem 'decomposes' like 'the scene of the crime'. Pollard's paper was particularly strong in its bringing together of this thematic across Muldoon's work, and stood as a complement to Leahy's paper which followed— 'Transcriptions of Seeing/Hearing Voices in Poetry by Hannah Weiner and Holly Pester'— which addressed structural devices in poetics which integrated technologies in their presentation. In particular, his interest lay in what he called 'the voicing body in poetry'. Through a reading of Pester's 'Buddy Holly is on my Answer Machine', a work which explores in Leahy's phrase 'sound contamination', the 'body' of the poem is subject to a contingency on behalf of both the witness-reader and the technology involved— the fast-forwarding

and rewinding creating a 'skipping' directionality in which communication is experienced primarily as affective rather than didactic. This thematic was identified also in Hannah Wiener's *Code Poems* (1982), which is a poetic-dramatic work based on semaphore communication. Wiener stages Romeo and Juliet in this manner, playing with the effects of essentially pragmatic sign-language in a somewhat absurd recontextualisation:

Romeo: Stop, heave to, or come nearer, I have something to communicate

Juliet: Sorry I am unable to comply with your request

Romeo: The following is plain language

Leahy observed here that the strictures of a code can necessitate improvisation, which established a thematic bridge to my own paper— 'Improvised Thought Felt: Thresholds in Free Jazz and 20th Century Poetics'. I sought to present a survey of American writers working in a jazz idiom, and made efforts to distinguish the differences between a jazz aesthetic and a jazz poetics, the former relying on 'pose' than the latter's attempts to create an interdisciplinary embodiment of jazz theory and philosophy. Drawing specifically on Nathaniel Mackey's long poems 'Song of the Andoumboulou' and 'Mu', I was keen to identify improvisation as occupying a threshold between the thought and the felt, or the planned and the spontaneous. In this regard, a key unifying feature across the panel was the notion of the poem as process. Whether improvisatory, entropic or technological, each presentation dealt with what happens to language in the poem when it begins to question its own ongoingness. A distinction was raised during the following discussion between this notion of 'poem as process' in that, for a poet like Muldoon, process is primarily a thematic occupation rather than, in the work of Nathaniel Mackey or Hannah Weiner, a constitutive fact of the poem's form.

After a short break it was time for the first plenary of the conference. Redell Olsen's performance-essay 'Proposals for Landscapes: and Other Mutual Antipathies' was an ambitious audio-visual presentation which sought to address 'a thinking-feeling in the immediacy of what's coming'. It was specifically the threshold between

the 'felt-thought' that Olsen identified as allowing 'multiple registers of material and linguistic possibilities'. In particular, this took the form of negotiating between lyric poetic modes and conceptualisms. After some theoretical groundwork, which drew on both Emily Dickinson and Brian Massumi, Olsen's plenary developed into a poem, where slides with short phrases from what appeared to be two distinct voices flashed before the audience as she read them aloud. The effect was to create a space in which that which was being thought through was felt as an interaction between voice, presence and image. Olsen referred to this as 'affective presence'. The development of argument through a 'landscape' was further underscored by the presentation's closing short film, which over the course of about three minutes showed a field sheeted in plastic being buffeted by the wind, changing shade and contrast as the light altered. Following the plenary, University of Plymouth's Periplum Press, who recently published chapbooks by Mark Ford and Peter Gizzi, ran a local ale and wine reception. The delegates then walked through a torrential downpour across Plymouth's historical Hoe area for dinner at The Waterfront.

Saturday morning began with a particularly unique and interesting panel in the form of 'The Plymouth Poetry Scene from the Inside' (chaired by Scott Thurston). This brought together independent scholars and poets Steve Spence, Norman Jope and Kenny Knight – three key figures of the Plymouth Language Club (PLC), an important reading series which has been running in the city since 2000. With everyone sitting in a circle, Knight arranged a series of newspaper cuttings on the floor from the Plymouth Herald's 'Literary City' column authored by William Telford (who was also in attendance). After short introductions from the chair detailing the poetic careers of the three speakers, Jope got proceedings underway with a thoughtful contextualising of the Plymouth poetry scene in terms of the city's relative geographical and cultural isolation, suggesting at one point that it resembled 'a northern city in the south' and noting also its tensions between cultural conservatism and radicalism. Spence sketched out a history of the scene, noting how an event in November 1991 to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Rimbaud's death, brought the key protagonists together in the same room for the first time. Spence mentioned The Poetry

Exchange (1993 to 2000), a writer's group which he found both supportive and critically engaging and which was the forerunner of the PLC which got underway in 2000 when some funding was received to organise regular events. Spence read a list of readers to the PLC from Tim Allen's essay in *Cusp: Recollections of Poetry in Transition* (Shearsman, 2012), which was an impressive roster indeed including figures as distinguished and diverse as Alice Notley, Maggie O'Sullivan, Lee Harwood, Helen MacDonald and Barry MacSweeney. Knight continued the survey by recounting how he met Tim Allen at a reading by Peter Orlovsky and Allen Ginsberg around 1980 and later joined the Swarthmore poets writing group before becoming involved in The Poetry Exchange. Knight has been running a new group called Cross Country Writers for three years, which has had a remarkable 150 readers in that time, and he also noted a general increase in poetic activity in the city over the last five years. The chair then read a statement from Tim Allen, now resident in Lancashire, which briefly recounted his own experience of the scene and his attention to local cultural 'fault lines', not least the controversy around the appointment of a Poet Laureate to the city in 2013 which gave Plymouth a period of its own poetry wars. As Telford pointed out, however regrettable the circumstances around the appointment, it got large numbers of people talking about poetry in an almost unprecedented way, proof, were it needed, that poetry is important, and people do care about it.

At this point the panel shifted into poetic mode with short readings from the speakers, very much bringing the poetics of the discussion directly into the room. Knight's poem 'A Long Weekend on the Sofa' (online at Leafe Books) was written from the point of view of his own book – *The Honicknowle Book of the Dead* – on the shelf of the local Waterstones, whilst Jope imagined oracular sequestration in the sea cage of Plymouth harbour and Spence's pirates came out to play in 'On the Hoe.' A rich discussion followed which continued to trace Allen's fault lines, whilst also celebrating the achievements of the scene, such as the publication of *In the Presence of Sharks* (2006) an anthology of Plymouth poetry edited by Jope and the late Ian Robinson. Alan Munton, who wrote the afterword, was also in attendance and spoke very warmly of his experiences of poetry in Plymouth. Telford however

sounded a note of caution about the capacity of the modern newspaper to maintain niche coverage of local scenes, and it was generally acknowledged that his 'Literary City' column appears to be unique in the UK. In this context, Jope also appealed for the necessity of links to the national scene, whilst the chair indicated his own links to Plymouth and his awareness of its activity from his North-West perspective for almost twenty years. Thus this warm and fascinating panel drew to a close.

Simultaneous to this, Gareth Farmer (University of Bedfordshire) chaired a panel entitled 'Post-Confessional Poetics' featuring Kat Peddie (University of Kent) and Sophie Robinson (University of East Anglia). Peddie opened with her talk on contemporary reconfigurations of so-called confessional modes in poetics. Specifically, she was interested in figures such as Maggie Nelson, Claudia Rankine, Lyn Hejinian and Anne Boyer, and in particular a trend visible in contemporary poetics to present 'the subject as a body that feels'. This focus on affect bears relation to confessionalism in that, in the work of these poets and others, it is the body which itself confesses through sensation. This scrutiny of the body carried over into Sophie Robinson's excellent paper on the somatic poetics of C.A. Conrad and Eileen Myles. For me, this was an eye-opening presentation not only in its pertinent close readings of what Robinson termed 'queer trauma' but in the care it took to contextualise particular poems within their conditions of composition. One particularly stark example of this came in the form of Conrad's retelling of the execution of his boyfriend Earth. Conrad's response—"What does it take to get a faggot's execution investigated? POEMS!! The weight of poems has arrived!!"—was to create a series of (Soma)tic poetry exercises involving visiting locations and carrying out a series of rituals. In this sense, both Peddie and Robinson were concerned not only with embodiment as a mode of confession but with what happens to such attempts at embodiment when confronted with the real fact of trauma, and specifically homophobic and/or sexist traumas.

After a short coffee break, conference co-organiser Anthony Caleshu chaired a panel entitled 'Measuring Feeling', which featured papers from Daniel Katz (University of Warwick), Ben Hickman (University of Kent) and Iain Rowley (University of East Anglia). Hickman opened the panel with his paper 'Beyond Showing and Telling:

Consciousness After the Avant-Garde', which took aim at recent Conceptualist works by Kenneth Goldsmith with a view to identifying supposedly new revolutionary ideas in aesthetics as having their roots not only in Language Poetry forbears but as far back as early twentieth century artistic movements. Hickman sought to present an alternative to these outdated and arguably extremely cynical modes of experimentation—with particular reference to Goldsmith's 'The Body of Michael Brown'—in turning to poets such as Ben Lerner, Peter Gizzi and Juliana Spahr, whom he grouped as working with 'vulnerability against "heroic" avant-gardism'. Hickman's sense of 'vulnerability' was developed somewhat from the work of Judith Butler, but more so from the poets themselves. This sense of invigorated and politically engaged contemporary lyric poetry carried over into Dan Katz's paper, entitled 'Peter Gizzi and Ben Lerner: The Cold and The Cold in Recent American Poetry'. Katz was seeking to highlight the paratactic qualities in Gizzi's and Lerner's work, specifically the disturbance of lyric and narrative subject. The 'cold' in question was addressed with reference to Gizzi's excellent poem 'A Panic That Can Still Come Upon Me'. Katz commented on the tension established throughout by an insistent procession of lines beginning 'if'. These 'ifs' never seem to find resolution, and as such vulnerability here is figured as a generative openness, wedded both to lyric tradition and a self-reflexive scrutiny of language. Following this, Rowley's paper, on themes of childbirth and midwifery in Mina Loy's long poem 'Parturition', was a slight diversion from the topics covered in the other two papers, but offered a less contemporary example of a poetics of 'vulnerability'. This underscored the sense in which experimentation in poetic form is often in some way related to taking particular risks which leave the poet exposed.

This theme carried over somewhat into the second plenary of the conference, delivered by Matvei Yankelevich, poet and cofounder of Ugly Duckling Presse. Entitled 'Saliva: Moscow Conceptualism's Reclamation of Poetry and Sentiment', Yankelevich's talk appeared to have two main ambitions— to present a thesis concerning what he called 'romantic conceptualism' and to bring to light a number of Russian and Eastern European poets whose work is largely unknown in the UK. In this latter ambition, Yankelevich's important work as curator of the Eastern European Poets Series and

editor of *6x6* proved a valuable resource, referring to the Moscow Collective Action Group and figures such as Dmitry Prigov, Steven Zultanski, Vsevolod Nekrasov and Lev Rubinstein. The 'saliva' of his title referred to the Russian etymology in which dribble/drivel refers to an over-emotive earnestness which lacks self-awareness, which Yankelevich related to some conventional perceptions of the romantic lyric self. Conceptualisms, he argued, did not need to set themselves in opposition to this 'dribbling' mode, but could instead seek to develop a space wherein the conceptual thought and the lyrical feeling could work together in tension. One such example of this is Dmitry Prigov's project of composing 24,000 poems, one poem per month for 2,000 years. The intention is not entirely conceptual as, unlike in the work of Kenneth Goldsmith, it cannot be autonomously achieved, but neither is it simply a case of writing 24,000 lyric poems— the impossible teleology of the project straddles lyrical and conceptual impulses, as though *The Cantos* or "A" were always planned to fail. Of all the plenaries, Yankelevich's seemed to speak most directly to a contemporary situation in which 'thinking' and 'feeling' are not necessarily at odds but permeable in a number of generative ways.

Yankelevich's plenary was followed by a panel entitled 'Language Under Poetic Scrutiny', chaired by Plymouth's David Sergeant. Opening the panel was Peter Middleton (University of Southampton), with a presentation entitled 'Poetry and the Expanding Universe of Language'. The cosmology implied in the title here was largely metaphorical, in the sense that Middleton's intention was to present 'a satellite picture of modernity' through readings of J.H. Prynne, Fred Moten and Juliana Spahr. In particular, Middleton wished to address 'English's expansionist tendencies', and how these tendencies are critiqued in the works of the aforementioned poets. In making this move he drew on Timothy Morton's 'hyperobjects', posing the notion that language is one such porous totality. In Fred Moten's *The Feel Trio*, for example, Middleton drew attention to the ways in which Moten's jazz-informed poetics utilises non-verbal improvisatory communication in a manner which displays an 'expansion' of language.

Following this, Gareth Farmer (University of Bedfordshire) delivered a paper entitled 'Post-Mimetic Poetics'. Farmer sought to identify recent trends in contemporary

poetry which displayed movement beyond a notion of poetry as embodying different registers of thought. In this regard, he drew our attention to poetries which can be seen to operate not autonomously but independently of perceived realities, generatively using this chiasmic interchange to suggest dynamic and immanent forms of linguistic innovation. Drawing in particular on Denise Riley and Simon Jarvis, the paper challenged foundational Aristotelian aesthetic beliefs and raised significant questions concerning the boundaries between the phenomenologically experiential and the aesthetic. In this sense, Farmer's paper gestured at a posthuman hermeneutics, which liberates poetic form from being necessarily tied to any one mode of privileged subjectivity. This notion was commensurate with, in particular, the work of Juliana Spahr, whose poetry was referenced frequently over the course of the conference.

The strictures of borders also preoccupied the following paper by David Herd (University of Kent). Herd's paper was, for me, the highlight of the conference. Particularly in light of the then upcoming Brexit Referendum, the topic in question – Theresa May's desire to create an actively hostile environment in the UK to dissuade immigration – was both heartfelt and urgent, and the majority of post-panel discussion centred on these very real concerns. Entitled 'Poetry in the Age of Deportation', Herd's impassioned close reading of the 2016 Immigration Act alongside Hannah Arendt's 'We Refugees' identified the former as very clearly criminalising the immigration process. Specifically, Herd sought to present this not only as a document but crucially as an act of language. Quoting Arendt's *The Human Condition*, Herd stressed the fact that 'a life without speech or action is literally dead to the world', framing this in the context of immigration tribunals which take place often without the presence of the party concerned and even more frequently in an alien language, making the act of communication itself a hostile engagement. Herd closed his paper by suggesting a number of ways in which we as members of academic communities can assist those held in indefinite detention. Notably these acts of assistance were to take place in language, through writing and translating letters, as well as documenting the stories of migrants and refugees. This latter task is largely the focus of *Refugee Tales*, an organisation with which Herd is involved.

This fascinating panel was followed by the third Plenary of the conference, delivered by Keston Sutherland (University of Sussex). Sutherland opened his plenary—entitled ‘Naked Intensity’— by stating he would be offering a very compressed account of ‘what it feels like to be alive’. In this task he sought to present what he described as Karl Marx’s poetics. By this he meant not Marx’s own thinking about poetry or early poetic works but rather the task of extracting from Marx’s economic and philosophical writings a means of perceiving the tensions within poems. This, he argued, had been ‘paraphrased out of existence in translation’, and as such much of the talk was devoted to reengaging with original texts and documents to discover precisely what kind of ‘poetical thinker’ Marx in fact was. This task led Sutherland towards a mortality and teleology gleaned from Marx’s major intellectual forebear Feuerbach, who stated that ‘There exists only one death [. . .] if you die, you die totally’. Throughout, Sutherland insisted on a stark materialist poetics in both Marx and Feuerbach, going so far as to clarify this desire to avoid abstraction as ‘love’. ‘It is only in love’, Sutherland commented, ‘that the secret of being is revealed’. Perhaps the most striking and engaging moments of Sutherland’s presentation were found in his close reading of sections of Verity Spott’s *Trans* Manifestos* (2016). After displaying and reading a particularly violent series of textual operations which addressed transphobic abuse, Sutherland asked simply ‘how is it possible to read this?’ It seemed that the Marxist poetics in question, revealed as a thoroughly materialist and *loving* understanding of the relationship between poet and poem, could be used as a means of countering such difficulties foremost with a critical compassion.

The final day of the conference began with a panel entitled ‘Languages of Resistance’, featuring three papers which addressed rioting and the poetics of direct action. I was honoured as chair of this panel to also provide an improvisatory tenor saxophone overture at the invitation of William Rowe, Helen Dimos and Stephen Mooney, before Dimos began her paper, ‘Language of the Pores – Necessary Poetry’. Dimos’ presentation was structured as a series of ‘scenes’, which functioned less as a dramatic organisational principle and more as aphorisms, standing alongside each other distinctly whilst simultaneously permeating thematically across their span.

This was an intentional intersectionality in fitting with the 'porous' surface of poetry Dimos sought to address. She argued for a conception of the poem in which the poetic voice 'spoke from the pores', operating as a kind of osmosis, a radically open and crucially breathable surface. Following this, Mooney's paper 'Poetic as political response – the War Machine in Will Rowe's *Nation*' addressed his fellow panellist's recent collection of poetry which articulated responses to the London Riots in 2011. Mooney's identification of Rowe's poetry as developing a 'visceral poetics' utilised this term to refer not only to the poem as a collection of organs functioning together to articulate their body, but also to address the conference's eponymous dichotomy of thought and feeling. Rowe himself identified poets with whom he felt an affinity in adopting this mode— particularly in Sean Bonney's *Letters Against the Firmament* and Spahr's *That Winter the Wolf Came*. Both collections frame riots and instances of direct action in their poems, and Rowe sought to voice this theme through the notion of the event, asking: What is the time of riot? Drawing on Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, Rowe brought attention to the necessity of bearing witness and of making testimony. He also moved towards identifying instances of violent poetics, perhaps the best example of which he found in Bonney's 'hex' poems, which he described as having 'malevolent alphabets'. What unified the panel was a sense of urgency, and specifically of the necessity of poetics which are themselves urgent, violently addressing the interstices of time/event/action so as not to merely bear passive witness to violences committed on the disenfranchised.

The final plenary of the conference was jointly given by Holly Pester (University of Essex) and Jack Underwood (Goldsmiths) and chaired by Plymouth's Anthony Caleshu. Pester's presentation was entitled 'Nervousness as Style' and she prefixed it with an indication that she was not thinking of anxiety in a Heideggerian sense in terms of individuality and self-awareness but rather how worry becomes the scene of bodies: tentacular, related, affected and affective – linking this perspective to Donna Haraway. Other references for this train of thought included Bataille's notion of love-sickness, how Gertrude Stein's plays 'play on the nerves of the audience' and Perizi and Terranova's essay on 'Heat-Death' (2000) which discusses how the

'turbulent' body is entangled with Capitalism. Turning to Cathy Wagner's poetry by way of example, Pester discussed poems from Wagner's *My New Job* (2009) in which physical therapy exercises become the ground for examining how gestures of the body are linked with social dynamics. Referring to Kathi Weeks' *The Problem with Work* (2011), Pester asked 'can the body express itself out of the currency of work?' and discussed women and queer bodies under the discipline and control of work in Nat Raha's poem '(when we're working whilst we're asleep)' (2015) and Wagner's *Nervous Desire* (2012). Pester's second key question concerned how to think, write and perform with nervousness when it belies a power struggle with life. Crucially, she recognised the inability to escape from the 'structures that produce me' even as the body continues to resist in its nervousness, and described her current work with lullabies as concerned with resistance to the reproducibility of the body.

Underwood spoke to the title 'A brief manifesto in favour of Kindness' in a breezy manner which belied the seriousness of his preoccupations. Opening with the gambit that he was trying to speak to 'everyone at once' he referred to remarks by Sam Riviere 'I no longer trust my opinions' and Craig Raine 'if I worried about bad readers, I'd've given up writing poetry long ago' as the context for an analysis based on Lorraine Code's view that, although whatever one thinks one knows about poetry cannot be generalised, white men police what is good and bad amongst readers and poems. Underwood challenged Raine's poem 'Gatwick' as an 'awful sexist poem' and an example of the confidence of white men in insisting on their knowledge, a position Underwood linked to Sandeep Parmar's important article 'Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK' (2015). Underwood's antidote to this state of affairs was to evoke poetry as a 'fundamentally empathetic dialogue', accusing the fashion for Uncreative writing as conjuring the author figure whilst claiming the opposite, with the absence of the 'I' becoming the 'ego's biggest anvil'. Arguing that we should take the 'ego out of categorisation'(!) Underwood made an appeal to 'stop nurturing literary snobbery' ('those making poems from North London tapas menus – you are not under threat from slam!') and argued for the reembodyment of the poem as a 'vital weapon' against silence for black, gay and queer writers. Underwood sketched a

model of the 'kind' poem (reminiscent of Douglas Oliver and Peter Riley's poetics) as an invitation for participation that incorporates concern for others into one's own, accommodating subjectivity into objectivity and being prepared to talk about universality. A 'kind poem', he argued, had no good or bad readers, and metaphor itself was an act of kindness.

Following these fascinating talks, the plenary transitioned into a poetry reading with Pester offering some of her new 'untitled lullaby' texts, one of which memorably détourned a disability questionnaire, whilst another was linked to early medical abortion: 'why does my tailbone hurt?' This was devastatingly good poetry – nimble, smart and funny. Underwood's performance was appealing for its candour and sensitivity – walking the walk of his 'kind' poetics in lines such as: 'people are unfinished and made between each other.' This was a satisfying conclusion to the conference in its clear appeal to the overall theme and the awareness of the continuity of critical and creative practice in the work of these two inspiring young writers.

Overall, the conference left a strong impression, particularly in the myriad unifying themes presented and raised in discussions over the weekend. There may have been a worry, perhaps, that with focal points as wide-ranging as 'thinking' and 'feeling', conversation may have been lacking specificity. However, a sense of urgency prevailed throughout many panels, and on the question of the duality of the 'thought' and the 'felt', responses frequently raised notions of affect, embodiment and the importance of poetic activity as *praxis*. In plenaries and papers which broached themes of rioting, queer confession, Karl Marx's poetics, refugee tales, local poetry movements and avant-garde methodologies, there appeared a pervasive sense of the necessity for criticism to bear witness to the climates and contexts in which poetics are engendered and conceived. Given the timing of the event, weeks before the Brexit referendum, it was reassuring to hear so many people both inside and outside of academia seeking to address this prevailing turbulence in a generative and pro-active manner.

Dr Matthew Carbery

University of Plymouth

(with thanks to Scott Thurston and Harrison Sullivan for contributing to this report)

Competing Interests

Dr Matthew Carbery works at the University of Plymouth and is Editorial and Marketing Assistant for Periplum Press. He was not involved in the organisation of the conference but did deliver a paper on the first day.

How to cite this article: Carbery, M 2016 Contemporary Poetry: Thinking and Feeling. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 8(1):e6, pp.1–16, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/biip.31>

Published: 13 December 2016

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