

PROJECT PAPERS

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Poetry for the Next Society: Design for Continuing Investigation*

What I'm going to do is just talk a little bit about a few threads that I heard running through the symposium and talk a bit about some questions that they gave rise to in my mind and that I think we might pursue a little further here today. A lot of it has to do with how that title "Poetry for the Next Society" was fielded. One of the things that that title could be suggesting is a possible alliance between poetry and society in the future, a new kind of prominence or even centrality for poetry, a greater salience for poetry in the society's cultural consumption patterns. Various people played with that possibility by way of highlighting and lamenting the present situation, the marginality of poetry in our present society. In various ways we heard people speaking out of the anxiety and the impatience that have come from that marginality. Such things as Peter Lamborn Wilson suggesting ways in which poetry might get closer to the mainstream, either in an accommodating way or in an oppositional way, by making use of pornography, billboards and so forth. Clearly that's an impulse that comes out of a recognition of the peripherality of poetry to the society's concerns. Or, again, on the Television panel — the very fact that there was a Television panel is an admission that, as Miguel Algarín said, television is "the art form" today, that it does occupy that central place that many would want to see poetry occupying. This also came to light yesterday in a different way, with the Nicaragua panel. It was very clear that what the North American panelists were seeing in Nicaragua was a society in which poets and poetry were central and there was a great deal of obvious envy for that situation. I think too that the various performance-oriented readings and lectures betrayed a desire to move toward that performative mainstream. One question this raises for me is: What basis do we have for believing that poetry's marginality in this society will end in any near future? In what sense can we speak of "poetry for the next society"? My sense of it is that for quite a while poetry will continue to be *against* the society and we would need to talk about what kinds of changes would have to take place for that to not be the case.

Now another way in which that rubric was fielded was to take it as a question of what poetry or what kinds of poetry will matter in the future, what will become dominant or prevalent. This was mainly the kind of thing that came up in the lectures. It relates to predicting trends, fashions, tastes, and so forth. Hugh Kenner elected not to do that — very wisely, I thought. It also relates to canon-formation. These were people from the academy, one of whom is the author of a book called *The Pound Era*, and spoke of "major poets." Obviously that kind of vocabulary is very crucial to canon-formation, where you can decide that a whole era can be summed up in one surname. There seemed to be some attempt on the part of the other lecturers to figure out what the poetic phenomenon which would sum up or characterize the next era will be. Houston

* *Poetry for the Next Society: Design for Continuing Discussion* was the final panel of the Poetry Project's 1989 Symposium, *Poetry for the Next Society*. Intended as a wrap-up of the four days of events, the panel included, in addition to Erica Hunt and Nathaniel Mackey, Roberto Bedoya, Kofi Natambu, George Tysh and Anne Waldman.

Baker put in his vote for Rap, and Marjorie Perloff seemed to think that some kind of Wittgensteinian Canadian poetry would be the poetry of the future. Allen Ginsberg spoke for a poetry of grief, which of the three is the one I'd bet on.

Also raised in those lectures was the issue of pluralism. Marjorie Perloff brought it up by way of sneering at it, and I think that given the kinds of social agendas that have been articulated at this symposium, wanting both the society and the cultural work that comes out of that society to reflect the heterogeneity of the society, the kind of challenge to and dismissal of pluralism that came from Perloff is something that we need to address. Allen Ginsberg raised the issue of pluralism in a different way, admitting to not having read Black literature, for example, until very recently, and he talked about the ways in which the various kinds of social and psychic resistances within the dominant culture make that a continuing fact.

So, the issue of heterogeneity with regard to the canon and finally the place of canon-formation in the literary industry: anthologies, the academy, etc. The kinds of moves toward cultural diversity that are going on in what's nowadays called canon-reformation — what kind of impact are they going to have on poetry? One of the things that I thought about in listening to the various talks, is the fact that poetry is increasingly marginalized within the academy. At least that's been my experience. We have a number of things that are displacing poetry, pushing it farther to the fringes in literary studies and in the humanities in general; the emphasis on narrative, for example. The formalist move in poetry that Marjorie Perloff complained about is a symptom of this in its insistence on getting back to narrative — an attempt to win back an audience lost to novels, diaries, and the like.

Also, the importance attached to theory is something that I think we need to talk about — the move away from literary studies or poetics pertaining strictly to literary texts as they were formerly defined, the move among academics and critics into what's now called culture studies, the examination of textual practices from the standpoint of an expanded sense of what qualifies as text. The former privileging of literature and, more generally, "high culture" within the humanities is now being challenged, even inverted. For example, at Santa Cruz recently, a job candidate for a position in art history came and gave a talk on hairstyles. There's now a greater interest in popular culture and, as I've said, culture studies generally. What impact will this have on poetry in the near future? Will poetry move to accommodate this, to somehow lend itself to this? Will it be further blanketed by it?

Another question that arose from the rubric under which we're laboring is: What kind of society will the next society be? There wasn't a whole lot of attention given to this question. It was implied in, say, the Nicaragua panel and I think it was also implied in the best instances of the canon-forming that went on in the lectures. I didn't get much of a sense of what kinds of social and historical developments Marjorie Perloff was basing her canonizing on, but it was very clear that Houston Baker's came out of a Black agenda, a Black neo-nationalist agenda. And very clearly Allen Ginsberg's ideas and reflections put forth a vision of the future and what society will be like in the future; entropy, largely.

So, what kind of society will the next society be? And what are the implications of that for poetics? It doesn't seem that you can answer the one question without answering or trying to

answer the other. Finally, I'd like to go back to the beginning of the symposium and remind us of Reverend David Garcia's pointing out that the word *ecclesiastes* means a "calling out," and think about the way in which several times during the symposium we've had people lament the loss of ritual, meaning, myth and the sorts of things that can make for a collective calling out and coming to one another. We have to ask will there be a society that we can be for and, if so, what kind of society that would be. I kept thinking of Robert Duncan's line "would-be shaman of no tribe I know." I wonder what kind of tribe we're going to bring about in the next society.

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ERICA HUNT

"Poetry for the Next Society" is a phrase with ambition, soaked with multiple readings. Presentations during the symposium were as various as the writers, literary communities and cultures converging in the extended Lower East Side. There is no singular future any more than there is consensus on the past or present. The measure of poetic thinking's relation to the next society is determined by what is most alive for us now, even as we bend down to pick up the pieces.

I too thought about this sort of multivalence of "poetry for the next society." It seemed to me that depending on the way that you wanted to read it, it could be a prescriptive, that is, poetry as we see it to bring about the next society, or as we want to be seen by the next society. It seemed to me that some of the speakers were apologetic, that poetry for the next society entailed somehow asking for forgiving what we have somehow been participants in in the present. It seemed to me that poetry for the next society could also be read as a kind of utopian concatenation of present particulars, of present practices of writing. And it was in the utopian sense, in the sense of transformative, that is, poetry as transformation, as activity between reader and writer and audience and performer that I took "poetry for the next society."

I guess I wasn't interested so much in the phrase or in the notion of poet as legislator but poet as participant on all levels, that is if we agree that social life is organized not only through our actions, but also through our texts. So that means abandoning some notions of the individual poet, marginalized writing isolated in a room for a small audience . . . I mean it really challenges that notion, that if poetry "is" for the next society in the sense of transformation, that is, producing change and having active being in the world, then it means that we have to think of ourselves as multiple and as participating not only as writers but as citizens. So that when I listened to the earlier panels, I listened especially carefully to the way speakers suggested that we get from here to there.

In the panel "Rendering the Future" speakers took on the task of enlarging the present. What I heard there were descriptions of a kind of microfuturism, a profound attention to the present in order to rescue daily life from silence, and how we might take that method to anticipate and articulate the future. The other thing I heard was a portrayal of skirmishes within the patrilineal web of literature, by that I mean the sort of slaying of the father and the father before that and in that sense I guess poetry is timeless. It's also in a way motionless. I also heard the

articulation of a kind of science fiction, skimming along the vectors of individual desire. Once again, desire is an important component in producing change. It is a motivator, it's what makes you want to move. And so. But nonetheless, I wanted to hear more how we could ground the practicing in some social body however we define it, be it literary community or be it social movement. I was left with a sense from that panel of the imagination sort of on an incline, trying to get up the incline — and as individuals, then, we are basically trying to confront some of the inertia that hinders us from change; and when I say us I mean the society. So, again, when I hear poetry for the next society, I hear us invoking some kind of social change.

On another panel, "Language and Television", literature took the form, was defined, it seemed to me as canon, and as reading practice spreads now, radioactively, through TV, the contagion of the "beautiful", "the true", "the complex", "the shapely", buttressed by correlatives, exalted or pathetic. I mean at some point or another there was a description (I haven't seen this series) [*Voices & Visions*, a television series on poets shown on PBS - Ed.] but there was a description of images accompanying various poems, and pastels were the colors of Emily Dickinson, and these other images were the actions for Whitman. The sense that I got from this was that, well, all of a sudden we had fallen into a kind of clichéd use of allusion and simile and pathetic fallacies of the nineteenth century. To depend entirely on TV's role in making the future is to walk directly into the corporate body, an oilslick, refuting its sponsored lyricism. Another slope, this time slippery, littered with junkabilia and product endorsements. And who's the audience? How are they addressed and engaged? And for what? as the familiar catechism of contemporary Marxism goes. In TV, that well of babble, signifying proceeds by threat, what will happen if you leave out the fabric softener or don't call home enough, is as much the language-content as the American Playhouse drama or the poetry that entreats us to poetic thinking, that is, of discrete difference.

On Friday night we heard four lectures on a theme of Poetry for the Next Society. Of the four, the lectures by Houston Baker and Marjorie Perloff engaged me the most. Houston Baker, using the church to preach, saw the theme of the symposium as a call to testify and prophecy, getting from here to there, beginning with the sharpened street voices of Doug E. Fresh and Public Enemy, he preached the OT (the Oral Tradition, the Old Testament, the Old Time Religion) refigured as Rap, or as he parsed it for us, recovered auditions of all peoples. I have to admit that I was attracted to this version of poetry for the next society because it seemed to me to function as very productive metaphor, generative metaphor of what I hear in the summer courtyards of my urban village. As a reality, however, I know that it is also an instrument, it's a march, the beat is a march, it's a march delivered to the masses. It's alternately heroicized or demonized by the culture industry with which it frequently intersects. It is at once the most vital part of the oral tradition while at the same time, with its heavy accent on male contest, I find it also atrophied, somehow partial. But I agreed with much of what Baker had to say, which is that Rap is melancholia in revolt. And it's going toward heterogeneity, new uses for the past, difference and the space for opposition.

Marjorie Perloff's talk [see the Oct.-Nov. 1989 *Newsletter*] painted a contemporary predicament where we no longer own the word modernity, where the people living in the present no longer own the word modernity and instead it seems to have. . . largely the Right has captured

that word quite well. Recently there was an article in the *Nation* by George Black (not the journalist) but he was describing a phenomenon in England where Margaret Thatcher has basically been able to discredit socialism as a kind of antiquated system that can't work and that modernity consists of accepting scarcity and accepting conformity, that these are the new conditions under which we must live. This is what's possible, and if you can't make it, well. . . it's a kind of social Darwinism but it's basically got a new face. It seems to me that Marjorie's description of the new formalism is a kind of literary Thatcherism, in which you basically reduce literature to its slenderist and most linear kinds of expression and you privilege it, you say that that's the thing that's going to survive. So I found that information enlightening because I hadn't actually been attending to this. And I also found that her strategy of resuscitating Wittgenstein, who is a personal favorite of mine, as a philosopher of the performative, or present tense seen not as a way of adding seasoning or local color to the literature but as a way, or a part of that desire, to make the poem an event, the thing that happens, once again between reader and writer, audience and performer, an event that produces change.

Poetry for the next society is for me the trans-national, exploding once again the myth of monoculture, the hypostatized origin of a single fountain, a single referent, a typical register, an atomized body, a single blueprint for the future. It proposed contiguous projects of deeply considered difference and congruence, it proposed cultures in which we have multiple memberships, and those memberships permit us to be both subjects and objects of our own history, text and situations.

I think I'll close with a little anecdote. It's one I've told before. There was a visiting trade unionist from South Africa, a Black trade unionist, who was here for quite a while and was touring various organizations, people in movements or people involved in movement work; he visited not only the labor unions, locked-out locals, the Hormel lockout in Minneapolis — he visited the farmers who were protesting farm foreclosures, he visited folks in Pittsburgh who were trying to get industry going again, he visited folks in the South who were working on voter participation. And after he had been here awhile and he had seen quite a bit, he was due to go back; but it turned out that while he was here a state of emergency had been declared in South Africa and his family was visited by the police as well as by other state security forces and they had gone to the house, and they were clearly looking for him, and we urged him not to go back because he would definitely be seized and put in prison — at this point they were detaining a lot of activists. And he said, well I have to go back because I have no portfolio. In other words, if I stay here I have to have a particular mission, so I have to go back. And we said, you can't go back because it's a state of emergency. And he replied, well it's always been a state of emergency for as long as I've lived.

The story is important to me because it raises the threshold of the urgent. That is, in some ways we're not there yet, to the point where we can really accurately project what the next society is. I think that there are certain signs that we are getting close. I take heart from looking at the news this week, when the first five stories are about demonstrations. I think that that raises the threshold of the urgent, where we can see in those demonstrations and in the coming together and strengthening of movements, we see where the poetry for the next society will take place. I think it's instructive that the poetry that informs many of the writers that have been part of this

symposium, and certainly myself, happened some time ago, but they do inform and make poetry live, those movements, and so I would refer back to the student movements of the sixties, the African-American liberation struggles of the sixties in the South, I would refer us to the antiwar movement, I would refer us to the anti-imperialist movement where people didn't write poetry as instruments of those movements, but what they did was that they brought about a widespread consciousness that we could do things differently, and that there might be different logics about social life and about culture and so it's to the student movements and to the movements of peoples toward their own liberations that I think we find how poetry will be for the next society.