

Poetic Economies in Performance: An Introduction

Elizabeth-Jane Burnett

There is a phrase shuttling between Boulder, Colorado and New York City. A phrase meshed among the roots of two institutions exceptional for their promotion of contemporary poetry in performance. The institutions are Naropa University and the Bowery Poetry Club; the phrase: “the poetic economy.”

This section brings together writings from those central to this term’s origin and appropriation: Anne Waldman, who with Allen Ginsberg founded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa, and Kristin Prevallet, who founded the Study Abroad on the Bowery program with Anne Waldman, Alan Gilbert and Bob Holman.

Speaking at the Bowery Poetry Club in 2005, Anne Waldman defined the poetic economy as the set of exchanges within a community developed to promote collaborative creative ventures.¹ She places this type of community in opposition to widespread conceptions of a culture industry, as it does not aim to make economic profit. The poetic economy instead takes anthropological precedents, looking at the way that archaic societies used exchanges for purposes other than making money. The work of Melanesian ethnographers on the gift, principally Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift, Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*,² is suggestive of possibilities for developing poetic networks and also promotes poetry’s performance as being central to this type of economy. Poetry’s oral tradition is finding new relevance in the recent development of poetic practices supported by Naropa and the Bowery Poetry Club that focus on the spoken word. This link between economy and performance is made more explicit by Prevallet and Waldman in the interviews published in this section, while further contextualisation of the term “poetic economy”

¹ Anne Waldman speaking at the Bowery Poetry Club, SAB Program, 2005

² Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift, Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1969

as relating to Mauss, Middleton³ and others, can be found in an essay on poetic economies forthcoming in the next issue of *How2*.

Broadly speaking in Waldman's context, "the poetic economy" is poetry and money. When we discuss the ways that poetry exists outside corporate consumer culture, we are discussing the poetic economy. When we ask for voluntary contributions at readings, download work for free from *How2*, email each other work, advice, contacts; when we blog. The networks we develop within a poetic economy perpetuate and energise artistic exchanges within a framework where community is problematised. Utopian counter-corporate practitioners work on one side, audiences and the other groups and individuals who interact with them operate on another, and an inevitable spectrum of overlap opens up a field of interrogation between the two.

Naropa University hosts a poetics program operating on a community-orientated model and provides a lot of free services. The Summer Writing Program at Naropa provided the guiding pedagogy for the Department of Writing & Poetics at Naropa, and out of these summers a major literary archive has grown. Hundreds of hours are now provided free on the web by going to [Archive.org](http://www.archive.org/details/naropa) and scrolling down to Naropa <<http://www.archive.org/details/naropa>>. Early recordings of Allen Ginsberg, John Cage, William Burroughs, RD Lang, Gregory Bateson and more are provided without charge. Many books, small press magazines and anthologies, where authors donate their work, and editors work with little recompense, have also sprung from Naropa. As Waldman states: "it's a complicated and under investigated culture and economy."⁴

The Bowery Poetry Club serves as café, bar, book shop, performance and teaching venue, and is made available for minimal fees to many poetry presses and organizations, poets and students in New York and beyond. Bowery Arts and Sciences, the non-profit arm of the club, aims to preserve and enhance the oral tradition of poetry through live readings, media documentation and education. The Study Abroad on the Bowery program founded in 2003, fulfils an important part of

³ Middleton, Peter. *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership and Consumption*, Raleigh: Alabama University Press, 2004

⁴ Email correspondence with Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, September 2007

this educational component. This program introduces a range of poetries to students of all ages; preserves endangered languages through teaching the value of the poetry of these cultures; and integrates poetry with other arts and into daily life through its internships and activism. Holman asserts: “I fully expect the Poetic Economy to “triumph” over the big bully Goliath Corporate Capitalism...Who can solve the riddles of chapbooks outselling...CDs of spoken word? The riddle of video poetry?”⁵

In addition to featuring discursive discussions with Waldman and Prevallet addressing the term “poetic economy”, this section brings together new work from these poets – examples of the poetic economy in practice. Continuing this feature, in its next issue How2 also plans to publish the work of practitioners brought together through a lattice of networks, communities, venues, small presses, poetry readings, performance and discourse — extending its practical exploration of the “poetic economy.”

⁵ “Imagine! The Poetic Economy vs. the Horrific Triumph of Capitalism: A Report from the Front”, Bob Holman, unpublished