Between art and money: The social space of public readings in contemporary poetry economies and careers

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Abstract

What roles do public poetry performances (i.e., ‘readings’) play in contemporary fields of poetry production? Drawing from extensive ethnographic, survey, and interview data gathered in Paris, New York, and Toronto, we explore the social dynamics of readings in order to understand better how these public and social gatherings contribute to poetry economies and careers. While differences exist between the locations for our research, the similarities are striking: we find that readings are crucial to poetry economies because they foster and maintain distribution networks for contemporary poetry in a global marketplace that tends to ‘squeeze out’ forms of art that lack broad commercial appeal. We also find, across these locations, that readings are used in different ways by poets at different stages of career (i.e., unestablished, established, and well-established) and by poets operating in different genres (i.e., those writing ‘for the stage’ versus those writing ‘for the page’). Finally, we emphasize that readings provide an important space in which poets and others (e.g., booksellers, publishers) navigate the difficulties of making art while dealing with the necessities of money.

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1. Introduction

Poetry is often considered a written art, particularly in the mainstream contemporary context where print publication is central to the economy of poetry production, the distribution of poetic works, and the careers of contemporary poets (Craig, 2006, 2007a; Dubois, 2006; Ekelund and Börjesson, 2002). Nonetheless, the roots of poetry are oral (Jarret, 2007; Rousselot, 1996), and contemporary performance poetry is a clear extension of this oral tradition. In addition to this poetry that emphasizes performance as central to its form, contemporary poets who write ‘for the page’

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also read their poetry to audiences in coffee shops, libraries, bookstores, universities, or other venues. We contend that poetry readings are characterized by their focus on both poetry and the social interaction of those who participate in the events—whether as audience or as performer—and that, as a social space of activity and relations, they are key to both poetry economies and careers. As such, readings enable important ‘sideline activities’ for poets (Janssen, 1998).

Resonating with Janssen’s (1998) work on sideline activities, others have likewise explored the importance of extra-literary or quasi-literary activities for author’s recognition and career advancement (Lahire, 2006; Van Dijk, 1999). For instance, Van Rees (1987) has shown that reading at international poetry festivals fostered the career of Dutch poet Hans Faverey. We extend such insights with a cross-national examination of the roles that readings play not only for poets as readers, but also as audience members. Thus, we also build on work that has shown, among other things, that social relations can affect authors’ reputations (Barker-Nunn and Fine, 1998). For while Janssen (1998: 276) has found that the versatility of an author’s engagement in sideline activities is important for building reputation, a qualitative examination is necessary to flesh out how that versatility is nurtured. By examining the social space of poetry readings, our study therefore addresses the gap highlighted by Markusen (2006: 1932), whereby insufficient work explores the importance of spaces that anchor artists’ creative development and careers.

Our focus on poetry readings reveals the collective nature of artistic production, and it stands in sharp contrast to the icon of the solitary poet (see Becker, 1982). As Bourdieu (1993, 1996) has shown, artistic creation happens within fields of cultural production that contain an array of interrelated actors (e.g., poets, publishers) and that exist in relation to larger fields of power (e.g., globalization; see below). These fields of production are further shaped by opposition between the logic of ‘art for art’s sake’—where restricted production is for an elite audience of fellow artists—and the logic of ‘art for money’—where large-scale production aims to satisfy a mass audience (Bourdieu, 1996: 121). Even though Bourdieu (1993: 51) has noted poets are among those most markedly participating in fields of restricted production, it would be a mistake to think that poets valuing art for art’s sake removes the pressures of the market from either poetry careers or economies. Indeed, the uncertainty of poetry careers can be attributed to the difficulties of navigating the tensions of creating ‘art’ while creating a product one hopes to sell (Craig, 2006). As particular types of restricted fields that are situated amidst literary fields of large-scale production—local poetry economies, too, must negotiate this tension.

Given such tension between art and money, we ask how the social space of poetry readings contributes to the marginal yet thriving economies of poetry production and the uncertain careers of poets. To answer this question, we draw from extensive ethnographic, interview and survey data gathered in the contemporary poetry worlds of Paris, New York, and Toronto. We find that readings meet a variety of needs for poetry economies through promoting, distributing, and paying poets while protecting them from the taint of pecuniary concerns. We also find that poetry readings are used differently by poets at varying stages of career—with established poets utilizing their interactional aspects in different ways than either unestablished and well-established poets—and that readings have different effects for poets who work in different genres—benefiting those who emphasize performance more than the page. While differences exist between the locations for our research, there are also similarities—and we posit that these similarities lead to a stronger understanding of how readings are important to poetry economies and careers that must actively balance the tension between art and money.

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1 For full elaboration of this ‘thriving marginality’ and an in-depth account of poetry economies, see Dubois (2006).
While much has been written on literary economies and careers more generally, sociologists have given relatively little attention to poetry. Given this, we proceed by first drawing from the literature to summarize key aspects of literary fields—discussing how poetry economies are affected by the globalization of cultural production and laying out common stages of poetry careers (e.g., established). After providing this broader context, we then turn to discussion of our data and findings—which includes a description of what poetry readings entail and how they enable a negotiation of art and money.

2. Restricted fields and globalization: poetry economies and careers

Poetry economies unfold in restricted fields of production, fields that Bourdieu (1985, 1993, 1996) has called ‘the economic world reversed,’ as they honor art produced for ‘art’s sake’ over work produced for economic gain. While cultural production can often be hybrid in its combination of economic and aesthetic logics (Caves, 2000; Leslie and Rantisi, 2006), this is truer for large-scale fields of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1985) than for those restricted fields in which cultural capital, not economic capital, is more highly valued despite the necessity of addressing economic realities. Anheier et al. (1995: 863) explain that for careers in restricted fields: “Economic success is secondary to symbolic value, and writers compete for cultural capital in the form of recognition, reputation, and legitimacy.” In the simplest of terms, this means that art is expected by poets (and others) to take precedence over financial gain.

Importantly, poetry’s restricted fields of production are located within larger fields of power, and despite their ethos of ‘art for art’s sake,’ the economies of poetry must deal with pressures that result from the globalization of culture. Some worry that these pressures can result in homogenizing trends because globalized mass markets require popular products with high sales (e.g., Armstrong, 2000; Held et al., 1999). As Armstrong (2000: 379) notes, a global market model defines culture as a commodity to be treated like other commodities—and cultural products are therefore required to succeed in the marketplace like any other product. Indeed, literary fields, in general, are confronted by the ongoing process of globalization—as seen by the increasing dominance of markets by multinational corporations in both Europe (Rouet, 2008) and North America (Greco, 2000). While poetry is prestigious, it has a limited market, and given the costs of distribution and marketing, big publishers are often reluctant to invest in publishing poetry that will not have mass sales. While poetry is based on an aesthetic logic, it is reliant on the publishing industry that must embrace a contradictory economic logic (Bourdieu, 1985; Dubois, 2006)—particularly given the push toward mass production and sales that comes with a global market.

2.1. Poetry economies in France and North America

In response to these globalizing trends, poetry economies in Toronto, New York, and Paris tend to specialize themselves further by creating their own infrastructure of associations, academies, etc.2

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2 The work of Craig (2006, 2007a,b), Dubois (2006, 2008, 2009a,b) and Wilson (1958, 1990) are among the few exceptions.

3 In 2007, poetry represented only 0.14% of the Canadian book market (Booknet Canada) and 0.04% of the French book market (Syndicat national de l’Édition Report).

4 For example, in France, there are Aujourd’hui Poème, Académie Mallarmé, Printemps des Poètes, Maisons de la Poésie, and Marché de la Poésie (Dubois, 2006, 2009a). In the USA, there are the Poetry Society of America, Academy of American Poets, and Poetry Calendar (poetz.com). Canada has the League of Canadian Poets, Canadian Federation of Poets, Canadian Poetry Association, etc. (Craig, 2006).
and they tend to work mostly with small publishers and a limited number of booksellers. In tandem with this specialization, poetry production requires external support beyond the sales it garners. Sapiro (2003) contends that national literary fields can be defined according to whether they rely more on the state or the market for support. She finds the American field more reliant on the market, while the literary field in France depends more on the state. We add that the academic field, too, provides support—particularly in the United States (Craig, 2006). As in France, Canadian poetry is reliant on state funding in the form of grants that support several aspects of poetry production and distribution (i.e., grants to poets, publishers, etc.). We further add that, as a genre with limited market share, poetry is often supported by other genres and facets of the literary market. For example, presses will ‘subsidize’ their poetry line through the sales of more popular books, sometimes even publishing the poetry under an imprint with its own editorial board in order to maintain the prestige of a smaller literary house without facing the same financial risks (Craig, 2006; Simonin, 1998).

This external support is crucial given how the largest publishers approach contemporary poetry. The biggest publishers in France (e.g., Hachette) and Canada (e.g., Random House Canada, Harper Collins Canada, Penguin Canada) do not publish contemporary poetry lines. While Random House in the United States does publish some contemporary poetry from well-established poets, there is still a reliance on smaller literary presses for the bulk of poetry publishing, with publication in a large press like Random House indicating the level of success reserved for Poets Laureate and (deceased) luminaries of American poetry who generate large sales figures. In practice, larger houses that publish established and consecrated poets delegate the search for new talent to small literary publishers whose fixed costs are lowered through limited distribution and small print runs. That is, because the smaller presses are more specialized, they are better able to take risks with books that sell only in limited numbers (Craig, 2006; Dubois, 2006).

The French case illustrates the importance of these smaller publishers and how they maneuver between art and commerce. Gallimard and Le Seuil are prominent houses that have made their names through their prestigious list of authors, including poets, whom they publish in ‘pocket collections.’ These publishers subsidize the publication of contemporary poets through their publication of bestselling consecrated poets—so the investment in poetry is long term. Pocket collections publish only two or three poets annually, and only publish collected previous work. The print runs are large, they sell quite well, and contemporary work is a small portion of the list. Although this is similar to the U.S. example of Random House publishing established and consecrated poets who have made their names through smaller presses and journals, the French pocket collections play a larger and more distinct role in French poetry economies and careers. While the pocket collections have literary prestige, they also have economic reasons for their continued publication. The hope is that the few contemporary poets who are chosen will become well known (at least in part) because of their inclusion in the collection and eventually sell as well as the consecrated poets on the list (Dubois, 2009a). The French case also illustrates some cross-national differences, as there are no comparable counterparts to pocketbooks in Canada and the U.S. (Craig, 2006).

2.2. Poetry careers in France and North America

Having outlined the contexts of the global literary field and local poetry economies, we now examine the poetic career. Poets’ careers fit into a framework of loose stages that are strikingly similar in North America and France (Craig, 2006, 2007a,b; Dubois, 2009a,b). Informed by our previous research, we categorize these stages as unestablished, established,
Poets are unestablished when they first enter the field and take up the mantle of ‘poet.’ As poets progress and make a name for themselves in their local field of poetry production they become established. Finally, we understand well-established poets as those who have gained influence and attention that extends beyond their own field of poetry, and at best, across time into posthumous success. This distinction between established and well-established parallels the distinction that Lang and Lang (1998, 2001) make between ‘recognition’ and ‘renown’.

Poets move across these stages in a series of steps. Given the uncertainty of poetry economies in a globalizing marketplace, these steps are necessary, but not sufficient, for attaining first recognition and then renown—as there are no guarantees for how to obtain the hoped-for posthumous success (see Craig, 2006, 2007a,b); given differences in local poetry economies, these steps are somewhat different across the three nations. In France, most poets begin by publishing in journals. Once they publish a book they become established. The next step is being published by a larger publisher, with one of the highest achievements being chosen for a pocket collection that further legitimates and consecrates the poet as well-established. Indeed, pocket collections act as a kind of ‘palmare’s’ (book list) that presents the best of poetry to the wider public outside of the poetry world. It is usually only once a poet’s work is published in a pocket collection that the French academic field becomes interested in a poet’s work and further contributes to a poet’s legitimacy and influence (Dubois, 2009a). Clearly, being published in pocket collections is an achievement attained by few.

Similar to their French counterparts, North American poets take key steps with journal publications, and they become established by publishing in book form. While the academic field in France welcomes poets only once they achieve recognition in the poetry world, in North America (and particularly the United States), universities participate in the creation of contemporary poetry. They offer master of fine arts (MFA) programs in creative writing for aspiring writers, and publish poetry journals in which unestablished poets strive to place their work so as to take the next steps toward becoming established.

There is no real equivalent in North America to the French pocket collections and, hence, subsequent steps are different. Becoming well-established in North America requires that while, doing the work of publishing in journals and writing books, poets must also perform the kinds of work that will ‘project’ their name and poetry into the future, in hopes of eventual consecration and renown. This work of projection (Craig, 2006, 2007a,b) often involves acting as a mentor to less-established poets or acting as a gatekeeper (e.g., publishing, editing). Like Janssen’s (1998) finding that the versatility of writers’ involvement in the literary world has positive effects on the critical attention paid to their work, we have found that those in the poetic world acknowledge the artistic legitimacy garnered through work other than writing poetry (Craig, 2007a,b). As one Toronto writer mused: “Poets who are important are poets who exercise some kind of influence in one way or another.” So while inclusion in pocket collections is decisive for French poets, in North America, contemporary poets must take steps that are relational in nature (e.g., mentoring)—steps that help mark them and their own poetry as worthy of critical attention.

We now turn to the data that allow us to examine the role of a social space—poetry readings—in shaping poetry economies and careers. It is there that poets and their constituents deal with the tensions between art and commerce—tensions that are particularly pronounced in an age of globalizing literary markets.
3. Data and methods

The data used in this paper are pooled from studies the authors performed individually in Toronto and New York (Craig, 2006) and in France (Dubois, 2006). While the research was not performed originally in conjunction, our ex post facto collaboration provides opportunity for cross-national examination and serendipitous triangulation—particularly as both studies, among other things, relied on samples of contemporary poets.

Poets had to have published at least once to be included in the respective samples—at least a single book in the French study, and a book or poem in the North American study. This criterion of publication is common in studies of authors, whether explicitly or implicitly (e.g., Anheier and Gerhards, 1991; Anheier et al., 1995; De Nooy, 1991; Janssen, 1998; Rosengren, 1985). In addition to their work as poets, many of them also worked as publishers, reading curators, booksellers, or editors. And all of the poets interviewed were audience for and readers of their colleagues’ poetry. Indeed, poetry audiences are 45% more likely to write poetry than those who are not part of this audience (Bradburn et al., 2006: 3), and others have noted that poetry is often produced predominantly for poets (Bourdieu, 1996: 118; Sapiro, 2003).

The North American sample includes 40 poets—20 from New York City and 20 from Toronto. Snowball sampling was used in order to take advantage of the informal networks that serve the purposes for writers that institutionalized, formal mechanisms (e.g., evaluation and promotion within a company) do for advancement in other careers (Anheier and Gerhards, 1991: 813). Interviews were open ended, included discussion of poetry readings, and were 3–5 h long. The interviews were paired with extensive observation of poets and poetry events (e.g., readings, book launches, etc.) in both cities. Interviews and observations took place from 2002 to 2005. All but six respondents were interviewed in cafés or restaurants. Of those six, five were interviewed in their homes and one was interviewed at his place of work. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then manually analyzed. While all 40 North American respondents were published, not all had published books, as the aim was to have a sample that included people at different career stages.

In contrast, the French sample was drawn from a list of 300 published poets that was compiled from institutional databases and anthologies. Online survey requests were sent to the 300 poets, and 91 responded. The survey asked about publication history, participation in readings, grant and award history, relations with other poetry actors, their genre or style of poetry, and demographic characteristics (age, education, second job, etc.) Results of this questionnaire were analyzed using Sphinx. In addition, eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted between September 2003 and September 2005. Twelve of the interviews were with poets, with six of those also being publishers. The remaining six interviews included four booksellers, and two directors of poetry organizations (Printemps des Poètes and Centre Régional du Livre de Basse Normandie). These interviews were held in Paris cafés and private offices, and were transcribed and analyzed manually. This data collection was combined with attendance and observation at poetry events (readings, launches, etc.) from 2005 to 2009.

Like the North American sample, the French poets were not all at the same career stage. However, the French sample was more exclusive because it included only those who had a

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5 Sources were the ‘poéthique’ of the Printemps des Poètes (the state institution in charge of promoting poetry), the database of the centre international de poésie Marseille, the database of the ‘Marché de la Poésie’ in Paris, and poets whose books have received public support from the Centre National du Livre.
An increased number of publications is one indicator a poet is better established than those with fewer publications. Table 1 outlines the distribution of number and type of publication for the poets in our samples, as well as demographic characteristics.

Note that differences in these samples are not reflective of differences in the population of poets in each place, particularly as the North American sample is not representative. While age and gender distributions differ between these groups of poets (with the French sample being older and including a greater proportion of men), education levels are strikingly similar, with more than half of each having earned graduate degrees. This is likely connected to the fact that poets and poetry economies are heavily reliant on educational institutions, albeit in different ways in France and North America (see Section 2.2). Having noted these general differences and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Characteristics.</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>North America</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18 (19.7%)</td>
<td>21 (52.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>73 (80.2%)</td>
<td>19 (47.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;61</td>
<td>47 (51.6%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41–60</td>
<td>38 (41.7%)</td>
<td>14 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–40</td>
<td>6 (6.6%)</td>
<td>26 (65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education(^a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate work</td>
<td>47 (55.9%)</td>
<td>23 (57.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate degree</td>
<td>29 (34.5%)</td>
<td>14 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>8 (9.5%)</td>
<td>3 (7.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>7 (7.7%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 Poems</td>
<td>N/A(^b)</td>
<td>4 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several poems (3+)</td>
<td>N/A(^b)</td>
<td>10 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 Books</td>
<td>24 (26.4%)</td>
<td>17 (42.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+ Books</td>
<td>67 (73.6%)</td>
<td>9 (22.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage of career(^c)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unestablished</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>14 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established</td>
<td>82 (90.1%)</td>
<td>22 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-established</td>
<td>9 (9.9%)</td>
<td>4 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) For the French sample, these are valid percentages that take into account the seven missing cases.

\(^b\) Only poets who had published at least one book were included in the French sample.

\(^c\) While number of publications is one indicator of career progress, being ‘well-established’ requires international recognition—which may or may not result from more publications. Markers for poets’ level of establishment will be further discussed in elaborating the variable ‘stage of career’.

The decision to include only poets with book credits in the French sample may account for this noticeable age difference.

This reflects a masculine domination in the French canon. However some younger women (aged 40–45) are rising in the poetry field (see Dubois, 2006).
similarities in the sample, we now set the stage for our analysis with a description of an ideal typical poetry reading.

4. Setting the stage: poetry readings

Despite their variety of venue and poetic genre, readings are characterized by their focus on both poetry and social interaction. Even though readings are an important place for meeting and interacting with others in the poetry world that does not mean poetry readings are open social spaces to which all are equally welcomed. Indeed, Janssen (1998: 278) has noted that authors do not have full freedom of choice regarding their participation in the field since there may be a “weak demand for them to perform certain activities.” Despite poets’ common assertions to us that poetry is ‘open,’ there are power dynamics and exclusions that shape the social aspect of readings. How one behaves affects whether there is ‘demand’ for one’s participation, not only as a performer but also as someone included in social interactions. Thus, unwritten rules and expectations must be followed if one is to capitalize on the opportunities those readings present.

Readings can be divided into those that feature poets who write ‘for the page’ and those that feature poets who write ‘for the stage,’ yet many of the same dynamics appear in both settings. Readings for both of these broad genres take place in a variety of locations: bookstores, cafes, libraries, universities, bars, and festivals. Readings at libraries, universities, and festivals tend to attract more well known poets, publishers and critics. However, those players tend to socialize with others who also have high status in the field, and there is little opportunity for lesser-known poets to be granted attention. This means that smaller events provide better opportunity for less-established poets to meet high-status players in the field—even if fewer attend—since the latter’s attention is not monopolized by other powerful players.

The audience at readings is dominated by poets and other actors in the poetry world—editors, publishers, professors of poetry, critics, as well as those friends or family of the featured poet(s) who provide important support (see Becker, 1982). Usually the poet or poets are introduced by the organizer of the reading. While the poet is performing, the audience is expected to be attentive and engaged. However, the way an audience expresses engagement varies between genres of poetry. For those who write for the page, respectful engagement means listening quietly, not applauding until the end, and not causing unnecessary distraction (e.g., it is frowned upon to get up to order a drink in the middle of a poem). One poet’s description of a reading she hosted in a Manhattan bar shows the strength of these expectations:

    Wait staff ripped paper tablecloths from a stand next to the readers, talked loudly, and slammed doors. It was really frustrating. These were three of the best poets I’ve heard in a while. It sucked that they had to work so hard to be heard. Patron noise, kitchen noise... but their audience was working hard, listening and attentive.

Her comments show an appreciation for how the audience was meeting expectations about appropriate behaviour, even while she condemns those who violate those expectations. In contrast, for those writing for the stage, attentive engagement can mean shouting out appreciatively during the reading, raucous laughter, and even good-natured heckling. This more vocal engagement of the audience is common at slams, spoken word, and many open mic events.8 The former mode of engagement may stem from romantic ideology that consecrates poetry

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8 These are readings where poets are not scheduled but present their work on a first come, first served basis.
(Bénichou, 1996), and thus requires respectful silence, and the latter mode may be a reaction against this perceived pretension that is often expressed by experimental poets (e.g., shouting in readings, as Dadaists did).

Once the reading is completed, the poet joins the audience and the event continues through socializing. If this necessitates going elsewhere (e.g., if the reading is held at a library), the poet and audience tend to stay briefly at the original venue. This allows people not in the poet’s circle an opportunity to buy books and have them signed, to introduce themselves, or to be introduced—and perhaps even to be invited to join the poet and his or her circle of friends and colleagues. Now the dynamics of poets’ interactions at readings become more clear: who is invited or assumed to be welcome to accompany the featured poet(s) and organizer(s) to another venue is telling—and the movement of some but not all participants to a second venue parallels the social exclusions that happen when the venue does not change. These exclusions happen despite an ethos within poetry worlds that poetry should be open to all. As one poet remarked:

I’m Jewish, I was not cool in high school, I know what it feels like to be excluded, as do a lot of poets, so the last thing I want to do is turn around and be an excluder and I personally make a huge effort to be welcoming... New people come along, and whether or not they have a book, you bring them in.

This ethos of inclusion is not without conflict. When poets talk about how exclusions happen despite a commitment to being open, they explain them as hinging on the quality of a poet’s work. The poet quoted above continued: “Any time you form a group, I think it’s inevitable people are going to feel outside, and there are certain people who are just resentful by nature because their work isn’t good or it isn’t very accepted.” While exclusions can be based on the quality of a poet’s work, they can also result from unwritten rules and expectations for poets at these social and professional events. Many poets, when asked about ‘manners’ at events like poetry readings said that being supportive is the ‘golden rule’ of behaviour for poets. While this too sounds like one could expect an inclusive environment, one must first assess what ‘being supportive’ means.

Craig (2007a,b) has outlined how the dynamics of poetry interaction can be understood as a gift economy where poets exchange material gifts (the poetry itself), effective gifts (e.g., opportunities to publish or read), or affective gifts of friendship and sociability that “...help others through times of personal doubt” and affirm poetic belonging and identity” (Craig, 2007a,b: 263–264). What one is expected to offer depends on stage of career and to whom the gift is offered, with the correct gift being the most valuable—the value being determined “by the status of the intended recipient” (Craig, 2007a,b: 261). This means that newcomers must be aware of what they have to offer, but be careful not to impede the flow of ‘gift giving.’ To illustrate: a poet attending a reading series for the first time will be seen as rude if she thrusts herself into conversation with those who are clearly already engaged, particularly if the motivation is seen to be selfish (e.g., asking someone to read her manuscript). If, however, that same poet attends the series regularly and is clearly offering herself as an audience for poetry, she is more likely to be invited to participate more fully—an invitation that is offered in response to the gift of being a consistent audience member. There are, of course, numerous ways to become integrated into others’ circles, but the key to negotiating poetry’s social interactions is understanding that they are based on a logic of offering (Craig, 2007a,b). And while that too may sound like a community of open arms, it is clear that violating that logic (e.g., ‘shameless self-promotion’) is a sure way to find oneself excluded—and this perhaps before the quality of one’s work even had a chance to be assessed. Given the operation of this gift economy, then, poetry
readings become an important social space in which poets and others work through the clash of aesthetic and economic logics.

5. Readings in contemporary poetry economies

We contend that readings play a compensatory role in poetry economies. They help attend to those areas that the ethos of poetry (‘art for art’s sake’) does not directly address—those ‘base’ aspects of business that matter in many fields of production. That is, readings can compensate for poetry’s disjuncture with economic logic and necessity. More specifically, we find that readings are important to poetry economies because they provide an avenue for promotion and distribution of poetry and because they provide one of the few opportunities for poets to be paid for their work—all in the name of art.

5.1. Promotion and distribution

The contradiction between aesthetic and economic logics means that poetry publishers must define methods of promotion and distribution that fit with poetry’s specific ethos and that protect poetry from being overwhelmed by the globalizing trends of corporate dominance and homogeneity. Paralleling Anheier and Gerhards’ (1991) finding that informal networks benefit literary fields and writers, we have observed that informal networks are poetry’s solution to the problem of creating and maintaining marketing and distribution circuits in a field where promotion can be seen to violate its ethos. Through readings, poetry actors and their networks are brought together and mobilized through an event characterized by its focus on both poetry and social interaction. Poetry readings supply the reason for attendance at an event populated by other poets and key players. However, the gathering is stripped of the business-like, intentional aspects common to professional conferences and meetings. The social aspects of poetry readings shield business-like encounters from accusations of betraying the value of ‘art for art’s sake.’ This shield also extends beyond that initial event. Having met at readings, publishers, poets and booksellers maintain contact that addresses marketing and distribution needs, yet they base that contact in an affinity first developed in the social context of literary appreciation.

Poetry’s distribution problems precede the issue of limited sales. As one French bookseller interviewed said, “There is no chance to sell poetry books if there are none on our shelves.” Poetry readings help with this by problem by enabling booksellers to interact socially with poets and publishers. This is key because it increases booksellers’ awareness of smaller press publications in an environment dominated by large book distribution companies that often refuse to represent the smaller publishing houses that are more likely to participate in the publication of poetry (see Section 2.1). Poetry publishers have also refined other strategies to use in conjunction with poetry readings (e.g., direct sales, partnerships with bookshops, and cultural events in schools). All of this, in turn, contributes to an efficient distribution network, one in harmony with poetry’s economic and social structure (see Granovetter, 2000). Thus, readings are necessary for poetry economies because of the limited market, and because they allow such fundamental concerns as marketing and distribution to be cast in terms that avoid violating the central ethos.

5.2. Booksellers, sales, and illusio

Readings allow publishers and poets to build networks of aficionados, to develop loyalty in their readers, and to create a sense of community, at the core of which, is a shared belief in the
value of poetry. This shared belief can be understood as an example of *illusio*—i.e., a faith and investment in the stakes of the field (Bourdieu, 1990: 66). Nurtured by sociable interactions, this *illusio* is not only necessary for those who write and publish poetry but also for those who sell it. Booksellers must believe in the value of poetry if they are to stock their shelves with a product that has a limited market and that creates so little profit. Their full and integrated participation in the inverted field of restricted production, however, increases the possible rewards of prestige that stem from a strongly held *illusio*. Such participation also increases booksellers’ ability to capture that limited market.

This integrated participation is seen when bookshops provide free space for poetry readings. Their hosting provides further opportunity for publishers to interact with booksellers, while booksellers enliven their stores by bringing the limited pool of poetry consumers into their shop. After all, shelf space alone does not guarantee sales. As one Toronto-based publisher of poets asserted: “The only way to sell a book of poetry is to sell it from the hands of the poet.” That is, people feel compelled to buy the work if they are socializing with the author in a way that they do not if they simply see the book on a seller’s shelf. In addition to bringing the market into the shop, hosting a reading or reading series can help an independent bookstore establish itself as a ‘great good place’ (Oldenburg, 1989) that is central to community—encouraging customer loyalty and commitment that can keep these smaller businesses going.

When readings are held in places other than bookshops, a connection to a particular bookseller is still often made by having a store representative set up a table to sell copies of the books written by those reading at the event. Again, this increases sales (to the benefit of both the bookshop and the poet), and this also provides the seller with the symbolic capital of ‘sponsoring’ the reading. Indeed, it can enhance the reputation of the poet to be ‘sponsored,’ rather than ‘hawking’ the book after the reading. Having a bookseller perform that work frees the poet to interact with others at the reading, thereby keeping the boundary more clearly drawn between the romance of artistic production and the profanity of its distribution.9

5.3. Poets, performance, and payment

Readings also contribute to poetry economies by providing poets with reading fees. That is, while readings can sell books and thereby support publishers and booksellers, they also pay poets. Poets make little money from their books. In Dubois’ (2006) sample, 2.2% earned €2000 annually from poetry, while more than 60% of them made less than €150. While readings can pay fairly well as individual events, they usually do not provide adequate stability of income to prevent poets from needing to take on a secondary job or career (Craig, 2006, 2007a; Dubois, 2006). Nonetheless, poets take heed of readings as a way to increase income earned through poetry, adding to the smaller financial rewards represented by book sales. One French poet commented:

A book, it brings in €300...I cannot complain, I have nice reviews, but also [the book can lead to]15, 20, 30 readings. And a reading, it’s paid a €200–500 fee. So the book is like a loss leader product.

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9 While some poets distance themselves from the taint of sales by delegating the work, others manage this conflict by personalizing the transaction. For example, one Toronto poet told how she writes down the name, or a description, of every person who buys a copy of her limited-run books.
The same is true in the North American context, where the sale of a poetry manuscript to a publisher may garner the poet only a few hundred dollars, and poets rarely earn out that advance through subsequent sales. However, readings arranged to promote the book, or that come from interest generated by reviews of the new release, can provide poets with reading fees and opportunities for subsidized or fully funded travel.\(^{10}\)

Whether poets identify as writing ‘for the page’ or ‘for the stage,’ they invest in the market for readings. Nevertheless, those who write ‘for the stage’ participate differently because their performance is the product just as much, if not more than, any printed version of their work. For these poets, readings are the primary mode of dissemination and compensation for their work, not a vehicle for promotion of a product separate from the performance itself. As such, readings can pay performance poets fairly well. As one New York poet explained: “You can make bank [a lot of money] doing the slam circuit. You go from one university to the next, and you can make bank.”

6. Readings and contemporary poetry careers

While making money is not central to defining poets’ identities, readings are nonetheless important sites for contemporary poetry careers—places where poets can perform, as well offer and receive sociable support. Janssen (1998: 269) notes that social capital is a resource:

\[
\ldots \text{that flow[s] from the possession of a more or less institutionalized enduring network of relations of mutual acquaintance and recognition. Such a network does not arise naturally nor can it be established by a single intervention. It is, rather, the result of a continuous effort.}
\]

Poets also deem ongoing relations as essential for a career. One poet moved to New York because of his need to be in a place where poets can frequently encounter others who share their artistic convictions. He said: “I had to go to New York and find my peers. I needed to be in a serious place where people were writing seriously. I needed to go where the action was.” A French poet explained: “These readings give rhythm to my job as boatman of poetry,” highlighting how the social space of readings can ground the precarious career of poetry. More colorfully, Toronto poet Darren Wershler-Henry has quipped: “The real reason everyone went to Paris in the late-20s was because so many interesting writers had moved there. Exile my ass: it’s about community” (quoted in Schmidt, 2005). Of course, literature on cultural economies has much to say about the role urban centres play in creative careers (and vice versa),\(^{11}\) but just going to New York, Paris, or Toronto is not in itself a guarantee of finding a community that bolsters one’s belief in the value of poetry. For that, there must be a sociability of the kind readings provide, where poetry is the focus of the event, but the social interactions surrounding it are just as crucial.

We now discuss how poets use and are supported by their participation in readings as they confront tensions that occur in poetry’s limited field of production. We have found that poets’ level and kind of involvement changes according to both career stage and chosen genre.

6.1. Unestablished poets

Unestablished poets tend to have few connections and friendships with other poets (particularly better established poets), and they are unlikely to know gatekeepers. For the

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\(^{10}\) The Canada Council for the Arts, for example, has travel grants for which poets can apply.

\(^{11}\) Along with Florida’s (e.g., 2002, 2003) work on the creative class, see also Hendon (1985), Gertler (2004), Gertler and Vinodrai (2004), Gertler et al. (2002), Markusen (2006), Markusen and King (2003), and Stolarick and Florida (2006).
unestablished, then, readings can enable them to increase their social capital in ways that benefit both the ongoing development of their poetry and their careers.

Readings act as a space of apprenticeship within which poets may hone their talents. As one poet noted: “They [readings] allow me to verify that my poems may affect people other than me, and to have a dialogue with those people and meet other poets. Furthermore, a poem is for me really finished when it reads well aloud.” Another poet succinctly noted, “I knew what being good was, ‘cause I saw it.” Readings can thus serve as a testing ground for poems and poets alike. This apprenticeship extends beyond simply being exposed to poetry, as it also offers lessons about career. One poet made this apparent when speaking of his younger days: “I didn’t know what it meant to be a poet, I didn’t know what poets did... I saw them, and I thought okay, that’s how a poet lives. You read a lot and you work hard and you go to readings.” Clearly, the social-poetic space of readings acts as a kind of ‘shoproom floor’ where unestablished poets are apprenticed to those engaged in the ongoing work of their art.

Not only do readings provide an entry point where unestablished poets can demonstrate their skills, they also offer a space in which the unestablished can become peers with other poets. For instance, the unestablished contribute to the gift economy of poetry by being available to be mentored (Craig, 2007b). In turn, they can play a variety of roles in the efforts of established poets to ‘project’ themselves and their work into the future—as when they are influenced by these established poets or when they actively promote, if not memorialize, the work of the established (Craig, 2007b). The crucial importance of social-poetic connections at the outset of poets’ careers is evidenced by following: less-established poets in our sample generally attended a greater number of poetry readings and performances than poets who were more established. This heightened attendance also indicates that unestablished poets who lack the benefit of knowing someone well connected can attend readings to mark themselves as ‘part of the group.’ In the North American observations, for instance, invitations to join the sociable interactions that followed readings were extended only to those who either knew someone on ‘the inside’ or who had made themselves and their commitment known via regular attendance. While readings help bring the unestablished into the poetry world, it is clear that both literary and social skills are required for social inclusion.

The role that readings play for the unestablished—both in terms of artistic growth and career advancement—resonates with other research. Within the sociology of art, Farrell (2001) has documented the importance of collaborative circles and literary friendships for literary development and careers, and the cultural economies literature has shown that increased interaction with peers feeds innovation and creative growth.13

6.2. Established poets

Established poets have proven their skills and secured important connections within the poetry world. Still, attendance at poetry readings continues to be ‘part of the job’ at this career stage, when poets have achieved some recognition but have not yet moved on to the renown of being well established. Indeed, gatekeeping becomes one the key tasks performed by established poets. Rather than attend in hopes of meeting a gatekeeper, established poets are often there as

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12 Lang and Lang (1988, 2001) have especially emphasized the impact that active promotion has on the posthumous recognition and renown of artists.

13 Stolarick and Florida (2006) offer a helpful review of this literature.
gatekeepers themselves. Having moved further along in their careers, and needing additional income to support their poetry, many have also taken up work as editors, curators, or publishers searching for talent (see Section 5.3). As gatekeepers, these poets contribute to the gift economy of poetry in important ways. For instance, they offer support to less-established poets—sometimes formally (e.g., inviting poets to read, choosing to publish their work) and sometimes informally via mentorship.

The regular attendance of established poets (even if not as frequent as that of the unestablished) also bolsters their reputations as being well connected. This can result in several benefits—such as being considered for paid positions in the poetry publishing industry. In France, editors of the pocket collections (that brass ring of French poetic success) rely on a range of indicators for evaluating the impact of a poet—including books sales, critical attention received, and the extent of influence both on young poets and in gatekeeping. These indicators are augmented by participating in poetry readings. For North American poets, too, continued participation in readings can lead to higher levels of recognition and pave the way for eventual renown. Indeed, one well-established American poet can trace his initial publishing contract with Random House (a major American publisher) to other influential authors who attended his readings, bought his chapbooks, and became his friend. Those writers later had dinner with a Random House editor, where they conveyed how much they liked his poetry (even, so he was told, impersonating the way he reads). The editor asked them if they had any of his work—which led to a dream-like surprise for the poet: “It was really unusual. I got a call from an editor at Random House saying that she read my work and she wants to talk to me.” Although the editor had not attended his readings, she used others’ experiences at them to guide her decisions regarding a career-making contract for this poet. The sociable work that poet had done at readings, the chapbooks sold while he was there, and the performances he gave—all of these fed into his surprising route to success.

Established poets also cite time spent with peers as a key reason for their continued attendance—as readings provide stability, a touchstone, for the uncertain career of poetry. Consider this from a New York poet:

I spend a lot of time with poets. I think that’s what happens when you become engaged in writing. You want to talk to other poets and I think I just find them to be fascinating and open people. I try to go to as many readings as I can. I love readings. I mean to tell the truth, I find the majority of poets read very well.

While listening to poetry is part of the attraction, wanting to engage with other poets is the root of his desire for continued attendance. Just as unestablished poets offer themselves as audience, so too do the established. One established poet even listed what she views as her key responsibilities: “Listening to other writers. Trying to help them if you can. Getting them a reading, being there and giving them their moment.”

While the established no longer need readings to break into the poetry world (as is the case for the unestablished), readings still provide them a space for exchanging the support, encouragement, resources and sociability that ground this artistic career. In fact, this time spent with peers can matter as much as the poetry: despite the common refrain about the central importance of ‘the quality of the work,’ the featured poetry need not be assessed as ‘good’ for the reading to ‘go well’ in terms of the needs it meets for those in attendance. Hence, a New York poet brushed off any concerns about the quality of presented work, simply saying: “The good poets leave you wanting more, and the others, you can tolerate it.” Even if one is ‘tolerating’ the poetry,
the necessary and sociable work of the reading continues unhindered. This is the essence of poetry’s gift economy.

6.3. Well-established poets

Well-established poets may attend readings in order to maintain connections or to lend support to the less-established poets they mentor. But even so, we find these poets tend to participate the least of all. Compared to other poets, these senior poets are less likely to incur missed opportunity costs because of infrequent attendance—especially because their position in the poetry world is strong and they no longer need to develop their networks. Unlike the established poets who pursue gatekeeping activities at poetry readings, the well-established are gatekeepers by virtue of the strength of their name, or the positions that they hold in academe or critical review.

While their attendance is less frequent, some of the best-reputed poets continue reading. Some do so because performance is central to their aesthetic project. Others do so because they consider it ‘part of the job’ at this celebrated stage (thereby resonating with a similar view by established poets). Consequently, these senior poets promote poetry by presenting their work and lending the symbolic capital of their names to those at readings—those less-established poets in the audience, those who organize the readings, or those in attendance that might want to socialize with them. “My responsibility as a poet is to write reference letters when I can,” says one well-established poet. “I try to be supportive and attend readings. I think you have to give and to give back.”

Even though well-established poets do not need to attend readings to build their networks, the decrease in their participation is not solely because they do not need what readings can provide, but can also be a response to the pressures and obligations of a gift economy. “I used to go,” lamented one poet, “but now I don’t go to all that many readings. I just can’t go to all of them, I know too many people.” This well-established poet indicates he is aware of expectations and obligations to support peers through attendance—but the level of renown he has achieved makes honoring that obligation for all prohibitive. Indeed, we have observed that a less-established poet may be resented for failing to attend a colleague’s reading, yet the presence of a well-established poet is never expected but always graciously accepted.

One North American poet commented on her decreasing level of participation as she became well-established. She did so in a way that highlights that, even for those who have achieved renown, sociability remains a key resource that readings provide:

That’s the biggest change in the past few years. I used to go to a lot more readings and now I’m more selective and I go to the readings I know I’m going to enjoy—which doesn’t necessarily mean I only go to famous poets’ [readings], but I go to the reading [where] I’m going to enjoy at least the company, if not the poetry.

It is important to note again that the company available at the reading is as important as the reading itself. And as with many other poets, the reason for attending once one has become well-established is to enjoy the company of others—others with whom the initial connection was often cultivated during those earlier stages of more frequent attendance at events. Listening to poetry is less the point than is the ‘logic of offering’—the giving and receiving of poetry, opportunities, and friendship that, in turn (somewhat), resolves the contradiction of working for art’s sake while also working for the sake of one’s own artistic career.
6.4. Genre of production

In addition to stage of career, the form of poetry one writes also contributes to how likely one is to perform regularly and take advantage of the economic, social, and symbolic benefits of the readings market. Most of the poets making a living with poetry belong to experimental currents in contemporary French poetry (or the ‘slam circuit’ in North America). While slam and experimental poetry are not interchangeable terms, what they have in common is that they challenge the conventions of the established poetry world (see Becker, 1982)—in part, through the emphasis put on performance over publication. However, reading in public requires different abilities than writing poetry for the page, and not every good poet is a good reader; similarly, some argue that what works on the stage can often be flat and inconsequential in print. This complicates things somewhat, since it means that the reputation of a poet on the readings market depends both on his or her reputation as a poet and as a performer. This leads to the most experienced poetry readers being experimental poets, as reading and performing are central to the aesthetics of French experimental poetry and to the slam and spoken word poets of North America.

However, the economic success that can be gained through the readings market is double-edged. French experimental poets who are better able to secure revenues from performance are less likely to be taken on by prestigious houses like Gallimard. And while slam poets are often able to make money through their performances or from being involved in poetry outreach programs for children (Gregory, 2008), the route to consecration for slam poets is similarly unclear (if not unlikely). Thus, performance poets cannot rely on the same progression of publication and projection practices employed by poets who write for the page and who are more likely to gain canonical renown. Aside from the difficulties inherent in canonizing that which exists in performance, there is also a great deal of conflict within contemporary poetry about this genre divide—a heated conflict in which some poets claim that spoken word cannot even make the claim to be poetry at all. One New York poet spoke vehemently, saying: “Now people are empowered by getting on stage and sharing their shit, well you know what...Let’s not even pretend that it’s connected to poetry because the criteria are not the same criteria.” This kind of judgment is often paired with a resentment toward the type of success that performance poets are able to secure, which we see when one poet says: “...the guy is making a living on the slam circuit, a nice one. And his writing, fucking sucks. If you put it on the page it doesn’t even work as prose.”

This conflict puts the tension between art and money in bare relief. Poets who concentrate on performance aesthetics have learned to make money with their art, whereas more traditional poets are less likely to earn money through regular performance. Moreover, traditional poets are also in a conflicted position with regard to making money because the conventional, restricted field of poetry production emphasizes literary excellence and consecration that extends into the future over the more transitory success of making a living. Experimental French poets, along with those who follow the ‘slam circuit’ of performance poetry in North America, have brought into the poetry field a new ‘professional’ culture as they have challenged the conventions of the field.

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14 The differences discussed in this section highlight the importance of bringing aesthetic choices back into the study of artistic careers, a decisive question not often taken into consideration (Galenson and Weinberg, 2001).
15 Of course, not all experimental poetry is based in performance, but those that are can usually be understood as part of experimental poetry. For detailed sociological discussion of the culture of slam poetry, see Gregory (2008).
of poetry production. These poets thus transform themselves into Schumpeterian cultural entrepreneurs (Moulin, 1986, 1995), selling a product other than books in a specific market where the value is more obviously based on economic logic than the fine arts market. Note that those most engaged in this market are not only those who write ‘for the stage’, but that in France, they often come from art schools, and as Moulin (1986: 377) notes, have been trained to professionalize their artistic careers in ways that lead them to diversify their business portfolio (see Menger, 2002). It may indeed be that these poets are inventing a new kind of literary career and success, wherein performances are as much a part of poetic creation as writing and publication—and where money can more baldly coexist with the art of poetry.

7. Conclusions

As a restricted field of production, poetry must navigate the pressures of economic necessity while upholding the value of making art for art’s sake. We have argued that poetry readings provide social space in contemporary poetry fields that helps negotiate these tensions between art and money—both in poets’ careers and poetry economies. Central to this claim, is that the social space of poetry readings provides a setting for poets to engage in a gift economy, where generosity and artistic commitment motivate exchange (Craig, 2007b). Furthermore, embracing this gift economy highlights the importance of illusio and sociable interaction for distribution and sales within marginal, yet thriving, specialized artistic economies.

For poetry careers specifically, this study suggests we must build from our finding that poets participate in readings differently depending on their genre of poetry. Interestingly, we found that for those whose genre emphasizes performance, readings provide a pathway to an alternative trajectory which may lead to recognition and provide increased monetary success, but does not (yet) provide the prestige of renown that comes from the consecration of publication or inclusion in the academically acknowledged canon. This suggests that further work examining the differing ways that French, American, and Canadian poetry fields incorporate and are reliant on university systems could shed light on the possibilities and limitations of current pathways to renown in contemporary poetry. Also, one limitation of this study is that our understanding of prestige and accomplishment could not incorporate information on the size and prestige of the poets’ different presses. Since institutional prestige is clearly linked to prestige in literary careers (De Nooy, 2002; Verboord, 2003) constructing a way to assess the prestige of presses cross-nationally could also prove useful for future research on poetic careers and renown.

In artistic careers more generally, Menger has discussed that artists must diversify their portfolio of activities (1999) in order to make a living and promote themselves. However, while we support Menger’s view (1999), and that of Janssen (1998), our study suggests that artistic work goes even further beyond the work of production itself, and involves social interactions that

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16 In writing of the challenge to poetic conventions that slam poetry poses, Gregory (2008) provides an interesting discussion on the sustainability of cultural capital in light of emerging conventions and new routes to (and definitions of) poetic success.

17 A French videopoet published an article titled ‘Short portrait of the contemporary poet as a neoliberal salesman’ (http://www.sitaudis.fr/Excitations/bref-portrait-du-poete-contemporain-en-vrp-neoliberal.php, Sitaudis, September 27, 2004), in which he outlines the contradiction between this entrepreneurial status and the anticapitalist discourse of most of his colleagues.
help transform economic logic into the logic of reciprocity. That is, gatherings of artists which appear to be predominantly social provide opportunity for the expression of artistic commitment and passion, even while artists pursue their individual careers. We propose that future study of artistic economies and careers should engage more deeply with informal social spaces and interactions as central to negotiating restricted fields of production that struggle with the shifting tensions between art and money in our increasingly globalized world.

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