

In Interview: Jennifer Firestone and Eileen Myles

Jennifer Bartlett: Jennifer, can you briefly discuss your Letters project – which was featured in a previous issue of How2, and Jacket? Is it a project directly or indirectly related to mentorship? Jacket states that in the project “writers talk about the endemic hierarchies and problems in older models of apprenticeship.” Can either of you expand on this notion of outdated thinking?

Jennifer Firestone: The project first came about five years ago and is now coming to print with Saturnalia Books in Fall 2008. Dana Teen Lomax and I were looking to begin a project that was collaborative by nature and would connect poets who may or may not have access to each other in their day-to-day lives. We wanted to try on something different, not a book of poetics, or anthology of poetry, something that might lead writers to traipse through vulnerable, maybe even uncomfortable grounds.

Dana and I also had questions about Rilke's *Letters To A Young Poet*. We were curious about this book's easy appeal and particularly the omission from the book of the letters of the young writer, Franz Xaver Kappus. We hadn't heard people speak about this omission and it was difficult for us not to see it as part of the problems embedded within a "mentoring" relationship. Perhaps Kappus' letters weren't all that compelling. Perhaps he didn't want to see them in print. Whatever the case may be, we wondered what Kappus actually asked Rilke and how much Rilke's responses about writing and his two cents about love, among other things, spoke to Kappus' queries. Yet I want to make clear that Rilke's book wasn't so much the center of our concerns. The real desire was to get interesting, vibrant people from different generations and aesthetics in conversation with each other. The bonus that came from this is I think people did end up testing the idea of mentorship, trying it on, dissecting it, smushing it to the ground, etc. And all this grappling was very interesting.

Mentorship does reek of hierarchy. It's a problem, has always been. And real connection and growth does seem to develop from more organic friendships and relationships over the work one does – and with your own peers. More and more I see how that's where things really happen. We publish each other's books, introduce each other's readings and read with each other, it feels great, you feel seen and you don't have to take a boiling shower as soon as you get home.

BUT, just to play the other side, I can say that I've heard many of my peers talk to the fact that they'd like more of a mentor figure in their lives, that they feel older artists are kind of not around or available to them. What is this desire? Is it really about wanting/needing someone who's done what you think you want to do, to let you ride on their coattails for a little bit or whisper in your ear? I'm not sure. Is it not fair to want this kind of relationship (maybe mentoring is altogether the wrong word!) as everyone is so maxed out with time and energy so the absence

some younger writers might feel is a larger societal shift toward less access to others? Or are some just less willing to give?

And yet I'm also thinking about what a poet friend of mine once said to me. She was telling me about how when she gets down and doesn't feel seen for her work she'll make her own little handmade books of poetry or something along those lines. I love how she would kind of reposition herself out of the external light and focus on her own art-making. I'm interested in challenging myself with that idea and trying to reprogram myself away from external approval.

JB: How does your own relationship defy the old models?

Eileen Myles: I'm not sure we're in a mode of defiance. I've had a terrific experience exchanging thoughts and letters with Jennifer. I hope we do pursue a friendship in the future. For now especially being on opposite coasts I assume we're both knee deep in work. I would say in the exchange we've had that there's been a lot of honesty and generosity and deep appreciation of one another's work. What if it was bad? Could we say that? It hasn't been.

JF: I loved Eileen's letters. She's got an amazing mind. Her letters were generous, sensitive, smart, compelling and funny as hell. We had zero relationship before the project began. I always appreciated her writing and had gone to her readings in the past. I knew I wanted to invite her to be a part of this project. Then (Eileen correct me if my memory is wrong) she was open to being matched with a poet for this project. We tried to let poets make their own choices of whom they'd like to write to. I think Eileen might have even asked me for a suggestion and audaciously I suggested myself. I sent her some poems and then it was a done deal and the exchange began.

JB: Were the letters featured in How2, as part of this project, your first connection? How has your relationship grown since then? Would you consider your relationship one of mentorship?

EM: First personal connection, yes. I think there's a lot of assumptions in your questions. I would say time will tell whether Jennifer and I become friends. I loathe the term mentorship. It just sounds like professionalized friendship. We do have careers and friendships occur there. I just didn't come up (I mean like grow up) with that language (mentorship) and don't really like the system that supports it. It seems extremely capitalist.

We don't have a very capitalist friendship. Nope.

JF: My last response speaks to how we first connected. *How2* published our first

exchange from the Letters book. I also hope for a friendship with Eileen but at the same time I don't want to walk around with any presumptions, a sense of entitlement because we had the exchange.... of course if it happens, great, I'm all for it. Her letters deeply resonated with me and helped me in many ways and I think (not sure if this was conscious or not) Eileen really tried to shrink the power gap right from the beginning. She immediately asked to see my writing and she READ my work. I mean really read it and engaged me as a person and artist.

JB: How necessary is the role of mentorship in poetry? Do you think it's necessary for a young poet to be introduced by a mid-career poet in order to gain recognition?

EM: I think it's highly unnecessary but a gift when it occurs. Mentorship is totally hierarchical as a reigning reality. It suggests that someone has the keys to the kingdom. I think your own horizontal friendships are way more important and really are the future. I think it's a gift if both poets are genuinely excited by the possibilities in one another's work. Sure, I help young poets I admire. Plus the colonies and graduate programs require letters of recommendation. It supports the illusion of mentorship and creates a mass of paperwork for the older poet and a lot of emailing on the part of the younger poet. Weirdly, that all used to be conducted in a more personal manner. You'd have to call the person to ask for a favor. I'm not saying call me, but it seemed more on the line ten or twenty years ago.

JF: Necessary, no I don't think so. In fact, I think I'm getting recognized by my peer's help and support, and just by maintaining my integrity and putting my work and myself out there.

JB: Jacket notes about your project, "The topics in these letters range from race issues to gender codes, and from U.S. politics to poetics." I find that discussions about issues relating to poets with disabilities are vastly lacking across the political spectrum. Is this something that is touched upon in the Letters project, in addition to race and gender prejudices?

JF: I agree people seem way too quiet around disability. I don't think the Letters project takes on disability either, though discussions around people's physical and other struggles come in and out of the book. Dana and I wanted to be careful about not being too prescriptive so we didn't tell people to take on any particular issues.

EM: I'm curious about why disability is important to you. I'm not challenging, but curious. I'm concerned about sexuality and class, personally.

JB: I'm largely concerned with disability because I have cerebral palsy. The disability movement feels like the unacknowledged civil rights movement. 77% of people with disabilities are unemployed and, in Oregon, it is legal to pay a worker with mental disabilities \$1/hr. Even the negative stereotypes of women are not available to women with disabilities. We are not regarded as sexual beings, and I cannot tell you how many odd looks I've had just when taking my son to the playground.

EM: I am, for reasons as personal as your own, very aware of how sexuality and class rarely enter the mix or are the disposable, exchangeable items in a "diverse" menu. The problem seems to be that there's some mainstream or normal setting for social responsibility and when it moves to "other" it seems to be endlessly creative for bureaucrats and politicians for who's in and who's out. Thanks for your reply. My awareness of disability is thin.

JB: Denise Levertov wrote that she didn't consider herself a 'female' poet, rather just a poet. Can either of you relate to either of these ideas in terms of mentorship, influences, or just being? Do you think it's more of a question of gender than sex?

EM: What do you mean? Are you referring to sexuality? I think you mean perhaps that in the poetry world of the 50s and 60s - women were utterly excluded and so you get remarks like Denise Levertov makes. You would have to erase your own femaleness in order to explain why you were here at all. You were better than all those other women. Or just not noticing them. In the 70s when I came around it seemed a female poet was still basically butting up against a sense that she was most likely someone's girlfriend or partner. But a cult of friendship reigned to a great extent in the East Village of the 70s and early 80s and I got that gift from a number of older poets of both sexes and I was extremely grateful.

JF: Not sure I follow the question but I do feel like a female poet. I mean I feel female through and through and if I try to forget this (not like I would want to) I feel like someone is trying to get me to remember. It's really a loud division not only in the institutions in which I've taught but also in poetry communities. I think of certain male poets I know who are really into talking about THEIR ideas, THEIR art, and they can be really loud about it and this behavior can be looked at as a standard, like this is how you are supposed to be if you're an artist. Yet really it's just one way of being in the world.

JB: In regard to aesthetics, Eileen, you were somewhat involved in the performance poetry movement. What do you think has become of this

movement and what affect has it had on the wider spectrum of poetry? Jennifer, does this movement fit into your work at all?

EM: If we were talking my responses would sound more humorous than chiding, but there was no performance poetry movement. In the 80s and even 90s performance was more vanguard than poetry and it was an opportunity to distribute your work differently. It was a scene that was extremely open to women, people of color, disabled artists and queers. People from non middle class backgrounds were also more present because it didn't occur in an academic institution and had a popular audience. There was about ten years when a poet might be performing in the performance scene and I was definitely a part of that. Slam poetry kind of edged in in the early mid nineties and I wasn't part of that. By now the writing program movement has all but edged performance poetry into its own waning fringe. I think though there are people teaching and performing in both worlds, the mainstream and even experimental poetry world is pretty uncomfortable about performance because it's thought to suggest that one is not an intellectual. Happily the art world is more sophisticated than that and has always embraced performance though it's really onto architecture and collectives by now.

JF: I'm very wary of any movements, but I do have an appreciation for lots of kinds of poetry. I learned a bit about performance from talking with and seeing Sekou Sundiata perform. He taught with me at Eugene Lang and seemed very connected to his work, his body, the stage and how all these things seemed to form a certain symmetry.

JB: Jennifer, you are from San Francisco and, Eileen, you currently live in California, right? Do either of you have any comments on the dichotomy between East Coast and West Coast poetries? Is it true that the poets on each coast have a difficult time validating each other (let alone the middle!)? Do you find that, in general, working and publishing in California is less aggressive than some people find it in New York City?

EM: I think California is a great place to write, I think SF has a marvelous young poetry scene, better than NY I think. But I also think that Philly and smaller cities will continue to be more important than they were in the past. I think poets' need to do readings on the other coast will always encourage interest in each other. Also, it's easy to assume that more is going on over there, or that the pickings are better someplace else. I admire people who move around enough to see what's true for them.

JF: All I can say is when I lived in S.F. I felt fortunate to come upon some really wonderful, innovative experimental poets who helped me completely open up my work. And yet at times it did feel small, confining and even perhaps parochial.

NY can be rough but it's also so diverse, there are so many pockets of action going on that you get the feeling someone will listen to and/or publish your poem, your project, etc. But both cities have a lot going on. I would say what I really like about NY is that it seems more writers come through here so you get to meet people who aren't just New Yorkers and who aren't really on your radar. That's exciting.

JB: Can you describe your interest in politics and how it fits into the body of your work and unites your relationship? What do you think is the most pressing political issue today? Do you see Hilary Clinton as a model for feminism?

EM: Politics is my lifeblood and poetry is second to conversation my favorite means to express my place in the political scheme. Unites whose relationship? Me & Jennifer. That seems to be asking for a good girl answer. Are we talking about feminism? I think it's been totally on the forefront of our conversation. Oil and water are at the front of politics. The Middle East and women's issues. I think the existence of Hillary as a woman who badly wants to be president is a great model for women and feminism as a way to be powerful in the world as a female.

JF: I try to pay attention to what's going on in the world and struggle to articulate my own politics in my teaching and in my work. A manuscript I was working on, *Flashes*, is overtly political — but is this the most direct way to create change? Perhaps not, but it's my way and what I can offer at this point.

JB: My favorite thing that Eileen says in her letters is in regard to teaching, "They don't deserve you. I think you have to care less about teaching and wowing them and spend more time going to the movies, and reading and writing and hanging out with your friends. Give less!" Without getting in trouble (!) can you say if you took her advice?

JF: Actually I did. She gave really good advice and it shook me up a bit, and made me think twice about where I was putting my energies. Although I can't say I've seen many more movies since then!