

Poetic Labor Project

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For Labor

Because I decided to get as many jobs as I could and work these jobs in between sleeping and eating and caring for my child, I wanted, also, to build muscle and then more muscle, eat lean protein, and lose all intrusions of language or imagination or whatever it was that distinguished a poet from anyone else. This is not the first time I had to quit like this, but with all of these jobs I could eventually begin to see my hamstrings. I learned to do the reverse prone jackknife, and though later I understood it was a question of “How much poetry can I remove from me?” at the time it was a question of numbers, each hour accounted for in a notebook devoted to the accounting of hours.

In that my life consisted of working many jobs and taking care of a child and eating protein without any reading or writing, my life was not that different from the lives of many other people except that sometimes traces of an earlier life would appear in the form of people wanting things from me. I resolved to give them nothing. I barely gave them *no*. I learned to do my deadlifts with one leg behind me straight high in the air. I was always wanting balance challenges, like the twenty pound bicep curls with one foot tucked against my knee.

There were a few nights I would feel sorry for myself and cry about capitalism and what it had done to us, but not too many nights. Some nights we would go to the strip-mall bars of these old suburbs of the gentrifying city, and in these bars the people who worked too many jobs and also took care of their children and did not read too many books sang songs by Shania Twain and Destiny’s Child.

I could not even stand in the bruised world yelling “It’s a bruised world!” Was this some kind of macro-nutrient imbalance? Who knew?

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I had a dream about the labor conference. I hadn’t been invited to speak and don’t know why, then, I was speaking there, but stood up in front of you and said, “Now imagine that once every seven years one Tang drinker gets to sip on the orange juice. Imagine being the one who is always being promised the orange juice. Imagine, sometimes, they even let you pour them their juice.” This was a “provocative model” and “highly efficient de-professionalization” -- and I realized even then I couldn’t keep talking about Tang-life but couldn’t stop, could also not start to say what I meant or finish it. It was a graceless dream, or a dream in which I had been graceless, and afterwards I woke up and wondered if I had been reading from someone else’s notes.

*

I had never even thought of trauma as a trauma, perhaps because that word seems to be used by a kind of despised class to indicate the disappointment they feel that they are

not able to have exactly everything that they want. I don't even want what I want. What delicious possibility is inherent in the world of those who do not have the everything of the few, who do not have to make one false choice, then the next, traumatized always by the stakes of mere taste, by the terror of an incorrect move among the serious, spectacular minutiae?

After the second night of hemorrhaging I promised in an email "I will not let myself die" but still almost did. Even my boss said out loud what was killing me. It would have been perfectly literary if I had let myself die there on the bathroom floor asking for no help and afraid of the cost of the hospital. I had two choices and bleeding to death or losing all my money was too much symmetry. The bills later shook in my hands, shook on my lap, as if they were a kind of wind-up terror toy. The project of devaluing had made me, as a concept to myself, almost entirely expired. Once I got out of the hospital, my daughter said "humans die easily," and I told her that "yes they do," and also, "no they don't."

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One has slivers of the self-directed life. I can give you the exact days and months and years: two days *here*, in a city I might never see again, or one month, *there*, thanks to *that*. At first, a pie chart, then something else: there is a brute in these rooms and apartments and duplexes and trailers and shared houses and single-family houses. The brute is not human, but like a bear, if a bear were a shadow, and ten times bigger than any figure I let myself imagine. This brute like a shadow and the bear not like a human is named *survival-life*. The brute is always saying something, is always paraphrasing Hannah Arendt, is all-like *give me the labor of your body, not the work of your hands*. There are children who fall asleep every night in that bear's arms. My favorite arts are the ones that can move your body or propose a new world. What at first kept me enthralled wasn't justice, it was justice-like waves, and a set of personal issues, like aestheticizing and the limitations of reading lists before the digital age.

I read my Epictetus until I realized I had enough, already, of the corrective imagination of a slave. People told me, of themselves, *my whole life has been that brute*. I've never figured out how to write about anything, like narrative is allergic and analysis is violence and discursion is betrayal. I'm sure I don't know how I fit in here, but if you look for "all life into survival and all survival into life" I am something like the third hit down.

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My Belated Cpt—Ellipsis, Translation, The Body

On January 14, 2009, Cathy Park Hong posted a comment on Rodrigo Toscano's *Collapsible Poetics Theater*. Here is a small portion of what she wrote:

The text is not a script for voice, but a script for performance, underscoring its artifice... the emphasis is on the artifice of voice, the voice in drag, masque, ridiculous impersonation. The voice is both synthetic and serves as a synthesis of hybrid languages...Toscano's poetry is infected with the language of Globalization and consumerist culture...tech-speak, ad-speak, and business-conference room-speak...question the totalizing effects of Global Capitalism on individual choices... informs us that faced with the market monolith, there are no choices, even though we're led to believe that we're inundated with them. The voices are mordant, thorny... Many of his works share a troubling relationship with the collective: in one sense, the mass subsumes into corporate groupthink, but in another sense, the collective is necessary for political action. Throughout the book, the individual is never specified. Voices are anonymous, neutered groups...there is no differentiation between person and product, person and property, person and the labor force...simply anxious actors programmed to put on a "happy pappy face" in the great determining system of Capitalism.

On January 19, 2009, I posted my response:

I concur completely with your comments even if they are, as you note, an essay toward a more thorough analysis of Toscano's work. You have identified what I too find compelling and troubling, the reduction and *ad absurdum* logic of the "voice" to a collective--that is, the way the collective turns out, in its more vulnerable moments, to "be" an assemblage of disembodied voices. Yet, and this is the radical nature of his work, that dynamic (which is not a dialectic) is also the promise of another future, a trans-nationalism at the edges, if not outside, of the consumerist/globalizing markers of identity--and "identity politics" is far too reductionist (and parochial)--with which, in which, we find ourselves, so to speak...

I am writing this, today, on January 18, 2010. I did not intend to mark this work with the X of an anniversary, much less the MLK of a national holiday. Yet here I am, one year after my initial post on CPT. In what sense did my body know, if it knew, that it had been a year, a full revolution around the sun, even if the difference between dates, one number, is the index of history as a constructivist science, a lag, belated date only in relation to a day—one revolution around its own center—called Monday? And what

does this body, which is not the same body about which I wrote a few words above, have to do with the X of an anniversary, the MLK of a national holiday? Would it be brash to call these days and dates, the delay that throws them out of line with one another, one or the other always late in relation to one another, CPT? Can this delay be drawn as an ellipsis, as an absence, as the relationship between a stamp pad and stamped impression, between a stage and a stomp?

(Rodrigo Toscano from Conditions of Poetic Production and Reception, part 1)

Now, along a Realist Theatre code-&-expectation grid that sequence “makes no sense” as to how the body-action narratively “syncs” with the speech-say action. But from the perspective of Poetics Theater, it’s altogether different. The body-action is a coordination (between two players) as through a series of stress points (the limits of two anatomies). And the speech can also be thought of as a coordination (of materiality of the signs) as through a series of ideological stress-points (Globalization giving birth and truncating incipient urbanist art forms). The “((fuck))” is where the two theatric designations would meet, but don’t. So action and speech are preserved (not pimped one onto the other), and what’s expended is the spectators striving to piece them together,”((fuck)).” So, they’re disynchronous as regards unified gesticulatory purpose, but bisynchronous as regards an elemental theatric moment, that is, a demonstration of players coupled by a spectatorship making critical discriminations of such a demonstration.

This writing proceeds without ellipsis, having reduced Cathy Park Hong’s writing to a text sewn together with ellipses, the point being that Hong’s writing is mere pretext for my writing. Still, the ellipses are an ethical gesture, alerting the reader of a missing text. Translation not only presumes the elliptical, it demands it, cannot precede without expelling an ur-pre-text. Every translation, of course, like every mode of translation, differs from other translations, other modes of translation. What does it mean, then, to translate one revolution of the sun into a date? And the reverse: what does it mean to translate a discourse into a body even if we grant that both may share a term—a “poetics”—even if we also understand that this one word means at least two different things when applied to discourse and to a body?

(Rodrigo Toscano, from Body Capacitance and Edging in Poetics Theatre, part II of Conditions of Poetic Production and Reception)

One wakes up in the morning in a state of waiting, engages that waiting by getting newer infusions of waiting, and when that aggregative volume of waiting slows one’s flow to a crawl, one looks for “speed” – on the Internet – in vain. “Feel Your Media – Bitch” – one of its formal tasks – is to interrupt that “waiting” by punctuating speech-moments with corporeal movement, and vice versa. But this interruption is not just about supped up versions of ideological signal-jamming, it’s about an open air, public exploration of ratios of linguistic language to non-linguistic language as a marked-up form of readability. And when the spectators “feel” (or even better – refuse to “feel”) that tensioned readability as its developing, if they internally begin to dispute the ratios presented, then the piece becomes one of those “cruel things” that “exercise themselves against us.” Thus, the

“private viewing” affordance of Internet media viewing, and subsequent waiting game that follows, all that shit – is messed with in that piece. And if I had a preferred “way” (singular aesthetic allegiance) to stage that exploration, then I’d have only one single episode (interference modality) to show for it. Instead, I take 15 cracks at it. Contrast (social, aesthetic) is at a premium for CPT.

My response to Cathy Park Hong’s brief comments on CPT on the Poetry Foundation’s Harriet blog points to the way I’ve been thinking about your work since 2005, specifically, since a piece you read at the Modern Language Association Convention in Washington, D.C. December 28, 2005. In that piece, you raise, and dramatize, the differences or lacunae between intentionality and significance. I wonder how a poetics of political and social engagement might bridge the gaps implied by your work?

RT: “Sort of. But not enough.” As an opening riff, these two assertions (even if generated by doubt) seem to mark the border between material language and the “world.” At the same time the polyphonic performance of the essay, like your poetry in general, attempts to stage—literally—the world. Perhaps a “premature truncation into social discourse in general”? Given the didactic/rhetorical effects intrinsic to all language use, is the difficulty of your work one way to block the reader’s “natural” desire to conflate language and world (which presupposes their absolute difference, as though the former is “in” but not “of” the latter, as though the letter is “be” but not “out”-side the “earth”), to turn the complex and dense twists and turns of your lexicon into a window through which “reality” is “merely” framed?

Regarding the events transpiring on the streets of Mainz, Germany from your “observation deck,” you ponder the question of belatedness and prematurity as indices of traditional poetic assumptions (the poet as vatic bard or historian of memory)—your phrases “Super sort of not” and “super of” seem to me to encapsulate these notions. Given the desire to be—and actuality of being—“embedded” (deliberate, ironic, yet “true”) for the poet, are the aesthetics implied by belatedness and prematurity factored in mere elements of poem-making or marginalized as much as possible (we can’t discard them entirely without discarding writing altogether)?

Given the exhortation of the “trans-migrating subject,” posed against the “nativist,” does this piece (the essay itself) give short shrift to the TMS which writes, speaks, not only “back” to its own nativism but perhaps to the very concept of nativist logic (which might, might, appear to presuppose that all “logics” practiced within a given geo-political sphere, however multiple and complicated, do NOT disturb the concept of the “native.”)?

These questions/issues that I raised almost four years ago seem to be verified in what is staged in CPT. What I find fascinating about all the work leading up to CPT is the way in which, on the one hand, the transnationalist discourse and subject positions you articulate (and in your *Jacket* interview/conversation with Natalie Knight you make clear that there is no circumventing authorship or, in the case of CPT, directorship, however loose the reins/parameters) open up new possibilities for poetic discourse even if, at the same time (but I want to return to the question of temporality), this discourse becomes “just” another sector within aesthetics in general. When you write, in the “position”

of 1, in CPT (p. 6) that “I suppose I am rather burdened...by the premature truncation of poetic discourse unto social discourse in general,” and positions 2, 3 and 4 chime in that they’ve all “heard that one before”, what is the time of the “premature”? How is the “right” time recognized in relation to a “before”?

Rodrigo Toscano, from *Body Capacitance and Edging in Poetics Theatre*, part II of *Conditions of Poetic Production and Reception*

The point was to have speech squinch out of those bodily contortions, and not be as a (however skilled) “voice over” to a particular “staging” of a given “character’s part.” Squinched out, “painful.” And the spectators (“bi-ped hominids”—it’s worth repeating) recognize those stress-points, and start desiring—no! designing “pleasurable” releases. The mind jumps ahead looking for solutions to locked motions. Therefore the “solutions” that the CPT posits in subsequent sequences (i.e., all players suddenly springing up in unison, locking arms, running forward, jostling each other, and belting out lines, and so on), can be thought of as pivot-points in contrast to the spectators’ non-contemplative, but already exacerbated, sensory motions. That’s how “time” is created in CPT, from a body-to-body, offset clocking. The challenge, as a score writer for this overarching clock, is calculating when a space might open up for a new “setting.” And since a “setting” combines (actual-time) duration, bodily capacity, and conjoined sensual-intellectual searches for release points – oh, and messes in the making too, phew! there’s lots of “places” to jump off from. So progress here is not necessarily meant as something moving forwards, but just simply “somewhere else.”

CPT (even the small part I witnessed at Miami University, Ohio in early 2009) relentlessly puts forth the dilemma of articulating positions for resistance, if not opposition, and the seemingly impossibility (or difficulty) of locating positions for resistance, and yet the radical non-site of CPT suggests that this indeterminate (in space and time) resistance might be more potent than any kind of localized/specified politics of opposition since the “opposite” itself has been annexed by capitalism/imperialism and the historical failure of a Marxism contorted into “premature” states—a prematurity that resulted in totalitarianism. Would these histories serve as warnings for what is posed at the outset of CPT, that “premature truncation into social discourse in general”? Would poetic discourse, here, serve as a kind of anti-absorptive obstacle and reserve for a culture and economics founded on the innovation/obsolescence dyad?

Rodrigo Toscano from *(New Resistant Subjects [Bot to Bot])* part 4 of *Conditions of Poetic Production and Reception*

One way that [kari] edwards invited the precariousness that we’re talking about (—not an avant-garde that must think itself in relation to an ‘_outside’...or one that plays in sandboxes of semiotics forever either||) was by incorporating biological-physical death as an inbuilt limit to key life-making processes (labor, art, sex); and by extension, the —freedoms|| that these processes suggest, that they must be embraced as completely as possible. But I would suggest too that these same —life-making processes,|| – that they too, be understood as constrictions to yet other life-making processes, ones that are as

yet unidentified. This would suggest a rather strange embrace of anti—purpose|| (even as voluntary degradation!) so that we have to make curiosity, make the chimerical, make the evanescent even, that is, in contrast to —research.

There is not only translation of a poetics into a space there is only translation of the body into the body in another space even if—especially if—the body is the “same.” This body typing this today, 1/18/10, MLK Day, a “national holiday,” is not the same body that will soon arise from this chair and, in a microcosm of evolution, its own little death, “become” a different body only on the assumption/condition that the body is, from the start, hypostatized as a homeostatic object or subject. CPT remains thus a poetics of the body politic translating itself on numerous national (international?) stages, a micro-politics adducing Western history as the literal and symbolic congealing of drives into body, the body as prototype of all bodies. Or put another way: “the premature truncation of poetic discourse unto social discourse in general.” This “unto”—not into—suggests sedimentation as the “first” movement toward an orogeny, though what remains in question is the not-yet time of the “premature.” What remains in question is the viral implications of Das Kapital—how do we avoid de-bugging the system? What are the sexual implications of bugging out, buggery, etc. in relation to the reproduction of the social contract—[QUOTE] “balm...and buggin” when “buggin’s’/’balm’ too?” (from Balm To Bilk, a poem for two voices) we sign every time we wake up from our little deaths and “go to work”? After all, as you write, “there’s theatric ‘labor’ (or better put, body effort—borne of body capacitance) that is homologous to social labor as a whole.” (Body Capacitance and Edging in Poetics Theatre)

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Between these markers, body to body, “shop to shop,” (RT) these births will always be imagined as the ends of labor, colored people’s time, now.

LARA DURBACK

I hate money. I really do. I like labor. I like working. I work hard. I always have. I've been working with this organization MISSEY. I'm a poet, but I usually don't say that to people. In the MISSEY Community Collective, I am called Fundraising Team Leader. "But you hate money!" you say.

I say, "I fell in." I met these people and I couldn't leave because they face human darkness every day with a radical love for others. It seems to be the only way one can work on these things. (Well it requires a lot of self-care on the people doing the working too.) I was pissed off at someone else on my Fundraising team, and I complained to Nola, the founder of MISSEY, who responded by email saying, "I hear you. ...[addressing my concern, but] love conquers all." I wanted her to be my Ganesh, to move away my obstacle, to be "the boss." But she was like, "just love." I grit my teeth to myself for a few days, want to quit everything, and then things clear and I can work on things again.

I hate asking people for money. I don't want money for anything except trains and beer and photocopies and books. I needed things for a while, now I know that everything I need I can find in the trash. I grew up thinking I would be on the street everyday. I was told that. I ate cold hot dogs from the fridge while he talked on the phone. But I'm big now.

I hate asking for money but today I went into a schmoozy Temescal restaurant and asked for money. I usually think of my work with MISSEY as curating...I only ask for things from businesses that have been a dear part of my life for a while, people who have some sort of relationship with communities and employees that I respect, like Oakland Community Acupuncture, Pizza Pazza, Full House Cafe, Rooz Cafe, Laura Camp Yoga. Friday is my day off, and I dedicate about 4 hours to MISSEY usually, and this particular morning I was working on me & Greg Turner's chapbook for Dusie, Garbage Research #1: Hoarders. We'll see if it makes it as a chapbook, it's pretty ziney.)

So anyway, that morning I had been at a mindful pilates class in which I just lay on a roller and think about my spine for an hour, and I felt radiant and focused and clear for the first time in two weeks. Despite the scary tsumnami and earthquake news, it was inner peace. I biked up the street and got a number for a sandwich at Genova, #78, and they were only on #50. So I thought, I'll go across the street and try to get a gift certificate for MISSEY's raffle fundraiser. I sort out one of the copies of the letters asking for money and try to write a personal note. A gust of wind comes and knocks all my papers around. Someone helps me. I thank them and say something self-deprecating and walk into the empty restaurant. At the back, 4 men are prepping food. I am intimidated, start getting dizzy. "Hi, I'm here to s-see if you have a would uh give a uh g-gift certificate for a fundraiser." They all grin at me kind of condescending.

They are cutting meat. I don't eat meat. I don't mind it, but it's really gross alone, and with people all touching it. The main guy is very good looking, and is grinning sort of smugly.

“What’s it for?” “It’s MISSEY. Motivating Inspiring Supporting and Serving Sexually Exploited Youth.” I stumble over that too. I kick something on the floor accidentally. I have 2 braids, yoga pants, an overstuffed bag weighting me down, I feel about 1 foot tall. I feel like they are looking at my body. “Sexually exploited? That’s kind of a clumsy term.” “It’s another way of saying teen prostitutes, but they are not prostitutes because they are not making any money. And people don’t have much sympathy legally for the term prostitute.”

“I love prostitutes.” He says. My hips feel like they are going to fall off. “Don’t talk like that...” I say, but I am crumbling, “Did you get our letter we sent?” “Probably not,” he says, and I feel like I just want to run, run, run.

“There are a lot of girls on the street near where I live. I have smokes with them and stuff when they’re outside,” he continues. “Where?” I asked. “63rd and San Pablo.” “Are they young?” “Some of them.” And he sees me still giving him wary psycho eyes, and says, “No seriously, the first girl I dated used to be a prostitute. I had a kid with her. [He walks around from the other side of the counter.] She’s an amazing human being. She wasn’t like on the street though....of course I’ll give you a gift certificate.”

“So she was making money, huh? Well these girls aren’t making money. The new trend is that long time drug dealers have switched to dealing girls. It’s less risky.” He starts writing a gift certificate with meat hands.

He shakes his head and gives me the gift certificate. I shook my head. “I really thought you were just going to be an asshole.” I said. “Thanks.” And I got back over to Genova when they were only on #76.

Sometimes I wonder how I have time to work on this stuff. This is work. I am on my way to the office to make phone calls and use Google docs and edit letters and plan meetings. I can ask for money for this because it’s not for me. If it was for me, I would hate asking even more. I fell into working here, and I have a 2/3-time job at Mills College Book Art Program the rest of the time. And then the rest of the time, I write (and the writing of course overlaps with everything whenever it can).

I think work was a lot worse before I decided to completely shape and curate my life. I never had energy to do anything. I was constantly anxious and thinking that every thing I wrote or did wasn’t good enough. (I mean, there were meds to surrender to, also.) Many of the people I admired in high school and early college were poets, knowing them in a book, or knowing them in life and also in their writing. I chose to go to college because I needed to get away from my family. I did not have academic goals. I did not have money to move anywhere on my own without choosing a dorm. The poets that I found as I studied had one foot in academia and one on the ground. I met Jena Osman. Her advanced poetry workshop was the most challenging course I took in college. Plus there were others I had found on my own, in libraries. I was exposed to poets that were working very hard on things that other people would puzzle over to understand why they were working so hard. Poets that I encountered generally studied things other

than their own line of work. (I cannot say this about people I knew who “officially” studied finance, or linguistics, or sound design. It seems like the line for others was often between study vs. fun. Or study vs. responsibilities such as children and jobs that make rent [a restaurant job/office/store job]. So a poet is not separating that. Yeah?) Was I lucky? Were other poets elsewhere not like this? From people’s perceptions of poetry that I’ve heard outside of poetry scenes, poetry is perceived to relate to depression, love, laziness, or tragedy (as in all the 9-11 poetry attention), perhaps it’s not true that poets are the way they say they are. But I always thought, real poets studied the world. Real poets lived like something like Ed Sanders’ Investigative Poetry narrates, though I’m not exactly sure I’d want to be Ed Sanders. Real poets had knowledge of all the art around them, current events, consciousness, word origins, urban planning, labor organizing, indigenous peoples, alternate histories, psychology, biology, sociology, and they all have theories about everything. Real poets were multiple. Real poets were secret philosophers but not as annoying, just flakier and more late.

When people in Full House Cafe where I waitress on Sundays ask me what kind of art or writing I do, I say, “investigative poetry.” If I don’t say that, they will think I write about love and hide in my room. I write about love sometimes, don’t I?

Once I can start allowing myself to have the space to learn other things besides poetry, forcing myself to be with people other than poets (it’s not that hard), then I am more of a poet.

The labor of printing chapbooks by letterpress washes over me now. I’m supposed to talk about that here, I think. I enjoy the mechanics, the rogue printers I met who will tell you how to fix any problem cheaply once they trust you. I also enjoy spending time researching how to buy the least amount of things possible to run a whole print shop and bindery. How much can we reuse with things like Freecycle? How can we find things made locally? How do we balance between making art more sustainable and not buying into greenwashing marketing?

I print only sometimes. It can be extremely frustrating to work with individual metal letters and spacing, and the long sessions are hard on the body. Vandercook presses (flatbed cylinder proofing presses) were not intended for production work. People would run one print and take a photo of it. (But Vandercooks are easier to learn and there is less risk of smashing your hand than on a platen press, such as a C&P, a press that is intended for production.) I have experienced a rip in the cartilage of my sternum that I’m almost positive was related to printing on a Vandercook (cranking the heavy carriage back and forth hundreds of times with the same arm, with an odd torque to my torso).

People know what I have access to in terms of presses at Mills, and unlimited art crap lying around, but they don’t generally know the complicated system of space and power I need to navigate in order to make my day-to-day operation of Mills peaceful. And that means I can’t just print all the time. I also have such problems with overextending myself I have ended up in the hospital in the past. (But that’s how you get a part-time job in Book Art that 24 people all over the country applied for because people just love

access to that stuff so much. You gotta be an overachiever, a go-getter. Little did the applicants know it would be 2 years of planning six equipment moves involving cranes and trucks and also moving carts of things alone, and bringing your boyfriend in to help you because it couldn't get done otherwise and sweeping out cabinets of mysterious powders left over by the chemistry building the program moved into BEFORE it became a dream job.)

I cannot count the times I have been asked by people to print something for them or with them, even though I barely know them, and for a long time, it made me feel like it was all they wanted from me, sort of like something else I always thought people wanted from me. I mean, I'm not against doing free work at all, but...

Nola said at a MISSEY Community Collective training, "It's a classic abuse thing, people always go back to, 'that's all they want from me.' "

Like sex. Like sexy letterpress.

But you can heal, and have pleasure again, and print again, and write again.

I give honor to a lot of the poets who do a lot of things. I'm so happy to hear of poets as urban planners, performance artists, doing graphic design, social work, protesting, working with youth, enmeshing the world they have in their poetics with the rest of the world, making it one fluid curation or stream of energy that matches an intention. Because what is a poetics if it doesn't do anything that gets it out of the house.