



REVIEW OF THE SIXTH INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON POETIC INQUIRY: BREAKING THROUGH THE ABSTRACT: POETRY AS/IN/FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Abstract: This is a review of the 6th International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry held at Bowling Green State University, and graciously hosted by Sandra Faulkner. This symposium meets biennially with presenters from many different areas of the world such as Nova Scotia, Canada, and New Zealand. The theme this year was poetry in/as/for social justice. In this review, I seek to think through some of the questions and uncertainties that arose over the course of the few days we met in November. We complicated meanings of social justice at this contemporary time and revisited formulations of social justice through past events. Within this review, I write a personal/theoretical piece embedded with citations from poets, and in the end compose a poem that is an amalgamation of language from presenters' abstracts and my own ideas.

Keywords: art/research reviews; poetic inquiry, poetry, social justice

Where is the edge of belief? Is it possible to believe something truly unbelievable? How does that begin? Is there a crack of light under the door? How do you know to see it as light?

-- Anne Carson, *Float*

When I walked into the Sixth International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry, hosted by Sandra Faulkner at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, a question was being proposed about the kind of feminism we want, and need, at this particular time, and specifically in the United States. This was my first symposium and, as a doctoral student, I was unsure of what to expect. What I noticed immediately was a group of scholars having a generous, timely, and difficult discussion of what (and who) we mean when we say social justice, and what our role might be as poets, researchers, scholars (or, well, people) in this vexed social climate in which the most vulnerable among us are dehumanized and oppressed through social structures, policy, and the everyday degradations perpetuated by those who wield power (putting it lightly). I hope that my rendering of this symposium may foster explorations through and towards the varied envisionings of social justice offered by poetry.

In my academic life an unending amount of my time is consumed by twisting critique on my tongue, but at this symposium I was invited to hold both praise and critique as interactive and expanding forces insistent on inciting belief or perhaps, a peek at the “light under the door” (Carson, 2016). Now, all of this may sound cliché; *light* and *belief* may very well be the most overused words in poetry, but follow me for a moment and consider that we may just need to reclaim, or at the very least attend to, the cliché. As I read more and more poetry, the same words appear repeatedly.

Lately, I have been compelled to highlight *moon* in poems: “the *moon* holds no grudges” (Eliot, 1915), “the *moon* forgot how to speak *Twi*” (Rollins, 2017), “we crave cold marrow/ from the tiny bones / that *moonlight* scatters” (Hass, 1979). I am fascinated by its persistence, how it folds itself, creased and layered, from poem to poem. I cannot tell you what the moon is or what it means anymore; it

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just keeps acquiring versions of itself. In some ways, this is how I am beginning to think of social justice, much more intricate and full of multiplicity than any singular definition could affix.

At this November 2017 symposium, the presenters grappled with notions of social justice and its complicated nature, revisiting the ways we position and ponder abstract and concrete interpretations of justice within and across the past, present and future. Often these words we appeal to and repeat in poetry or scholarship—moon, light, belief, social justice, problematic, resistance, critique, praise (the list could go on)—seem to only be afforded particular meanings. In this space we began to parse our assumptions and understandings through listening to the poetry of others created across times and spaces we were only beginning to glimpse. Mary Oliver has this luminous way of thinking about this kind of listening; listening as its own act of presence (Tippett, 2015). So here, I have come to think of how we might, in our journey of negotiating poetry in/as/for social justice, come to understand the role of the abstract and come to conceptualize words linked closely to the concrete ways we may enact social justice such as silence or resistance. I appreciated that we spent time considering and reflecting and that there was not a forced urging of progress, but, instead, moments ruminating on the resonances that infused the room; a careful and corresponding attention to the ineffable realities that poetry garners a closeness to transposing.

It was within, through, across these spaces created by the readings of the poems that I wondered how and if we may as Adrienne Rich (1978) challenged, "...break through this film of the abstract / without wounding...?" (p. 16). I was reminded, specifically, of a quote from the beginning of the book, *Poetic Inquiry II: Seeing, Caring and Understanding*, (Galvin & Prendergast, 2016) where Saint Augustine asks, "What is it that shines into me and pierces the heart without wounding?" We have all heard, and probably repeated, that the personal is political and vice versa, and through our encounter, we've experienced the realization that there may be no way to only intellectualize the visceral and harmful realities that reside in the everyday fissures of our lives. I do not claim to have any kind of answer to think through how we move between the abstract and concrete; I am not sure I could ever parse that. I do think that complex and impending questions linger somewhere between these two quotes that work at translating two distinct experiences of the abstract, the ways it can shine through the piercing, but also the ways it wounds anyway.

And here are the pressing questions that sneak into those lingering spaces: What, then, is social justice? What does social justice look like, feel like, move like? What does it mean to resist? Are there ways to resist that do not perpetuate harm? Is silence a form of harm or resistance? (and, of course, the list goes on). All of these questions punctuated with the inadequacy of words: "language cannot do everything -- / [that we can just] chalk it on

the walls where the dead poets / lie in their mausoleums” (Rich, 2013, p. 16). As poets, we contend with this tension that language is insufficient but it can also be our most valued resource for its distilled and nuanced (albeit, sometimes, incomprehensible) collective and individual meanings rendered and translated through the resonances invoked by the poetic form.

One particular and important thing to note about this symposium is that we all gathered together in the same space and listened, as a group, to each presentation. This allowed for an intellectual interconnectedness to unfold through the poems and discussions. Through this gathering, I noticed a nuanced form of humanizing happening, a listening for the distinctness of each poem (or voice, or life), and also a careful attention to the slippery meanings of particular words. For example, one discussion lingered on the word, *resistance*, with questions arising such as how do we reconcile our need for action with the implications of resisting (of insinuating an oppositional force)? And who are we to police the language of others if they do want to name it, *resistance*? Within this I learned to sit with the complicated ways language does and does not have power. This is a precarious stance for a poet and, for that matter a scholar, when my only way to move as myself is through this (lacking) language. The only comfort I might be able to acknowledge in this lived contradiction is that the reiteration of the complexities of voice and language were present and important at this symposium and that we did not shy from trying to interrogate and understand the nuances that riddle our words. I was reminded of the ways we began to resign ourselves or, as the poet, Ada Limon (2015), asked “Why must we practice this surrender?” (p. 14). Perhaps, we are meant to persist in the in-betweens of resistance and surrender. It is in this space that we practice the healing that many presenters discussed, and also the creation of the made thing, the thing that moves us closer to conjuring awareness and connection. I remember another salient moment when someone in the audience remarked to a presenter about her reading of one of her poems, “In the midst of your witnessing, I picked up your empathy.” It is here in the midst that we may need to be most attentive to the minute and specific spaces that build and layer our appreciations and permeate not only our poems, but the margins of our poems.

At this conference, ways of contending with and being present with the difficult complexities of enacting forms of social justice were offered; I keep coming back to Kimberly Dark’s (2017) poetry performance and how she asked us all, together, to take a breath. Dark (2017) began her reading by discussing that our breaths become a way to build our poems and that silence can be its own way to sculpt language. Although silence has sometimes been aligned with complacency and complicitness when discussing social justice, I would argue it becomes its own force and action within poetry and further that we are all “...learning so many ways to be quiet” (Limon, 2015, p. 13). We are all learning so many ways to invoke a dialogue of listening. What I noticed as we all took a breath together is that each breath

was both individual and shared. I do not mean to overly-romanticize these moments, but I do mean to bring attention to the ways we explored silence, the ways we began to re-envision our roles as poets who conjure and offer space. Dylan Thomas (1961) remarked on this occurrence within poems, “the best craftsmanship always leaves holes or gaps...so that something that is not in the poem can creep, crawl, flash, or thunder in.” Further, as noted by more than one presenter, Leonard Cohen’s (1992) lyric, “There is a crack, a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in.” At this symposium, poems offered and generated gaps, holes, and cracks that allowed for the light to get in. In deciphering the “cracks” in poetry and language, we attend to the ways we compose and cultivate space within our communities. We engage with human and poetic ways of approaching the ineffable, not demarcated by difference but linked by it. It may be that these gaps are suffused with the space needed to consider the reverence and resonance that so often compels a group of people to intently listen to the reading of a poem. But if these holes, gaps, cracks present us with light or chance encounters with light, “how do we know to see it as light?” (Carson, 2016). Everything we encounter seems to be bent by our framing and context and all of the things (abstract and concrete) we carry with us.

Now, It seems that we may be caught in the uncertainties, left with our hands grasping and full of roaring questions. I see no other way to move forward then to listen, and no other way to make room for listening but with a poem. Here is a poem composed of lines from each of the presentation abstracts, and infused with some of my own lines. I hope this poem helps to distill and illustrate some of the intellectual, imaginative, and generous thought that was present at this symposium.

If we begin to listen: this crackling
of melting snow, this awakening
of aged floorboards, this language
that punctuates our becomings. How
if we listen when we talk about time,
hurry and late become euphemisms
for shame and guilt, how ordinary
it would be to be enough.

When all I want to do is bring
attention to the quiet places
of inequality that lurk. My partner
tells me I should be careful: this
thumbtack, pointed side up, this
humming of abandoned train tracks,
this reeling of the wound, this, this.
It is here that we will try

to dialogue about societal issues,
and somehow begin to unpack
these complex and contested identities:
this symmetry of difference, this removal
of stolen bottles of hotel shower gel, this
distance of unlit streetlights. And it all becomes
a project of public remembering:
this Trump presidency, this rape culture,
this misogyny, this locker room talk,
and this feminist response. I do not
mean to romanticize any of this. I do
not believe poetry can do more
than it can. There is a space
beyond where we may
reconstruct, invite, evoke, uncover
language suitable for healing. Some form
of preparation and preservation. That we will
all become teacher-poets, this exposing, this
exploring, this teaching the grace of leaving.
How we will listen our poems into being,
where the crack is visible, where the light leaks in.
Some modulation of the heart, or
this endurance amidst depletion, this
scattered moonlight. This
is what the examined life looks like.
We are all responding to suffering. For one day
in this place, it is not a resistance but a making:
this time of fear and uncertainty, this creation
of composite renderings, this constellation as a
guiding policy, this space of a particular pause.
We have always written through our
entanglements, this lethargy and loneliness.
This gaze is no longer solitary. We will resonate
with the disturbing, transcend the confines
of this historical moment, waiting,
as an audience does. This
question: will we listen?

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