

Exiting the Schedule of the Poetry Reading

Klara du Plessis and Elee Kraljii Gardiner in conversation

Klara du Plessis is a poet, critic, and literary curator experimenting with a new practice of poetry event organization that she calls “Deep Curation.” From 2012 to 2018, she curated the monthly, Montréal-based, Resonance Reading Series, a catalyzing experience that also prompted her to think critically about the literary event as a form. Elee Kraljii Gardiner is a poet, mentor, and curator of The Whole Cloth Series. The moveable aspect of the series recalls her work with Postal Code Reading Series programmed in 2012 and 2013, which brought contributors in the anthology *V6A: Writing from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside* to different neighbourhoods in British Columbia’s Lower Mainland. In the fall of 2020, Klara and Elee initiated the following conversation to elaborate on their respective experiments with the poetry reading as relational form. Their curatorial projects question the rote format of the poetry reading and challenge writers, curators, and audiences alike to imagine more intentional modes of affective event organization, ranging from comfort to critique.

[EVERYONE SITS—ONLY AUDIO PLAYS]

Square Audio **Deanna** 2_M (audio file)

music stands.
- echo effect

[ONCE AUDIO IS DONE, ALL STAND UP]

Square Ears Interconnected

Square Clouds **Deanna**
 Margaret An introduction to cloud genera
 Charger p71 from "wisps are" to end of p78

Square Air Interconnected

Square Poems **Kaie**
 Margaret *Magnetic Equator* from p72 "i don't know where I
 Charger p4-8 am in this writing" to end of page
 ← light

Square Tongues Interconnected

[ALL SIT—AFTER AUDIO EACH POET STANDS ONE BY ONE]

Square Audio **Kaie** tinnitus (audio file)

Square Fragments **Deanna** The speed of sound — solo
 To proxy is to hold — collab → M ducty
 When my lover is across the ocean K 2nd column

Square Words **Margaret** The Offending Ear ← solo
 see more memories ← voices
 onerous swarm — wild.
 arioso — solo

Square Unity **Kaie**

Magnetic Equator, the unity of worlds → 98

[AS AUDIO PLAYS, ALL SIT]

Square Audio **Deanna** 3_M (audio file)

Klara du Plessis I love poetry readings, but am often bored by them, whether attending or participating. Both in my creative and curatorial practice and in my scholarly research, I've been driven to think critically about literary curation and to knead the discipline into a more intentional site for the presentation and sharing of poetic work in performance.

It's tricky to generalize, and there'll always be many wonderful counterexamples, but I do wonder why the conventional, contemporary North American poetry reading as a relational form often fails to engage the poetic work (as well as the poet and the audience) it aims to present. As we've discussed privately before, Elee, many poetry events expect the poet to appear *cold*, without context beyond a factual bio, without links to poets presenting alongside them, and without the requisite space to expand into their own performance or for the audience to sink into a sense of activated comfort with the poetry performed. Since 2018, I've been experimenting and developing Deep Curation,¹ a practice of literary event organization. This curatorial practice attempts to move beyond the variety show model of the poetry reading to create events that allow for dialogues between poets and poems. It deliberately navigates structures of scripting, improvisation, and collaboration, and includes methods such as excerpting and choral performance towards a complete reconfiguration of literary works into a new, collective production. In a brilliant, co-authored essay, Karis Shearer and Erin Moure call for "a new paradigm for the poetry reading and its study," suggesting that "the best poetry readings to see and hear are self-reflexive performances that deliberately disrupt the notion of the author as definitive interpreter of their own work."² Materializing this kind of thinking intrigues me...

Elee Kraljii Gardiner Yes! A catalyst for me to start doing things differently as a host and programmer was the publication of my second poetry collection, *Trauma Head*, a long experimental poem-memoir about having an arterial dissection and stroke. I was aware that retreading excruciating details night after night on tour

¹Since its inception in 2018, Klara has hosted eight Deep Curation events across Canada and internationally, with the intention to continue once COVID-19 protocols allow. Further reflections on how the event has evolved can be found on The SpokenWeb Podcast, Season 2, Episode 1: "Deep Curation—Experimenting with the poetry reading as practice."

²Erin Moure and Karis Shearer, "The Public Reading: A Call for a New Paradigm." *Public Poetics: Critical Issues in Canadian Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Bart Vautour, Erin Wunker, Travis V. Mason, and Christl Verduyn (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014), 271-87.

could be dangerous to my mental health and my reading of the work. I made some rules towards protection: I would read sequentially through the book, picking up on the page I had ended on in the previous reading and never excerpting the poem so as to avoid returning to the “high-drama” place a short-term audience might attach to instantly: the sexy, movie-trailer clip of the book that could also seduce me as a default choice at the cost of understanding the process of the text. This has been a helpful rule because I am experiencing the book as a *whole object*, becoming familiar with the flow and narrative, learning what the book does as an entirety. It also makes the hours before a reading very calm: no agony about choosing which poems to read!

With *Trauma Head* I knew I needed positive energy around me, so I thought about the best conditions, dream conditions, for a reading. What I came up with was a pre-launch event, an intimate circle by invitation. I wanted to be with people who are not only clever readers of poetry but also either know me or know what it is to deal with neurological alterity. We met the night before the launch at Massy Books in Vancouver, where the public launch would be. I placed chairs in a circle, lit candles (since artificial light can be really taxing, visually) and we had a mellow discussion before I read from the book a bit. I spoke about the genesis of the project and how I wrote it. Sitting around me were Patricia Massy, Fred Wah, Pauline Butling, Daphne Marlatt, David Chariandy, Sophie McCall, Stephen Collis, Amanda Rheame, Kevin Spent, Juliane Okot Bitek, Miriam Moses, Adrienne Gruber, and Anne Stone. Several people took turns trying out reading techniques for the poems such as two voices reading parts of a poem over each other. We tried positioning ourselves back-to-back and facing each other, reading the poem backwards, and reading lines in call-and-response. We were talking the book into existence and I felt that I was discovering it in some ways for the first time. I found myself wondering why the poetry community doesn’t make the type of space necessary for this kind of discovery more, why we shortchange the author when it comes to experience *with* the book.

KdP I admire your awareness of what you needed from a book launch of *Trauma Head* and how you were able to navigate that need with gentleness but also precision. We talked on the phone about this maybe a year ago and I enjoy thinking about your embodied choice to warm the bookstore space a day before the public event with an intimate group of friends and writers.

With the advent of COVID-19, I similarly felt the need to experiment with organizing a non-standard book launch for my new book *Hell Light Flesh*, keeping it as small as possible rather than the default: as large as possible. I scheduled three six-person discussions in Montréal's Jarry Park. Each event centred around three short readings from the book, followed by a dialogue that lasted between sixty and ninety minutes in total. In attendance were a varied group of colleagues and friends who all brought their mindsets and experiences to the event. Discussions were rich and thrilling. This series of events, held among people I trust, served as a workshop for me to think about how I want to talk about my new book. It was a challenging and even risky experience of exposing myself and my book in a way that is not usually required at a book launch. Probably as a result, it was also the most satisfying engagement with my writing I've ever experienced: an activated, durational listening and analysis that celebrated my book through real generosity of time, energy, and thought. The beautiful intimacy of these events makes me reflect on the potential value of insular communities and consider how a warmth from closeness might be transmitted to the more democratic, public-facing event. I've started thinking about these *Hell Light Flesh* park launches as part of my Deep Curation practice. Although the Jarry Park discussions were way more minimal in their presentation of poetic material than most of the other Deep Curation poetry readings I've created, they similarly sprung from an intention to frame the structure through which authors and their poetic practices engage with an audience through performance.

EKG I would *love* to see a script for a Deep Curation event. My own experience of deeper attention made me wonder about a place that could hold a book for as long as the text needs. Sachiko Murakami told me the term for what I wanted to try was a “whole cloth” reading, which comes from the term for when the pages of the book are not yet cut and the text appears on one long roll of paper or cloth. So, the series was born under that name.³ Sherwin Bitsui's *Dissolve* had just come out and it had the necessary threads: the book is cohesive, it builds a world, and it isn't longer than is manageable to absorb in one sitting. Selfishly, I also love listening to Sherwin read. I knew that the environment mattered. People had to be able to relax into listening well. UBC's Green College offered to host us in their cottage living room, which was the perfect venue.

³ The Whole Cloth reading series launched in February of 2020, with plans to hold sessions featuring authors in different locations across North America. Future events will be posted at eekg.com/readingsevents/the-whole-cloth-reading-series/.

Here are some personal notes I wrote about The Whole Cloth series:

Sherwin read Dissolve cover to cover for the reading series. Small audience, intense audience. No mic. Low, dimmed lights. Armchairs and couches. I liked how he loosened as he read and tried different timbres and gestures and phrasings as we all loosened and melted into the upholstery. It took about 15 minutes to get in the groove, which is when a normal reading shuts off. What does this tell us...

His Whole Cloth reading lasted only 37 minutes, but it felt timeless. Time was honeying. It could have been 10 minutes as far as I knew. Afterwards the air was thick, like cave air. His poetry persona left. The listeners didn't want to speak. Most of us could only react to sound, as if language had been so exhausted by his sharp images and contradictions that nothing was left for us.

Later, Sherwin said he thought Dissolve had achieved its goal, had fulfilled itself through this reading. He was surprised by how it felt, too. "Beautiful," he said. "Something beautiful happened here and I don't understand it."

KdP The poetry reading often favours the lyric poem. A short reading features a little selection of one-page poems as extracted from the complete book of poems. For any longer-form poetry, excerpting becomes necessary. I love that The Whole Cloth series is able to maintain the integrity of the poetic work as originally envisioned, a continuity by the author in book form. I'm also struck by the similar concerns driving The Whole Cloth and Deep Curation, but how they proceed with reverse tactics — reading a title in its entirety versus splintering different poetries to reconstruct a new, collective entity.

In my Deep Curation experiments, I try to use excerpting strategically, conceptually, and thematically, so that parts of different authors' oeuvres enter into dialogue with one another. The Deep Curation process usually starts with a prolonged period of reading, immersing myself in as many texts as possible by the invited poets. Once I start noticing touchpoints between the different works, I create a document with single lines or excerpts from poems or notes about longer poems that could work well together. Questions of shape and form impact the decision-making around the event: will it have movements, refrains, progressions — these decisions are almost musical. Then there are considerations about the placement of poems and pieces of poems within that formal structure.

Because I approach this process through the lens of curation rather than performance, I think of this scripting as a process of adjacency. I imagine the kind of connections and conversations that can take place between different works through proximity. All of this is a huge amount of work. Creating the first draft of a script usually takes me three to four months to plan and that feels rushed (having more sustained time to also work with the poets themselves would be a huge asset to further develop this project). I usually circulate the script with the poets a week or two in advance of the performance with the intent of receiving feedback. We then meet the day before the event when we are all in the same city to brainstorm more integrated and collaborative cues for maximizing the choral dimension of having two, three, or four poets performing together.

The result of all of this is a new literary whole constructed through the hybrid rearticulation and recombination of pieces of distinct works, vocalized collectively by the poets themselves. Deep Curation poetry readings can be playful and messy, but they can also be deeply poignant and succinct as different strands of poetic work come together. I like to say that Deep Curation deliberately retains the minimalism of the poetry reading—poets reading poetry—even as it rubs up against performance and performance art, improvisation, and more. I have been fortunate to work with, and be challenged and inspired by, phenomenal poets including Kaie Kellough, Margaret Christakos, Deanna Radford, Oana Avasilichioaei, Liz Howard, Tess Liem, Aaron Boothby, Canisia Lubrin, Erin Robinsong, Sawako Nakayasu, Lee Ann Brown, Fanny Howe, and others.

EKG The collaborative energy here is superb. No two events could be the same, could they? And that ephemeral, irreproducible quality is so like a poem itself, which exists in all moments and only one at the same time.

I realize in hearing your ideas, Klara, that what I am reaching towards in new considerations of the poetry reading is a way to expand time: to stretch time around the poem and to create pockets of time within the poem that the audience can inhabit. Chronology runs into different boggy or luge-like environments inside the poem—that's its magic. So how can we create the space and context for listeners to leave the clock world and enter the chronology of the text? Some poets are skilled at drawing the cloak around themselves and captivating listeners so easily that the world of the bookstore or café falls away within the first few feet of verse. It comes easily to some people ... and I have opinions on why, connected to performance.

What, for example, made it possible for M. NourbeSe Philip and Cecilia Vicuña to alter the Zoom parameters of distance between three hundred-and-fifty people last night (November 18th, 2020) for Harvard's Woodberry Reading? Aside from their proximity to the screen, their calm energy, the intimacy of their close voices on the mic (particularly Vicuña's high whispery voice that came across like a lullaby or wind song), I noticed the event was set up for the authors to be supported, relaxed, and for the audience to know what vibe was in the planning. We were invited to mingle before the event. Each poem as well as the event itself, including the format and musical selection, was well contextualized by the host, Christina Davis. The word "hospitality" pops into my head. Both readers, who had never met, seemed like dinner guests in the midst of a great evening. The tenderness, the care-fulness, was palpable! The Woodberry Reading was an exceptionally exploratory and intimate event because of the way it was guided in by the hosts and helpers, and how they made a direct place for the readers to engage, concentrate, connect. My sense is that the poets and programmers wove a unified purpose through the digital fabric of attendees towards an idea of attention or exploration. They signaled that my digital presence made me part of the reading even though I was silent and had my video off.

KdP It was so nice seeing your name on the guestlist for that event, with me listening from Montréal, you in Vancouver, and the event in Cambridge! This new phenomenon of the online event allows for the contraction of geography, playing with space in perhaps a similar way as an engaging poetry reading plays with time. It's about exiting scheduled, processual time, and entering a fluctuating, fluttering, poetic time. It's also about forgetting the dimensionality of the page for a while to listen. For me, that listening is often a merging too—being with the words spoken, but also inhabiting my own thoughts, reactions, unrelated reflections, and being present in that partial, imperfect attention. ■