

*This text was originally written as an introduction to a pamphlet following an evening of poetry readings in Great Yarmouth, at the very beginning of March 2020. It was the first in a series of poetry readings titled « no relevance » and brought together local poets Paula Thompson and Gia Mawusi with poets living further afield - Mira Mattar (London), Sabrina Soyer (Paris) and Adelaide Ivánova (Berlin).



an introduction |

Inviting writers to a place they have no direct connection to is a gesture most often undertaken by large literary or arts institutions. In these contexts we rarely see the invited actually engaged with the specifics of their new surroundings. This just contributes to existing hierarchies through which recognised culture is understood to be manufactured elsewhere - usually capital cities, the metropolises from which art seemingly springs - and then deemed consumable to the rest of us. This relationship between the city and the country was reinforced by groups of London-living people who in the lead up to the 2019 general election, turned up on doorsteps in the disappeared towns and villages of the UK on weekends to try to persuade local people that they knew (and shared) their best interests. If there's something to be learnt from this it's that enthusiasm cannot be a substitute for commitment. There cannot be a politics, or a poetics, that is not specific to a place and the people that live there.

But for any kind of politics (and poetics) that believes in the total undoing of things-as-they-are, it's crucial to expose the real connections and solidarities between people living 'here' and people living 'there'. We have known the necessity of refusing to believe in a dogma that dictates during disaster events reported around the globe that we must care only for the few who share our colour of passport. Workers, the unemployed, the sick, the submerged, the dispossessed, those systematically subjected to patriarchal and racialised violence; we have more in common with one another across the world than with the rich and seemingly powerful who happen to share our surroundings.

What does it mean to have roots in a place? And what, and who, are those roots attached to?

There is immense focus on what has left Great Yarmouth: the dwindling tourists, the relocated art school, the closing of the last smokehouse, the diminishing fishing industry, shipbuilding, port; the high street increasingly derelict. Even in my own family: my mum, who ran away at 17 to work and cover up on the beaches of Franco's Spain. Cheap studio and exhibition spaces are often used by artists living elsewhere, who rarely contribute to the town's inner social or cultural life. Last year I met a ceramicist who lives in a city 21 miles away but has a studio here, making pieces stocked by exclusive shops and galleries across the UK. When I asked if she ever thought about moving here she said that she found the town "too depressing."

During her time here in the lead up to the reading, Adelaide observed the shelves of the town's library: the lack of poetry books (there were around 20 - mostly 'love poems' or by Carol Ann Duffy), while Thatcher's autobiography was given prominent shelving position. Libraries can be understood as a reflection of expectations - of the interests, politics, education and identities of the surrounding population, their stock exposing prejudices based on demographics. There's this idea that in working class seaside towns - forever lumped together despite differing demographics and conditions - like Great Yarmouth, poetry (and recognised culture more generally) is irrelevant. That poetry means little to lives sustaining themselves at the sharp end of austerity. This idea materialises simply through the fact that just 21 miles away in the same county is UNESCO's first 'City of Literature'; yet leave the city for the surrounding countryside and you'll find some of the lowest literacy levels in the UK.

Despite the omnipresence of shops and businesses with seemingly little economic viability (the stall that sells only mushy peas, junk shops that open only between 2-4pm, the club that plays only Ministry of Sound CDs), there are no bookshops in Great Yarmouth. Why? Maybe because of this widespread idea that a working class town has no interest in, or need for, literature. For the state and its bourgeois backscratchers, the *problem* is seen as an impossibility to persuade or "educate" working people to read books, rather than, as a Centerprise youth worker wrote in 1977: "seeing the issue as a result of two centuries of active suppression of working class people becoming too interested in politics and literature... The incalculable years of imprisonment spent by thousands of individuals in the last 150 years for daring to publish, or distribute writings on economics, philosophy, literature and other oppositional categories of thought." This conscious strategy is clear in the government's response to illiteracy: mobility scooters. This idea, and condescending responses around "the education of" working people, led working class readers and writers in the '70s and '80s to set up their own bookshops and publishing presses across the UK, as documented by the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers.

And then the dangerous liberalism (too often disguised as militancy) of trying to claim that people don't need books like they need food, housing, work, warmth - as if we can only aspire to what we *need* and not beyond it. As if survival is all we're asking for. As if reading, writing and distributing literature (whether read or listened to) wasn't fundamental to struggles for better material conditions in apartheid South Africa, or '70s Nicaragua, or the Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados (the Unemployed Workers Movement) in Argentina, or the Diggers' occupations for common land in 1600s England, or liberation struggles led by communist peasants in Palestine. As if poetry cannot be specific to our own lives.

But culture isn't a 'right', it's a real living force - one we're already making and participating in daily. When workers in Argentina were faced with the shuttering of their factories, they occupied

them: creating spaces inside for a cultural centre, theatre and printmaking workshops, a free health clinic, a people's lending library, an adult middle and high school education program, and a University of the Workers. Yet the argument that "books are necessary too" often goes hand-in-hand with gentrification, displacement and assimilation, under the guise of 'cultural development.'

With this comes the (western) assumption that poetry cannot relate to the conditions of a place where there is high unemployment, poverty, prison leavers, homelessness, precarious immigration, flats in which people die from easy-to-avoid fires and a lack of carbon monoxide detectors, a place where Universal Credit was trialled and the number of people accessing foodbanks multiplied. Where one day you see neo-Nazi tattoos branded on arms, a car brandishing Confederate flags, and a postbox for the National Front; and the next, community meals where English is exchanged for Portuguese is exchanged for Lithuanian is exchanged for Guinensi, where stencilled graffiti of Angela Davis appears, where people embroider quilted scraps of material with "No to austerity," "No to immigration controls," "No to the closure of women's refuges." That poetry is a luxury we can only find strength or joy or anger or utter nihilism in once we too have transcended these shitty conditions. Only once we have ironed out our contradictions. That poetry "makes nothing happen." I read a recent anecdote about the apparent pretension of calling yourself a poet: "This embarrassment is so widely acknowledged among poets that it has become a cliché... [imagine] a party scenario. *And what do you do?* Oh, a writer... *and what do you write?* Gulp."

But what about the parties where people don't turn to one another and ask, what do you *do*? Where poetry is more a thing you practice and participate in, and less wrapped up in some kind of identity, career or academic study. Few of the people I know would call themselves a 'writer' or a 'poet', but everyone around me does write - penning poems after midnight, in between shifts and drop-ins, quiet moments in support houses, on the back of the bus, in brief cigarette breaks; when the kids have gone to sleep.

A real distinction does exist between culture and conditions, though; there is a difference between funding arts projects and funding housing. But it's not difficult to separate the everyday practice of culture, to which everyone has a claim, from a literary establishment and industry that has - as the qualified arbiter of taste - its own reasons for trying to persuade us otherwise. That posits 'craft' over the political and social principles of a poem: *who cares if a poem is racist or homophobic if it's well written?* If it adheres to the rules of a sonnet or sestina. The poet Julie Carr wrote somewhere:

'Craft' is not a word I use very much when I speak to myself about poetry. I don't consider that I am crafting something, but rather that I am listening to something, allowing something, or at times, searching for something.

Of course I do craft, but very differently than I was taught to when I was in school. I don't think about making "strong lines," I don't think of creating a sense of inevitability or closure in the poem. I don't think of taking out "excess." Rather, I think more as a dancer thinks about choreography. I think about density and lightness. I think about opening space up, or crowding it. Sometimes I consider moving more firmly forward, or stopping, or pausing. And I think about time.

To be invested in some kind of idea of 'good' poetry that is severed from its relationship to the person who wrote it - that denies the social life of literature (as social practice) - is absurd. We are drawn to poetry for our own reasons and histories, distinct from a literary industry that publishes

writing from outside official state culture only if it can be labelled and sold as ‘crazy writing’ or ‘poverty writing’ or ‘exotic writing’. Its designated otherness and unprofessionalism becomes its selling point - its marketability - as a form of newly-discovered cultured existence.

Books can’t house or feed us, but surely we can demand both? I applied to Arts Council England funding for « no relevance » to be able to pay people - not just to read poems, but to cook, translate, organise, print, design: to distribute money that often gets granted to the same organisations and institutions again and again.

But what does it mean to try to hold onto the radical intentions of a poetry reading - to keep it from all the ways in which state-sponsored funding attempts to appropriate, professionalise and institutionalise culture? I don’t know. What I do know is that some things aren’t seen as ‘political’ or ‘radical’ because certain language isn’t being used; but the things you do, together, in a space - or how people reorientate their relationships to others - can be. If it isn’t co-opted by a liberal arts elite, it’s in as much danger of being co-opted by a self-identified Left that is just as capable (and willing) to homogenise ‘community’. Declaring a politics doesn’t just make it so. And prioritising a certain kind of political discourse - one most often announced, acknowledged and brandished like markers of distinction at the centre of subcultural scenes - is to ignore the many things we can share with one another beyond aesthetics or language or exact analysis. There are so many feelings and principles and ways of living against the structures that seek to end us that do not need to be named in order to see they’re alive.

What could it mean to abandon current forms of engaging with poetry - a ‘scene’ whereby people of a similar age/generation, class, race, aesthetic, and precise politics share space - for spaces in which there is no single dominant demographic, trajectory or way of experiencing the world?

And what could it mean to do this in messy living? For so long there has existed the perspective that literature must be simple in its expression in order to reach people at the cafe, at the cash point, on the stoop, in the library. That, whatever our experiences, as poets we must simplify and reduce language and its meanings in order to ‘speak to’ or ‘make accessible’ our thoughts and desires for some externally-determined “people.” As the poet Galina Rymbu reminds us:

It can seem like the oppressed have a simple language, that we should employ a series of reductions to work with this language in order to be comprehensible as poets and artists. But there is no such thing as a simple language, just as there are no simple emotions. Here everything is even more complex—a real rat’s nest of complexity made up of the languages of violence, ideological pressures, propaganda, biopolitical manipulations, survivals of the past, fantasies, hopes, and even certain seeds of “emancipation”—meaning, partially violent concepts that provide an intuition of what might lead the “simple people” to freedom. In this sense, the idea of “simple language” is really just a total syntactic, lexical, and discursive collapse, and it’s very hard to work with it, almost impossible.

As poetry is irrelevant to places like *here*, so too are its inhabitants to ‘culture-making’ cities like London, Paris, Berlin: the belief that to invite people from other places is to expose us to languages, cultures and contexts we don’t know about. This is important: to provoke dialogue and exchange at the clear points of dis/joint, and see what might occur when poets of different places exist in greater proximity than often possible. But the multilingual nature of the poetry readings of « no relevance » also reflects the demographics of the town itself: a large Afro-Portuguese population

crossing Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, East Timor, and São Tomé and Príncipe; Russian, Lithuanian, Kurdish, Romani - echoed in the casual language-switching of kids walking home from school.

Still I wonder: what are the possibilities of being irrelevant? In existing apart from what capitalism and the state deem culture, deem marketable, deem consumable? And how can we build our own sustainable, amateur structures to write and read and share one another's work?

During our time shared together and alone, in the days leading up to and after the reading, we watched starling murmurations, read poems aloud in preparation, ate together, decided how to order the readings and organise the space, met new people and groups (one afternoon I came across Adelaide hanging out in the library with a homeless outreach shelter), went to a community meal/language exchange, ran around with people's kids, searched for lighters, worried over poems, inspected the library's poetry shelves, swept the floors, saw the sea, stayed up drinking and talking and listening to poems and rapping and piano playing.

This pamphlet is a glimpse of a record of a live reading, more documentation than presentation. The ordering - each poet pocketed by fractured translations of fragments of poems from *Pièce secrète de Bibi la déesse* by Sabrina - reflects how we intended the ordering of the night to be. Here are some of the poems read that night, by the poets and their collaborators Doug Jones and Jason Parr, tracing histories and futures and presents that haven't happened by accident; aren't given, but made.

Lotte L.S.