

Vancouver 125 Poetry Conference



Poet Interviews and Reviews: October 19th – 21st 2011

Conducted by Carmen Faye Mathes
www.theacademicblogspot.blogspot.com

Hi Brad,

I've finished transcribing my interviews, which I have been posting on my blog, www.theacademicblogspot.blogspot.com.

I printed out a copy of all the transcriptions for the archive, and I have a CD with the audio on it as well. I want to send it to you (or drop it off somewhere?) where should I go/what should I do?

Thanks again for the great opportunity! I learned a lot and really enjoyed conducting the interviews.

Best,
Carmen

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Introduction

First, the panel is introduced. It has a theme. “Ecopoetics,” maybe, or “The Aesthetic as Political.” Then, the poet stands up and is introduced by the moderator. The poet begins with acknowledgements, then some autobiographical information, and a little anecdote about this particular poem they are about to read. After the poem has been recited (yelled, whispered, exhaled, delivered) there is a little afterwards, maybe, about how that poem is related to this next poem, and on and on.

Paratexts are extra-literary and extra literary materials that surround, buttress, come with, are published beside, or otherwise supplement the main text. When you are at a poetry conference, sometimes it seems as though there are more paratextual moments than poetic ones. At the very same time, there are as many ways to frame a poem as there are to write one, and the experience of hearing a poem read through these frames adds profoundly, I think, to the experience of the poetry.

Interview #1 : Joe Denham

Joe Denham read on the ecopoetics panel on Wednesday October 19th. Joe grew up on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia, and has resided in Vancouver, Victoria and Toronto. In his 15-year career as a commercial fisherman, however, Joe has worked and lived up and down the Canadian west coast, from Howe Sound to the Taku River. For five years Joe lived off-grid on Lasqueti Island (a small, water-access-only island in the middle of the Georgia Strait). Currently, Joe lives with his wife and two children in Halfmoon Bay, British Columbia.

I found conducting this interview really intriguing because 1) it's the first live interview I carried out at the conference (and ever in my life, actually) and 2) the interview itself is completely untethered, unkempt, and, after my prompt, Joe goes on without pause for eleven minutes. That's a long time when you are transcribing an interview (as you can see).



Photo credit Keith Shaw

Carmen: ...I'm here with Joe [Denham] talking about poetry and hopefully he'll talk to me a little bit about academy, and his feelings on [the academy] because I thought that was really interesting [after his reading, his] bringing up *not* going the school-route, not going the “academic route,” and [his] finding freedom in [his] poetry that way.

So I guess my first question for you is: do you think the academy and poetry are in an inextricable relationship? And should they be?

Joe: What I think is—I’ve done three years towards a degree so I’ve spent three years in the “academy,” ([and] I don’t have anything against the academy; that’s really not what I was trying to say)—I think that, yes, more and more—see, I don’t know how long the academy and poetry have been so closely connected it could be hundreds of years I’m not really up on the history of that.

I know that the idea of creative writing programmes, creative writing schools, and degrees, is probably a couple generations old now. It’s a really big phenomenon: it’s huge.

You know, when people talk about poetry being dead it’s interesting because [...] I know across the United States there’s tons of people studying poetry: at creative writing schools, for instance.

I think that [a creative writing school] serves a purpose; that it’s really good, [and] I think it’s a certain type of writing that it nurtures. There’s different schools of thought at different schools, right. But, ultimately the whole idea of what is—the whole premise of an academic sort of approach to writing is a certain premise—[as opposed to] the whole premise that I decided upon, which was to take the approach of going out into the world and learning from just living in the world.

“I actually got told by a creative writing instructor [...] to “leave and go and get a job and keep writing poetry.” And it wasn’t because I was a bad writer or a bad poet at the time [...] it was that particular teacher was wise enough to see who I was and what kind of artist I was and was needing to be and knew how to nurture it.”

Which isn’t to say that academics don’t live in the world ‘cause they do but to live outside the academic world in a different, you know, working class: fishing, building, stuff like that—it’s going to teach you different things just by nature of the fact that it’s different.

And there’s not a lot of artists and poets doing that anymore. Simply put, most people at this [conference] are going to be sessional or tenured professors. Which is fine. But what about all the artists...

I actually got told by a creative writing instructor after my second year to “leave and go and get a job and keep writing poetry.” And it wasn’t because I was a bad writer or a bad poet at the time—I had straight A+’s yadadada, right—it was that particular teacher was wise enough to see who I was and what kind of artist I was and was needing to be and knew how to nurture it, which was to say, [this teacher knew that] these places—these rooms [*gestures to the convention center around us*] “are not going to nurture you [Joe] to be the artist you needed to be—”

Carmen: [interjects] You needed to launch.

Joe: “—you need to go and just do your thing.” And I was wise enough... as much as she was wise enough to tell me that, I was fortunately just wise enough to take the advice.

I was going into her office hours to say, “Where do I go?” because it was at Cap College and they [could] only take me for two years and then I had to go. So. I did that [followed the advice]. And I didn’t really look back. I went to UVic for a year when I was finishing my first book because I needed student loan money to actually keep working, writing, and finishing. Which, I never intended to finish a degree there, I just wanted to get the student loans, take the writing workshops and be able to keep working towards my first collection because it was really close at that point.

So, you know, the point that I learned is that... What happens—what happens to me if I didn’t get that advice, if I wasn’t fortunate to have that happen for me. What happens if she had’ve said, “Go to Concordia,” and then I went to Concordia and then as a young impressionable 20-year old person I was being pushed and constricted into Concordia’s definition of what a poem is, or the particular professor’s definition of what a poem [is], and I was to bring a poem into a workshop and I’ve seen this lots of times where the professor says, “Well that’s not a poem: that’s a rant, or that an overly sentimental or maudlin this or that” and it all depends on personal sensibility, let’s get honest here. No one knows what a poem is, ultimately, right?

So: if you end up in the wrong room you end up not being the poet or the artist that you could have been. That’s dangerous.

So: if you end up in the right room you get, you get it all. You get supported, you get the proper apprenticeship, you get a publishing thing really easy at the end of it, you get nominations for some short-list thing and then you get a prize and then you’re a poet.

That can happen just as easily as the other, for the different person that ends up, unfortunately, in the wrong room, in the wrong programme, in the wrong school, and ends up not writing for the rest of their life. Or finishes the programme but has been so squished into being an artist that they’re not; trying to write poetry as defined by that particular programme that all of a sudden, that person never—doesn’t—they’re, they’re just—and I’ve seen them it’s like they’re ripped raw it’s like their soul’s been torn out of them—the whole—the whole *reason* that they came to art when they were sixteen or eighteen or...four...whatever, [the whole *reason*] which was this imaginative, exciting, playful kind of engagement with the whole idea of being an artist and making art is gone, and they’re just kind of dead. And there’s nothing left, and it takes ten years, or, maybe never for that to come back. It’s really dangerous, I think.

And, you know, it’s not necessarily academic—the academy’s—fault. It’s people working within the academy that are maybe not stepping back and [...] are maybe imposing their agenda (what they think poetry is or art is) as opposed to looking at each individual person in the room and going “well this person is doing this and that person...and that’s fine. I might not agree with as a definition of what poetry is, or whatever, but we all know that there’s as many definitions as there are writers.”

Carmen: So...poets in previous eras have released poetry that has been radical it has been different, and has had more critical review. And these poets were known for the rerelease of such poems with theoretical material appended to it. So, for example, Wordsworth's *Preface*, where he tells people how to read his own work. Have you ever considered doing something like that?

Joe: I've considered [laughs], I've considered doing that. I'm in the process right now of deeply considering it. Which means that—and I don't think [...] I would publish a book of poems with a big preface the way that he did—but what I think I might do, because, I'll be totally honest here: When I wrote *Flux*, which was my first book, I was young, I was fairly impressionable and I was very, um, ambitious.

You know, I read an article (I don't know where it was—in some big magazine, *Walrus* or the *New Yorker* or something) and it was writing about “If You Want to be a Published Author this is What You Need to Do,” and the first thing was “Read All Your Contemporaries and See What's Selling and Do It.”

So: I kind of did that when I wrote *Flux*. You can see it in the writing; it's pretty obvious, you know?

Carmen: You seem to have very good practical skills: knowing how to do things in order to get them done.

Joe: Yeah, and so I knew that I wanted to attention, for *Flux*, which, anyone who's writing a book does, to some degree. And I saw that, you know, this kind of work was getting attention at that point and I could write that, so I wrote it, and I got attention.

Now, once *Flux* was over I felt kind of disappointed in myself because ultimately I didn't feel a lot of the work was *actually* totally true. Now—a lot of the work, not all of it—I think that some of that book was really—that I'm really proud of.

And so, I took six years to write the next one [the book of poems entitled *Windstorm* (2009)], and I worked really hard to just listen to what was *my* voice, like, what did I want to do with poetry and what was that about, right?

Um...so...ah...the response [to *Windstorm*] has been lukewarm. And I think partially it's because people don't understand—and I've been *told*—that people don't understand what I'm saying, they don't understand why I'm saying it that way, they don't quite get what's behind this. So, maybe, I've been thinking about writing a book that explains that. Explicitly, you know?

It [would] explain what I did—that I *didn't* go to those rooms where you learn that poetry is this or that—and I—I have to be careful here because it's not, I'm not, trying to attack people in saying this. I'm not trying to say that there are bad writers or bad artists [or] any of that. Because that's not the case: there's fabulous artists and writers who come out of and live inside academia. Tons of them!

But, if I've done something different, then [there's] a need to explain that and maybe learn from that as much as I can learn from them, because I have spent time in academia I have learned from them and I do learn from them 'cause I read their work, right?

But, maybe it's a little bit harder to trust my work if you don't understand it.

Carmen: Do you feel that the reader should do just as much work as the writer does?

Joe: [long pause] No. I think that would be unfair of the writer to do that, and I think it would be unrealistic. Like you just said I have a pretty good idea, a pretty pragmatic idea of how to get things done [and] I think if you actually take it that far you are asking a lot of your reader and I think [...] too much. Especially nowadays I mean people have a lot on their plate, they have a lot on their mind, and they have a lot of different voices coming at them.

You know, maybe *Windstorm* suffers 'cause it asks the reader to work pretty hard with me, to go where I'm trying to go, without explaining it with a big huge preface like this is what I'm saying before I say it, here you go: and now you can access what I'm doing and where it's coming from and then appreciate what I think is appreciable about this book.

So, you know, maybe I erred there, a little bit [...] and maybe I need to rectify that by backpedaling and doing that: writing those words to explain to people what I'm doing.

Windstorms's a triptych. So there's two other poems that I'm building on top of that, which, you know, they'll be two other books that [are going to be] just as sort of strange and difficult, to a certain degree, right?

(I actually don't think it's that difficult, but it's *me*—you know? It's easy for me to feel like I'm not difficult but, maybe it is difficult for certain people and they...)

So, yeah: It's important for the writer to provide enough that the reader can—you know, people have to work hard enough as it is in life. I think it's always important to engage art but I don't think it should be so laborious that it's like a chore.

[...]

Carmen: What about—what about, same question: should the *critic* work just as hard as the writer?

Joe: Absolutely, absolutely.

Interview #2 : Kevin McNielly

Wednesday, October 19th 2011

Here's some paratext: Kevin McNeilly read two poems at the Vancouver 125 Poetry Conference 2011. On Wednesday, October 19, Kevin read from *Embrouche* (Nightwood Editions)

Carmen: My theme recently has been attention and paratexts...I'm interested in the ways in which we focalize, or put blinders on, or try and make people pay attention to what we want them to pay attention to in our poetry. How does your poetic practice take that into account? Do you think it's a subconscious thing? Do you do it consciously [at] any time?

Kevin: That's a good question because obviously in what we just did, I mean, it's full of paratexts: it's full of commentary.

And, generally speaking, you know the old adage that *poets or writers are some of the worst commentators sometimes on their own work*, but, generally those kind of commentaries are intended as you said to sort of lead response to kind of get people to see something in there.

I mean, I resisted, in fact, because I had written a lot of this paratext and in fact most what I—I just read two poems—and most [my introductory and concluding remarks were] talk about poetry, right? But I had resisted the urge to try and explain it, I hope. You know? To try and say well this is what this means or this is where this comes from and that kind of thing.

Because it seems to me that—I mean again this is a bit of a cliché—but you have leave it open... You have to leave the work open.

But at the same time...rather than leading people's response through paratext, the way I think about it is sort of opening a text up to question in some way. I feel like—and this more paratext, right?—but I feel like in a way when I'm trying to write a piece like a poem or something like that, that I want it in one way or another to almost incorporate the kind of critical element, that kind of commentary-like voice, where the poem in some way opens itself up for me to a kind of scrutiny of attention itself and of the leading of attention.

So it's not just a way to focus people's attention—to draw your attention to something, to make you hear something in a new way or to make you see something in a new way—but actually to reflect on the process of doing that...

I mean literally a paratext is *around* a text, but for me a text is very permeable, it's a kind of a weave, and it's open at the edges, usually, rather than closed. I like the idea of texts that kind of unravel as they speak even if they feel quite raveled, if they feel quite tied up.

Carmen: That's a really beautiful metaphor.

Kevin: Oh, good! *chuckles*

[...]

Carmen: So, related question, do you think that the reader should do as much work as the writer [when] engaging with poems.

Kevin: That's a loaded question, you must know. Because—I'm going to take apart your question a little bit and then I'll answer it—because it seems to me it implies...that there can be lazy readers.

And for me, the idea of a kind of lazy...reader or audience member—lazy spectator—is kind of bound up in questions of mass culture and popular culture. [An idea that] we kind of get this stuff and we are kind of inundated and it's a way of anesthetizing ourselves as opposed to the aesthetic.

So...I feel like, I'm very cautious about laying claim to any notion of mass culture because it feels to me as if it doesn't credit a person, whoever they might be, with the capacity to think for themselves, right? Sort of gets rid of their thought. So I'm always suspicious of that.

But I know what you mean! Right, and it's actually a really good question, so, that's my picking apart thing and, with that in mind: it's really a caution to myself.

I think that poems should do a kind of pleasurable work. Or offer you, [poems] can invite you—I don't think they can force you or compel you—but they can invite you to do a kind of work. I mean, it's not easy to read a poem and you have to spend time with it. Going back over the poem a couple times, reading it a few times, saying it out loud, slowing down—the fact is words are so compacted in a poetic text that they do slow you down. Like, you have to pause often and say 'what was that?' or 'how does that work?' or 'I like the sound of that.' That's work. And it's interpretative work and it's complexity.

But there are kinds of complexities that can be really self-defeating for a reader. You just get tired and you think I don't really want to keep pursuing whatever cryptic thing it is that this person is trying to say to me. So it feels to me like a kind of negotiation because on the one hand I want to give credit to a reader for having a kind of active mind, for being—wanting—for being *willing* to think about and to be provoked by the stuff but I want it to be pleasurable. I don't want to have, you know, such a thorny kind of text that it would push people away and they would say, 'eh... who cares, this is some professor guy spouting this stuff I don't understand and why would I care?' I don't want that to happen. So, it feels like a kind of a balancing act and I don't know if that's the best way to think about it but it *feels* like a kind of a balancing act because you don't want to evacuate your writing of meaning or density for the sake of an imaginary sort of 'dumbed down' audience, which like I said I don't think that's a good idea—

Carmen [background interjection]: Absolutely.

[without pause] Kevin: —but at the same time you don't want to push that audience away so...it's negotiable, I feel like. And I also feel like a poem can actually include that negotiation. Like, it's not just doing it but it actually maybe in different ways might reflect it.

Carmen: Do you think that the critic should do as much work as the writer?

Kevin: I think a good critic should do—well it's hard to say quantitatively but it feels like I want to say—a critic should do *more*.

I think they should so more.

Because, unlike, well... a critic is a kind of specialized reader and so they are kind of making a promise or a contract or something like that. They are making an *agreement* with whoever's going to read them that they [the critics] are going to take the time to engage with whatever it is they are engaging with, the work of art.

So, I think [critics] should live up to their promise, in a certain sense, like fulfill their contract, and... this is not to say that a critic is necessarily a better reader than anyone else but they've kind of entered into that role with the intention of paying attention.

So I think they should do that. So more time, in a way: more work. But it's good work again, I mean, I'm a critic myself right—it's what I do professionally—and I like it. I mean, it's work, I know this, but it's always pleasurable and I like doing it so I think that in some way is what I try and tell students...don't work on stuff you don't like. Work on something you like and if anything you can do that work with a sense of uh...it's *aesthetic*.

In the Greek word *aesthesis* means feeling—

Carmen: Right.

Kevin: —so it's like sensation. You want to activate those sensations ultimately when you're trying to help someone or foster someone to be a critic or work on your own.

Carmen: Awesome. Last question: in one word, what is your poetry about?

Kevin: Music.

Interview #3: Nikki Reimer

At the Vancouver 125 Poetry Conference I had the pleasure of interviewing poet Nikki Reimer. Reimer read her poem, “as long as you’re not doing anything wrong,” which both brings together and breaks apart different accounts of [the death of Robert Dziekanski](#) at YVR on October 14th 2007.

Reimer is author of *[sic]* (Frontenac House 2010) and the chapbooks *haute action material* (Heavy Industries 2011), *fist things first* (Wrinkle Press 2009), with *that stays news* forthcoming from Nomados Press.



Reimer divides her time between East Vancouver, New Westminster and nikkireimer.com.

Listening back to the interview recording, I’m struck by Reimer’s voice: resonant, measured, and clear. This transcription does not do it justice.

Carmen: So we’re here on Oct 20th, Thursday, 2011 at the Vancouver 125 Poetry Conference. I’m interviewing Nikki Reimer. She’s just given a talk at the 9:15 panel, and she did a reading of a poem, which was called...

Nikki: “as long as you’re not doing anything wrong”

Carmen: Which was in three acts?

Nikki: Yes. Yeah, three versions.

Carmen: Three versions, and with some [content] which was redacted which I thought was really interesting.

So my first question for Nikki is to do with paratexts. Because [“as long as you’re not doing anything wrong”] is a poem where there is a lot of paratextual stuff that would aid us in knowing what’s going on in the poem but you chose not to précis it with anything. So you didn’t begin with an anecdote, you didn’t give us any tools for understanding other than the poem itself. Why?

Nikki: That’s a good question. I...and often I *do*—when I read I often do provide a lot of contextual information—it was for some reason important to me for this poem that the poem just speak for itself. And I think what I was trying to do in the poem...is point to and represent and recreate the failures of language.

Specifically, as was discussed yesterday—one of the panelists, they were talking about trauma, and how...you represent trauma in poetry—so my poem was talking about a traumatic event that occurred where a man died. But what I was doing with the language was messing it up, remixing it, rejigging it, and...

Yeah; a bit like language poetry, starting with language-as-language...

The first version is really quite language as language, the second version I had taken what the official report was of simply the facts of this event and remixed that so that still is language-as-language but you're maybe getting a little bit closer to the event that I am trying to talk about. And then in the third version, that was my own writing, which I remixed and rejigged trying to look at nouns and verbs and how they're operating but...I don't know whether it matters in the end of it or not whether you know the story or not, I'm not sure.

Carmen: I think that's an excellent point. I'm often struck by [the work of] poets who embed in their poetry or in their paratextual elements *telling* people how to read. So there's more freedom when you don't, I think.

But my second question for you is: how much work should the reader be expected to do?

Nikki: Right. That's a good question, I'm not sure that I know the answer. I think that the work should have enough within it that it gives you something, right. I don't think that readers should be lazy, on the other hand. The reader is perfectly knowledgeable and educated and capable of looking up references if there are references that they don't know. But I don't necessarily think that you should need to have an essay next to the poem in order to understand the poem, right?

I think that essays after the poem can be quite interesting, it can be quite generative and fruitful and interesting to look at the work afterword but as side-by-side, as an explanation, I don't think so.

Carmen: Related question: how much work should the critic be expected to do?

Nikki: Ah, I think the critic should be expected to do more work [laughs] than the reader, yeah. I think that the critic should educate themselves about the work of that particular writer so that they have some sense of what the writer is in effect trying to do, and can align that writer's work with [that of] other writers, and compare and contrast and...yeah. Yep. The critic's job is hard.

Carmen: My last question is if you could say in one word what your poetry is about?

Nikki: In one word?

Carmen: In one word.

Nikki: Failure.

Interview #4: Rachel Rose



Carmen: I'm here speaking with Rachel Rose who just gave a talk on a panel that was about mentorship. She embedded in her readings two poems from other writers, and it was really interesting because those poems had influenced poems she'd written.

Bringing in [poems attesting to] the mentorship is not something I've seen done before. Did you conceive of that before [this specific panel] began or is that something you always do?

Rachel: Actually that's something that I learned from my mentor, Sam Green, who often starts his reading bringing a poem in—from often a poet that's not well known, a younger poet, but sometimes a well-established poet—as a way to deepen the conversation and to make it a communal conversation.

It's something I admire and wanted to emulate, so there's mentoring on multiple levels happening there.

Carmen: When you do something like that—bring in an intertext or a paratext—do you find it changes *your* understanding of your own work?

Rachel: Maybe. I think, as I said, it's part of this great ongoing conversation that goes beyond the grave as we discussed on the panel, you know where we're talking with ghosts and with Keats, if you are. And [this] extends to the future. So yes I think that just making it explicit that this conversation goes beyond me. So I'm speaking with Whitman and I'm taking with my foremother's as well.

And, yeah, I like to share the stage a little bit, as much as I can, with the other wonderful writers out there so...it's a way to bring their work close to mine. So it creates an intimacy between me and them even if they don't know about it.

Carmen: That's a really beautiful answer.

Rachel: Thank you.

Carmen: When you are writing are you writing for readers, are you writing for listeners, a little bit of both, or are you writing for yourself?

Rachel: Well, that answer has changed dramatically over time, I think. When I began to write, like probably many people I wrote for myself, or at least I would have said so, but you're never outside the realm of influence.

And then, I didn't write for readers but I wrote as part of the conversation: I wrote for other writers, for the poets that I'd read. Really, answering the questions that they'd raised or raising questions to their answers or just continuing the conversation with them.

And now as I'm doing more music—poetic music, right, because I'm not a musician but I write lyrics and libretto—and the audience has taken on a huge influence I think in the way that I think of the work because I know it will be performed in public and I'm just aware of how it will sound in a way that I've never... not that I've never cared about but [that] has not been a primary reason for me to write ever before.

Carmen: How much work do you want your reader or listener to have to do?

Rachel: Not much. Because I don't want to... Well, ideally, my work will work on multiple levels so it can be as much as you want it to be but I would be disheartened if I were excluding people from the conversation because they didn't have the sophisticated tools to analyze the work or find their way in. I want my work to let everybody find their way in, and then maybe those who have those tools can hopefully find other ways or other layers of meaning.

Carmen: I like the way you keep bringing up this idea of conversation, because it is so "both sided." In the conversation, where is the critic for you?

Rachel: I hope in the bathroom; somewhere where I can't see them *clears throat*

You mean the external critic, the person who's writing about the work?

Carmen: Yeah, so we've sort of talked about where the reader is...who the reader is...your ideas of readership...and I think the critic plays a role in that conversation too.

Rachel: Yep, perhaps. You know I did a BA in English Literature at McGill and I really thought I would continue and do a PhD programme. I love—I loved parts of that world but it became clear to me that I am much more drawn to being an artist than an

academic. And I suppose I have a bit of a fraught relationship with the way some criticism is practiced, um, where it tends to be much more about the personality of the critic than [about] trying to understand the art itself. That seems to be fashionable these days. You get a big critic who makes his name—and I say his deliberately—by how well and *wittily* he can tear other writers' work apart and that seems...uh...parasitic. Something to avoid.

Carmen: My last question is a question I am asking everybody, which is: if you were to describe your work in one word what would it be...?

Rachel: Connecting. Connecting and yearning. That's two words—you can't make me do one! Connecting-and-yearning!

Carmen: Okay, wonderful; I'll hyphenate.

Rachel: Thank you! Connecting-yearning. Yearning to connect.

Insights and Reactions with Bibiana Tomasic

Bibiana Tomasic is a poet; yet at the V125PC she was a listener, a thinker and a spectator too, attending the conference and soaking up all the language and rhythm around her. Tomasic was born in Croatia, and has lived in Germany before coming to Canada at the age of eleven. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. Her first book of poetry, *So Large an Animal*, was published in 2010 by independent Vancouver Island publisher, [Leaf Press](#).

1. The V125PC brought together all sorts of poetry people, from the poets themselves to readers and critics. In which camp(s), as it were, do you see yourself, and with which camp did you identify during this conference in particular?

*I am a poet. Have been writing poetry for over 10 years. My first book *So Large an Animal* was published last fall. I found it interesting that I often did not feel part of the poet camp, but seemed to sit somewhere on the edges, where the three circles of poet, reader and critic intersect.*

2. Can you speak about the major issues you felt were addressed during the conference?

I should have answered these questions earlier. My impressions of the major issues addressed: poetry as a political vehicle; the wrangling (sometimes) of lyrical vs. language poetry, or at least vs. non-lyrical poetry; the future of poetry.

3. Are there any questions you felt should have been addressed but were not?

Yes – I feel like the major issue not addressed is how to take poetry out of the conference, out of the four walls that it is written in/read in to the outside world. How can poetry be part of a larger cultural experience. For example, why not have a poet at various special ceremonies and public occasions? Also, what can poetry do, how can it be more active in instigating change – environmental, economic, cultural...

4. Do you have an artistic practice yourself? If so, in what ways or to what extent are your artistic and everyday life distinct/contiguous?

Yes. I write pretty much every week day. It's hard to break the two apart. Like you, light is often shed on my artistic practice when I'm melting olive oil or chopping onions. I do have a 'place' where I write, but it is part of my house and part of my family's living space, too. The challenge is to maintain a certain kind of head space that allows the creative brain to be present. Inordinate amounts of stress certainly cut the two worlds into very distinct halves, the creative side always thwarted by the other.

5. To what extent do you think contemporary poets rely on the academy (universities, MFA programmes, institutionalized creative writing workshops), and vice versa? In other words, are the academic and the romantic inextricable?

I did an MFA in poetry and I think many poets depend on the academic experience to expose them to more thought, more analysis of their own work. I think for me, as a poet, I am particularly linked to the academic world when I am researching a subject for a poem. But I think that to say that the romantic and the academic are inextricably linked may be a stretch, at least for me. Perhaps one uses the other, and then...I guess that would mean the answer is yes.

6. Is there a special kind of attentiveness that poetry taps into? Is this a different kind of aesthetic stimulation than, say, the novel or the painting?

I have written a couple of novels, too, and still hoping a publisher will pick them up. Yes, for me, poetry requires a kind of precision, be it about voice or form or image/metaphor, that is different from what the novel requires. My experience is that poetry comes in with a lot of power, like a wave. When it crashes against the shore, the bubbly foam is what I want to write about. With a novel, the eye stays over the ocean, analysing the movement of the whole body of water, how each wave might influence the next, how the ocean influences land, etc.

Conclusions, or: Five Things I Learned at the V125 Poetry Conference

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 26, 2011

5. When conducting an interview, do not respond to the interviewee's responses as you would in a normal conversation with, "yeah..... uh huh..... yeah....." as evidenced by my first interview recording with [Joe Denham](#), in which it is obvious that I am like, yeah, whoa, right, really enjoying our conversation, don'tchaknow.

4. Poets are people, too! as evidenced by Rachel Rose and Gillian Wigmore. Honestly, after their readings I just wanted to be their friend. Both poets exude such a compassionate warmth and curiosity about the world. Gillian's poem, "If You Falter And Stop Loving" has stayed with me--in such profound and sweet moments I keep recalling it--and Rachel Rose, who was kind enough to let me interview her, made me feel as though she had as much interest in my life and successes as would a close friend (whereas I thought I was the one interviewing her about her life and successes). I am keen to attend one of her [Cross Border Pollination Reading Series](#) events soon.

3. Poets don't know where all their source material comes from as evidenced by Jen Currin's talk of contagious ideas/sound/rhythms in response to a question about plagiarism. Of course, I am on board with her. Tonight, I happened upon, or so I thought, an interesting moment of convergence when I found a scholar I like and admire had written a couple paragraphs on exactly my topic of interest. Oh wow, I thought, apparently everything has already been done. Then, while melting onions and olive oil to make soup, I started to reflect that there is a very good chance that "my" idea actually came from those paragraphs... since I have read the book before. Sloppy note-taking? Academic integrity issue? Contagious source material?

2. Poets don't really know what their own poetic projects are all about as evidenced most effectively by Darren Wershler's response to Christian Bök: essentially, (not a direct quote, mind you) "Christian, I don't think that's what the Xenotext Experiment is about at all. The exceptionalism of the human spirit? I see it as an exploration of futility and the human condition." This is after Christian describes the terrific temporal reach of his endeavour to encode a bacterium with a DNA poem, which will preserve poetic evidence of humanity forever. (For those of you who have not heard about this already, I am NOT KIDDING [HERE IS A VIDEO.](#))

To a lesser degree this was evident elsewhere, though Christian tends to be polemic and is therefore an easy example. But this is something that I am liable to forget, working as I am with poets that have been dead for hundreds of years. Poets can't control how their poems will be read. They can't know how their poems will be read. No matter how many paratextual and intertextual markers they lay down, readership and critical response will be surprising.

1. "Rigorous dialogue comes out of respect" --Brad Cran

Of course, yes. But I think Brad's point was that sometimes we as Canadian poets/academics/thinkers/creatures confuse respect with extreme politeness, and don't

say what needs saying because we fear that outspokenness is akin to rudeness. Which is why it is important that we suspend our reticence and ask tougher questions; hold people to higher standards; and be more rigorous in our own discourse. There was a lot going on at the same time as the V125PC, from Occupy Vancouver (which is a kind of immediate and active force in the city right now) to the legacy of colonialism that the 125 Vancouver movement technically celebrates. Who better to put these issues under ethical pressure than poets? It is with respect for one another that we can ask such questions and receive answers that build solutions (and more questions, of course...).