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Communities/Commons:
A Snap Line of Digital Practice

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Abstract

"Communities/Commons: A Snap Line of Digital Practice" presents a brief history of digital poetry, from the perspective of the Electronic Poetry Center (EPC), Buffalo, and the international E-Poetry Festivals of digital literature, art, and performance (E-Poetry). The paper engages the discipline from various perspectives, considering its relation to historic contextualizing movements and institutional mechanisms. Determining a renewed vision of E-Poetry community, it is argued, are its exuberant origins: (1) the U.S. small press movements of the later Twentieth century; (2) the activities and philosophies of the Electronic Poetry Center; (3) its self-definition as more broadly-conceived than that of any specific category of digital literature; (4) the pre-existing literary ground of Black Mountain, Language Poetry, and related practices; (5) the vibrancy of the as-then-constituted Poetics Program at Buffalo, and; (6) a "symposium of the whole", the continued emerging importance of enthnopoetic localizations to an eventual realization of contemporary poetics. Finally, a call is made for the field being adaptable and more generous with its frames of reference. Such a breadth of understanding, it is concluded, contribute to E-Poetry's continuing vibrancy and to a wider vision of the possibilities for digital practice.

I am fascinated by the opening scene of Salvador Carrasco's epic film *La otra conquista / The Other Conquest* where the young scribe Topiltzin wakes up in the rain in the ruins of Tenochtitlán, fallen comrades around him, staggering to understand a total transformation of an historic paradigm. Such a change perhaps cannot be understood by historians, nor religiously, nor by any individual. In effect, our only option is, as did he, to write our way through it. The literal scribing of the material fragments onto the codex is the only way such an inversion of a dominant system can be processed. And, indeed – even given such a devastating historical collision, in Topiltzin's case – his practice of scribing the events created continuity with his past, as

well as serving as a means to understanding his present.

It would be unfair to claim such historic proportions for the shift at hand. It is, after all, a monumental shift but on a different scale. There are no bodies at the foot of the temple. There are no forced conversions. (Though there is coercion of the user by the operational demands of a given interface and its controlling software.) There are none of the literal atrocities that accompany political-economic subjugation. Yet to underestimate the degree to which the pressure point of the quill has shifted would be irresponsible at a minimum.

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1.

Such a timeline might begin in many ways. It certainly starts with computers (as is already evident by the context of this essay), but it must also begin *equally parallel to and independent* of computers. The use of computers in and of itself has no transformative effects on literary practice. After all, to use food preparation as an example, there is something about a good recipe that overrides the fact of whether it comes from a book, is hand-written on a note card, arrives through e-mail, comes from a web site, or is generated by some "intelligent" refrigerator device monitoring what is in your refrigerator and generating a recipe based on ingredients already on your shelves.

Or put another way, think of Buffalo. If you consider the impact of Black Mountain II, of the Charles Olson lectures, Robert Creeley's historic transgenerational relevance (Black Mountain, the Beat Generation, the San Francisco Renaissance, Pieces), of the procedural work of Cage and Mac Low, of Language Poetry, of the small press archive, of Tedlock and ethnopoetics, of the arrival of Charles Bernstein, the formation of the Poetics Program, the arrival of Susan Howe, the plethora of legendary magazines, readings, talks, seminars, projects, and social vibrancy of the "first generation" of Poetics Program students (including Peter Gizzi, Ben Friedlander, Roberto Tejada, Kristin Prevallet, Anya Lewin, Joel Kuszai, Jonathan Skinner, Jena Osman, Juliana Spahr, and many others), the idea of digital literary practice suddenly takes a different turn. The fact of the computer itself (though clearly topical) *–in terms of literary action and of literary community* – is not the defining issue.

The backstory to this poetic activity has roots in the concept of the little magazine, the renegade pamphlet, the manifesto, the independent literary press, literary identity as autonomous independent from the benediction of the institution, the role of the library special collection, the bibliography, the archive, the technologies of samizdat production. (This is not to say there can't be a relationship to the institution. Only that the quest for institutional approbation contains its own quid pro quo of concessions.) That is, like the handwritten recipe card handed from one okra enthusiast to another, like the effects of the printing press once it entered civil non-commercial society, literary production is sui jurisindependent, unbridled, often antagonistic—it does not seek the shadow of the institution for protection from the sun; it exist in a larger historical context. It stands at high noon.

From my own perspective, I would point to Buffalo for a beginning. (For others, this

Máshreq or first light might dawn at Brown University with the hypertext workshop, in Bergen with Espen Aarseth, with Hypercard, with Michael Joyce, or with StorySpace and its circle of supportive academics.) In Buffalo, two defining events in E-Poetry occurred: the founding of the Electronic Poetry Center/EPC (1994) and the creation of the Poetics list at Buffalo (1993).

It is fair to say, then, that this is a biased timeline because it is, admittedly, centered on literary practice. This is not to discount alternative paradigms through which other theorists and practitioners are addressing the field: gaming as a metaphor, hypertext, algorithmic variation, theories of postmodernism, semiotics, language as featureless data, among them. Unlike those approaches, this timeline undertakes a different and very personal journey. It does not, then, purport to be a clinical record of specific technical developments. It does not assume the presence of the computer to be the defining condition of the conversation. It treats the computer – though it *is* the 400-pound gorilla in the room – as an incidental factor. Or put another way, : that there is a life of writing, of poeisis, and of performance larger than a hard drive; the computer is a crucial instrument in the tool belt when approaching this field – but to see the larger issues, it is crucial not to focus on the tool but rather on the work at hand.

2.

The history of digital literary events, covering twenty years, seeming generations of activity, brings to the table a number of issues. Most are not literary. However, for a sense of continuity, it is important to understand what questions are on the table, to note where literary elements have been allowed to surface. I would never say, in this wide swath of digital gatherings, that the literary was ever intentionally eschewed. Literary issues may have been overlooked either from nearsightedness or from the heat of the moment. That is, I see the organizers of these events as if standing before a large kitchen stove, say in a restaurant or the kitchen of the Cambridge dining hall. There are a number of pots at full steam, some are overflowing. I see these organizers as attempting to address the full-boils as immediate – regardless of their long-term value to history or literature – because that was where attention was needed. Literary interests sat on a side burner, in this simile, simpering away, with the full flavor of decades of savory practice, occasionally stirred, but the recipe never fully investigated. That is, literature is not for everyone. But understanding what was in those other, more pressing pots is of significant interest, as literary events do not occur in isolation. A sense of continuity is key.

The snapshot, taken as the subject rushes by, is almost a blur. It is not a portrait, not panoply. It is not a historic record such as Louis Lang's painting "Return of the 69th (Irish) Regiment, N.Y.S.M. From the Seat of War", featured in a New York Times article (Pogrebin, "When Applying"), where every detail of a "history" is preserved in paint, a "combination of the sentimental—of the personal stories—and the collective narrative" with its "crowd that massed along the bay to welcome the weary soldiers [which] included all manner of society: flower sellers, fruit vendors, dignitaries, newsboys, grieving widows, well wishers and families of the wounded." Yet, the "pixel depth" (and, yes, meant metaphorically) of this image should be considered. Unlike the panoramic directness of Lang's treatment, there is undoubtedly more detail in the image than immediately meets the eye. Indeed, the "content" exists in exactly that which is uncelebrated: the tonal blue sky, the secondary framing suggested by

outcroppings of trees, the distant harbor peppered with three-masters, fallen individuals of the crowd, their hats on the ground, boys selling lithographs, a piece of fruit on a cobblestone texture, the details of white faces. It is that which surrounds the scene that gives context to the scene.

One interesting question that should be addressed is how the digital conversation – in literary terms, once squarely on the agenda at Poetics at Buffalo, veered sharply like the red and orange radar blur of a tropical storm abandoning its course when deflected by land. Indeed, some milestone projects could be seen as benefitting from the emerging dialog between poetics and digital literary innovation that occurred at Buffalo in the late Nineties: UbuWeb, PennSound, the Eclipse series of publications, LINEbreak, *RIF/T: An Electronic Space for Poetry, Prose, and Poetics*, and Jena Osman's "The Periodic Table As Assembled by Dr.Zhivago, Oculist".

The chronology dominates the eastern end of the North American continent, including Buffalo and Brown, crossed the ocean to Bergen, Norway, and touches on Atlanta, Iowa, Germany, and Australia. If the emergence of this field were to be captured in signal publications these might include The *Cybertext Yearbook, Digital Poetics: the Making of E-Poetries, The New Media Reader*, and New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories, and "Electronic Literature: What Is it?" Of course there is a lot of depth to those pixels, but the blur gives some sense of the motion. It seems to me that these references are but details on the larger canvas, that one must step back to get a sense of the larger picture.

3.

One might hypothesize what makes "the common" within reach. It is no profound act of interpretation to conclude that, though communities will protect common interests, it is more common for such protection to exist within scales of self-interest. With that supposition in mind, one may, nonetheless, postulate a treatise of the common.

In Common: A Treatise

- Communities can be configured according to different rubrics. These typically start with a group with an interest in common, those who are physically collocated, or those who have a root in common. Communities may be relatively stable in population or may be typified by constant fluctuations. They can be voluntary, obligatory, intentional, or accidental. One can be a member of a community and hate it. One can yearn to be part of a community that one will never enter. (Or, conversely, one may never wish to be in a group, paraphrasing Groucho Marx, to which one has been accepted.) At the end, however, members of a community have some form of shared identity, from fleeting to permanent.
- A college commons, of course, is a shared gathering area, usually a grassy square surrounded by buildings. Members leave their private space to enter a common area where they might interact, recreate, or converse.
- Communality, once circumscribed, is characterized by difference within communality. Not only are there different reasons for being a member of a community, but members often manifest different cultural values as participants. Further, within any community there are almost always differences in opinion of what is the most important issue. Agreement in opinion can synergize and

motivate action. Disagreement about the importance of issues can divide and even fracture community.

- Some communities are better fractured than whole. However, they almost invariably lose effectiveness through fracture.
- One may usually enter or leave a community at will. Outraged renunciation of a community is usually a less than constructive gesture of respect to the community.
- Alliances and disagreements are personal, emotional, and unavoidable. Hurt, triumph, sincerity, pride, insult, rejection, and even excommunication are all felt intensely and are all emotionally real.
- The physical commons offers a good metaphor since, as a physical location, the commons outlives its occupants. That is, despite one's passion for the various issues that are present, one must realize that the commons remains the commons. If one feels disaffiliated, there's no good reason to cut down the trees and pour acid on the grass. The truth is that when you come out of your building again, like it or not, it will still be there. This reality suggests it is wisest to never damage it. Even if one were to move away permanently, it is only sensible to leave the commons intact – and hopefully improved for one's tenure for the generations that follow.

Ultimately, the idea of a "common goal" has subtle contours that are not simple to decipher. These contours are determined by concepts of acceptable means, tolerable strategies, and the degree of authority that is sought. They are also factored by motivations for group actions, how resulting gains will be shared, and whose interests are expendable in the process. These characteristics all exist in degrees, not absolutes, and may shift unpredictably, depending upon always-fluid social factors.

4.

Of course, the question to be answered at this moment has to do with e-poetries and their community. To investigate this point, I'd like to juxtapose two early declarations that bear decisively on this question.

One is an initial characterization of the EPC, described as:

The earliest vision of the EPC was that it would be like a community poetry center, the Poetry Project in New York or New College in San Francisco, and would have, like a physical poetry center, a small press library, author libraries, tape archives, reading spaces, exhibit areas, and bulletin boards. (Glazier, "Mayapan")

The second is Charles Bernstein's incantation for the founding of the Poetics list:

Above the world-weary horizons New obstacles for exchange arise Or unfold, O ye postmasters! ("Preface")

Bernstein writes, "The Poetics List was founded in late 1993 with this epigraph serving as its first message. I had been on email for only about a year at that time, but from the first was fascinated by the possibilities for group exchange made available by the listserv format." Almost unimaginably, viewed from the perspective of the present day, an electronic mailing list was itself an unknown medium.

"I remember endless conversations with friends explaining the mechanism: you send out one message to the list address and everyone subscribed gets the message almost instantaneously. And to reply, you simply hit 'R' on the keypad and write your new message. My friends listened in something as close to astonishment as poets doing hard-time ever can. It was as if I were explaining the marvels of xerography to letterpress printers." (Bernstein, "Preface")

Indeed, numerous postings in the early days of the Poetics listserv were postings about what such postings should be about. (This is not uncommon to the self-indulgence and awkwardness of many tweets since the introduction of Twitter.) The idea of community was tantamount. Mark Wallace writes,

"Many of us have different senses of what this poetics e-mail 'virtual community' should be – and indeed the word 'community' is wholly inadequate for the complexity of the environment itself. Perhaps 'network' would be better –although that implies something perhaps less intimate than e-mail often is (and, among many other characteristics, I think poetics e-mail does have an odd intimacy). Still, we don't all 'get along' here, and there are instances when we shouldn't get along." (Wallace, "E-Mail Politics")

Among these threads of deliberation, David Kellogg reminded the List of a similar debate about literary identity, one of significant influence, that of Language Poetry:

As an addition to the debate, this from Ron Silliman's introduction to *In the American Tree*:

"It is now plain that any debate over who is, or is not, a better writer, or what is, or is not, a more legitimate writing is, for the most part, a surrogate social struggle. The more pertinent questions are what is the community being addressed in the writing, how does the writing participate in the constitution of this audience, and so on." (Cited in Kellogg, "Re: List Wars")

And Bob Perelman, noting "attempts to unite spheres of discourse" in the list discussion, proposed categories from his then forthcoming book, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History*, for consideration. Among these were, detailed in his post: genre (poem format), group formation, Grenier, the New Sentence, textuality (Bernstein and Brathwaite), Andrews, gender, literary history, and dream (short story format).

Considering that the referenced book itself is titled, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, it is particularly informative to consider the breadth, depth, nuance, and particularity with which Perelman structures his analysis. The investigation itself includes multiple genres of writing. Beyond that, one notes the non-traditional approaches to the subject. Rather than a direct assault on a single dominant theme, there are numerous ascents up various slopes that *in their variety define the theme as a totality*. These various ascents include interrogations of thematic materials, studies of specific authors (including, in addition to those named above, Berrigan; Silliman, Hejinian, Dahlen, Howe, Armantrout, and Harryman) and specific texts. Besides consideration (and writing within) specific genres, writing methods, poetics, and histories are considered. The lesson here lies in how the mapping of a variegated terrain, the mix of multiple perspectives, and the heterogeneity of the subject matter – within a given (and possibly

predictable) range, of course – is preserved, enriched, and given depth through its own heterogeneous sense of structure. This is the alternative to top-down analyses or, for that matter, of even arguing a specific position. It is world view through multiple characterizations rather than singular view through world ordering.

The ultimate model might be one that is more socially organic, much the way leaves collect at the edge of a stream. A model that can accommodate the aggregation of members of a group, their accidental entry into the conversation, their proclivity for sticking to the group identity and, given that each member is always endowed with its own particular momentum, their inevitable drifting away from the collective identity. Such memberships can be accidental, unintentional, transient, and of variable duration. They are most notable in the context of years.

If absolute proclamations cannot be made, with what are we left? If group identities cannot be assigned to something as tangible and obvious as a specific technology, does it mean that efforts at digitally-related community are futile? To eschew such categorical definitions has a surprising effect of liberation. That is, when considering literary activity within social, political, personal, and material contexts, when allowing digital issues to waft in and out of larger artistic issues, practices, and disciplines, like bees collecting pollen, one begins to see art function within its medium as a component of the migration of greater arts contexts. Such a realization enriches, contextualizes, and expands the possibilities of digital art practice, rendering its engagement with the cultural conversation much more poignant. Such a realization, in effect, broadens the digital horizon.

5.

E-Poetry 2011, occurring in Buffalo, New York, in May, 2011, can be seen as a milepost in a multiple view of the development of the digital poetry field. At the very least, the fact that the festival has now run continuously for ten years, celebrating a decade of committed service to digital poetry and poetics is in itself commendable. The fact that it marks a worldwide movement, having presented festivals in Buffalo, West Virginia, London, Paris, and Barcelona, is notable. The fact that it clearly set some markers for its own sense of direction for digital poetry practice for the next decade is a fact to be carefully considered.

There are numerous perspectives from which to view the performative, theoretical, and artistic practice breakthroughs signaled by the 2011 Festival. Clearly, these are not solely limited to issues of content, presentation, and structure – how the festival communicates through how it, itself, is composed *as an artistic occasion* – but also comprises an interrogation the concept of artistic community in and out of digital poetry. Thus, we move into the second decade of this facet of the digital millennium.

6.

As to the present, there are several major committed ongoing organizational efforts in the field as a whole. These include E-Poetry (the E-Poetry digital poetry festivals, Electronic Poetry Center), the ELO (Electronic Literature Organization), and ELMCIP (Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice). Each

provides coordination and attention to imbricated constituencies of the field. Each has distinct origins, different members (though these of course overlap), contrasting assumptions, and alternate visions of the direction in which the discourse should be developed.

Clearly such organizations further projects in the best interests of all in the field.

But even such well-intentioned efforts will not be realized if one is not aware of historic and cultural critiques. That is, one must recognize that still in the room are the "official ideologies that shoved European man to the apex of the human pyramid" (Rothenberg, xi). That is, a successful rubric must embrace cultural history on a worldwide scale. How is this to be done? It takes inspiration more than innovation; world-making as creativity. It rolls forwards on organizations as they lubricate its path, not as delimiters of practices that erect boundaries rather than opening passageways through mazes. This is not an easy process to describe. It is certainly not a process that necessarily falls into standard funding models. And yet, though such a future cannot even be imagined, one must draw some sense of orientation from words already on record, from an Eskimo song, when:

The human mind had mysterious powers.
A word spoken by chance might have strange consequences.
It would suddenly come alive
and what people wanted to happen could happen —
all you had to do was say it.
Nobody could explain this:
That's the way it was.
(Rothenberg 3)

The world invoked here is not meant as merely a mythic aspiration; one must think long term to arrive at a balanced global culture. It is the world of centuries past and the world of centuries to come. It is not immediately obvious to the logical facility how to engage the promise of such articulations.

7.

Still practicing are members of the first battalion, early pioneers of the field, some working in new ways, others still perfecting their earlier techniques, others are like elderly folks on the porch still discussing the Great Depression, and there are a number who, like those stricken with some degree of forgetfulness, have wandered out of the picture seemingly forever. Indeed, a colleague of many years, deliberating whether to come to E-Poetry 2011 or not, said, "I have to tell you honestly. As far as I can see, e-poetry is dead." At first it seems a harsh analysis. Yet when one watches what happens in the media: the way kinetic text is used in advertising, the superimposition of text and image in movies such as Wall Street and many other films, the digital doctoring, re-arrangement, decoration of time-based media, you can see how one might be pessimistic about the ditch into which the euphoric dancing letters of the early Nineties have now fallen. In these examples, textual animations are now common, ubiquitous; they are often vapid beyond notice. One cannot rely on Flash, Google searches, or the surprise of linked words to communicate any longer. Flash now belongs as much to Tide detergent commercials as it did to the most fervent Flash programmer screaming

"parole in libertà". Elvis has, indeed, left the building.

In order to place digital practice in a more productive context, it is clear that space must be made, if we are to move forward, for other voices, more diverse practices, different arrangements of the stage.

Such a community is not on the horizon; it is here, around us as we speak. These elements, including younger practitioners, voices from the developing world, and artists performing in diverse categories of artistic production, as suggested by the emphases of E-Poetry 2011, are encouraged to enter the group. To see what is new, one must try on new glasses! These voices are essential and exist independently of medium; they are crucial to the future of E-Poetries. Yet to truly listen and profitably observe these practices, the E-Poetry group must be aware that such participation comes with the field being adaptable, generous within its frames of reference, supportive. In this manner, everyone gains, a more vigorous future is engaged, more diverse individual practices result; indeed, such an "opening of the field" moves us towards realizing the "commune" within "community", and towards beginning to bring digital practice from its mezzanine observation balcony to the main dance hall floor.

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