

## Poetry, Public Spaces, and Radical Meeting Places — Invitation<sup>1</sup>

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The Spring of 2013 saw the contributors to this special issue on “Poetry in Public Spaces” turn a seminar room at Lancaster University in a fairly remote part of Northern England into a meeting place. It was a special meeting place because the face-to-face encounter of participants, the interflow of different concepts, the elaboration of new ideas, and the careful construction of viewpoints were, in a way, self-reflective. It was a meeting place to discuss meeting places and the creative verbal constructs we call “poetry.” It was in some ways a messy affair, because we each brought into play the inspirations and baggage acquired at previous meetings elsewhere: a commitment to anti-neoliberal resistance through the “Poetics of Resistance” network that had previously connected Ben Bollig, Constanza Ceresa, and Cornelia Gräbner; an enquiry into possibilities of connectivity through poetry that underpins the project “Non-Lyric Discourse in Contemporary Poetry,” in which Daniel Chamberlain, Cornelia Gräbner, and Ben Bollig have played a role; the dedication to a crossover between creative writing and critical thought reflected in transcultural connections that linked Graham Mort, Robert Crawshaw, and Delphine Grass to Lancaster University’s Centre for Transcultural Writing and Research; and finally, the commitment to radical, decolonial, and often excluded or autonomous projects that had brought Joanna Crow and Cornelia Gräbner together in a project organized by Chris Harris and Amit Thakkar entitled “Masculinities and Violence in Latin America.” The little seminar room became charged with different ideas not only about poetry itself but about the conditions and experiences through which poetry enters, inhabits, works, and struggles with and within local and global public spaces as well as the manner in which it

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is expelled from, marginalized within, or excluded from the same spaces. Adding to this complexity, our meeting place also brought together three generations of scholars from three different continents: Europe, North America, and South America.

In spite of the wide range of themes and perspectives, three strands of enquiry inform the essays collected here: How do poetic expressions enter public space and, if they do not, what stops them? How have changes in public space brought on by the neoliberal era affected the nature of public space and, consequently, how do they affect the kind of poetry that seeks to connect with public space in one way or another? How can creativity and critique intervene in these processes to turn “public spaces” into what Daniel Chamberlain calls “radical meeting places”? Each contribution grapples with one or several of these questions, sometimes with a focus on a specific locality, sometimes in an attempt to connect places and poetics cross-culturally.

The Lancaster gathering began with an enquiry into the *terms* of the meeting between poetry and its critique. Graham Mort took the participants on a playful journey between images—our own drawings of each other—and his students’ critical-poetic response to the words that made up the academic reflections to be presented on poetry and poems. Following this creative exercise, Mort liberated, rather than extracted, words from each participant’s academic presentation and fashioned “abstracts” of each in order to create a perspective of each presentation from beyond its conceptual, academic context. Mort and his team of creative writers then traced out the poeticity found in the abstracted words and elucidated how academic thought can both jar with and inspire poetic imagination. The impact of each on the other gave these words new life as a “sound poem” of “encountered language.”

A concern for the conditions and terms under which words become poems, and subsequently enter—or do not enter—into public discourse and space is one of the central themes of the essays by Ben Bollig, Joanna Crow, Cornelia Gräbner, and Delphine Grass. Bollig explores how poetess Andi Nachon revisits the dichotomy between public and private spaces, and between public and intimate language in commercialized, neoliberalized areas of Buenos Aires. Bollig’s focus is exclusively on a poetess rather than poets in general and on analysing her self-conscious and conscientious exploration of the lyric I in private and public spaces. This consideration of Nachon’s encounters in each space resonates with Gräbner’s analysis of María Rivera’s public recital of “Los muertos,” “The dead.” The gendering of listening and response processes in both Nachon and Rivera comes to bear on the gendering of space and on the ways in which we talk about and imagine different spaces.

Joanna Crow looks at how two Chilean Mapuche poets—David Aníñir and Andrés Huenún—deal with a literary establishment that is culturally and politically entangled with a state and a hegemonic mentality that have waged an

ongoing war against the Mapuche people in the south of the country. The hegemonic mindset and colonial, neo-colonial and neoliberal policies has deprived the Mapuche of most of their territory, particularly in recent cases favouring lucrative mega-projects on native lands. It continues to repress any Mapuche demands, initiatives, and movements that resist the dominant capitalist and neoliberal logic, legitimating their abuse. Aníñir writes his poems from a position de-territorialized from traditional Mapuche lands and re-territorialized within urban Santiago. He strives to sidestep engaging in collaborative endeavours with the literary establishment in order to build literary spaces outside of it. Huenún, on the other hand, situates his poetic imagination solidly within Mapuche territory. From there he uses his position as a poet to intervene in a public debate with the literary establishment and to deploy his poetry in a search for language that discloses contemporary Mapuche identity.

A type of homelessness not dissimilar to that of the Mapuche writers characterizes the poetic works and the biographies of the Alsatian poets discussed by Delphine Grass. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Alsace borderlands mediating and separating France and Germany were claimed by both with little or no regard for the Alsatians native to the region. Repeatedly changing hands and nationality, both France and Germany either vilified and slandered the Alsatians, or subjected them to public campaigns of cultural conquest and absorption. Grass elucidates how Alsatian poets delink their cultural identity from the nation-state and turn to a literary cosmopolitanism that is appreciative and accepting of difference. Given that hostile forces have frequently controlled Alsace territory, physical public space is not accessible to them. Alsatian poets turn their poetry into a “territory” equivalent to the “public space” found in traditional nation-states.

Cornelia Gräbner’s essay discusses the ways in which poetry plays a decisive role in movements that bring about an occupation of public space. Her study examines poems that were recited during “meetings” or “encounters” organized in 2011 as part of a journey undertaken throughout Mexico by the “Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad,” the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity. During these meetings, people gathered in public squares to voice, listen, and respond to expressions of the extreme pain caused by the confluence of state and criminal violence and abuse.

The theme of specifically neoliberal violence resurfaces in Constanza Ceresa’s article on Daniel García Helder’s poem series, *Tomas para un documental*, “Shots for a documentary.” Here space itself suffers structural violence that becomes visible in the de-industrialized landscape of Buenos Aires’ Riachuelo district. García Helder’s fragmentary “shots” of a landscape deprived of people, divested of movement, and left to die, counter the sense of deprivation and abandonment throughout the entire area by way of what Ceresa calls the “thick framing” of history. She elucidates how García Helder’s topology of affects is

achieved through a poetic language in which the poet himself becomes yet another object in the abandoned landscape and through which his lyric I is put literally on the line.

Márcio-André's and Urban Bálint's visual and critical intervention also explores the ethical dimensions of poetic public speech and its intersection with visual representation and performance intervention. Bálint understands Márcio-André's work through the notion of the lucid gaze, and through Julia Kristeva's concept 'chora', as a performative construction of a space without dominance or hegemony, where connectivity can flourish.

In his article "Poetry on the Underground," Robert Crawshaw searches for radical poetry in contemporary London. Hoping to find it in the metaphorically charged "underground," he encounters the project "Poetry on the Underground," which uses poetry on the subway or Tube in ways similar to those previously used by posters in this subterranean public space. After exploring the visual affinities between poems and posters, and the kinds of reading they invite, Crawshaw turns his critical framework on its head and moves from the underground to ethereal space, and to radical poetic performances on the subject of the underground, posted on that other "tube": YouTube.

Daniel Chamberlain, for his part, explores the phenomenological layers of language and experience inherent to radical poetry that reflect a juxtaposition and an intertwining of the tangible Body and the intangible public domain. Through different takes on the individual and collective "I" of poems and songs, he argues that the "radical meeting place" opened up by poetry becomes inhabited when the "I" no longer contradicts a communal space that is public and owned by "no"-one. For Chamberlain, poetry as well as its analysis and critique can play an important role in the debate regarding the relationship of the communal and the public over and against the private and exclusive.

Taken as a whole, this collection of essays offers a public space for a different kind of meeting, one that is disassociated from consumerism and entertainment. Most of its essays expose and challenge contemporary contexts characterized by dispossession, sensory deprivation, and, to paraphrase *The Coming Insurrection*, by networked solitudes. Our special issue focuses on the role poetry plays in transforming landscapes and backgrounds into living places of creative interaction and mutual edification. The exploration of how this transformation is achieved permeates all contributions. Each offers a perspective on how poetry helps sustain the radicalness of moments of mutual encounter. All argue that the deep-rooted transformations brought about through poetic meetings are much more than ephemeral incidents, brief moments of relief that make the *status quo* a little more bearable for another stretch of time. These essays invite readers to rethink our notion of "public space" in relation to the self and the "public domain" as well as of the ways poetry helps readers become the

territory of which they have been dispossessed. They point to languages of non-exchangeability, languages of shared experience that become tangible in the poetic discourse of people and places. We invite you into this, our public space for poetry and its radical meeting places.



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