My Kind of Town: Local literary Community

I moved from rural Indiana to Chicago in 1968 and lived in the neighborhoods of Uptown, South Shore, Lincoln Park, East Rogers Park, and West Rogers Park for 26 years, long enough to feel a part of its various local conditions. In 1971, on the strength of 15 poems I’d written, I was accepted into the first class of the Program for Writers at University of Illinois, Chicago, founded by Paul Carroll. Up to that point, my reading in poetry was what I could find in the Chicago Public Library: Sylvia Plath, Theodore Roethke, Galway Kinnell, William Carlos Williams, and the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella. Paul Carroll and my classmates immediately expanded my reading, but with the exceptions of Paul himself and Bill Knott, I was not reading any local poets. The most important turn in my reading may have come when a classmate dropped Ron Padget’s *Great Balls of Fire* on a conference table in Adams Hall at UIC. The work was so different from that of Roethke and Plath that it reordered my experience of poetry. I didn’t plunge completely into the New York School, nor did I remain where I was. I’m thankfully still in passage, within and among a number of heavy planets: Deep Image, Surrealist, the English Metaphysicals as well as the American (Dickinson), Williams and Stevens, César Vallejo and Pablo Neruda, Language poetry, Ashbery and Schuyler, Lorine Niedecker, Thomas Traherne, Robert Creeley, Zukofsky’s “A-14,” Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore’s “The Fish,” and Gwendolyn Brooks’s amazing vocalizations and close rhymes, as seen in “I Love Those Little Booths at Benevuti’s.” None of the above, including the “local” poet Brooks, were of my place. She lived on the South Side, and I lived on the North Side, which are virtually different cities. But I came to possess these poets. Was Williams important to Rutherford in his own time, except as a doctor of medicine? Did his next-door neighbors care? But spring in his backyard was important to poetry. Were Dickinson and Traherne necessarily of their place? Do we read the poet for the place? Or does the poet read the place for the essential?

In 1971, with Dean Faulwell and Jim Leonard, I founded the poetry magazine *OINK!* Maxine Chernoff joined as an editor with issue five; by number seven she and I were alone in the effort. The magazine ran for 19 issues before transforming into *New American Writing*, now in its twenty-first issue. To what extent were they, or are they, Chicago magazines? Most

This talk was presented on March 27, 2004 at the AWP conference in Chicago.
of its editors were from elsewhere and all were to wind up elsewhere. The editorial policy exhibited no recognizable influence from Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, Eugene Field, The Cliff Dwellers Club, Richard Wright or The Masses. Was Richard Wright a Chicago author? Nelson Algren was a Chicago writer, until he grew sick at heart, sold his belongings at a yard sale (one of our friends bought his radio), and moved to New Jersey. Why New Jersey? Because it's more like Chicago than Manhattan? Kenneth Rexroth left Chicago. Even Saul Bellow packed his bags. Gwendolyn Brooks was a great Chicago poet, and she wrote of its places, like the Mecca. Who are the Chicago poets today? Bin Ramke of Denver, Mark Strand of Nova Scotia, Li-Young Lee of China and Malaysia, Marvin Bell of Iowa City, Albert Goldbarth of Wichita, Stuart Dybek of Kalamazoo, Elaine Equi and Jerome Sala of New York City, Paul Hoover and Maxine Chernoff of San Francisco, Andrew Zawacki of Warren, Pennsylvania, Devin Johnston of St. Louis, and Maureen Seaton of New York City and Miami Beach, to name a few. The leading contemporary Chicago poet is Mark Strand, that's that. Who will butcher the hogs and stack the wheat? When Algren left town, the Chicago media suggested that Algren, like Keats, had been killed by a review, the lack of one in the Chicago media.

Since 1994, my primary residence has been in San Francisco. From that time until this fall, I commuted to teach in Chicago, where I taught a double load in the fall semester of each year (five classes), ran a reading series with eight to ten annual events, took responsibility for two poetry magazines, and coordinated a growing undergraduate poetry program. The resulting distance from both Chicago and San Francisco created uncertainty about my place and hurt me politically, especially in my workplace.

For years, Chicago was a fly-over city. The real world of literature existed on the coasts. Chicago's main poetry event used to be Poetry Day, sponsored by Poetry. In 1972, at the suggestion of Paul Carroll, a few of us including Lisel Mueller, Mark Perlberg, and Martha Friedberg founded The Poetry Center at the Museum of Contemporary Art. The idea was to bring poets to Chicago to read their work. For the same reason, to leap high enough to connect with what was not local, Maxine and I published New American Writing, sponsored a reading series at Links Hall, and served on the board of The Poetry Center. San Francisco comes ready-made. Someone else did the work of building (Kenneth Rexroth, the Duncan and Spicer circles, and so on). Chicago remained to be built.

Are San Francisco authors more sophisticated than those from Chicago? Are they really French; that is, French Communists? All my neighbors are Buddhist including the poet Jane Hirshfield, the personal injury lawyer Milt Weiss—who owned Fantasy Records when Ginsberg recorded “Howl” on that label—and his wife Joan, who has backed her car into our car four times.
times and once into the house. That’s my local condition, like fog in the
evening, crane flies cruising the wall, and Stellar Jays in the yard terrorizing
the cat. In Chicago, it’s walking to Pizano’s for deep-dish pizza, hot and cold
air that strikes you a blow, and a surprisingly good poetry section at the
Borders on Michigan. D.T. Suzuki writes that Buddhism and the mysticism
of Meister Eckhart are related. My upbringing in Midwestern German Pietism
may have been relevant after all, preparing me for life in San Francisco. When
Maxine and I invited our first Mill Valley friends for dinner, we served pork
loin. Our guests stared at the dish in amazement. This was food from an-
other climate. The work of the Spanish poets, Robert Bly tells us, is fleshed
and blooded. Do I admire the Spanish poets because I’m German? The his-
tory of poetry includes pork loin, watercress soup, and starvation. Can I
sprinkle a little realism over that dish?

For many years in Chicago, my role as a teacher, editor, organizer of
poetry readings, and poet was to encourage openness to the “new.” I was free
to do what I wanted with New American Writing, as a poet, and in the class-
room. But I was made conscious of my limitations when it came to the En-
glish Department’s reading series. The warning shot was given by the former
Chair of the English Department when he stated his dislike of a presenta-
tion by Language poet Bob Perelman. It was elitist, he said with anger. The
Chair had been doing some stand-up comedy on the weekends and had an
idea of the popular taste. Are the Marxists now the elitists? I was careful
thereafter to put a balanced face on the reading series, with a reading by
Gerald Stern and Li-Young Lee next to one by Michael Palmer and Ann
Lauterbach. My best students were sometimes puzzled. They liked the Palmer
and Lauterbach better. But I had to be fair.

When I won an NEA Fellowship in poetry in 1980, the literary director
of the Illinois Arts Council said that I’d won because I didn’t write like a
Chicagoan. How exactly does a Chicagoan write? Is it different from the
Pittsburgh style? The Trobriand Islands?

Which brings us to the academy. For many years, I taught at an open-
admissions arts and communications college in the South Loop that had a
large enrollment of first-generation college students. In Auden’s terms, we were
throwing the little streets upon the great, and it was working. My poetry stu-
dents were being accepted into the country’s leading MFA programs—Brown,
Bard, Columbia University, University of Iowa, Bennington—and were be-
coming known in the world (Elaine Equi, Mary Jo Bang). At the same time,
the poetry I had supported, a mélange of New York School and Language
poetry, was coming into its own. Charles Bernstein held a chair at SUNY/
Buffalo, Bob Perelman was an Associate Professor at Penn, Ann Lauterbach
joined Ashbery at Bard, and Mary Jo Bang was tenure-track at Washington
University. Even the avant-garde of the 1950s—Creeley, Ginsberg, Baraka,
Ashbery, and Levertov, among them—held academic positions. By the mid-90s, notable poets of the former mainstream like Jorie Graham and Brenda Hillman were being impacted by the new style. This hybrid approach was becoming dominant even at the most sacrosanct of MFA programs, the Iowa Program for Writers. Had the little streets defeated the great? Or had the great assimilated what they needed to hold sway? Perhaps the usual thing had happened, a revolution of the word for the post-1975 and post-1989 generations.

How does this shift in poetics relate to locality? Aren’t New York and San Francisco supposed to be the places for experiment? Ghettos of the avant-garde? Palaces of innuendo and vivacity? Would the Chicago Adam eat of it, and who was the Eve of postmodern seduction? Michael Palmer or Marc Smith? A former student attending Penn State’s MFA program reported that her poetry instructor returned from a San Francisco vacation three years ago with the news that something called Language poetry was going on there. “Do you think it will come here, too?” the instructor asked with fear in her voice.

I have a print-out from the website chicagopostmodernpoetry.com. It shows the incredible growth of experimental poetry in Chicago in recent years: The Discrete Series, the Danny’s Tavern series, the Chicago Poetry Project, the Myopic Poetry Series, Chicago Review, and Conundrum. To that list, I would add Flood Editions, edited by Devin Johnston and Michael O’Leary, Peter O’Leary’s magazine LVNG, Columbia Poetry Review as formerly constituted, Another Chicago Magazine at its most Beat, the recent arrivals of Margy Sloan and Bin Ramke, among others, and a new openness to such writing at School of the Art Institute and the University of Chicago. There’s nearly as much experimental activity in Chicago as in San Francisco, and that’s saying something. One can now say, “Lisa Jarnot is in town” or, “Ron Silliman’s reading at Chicago Poetry Project.” In this respect, the city has finally grown up.

The ironies of the bohemian versus the academic, the outsider and the insider, are a little tired. Poetry is practiced by all and in every social place. In the long run, at least, the best comes forward. The independent or non-academic position is charming—Lorine Niedecker on Lake Koshkonong, Carl Rakosi doing social work, the good Dr. Williams forcing a throat—but is not necessarily a moral high ground. Jeremy Prynne teaches at Cambridge University, and his stuff is pretty weird. Modern poetry going back as far as Whitman and Dickinson has the pattern of the obscure, strange, and marginal rising to classic status. The classic I was taught in school was “Thanatopsis” by William Cullen Bryant. What was that about?

Community is complicated. Poetry rises from local conditions—the local universals of sun, seed, bed, and fire. The reader appears and disappears in a
second. The mind sways in its own wind. Now and then the body remembers.

As a young poet in Chicago, my community consisted of several communities: The Yellow Press/Milk Quarterly group, the Stone Wind group (one of whom, Al Simmons, created the prototype of the Slam), the OINK! trio, the Ted Berrigan influence, the Paul Carroll influence, Gwendolyn Brooks and the Nommo Workshop, Michael Anania’s students at UIC, David Hernandez and Street Sounds, and so on. Everyone knew everyone else and would often read together. It felt cozy enough, but sometimes there was animosity. It was nothing like the impact of language poetry on the Bay Area, when Robert Duncan dragged Barrett Watten from the stage during his lecture on Louis Zukofsky. But my Chicago had its moments: the Surrealist attack on Robert Bly that ended in a fistfight and the arrival of police or the obscene Gregory Corso reading to a crowd of four hundred. His “Fuck you, you cocksuckers” rings down through the ages. One of my favorite scenes was when Jerome Sala, who was then drinking, crawled down an aisle of the Yves Bonnefoy reading at The Poetry Center, and pulled on my sleeve for rescue. The guards stationed at each end of the aisle were waiting to throw him out. He and Elaine had been misbehaving in the cloak room, protected by falling winter wear from the opaque intonations of our visiting French poet. Forgive me, Jerome, I failed to save you.

Each poet has his or her visionary company. It may or may not be local. It may begin in the local, like the youthful friendships at Penn of Ezra Pound, H.D., and William Carlos Williams. But eventually it must take to the greater stage. Recently my company has included Larry Eigner’s flowering distances. His work is suddenly dear to me, but not because he lived in San Francisco in his final years. It’s because I found one of his books in a store, opened to just the right poem, and entered silence and space. This is what Pound meant by the quality of a poem’s emotion. All else fades: the stipend for your magazine, the local influence you thought you wanted, and how many reviews your last book received. If with a clear eye, a student carries as a loved object the magazine you edited or one good poem you would also admire, your company is expanded.

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