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Free Poetry: Performance Notes on the Poetic Economy in Canada

The first lesson I learned working in a bookstore is: poetry doesn't sell. People will pay money for prose fiction or to see music, theatre, film, burlesque, people fighting, even the pint of beer that lubricates a poetry reading but for some unfathomable reason, people expect poetry to be free. There is an assumption that poetry is like pure math or science: a voyage of discovery with no sure destination or product. Poetry is a risky business. Language may be undermined, overridden or cast into doubt during the process of writing or hearing a poem. And poets are over all assumed to be altruistic; to make poems for the sheer pleasure of creation. There is something to this idea that poems (and poets) have an intrinsic value. I'm borrowing this phrase from deep ecology. Something about it seems to hark back to the oral tradition where poets had a high place in the economy based on the power and necessity of words and their deftness with them. But the notion of intrinsic value goes beyond the exchange of goods and the valuation of things. It works against the commodification of things (such as poems and poets) and asserts that everyone and everything has an indeterminable value in and of itself.

It was Sheri-D Wilson, poet, teacher, agitator and artistic director of The Calgary International Festival of Spoken Word and curator of the Banff Spoken Word Program, who turned me onto H.D., Naropa, Bob Holman's work at the Bowery Poetry Club, and in a larger sense, to the Surrealists and Beat poets (though I had been very enthusiastically reading both groups since I was a teenager, I had missed some of the important women in both movements and there's nothing like a shot of Sheri-D's boundless energy to make you look at things in a new and deeper light). She also turned me onto the possibility and necessity of organizing and archiving poetry events beyond the (not to be snubbed) local pub reading and

library collection. It was because of her that I ended up at the Bowery Poetry Club's Study Abroad at the Bowery in August 2005. Before being a student of Sheri-D's, I had an affinity for the experimental, the mystical, the political the poetic and the abstract. My mother is an artist who works mainly with abstract landscapes in different media. So I had a natural inclination towards a poetics that somehow challenges the consumerism and pressures of late capitalism that I grew up drowning in. Small press publications, chap books and zines have appealed to me since my cousin sent me some of her early zines and the Riot Grrl publications from Vancouver when I was twelve. I have read and written poetry since I was a child and you can find me at a pub listening to poetry at least once a week. But that summer I saw the infrastructure of the Canadian poetry scene and the poetry being produced in a way that I never had before.

To come back to an idealistic view: the gift of poetry is the gift of the imagination, through the creative process and the eventual poem. The life one lives through and around the process and the eventual poem. Poems are spells. They are nets of words that create and disrupt relationships, ideas, images and sounds. They have power and energy. They are different than advertisements. Or are they? What is a particular poem trying to sell? A way of life? A way out of life? A way of discovery? Each poem, of course, is a different riddle. And as poet Catherine Kidd says: "And in the end, she finds that getting there was not only *half* the fun, but *all* of it."

As a queer poet who often works in performance, and who is heavily under the influence of collage living in a rich country (poetically and otherwise), I have been fortunate to have the means to create poems: time to think and freedom of speech. And there have been many very generous teachers who have shared their experiences, ideas, time, energy and even on occasion, their homes. My privilege is not something that I take lightly. Because of the support that I have received in many different forms, I find myself with enough time and energy to write, to read, to perform, and to explore creativity. I live in a city with a good library system and although such things are always under threat in conservative political environments such as the one we are currently riding out, I have access to a wide

variety of poetic expression. Festivals such as the Calgary International Festival of Spoken Word and Montreal's Festival Voix Des Ameriques (where John Giorno was the Guest of Honour in February 2008 and Di Kimm is the artistic director), small presses such as BookThug, and Conundrum and Arsenal Pulp Press and Frontanac House, local reading series such as the Art Bar, the I.V. lounge and Plasticine Reading Series (to name only three of the many fabulous Toronto offerings), poetry projects such as Wendy Morton's Random Acts of Poetry (where poetry is read and given away for free to strangers on the street and it's all sponsored), and the growing network of poetry slams, are all essential to the infrastructure poetics in Canada.