Left Write!

EDITED TRANSCRIPTS OF 1981 LEFT WRITE CONFERENCE

edited by Steve Abbott

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Edited Transcripts of 1981 Left Write Conference

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John Curl,
L/W Conf. Coordinator

L/W Steering Committee (from left to right): Robert Gluck (Logistics), Bruce Boone & Denise Kastan (Finance), Steve Abbott (Agenda), John Mueller (Publicity). Photo by Eugene Lesser.

Introduction

"Everything or nothing: all of us or none."
— Bertolt Brecht

Bruce Boone and I conceived the idea for a politics and writers conference in the spring of 1980 and sent a letter to some 30 writers of various ethnic and aesthetic viewpoints seeking feedback. One third of those queried replied. We then wrote a second letter calling for a planning meeting. At this session it was decided an "open" or public meeting should be held in the fall. Over 30 writers attended. John Curl was elected conference coordinator and interested persons signed up on committees: Agenda, Finance, Publicity and Logistics. Each committee elected a chairperson who, along with Curl, constituted the Conference Steering Committee. The conference was sponsored by no one political or aesthetic group but arose democratically from the interest and energy of many independent groups and individuals.

From October to December, the Agenda Committee met biweekly to decide on (a) overall structure and purpose, and (b) who would be asked to lead workshops and panels. As many previous suggestions as possible were incorporated. Disputes and deadlock votes were not uncommon but compromises were worked out to the committee's general satisfaction. If first choice panelists were unavailable, we sought others representing similar viewpoints and constituencies. From December on, the Steering Committee then met weekly. All conference meetings were open and often were attended by outside interested persons.

The purpose of the conference was threefold. We hoped for active participation from all sectors of the Leftist writing community. We hoped the conference topics and structure would lead from grassroots experience and concerns to wider and deeper historical and theoretical understandings. We hoped an ongoing organization or alliance might develop out of the conference. While we perceived the conference as an educational event, we hoped an activist sense of Leftist unity might also be fostered.

Over 300 persons of all ages, gender and ethnic background attended at least some part of the two-day conference. Faced with a newly-elected Reagan Administration, enthusiasm and a unanimous sense of urgency about the need for Left unity ran high. The main disagreements, as the following transcripts show, centered on how to achieve this unity. Some felt we should align according to previous political formulations and models. Advocates of this approach stressed Internationalism and the need to see class oppression as fundamental. Feminists, gays and many ethnic writers felt racial and sexual oppression must be viewed as co-equal concerns and that no true Left unity could be forged without this understanding. Others maintained still different positions. The central dynamic, however, hinged on debate between the first two groups.

This conflict of views should not be wondered at as it mirrors current political debate internationally, particularly in Europe. As imperialism has moved into the subjective realms of information technology, media and advertising, and as an increasing segment of the work force in advanced industrial countries has shifted into high tech, bureaucratic and service jobs, a growing awareness of political semiotics and a sense of "the political as personal" has developed. This awareness was alluded to by writers as diverse as Robert Chrisman, Judy Grahn and Ron Silliman on the panels and was discussed in several workshops. Since these developments are just beginning to be addressed and have not yet reached definitive formulation, it is not surprising that easy solutions eluded our grasp. Nevertheless, the dispute is of central and critical importance as can be seen in how it later emerged in the Union of Left Writers

One of the great benefits of the conference—besides getting writers to think about the politics of their lives and work in general—was that so many writers of diverse communities came together, some for the first time. For many, informal discussion outside panels and workshops was the conference highpoint. I would hope future conferences might allow more time for such discussion, perhaps even setting aside a workshop period where all attending could meet in small groups to discuss their own writing. Another criticism is that greater emphasis should be placed on participants sharing in responsibility for childcare. But despite mistakes, major steps in the right direction were

taken. This was the consensus of our conference questionnaire and of subsequent conference reviews (cf: Spring 81 *The Black Scholar,* July 81 *Gay Community News,* March 81 *City Arts Magazine, Spring 81 Contact II,* March 81 *National Guardian,* March 81 *Noe Valley News,* March 3, 81 *People's Tribune,* March 81 *Poetry Flash*).

At the conference plenary session, the Steering Committee's proposal for an ongoing Left writers group (see appendix) was unanimously endorsed. Fifty persons attended the first two meetings but attendance declined during lengthy discussions on a statement of purpose, discussions reflecting earlier disputes at the conference itself. Should the group be an alliance or a union? What does fighting racism, sexism and homophobia really mean and how serious was the group's commitment to these struggles? Several successful political benefits were sponsored by the Union, and the Translation Committee put out a fine newsletter, but a split in the organization occurred over a conference review in *Contact II.* Several Union members objected to what they saw as "racist, sexist and homophobic" stereotyping in the review and a motion was made for the Union to write a letter to *Contact II* criticizing it. Although the motion passed, heated discussion continued and two meetings later, the motion was overruled. At this point a major split in the group occurred, followed by subsequent splits.

Political divisions are not necessarily bad. Lessons may be learned from them and persons involved can later regroup with an even greater understanding and commitment. Personally, I believe Leftists must be more sensitive about reductionist tendencies than has heretofore been the case. Stereotypic language is objectionable because it reduces people to unfavorable images and categories of victimization. Terms such as "fascism," "racism" and "sexism" can also be reductive if not precisely used and explained. It's been noted that oppressors often foster and exploit such conflicts to wreck Leftist unity. At the same time, no one can agree to principles of unity that deny the validity of their own struggles or that assign these struggles to categories of minor importance. We on the Left must forge stronger bonds of trust among ourselves, bonds based on mutual respect and support as well as openness to well-intentioned, constructive criticism.

Every panel and workshop at the conference was to be tape recorded. Unfortunately, some tapes were partly inaudible or ran out before the conclusion of discussion. Where necessary, we asked participants to write a summary of their remarks. We also wanted to include as much audience discussion as possible but condensation was necessary. Most transcripts have been edited to about half of what was actually said. Some transcriber/editors chose to interlace verbatim quotes with summaries whereas others presented remarks *as if* verbatim while cutting out repetition and amplification. I further edited all transcripts for balance, clarity and consistency. This final text has been approved by the ULW Publication Committee, whose project it was, and by the conference Steering Committee who commissioned and financed it.

I would like to thank C.T. Hall and John Sergeant who recorded the conference, to those of the ULW Publication Committee who diligently transcribed and edited the tapes, to Steve Anders for typing, Denise Kastan for copy editing and proofreading, Renaissance Graphics for typesetting, and Ken Weichel for printing. Special thanks also to everyone who helped make the conference a success including those who participated in benefits for it and the Zellerbach Foundation who gave the conference a grant. We hope this report will rekindle the inspiration, enthusiasm and goals of the conference itself.

— Steve Abbott

First Panel: How Does Writing Arise From And Affect Our Communities?

Nellie Wong, Asian American activist, poet, member of Unbound Feet theatrical collective
Alejandro Murguia, poet, founder of SF Roquet Dalton brigage
Judy Grahn, lesbian activist, poet, co-founder of Diana Press
Robert Chrisman, poet, critic, publisher of *The Black Scholar*
Steve Abbott, moderator, editor of *Soup, Poetry Flash*

Conference Coordinator **John Curl** began by welcoming everyone to the conference and emphasizing the goal of Left unity. He stressed that those leading panels and workshops should not be considered political or literary "stars" but that everyone's participation was vital. Each panelist would speak for 15 minutes after which there would be discussion from the audience.

NELLIE WONG began by quoting Genny Lim's "Author's Notes" to *Paper Angels:*

> *Writing is a political act. Every word, every statement is a commitment of belief and every belief is shaped by history or that artist's perception of it . . . I cannot separate my concept of history from my skin nor can I separate my sex from the way history has shaped me. History is, in the final account, a political statement. It is time now for new voices to be heard.*

But Asian American voices, like American Indian, Black and Latino voices, are not really new. Racism, self-hatred, sexism and white cultural imperialism have contributed to the dearth of available Asian and Pacific American literature. This doesn't mean Asian Americans have not been creating, have not been political.

Names of Asian and Pacific American writers create a panorama that becomes poetic and political all at once. The fabric's intricately woven, its threads intact. These names should be familiar to all: Sui Sin Far (Edith Wharton), Onoto Watanna (Winnifred Wharton), Ferris Takahash (Mary Howard Constable), Sophronia Aoki, Sierra, Chiye Mori, Helen Aoki, Lewis Chu, Toshio Mori, Ber Fee, N.V.M. Gonzales, Bienvenidos Santos, Diana Chang, Nanying Stella Wong, Le Thi Anh, Jade Snow Wong, Frank Chin, Nobuko Miyamoto, Clarita Roja, Jessica Hagedorn, Hisaye Yamamoto, Wakako Yamauchi, Sam Tagatac, Alan Chong Lau, Lonny Kaneko, Lori Reiko Higa, Doug Yamamoto, Connie Young Yu, Serafin Malay Syquia, Willyce Kim, Edward Sakamoto, Cynthia Zarco, Emma Gee, Laura Tokunaga, Al Robles, Nancy Hom, Brenda Paik Sunoo, Emilya Cachapero, Norman Jayo, Merle Woo, Lou Syquia, Davis Hwang, Phillip Gotanda, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Garrett Hongo, Cathy Song. This is only a sampling. We write about politics, racism, sexism, inter-generationa and cultural conflicts, love, class and labor struggles, family, loyalty, honor, heroism, feminism, lesbianism, alienation, becoming free.

We're long time Californ' and we're here to stay. We've been lynched and still we write. We've been excluded, incarcerated, and still we write. In Chinatowns, Japantowns, Manilatowns, Koreatowns we've been mistaxed, slandered, chased out of homes and jobs and stil we write, sometimes slowly, infrequently, dispiritedly but our work thrives. We threaten, we provoke, we're controversial. We present ourselves politically.

Read *Aiiieeee!* Listen to its cries. Read *Roots, An Asian American Reader* and touch base with emerging voices of old and new. Read *Longtime Californ': A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown* and know the people. Read Carlos Bulosan's *America Is In The Heart* and learn about the heroism of Filipino workers. Read *Eat A Bowl of Tea* and laugh and cry about the struggles of two generations of Chinese in New York. Read *Asian Women* about the beginnings of feminism integrated with Asian struggles. Read John Okada's *No-No Boy* and learn about the camps. Read *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* by Maxine Hong Kingston, Shawn Wong's *Home Base,* Mitsuye Yamada's *Camp Notes & Other Poems,* Lawson Inada's *Before The War,* Janice Mirikitani's *Awake In The River,* George Leong's *a lone bamboo don't come from Jackson St.*

We've had our writing conferences. We've sought each other out in Oakland, Seattle and Honolulu especially women. Women have met with other women on university campuses, at women's centers,

feminist conferences. We've gathered together to bridge gaps between us as Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders. We've learned about our commonalities, of America's exploitation of us as workers, the prostitution of Asian women, the silences of our foremothers due to restrictive laws.

Asian American women are part of the feminist wave of writing. We speak for ourselves. We're angry, strong, militant and radical. We resist cultural genocide, fight sexism and homophobia, create new forms. Some of our recent prose and poetry includes Eleanor Wong Telemaque's *It's Crazy to Stay Chinese in Minnesota*, Fay Chiang's *In The City of Contradictions*, Geraldine Kudaka's *Numerous Avalanches at the Point of Intersection*, Mei Mei Berssenbrugge's *Random Possession*, Ai's *The Killing Floor*, Barbara Noda's *Strawberries*. Recent anthologies also include the work of Asian and Pacific women.

Art and politics are intertwined, in our lives and in society's. We need to build coalitions with other oppressed racial and sexual minority groups. We need a united front so that our struggles are linked: affirmative action, reproductive rights, gay rights, jobs, childcare. While we must continue to wage battles against racism and sexism in the media, in Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu movies, we must also find ways to continue our art. We want our stories, dramas, poems and visions out there where they rightfully belong. Filmaker and writer/activist Chris Chow notes:

> *Asian American culture is in crisis. The question is not whether Asian American culture will live or die. The crisis is complex—how to keep it growing, progressing and expanding when we can't make enough money to support ourselves with our art; when our communities aren't prosperous enough to patronize us; when we are on the verge of cutting each other's throats over the dwindling crumbs of foundation and government grants; when white owned and operated mass media ignore our work, distort our images, and rape our minds.*

Cultural repression will not stop us. It whips up new challenges, revives the creative spirit, clarifies our voices, hones our skills. We've been working in America a long time and we're not going to stop singing and fighting now.

ALEJANDRO MURGUIA: I'm pleased to see so many here today. Writers have always played an important role in anti-fascist struggles such as in the writers conferences held during the Spanish Civil War. I want to talk first about our immediate, local communities and secondly about the international community we all have a stake in. As writers, we have a commitment to raise our voices and our pens in acknowledgment of both kinds of struggles.

Speaking as a Latin writer who's lived all his life in barrios, I want to emphasize the inspiration our people give us. Our work comes from our neighborhoods, our streets, and from the incidents that happen in our immediate environment. And since our work comes from our (neighborhood) people, it must reflect their reality and aspirations. We should show what it is to live in these communities. We don't want to be sloganeering ad men. When Chicano and Latino culture became popular a while back, some of our young writers wouldn't study the techniques of good literature or do the work necessary to find their own unique style. It was easier to fall into slogans like "Down with the Pigs" or "*Viva La Raza*" ten times in a row. If what we write isn't of good quality, people won't read it and if people don't read it, we can't get the message across. As Ernesto Che Guevara said, "Quality is respect for the people."

Instead I feel we should take everyday incidents and give a certain magic to them or synthesize their importance to ourselves. For instance one can do a story about a young man robbing a liquor store or a mother trying to feed her kids and transform it into something out of the ordinary. We want to make images that will stick in people's minds as they read. Even the most mundane, insignificant event can be transformed so as to reflect the reality of an entire continent. Take the case of Nesim Mara, an Uruguaian writer, who wrote a brilliant short story about a subject so common no one had thought to do it before. It was about a bodyguard, one of the commonest figures in Latin America next to the dictator. His story was so powerful for the psychological insight it shed that it landed Mara in jail.

As progressive writers, we belong to a progressive segment of people struggling all over the world. I can't stress enough the importance of our solidarity with Cuba. I don't think people realize the problems Cuba has faced in the last twenty years, not because the system they instituted was against the grain of their people, but because of a material, medical, media blockade instituted by the U.S. government. We're constantly hearing anti-Cuba propaganda. We must be able to analyse and see objectively what this is. Regardless of whether we agree with the Soviet form of communism, Cuba is very important as a progressive example to the rest of Latin America. Nicaragua and El Salvador also need and deserve our support. I can't over-emphasize the importance of these struggles for the future of this continent.

Finally I want to point out the oppression of writers as writers in Latin America. They're constantly being persecuted. They "disappear" on a more regular basis than husbands do in this country. Even right here in California, the Nicaraguan poet Pancho Aguila is in jail. He was sentenced to twenty years because a Brinks guard was killed in a robbery he was involved in. On the other hand Dan White shot the mayor and a supervisor in this town and they're letting him out in three years. So we can see what kind of justice writers and Third World people get in this country. *Basta Ya! Y hasta la victoria siempre!*

Robert Chrisman, Alejandro Murguia, Steve Abbott, Nellie Wong, Judy Grahn. Photo by Ed Kashi

JUDY GRAHN: I'd like to use myself as an example of how writing arises from community. I hold myself accountable to several communities: working class, gay, lesbian, feminist, Leftist.

I grew up in a little town where my father was a restaurant cook. We were very poor. I listened to my parents a lot. My father spoke from his own experience, made up jokes and gave me the equipment needed to be a poet which I was by age six. My mother came to school plays I was in and praised me because I was the only one she could hear. I memorized Shakespeare and courted other girls with *Romeo & Juliet.* I also knew what Langston Hughes meant when he wrote about men working on a railroad they could never ride on.

I entered (writing) contests & won prizes til I was 16 & they threw me out. I wrote about my own experience but they accused me of plagiarism. This taught me to never trust people who run contests (laughter). At 18 I ran off with a woman who was in college. There, I was so poor her roommates brought me food. I worked as a waitress for 50 cents an hour plus one meal a day. When I slid down to 92 lbs. I joined the Air Force because they offered you 3 meals a day and took you out of your home state. After 8 months I was thrown out for being lesbian.

I then lived in Washington, D.C. where I joined my first picket line for gay rights in 1963. There were 15 of us & we were all required to look as straight as possible. I worked my way up to being a medical secretary & went to every college I could including Howard. My favorite teacher, Dr. Nathan Hare, was very radical. He recommended we read a lesbian magazine, *The Ladder,* which had a tract on gay rights. He wanted us to see how another minority group struggled against oppression. I was so impressed I wrote an article in a professional journal saying not all lesbians are sick. But most of what I wrote was not only unpublishable but *unspeakable* not only becuase of lesbianism but because I wrote as a pro-woman working class person.

Swept into the '60s, I met my lover, Wendy Cadden, a Jewish artist & radical from New York. We came to San Francisco, joined Newsreel & participated in nearly every demonstration from the Black Student's Strike at State to People's Park to offering our bodies as a buffer between rioting police & the Black Panthers. But Newsreel & other Left organizations were hopelessly sexist. We then joined women's consciousness-raising groups but when discussion of our lesbianism paralyzed our straight sisters we dropped out & started a group with 5 other political lesbians. We formed, defined & acted out lesbian separatism. For the first time we had a voice of our own & we used it loud and clear. We were a mixture of races & classes & used separatism as a tool, not as a way of life.

Wendy & I were ambitious artists but first we had to organize a community that would make use of our work. So we (1) planned meetings and actions that would help define women as a group, (2) lived in a halfway house for women trying to break away from unwanted marriages, alcoholism, mental hospitals & so on, (3) we began a press. I've heard big presses budget $20,000 for a poetry book & that small presses budget $5,000. We put out poetry books for $300. Our house also had a bookstore, was a meeting place for various committees & we published 2 newspapers.

Not only were we publishers. We were examples of women doing non-traditional work such as running & fixing our own press. We published Third World and working class material and especially tried to break down old stereotypes. We next merged with the larger Diana Press but were drastically attacked and vandalized. Diana Press then folded & we temporarily dispersed, exhausted.

In order to write out of a community I had to work hard to organize the community and to use my art to help define and focus it. I've never had the problem of alienated writers needing to go out and seek experience. I've had more experience than I could ever get down on paper. I've learned to trust everyday people who could tell me whether or not my writing was working, *not* those already established as critics or writers or those who would set themselves up *above* my various communities.

Every kind of group uses separatism to define itself. We who began it perceived lesbian separatism as a tool, one crucial for women who define issues from a base. We fought for this method & we'll continue to use it as a form. But separatism alone is not enough. When it's exclusively white it becomes racist as a matter of course. We need all our communities. We need to understand, communicate with, emotionally & politically identify with those (communities) we don't belong to.

Art is like a bowl. A bowl is beautiful but it's also meant to hold things. Art is not a way out. There is no way out. There's only what we've got and how to turn it around to reinforce our fighting genius, to clarify and point out what has been stolen from us. We must take it back or continue with nothing.

Moving art is never merely personal, never merely self-expressive, never merely produced solely for museums or record companies. Nor do artists ever know when they've produced it. Only other people can judge a bowl by its usefulness to them. At its best (art) comes from our bitterest anger, our most expansive love, our most courageous hopes, our most vital vision, our most honest insights, our fiercest determination. And this is a collective feeling. If the collective is fragmented, then art will speak of loneliness & alienation, of longing & isolation. If the collective is together, art, even at its best, catches only the thinnest glimmer of what we all feel when we allow ourselves to show how we feel.

Now it's time to forget the word bowl since that is simply an analogy of something which is socially useful. And at this particular time a bowl is not socially useful though it should be. Perhaps the work instead shapes itself into a long shiny surface which someone holds up and we all peer into it & say, "Yes, that is a face I recognize, that is an event I formed, that is what determination looks like, that is how resistance sounds."

Many people have pretended to see the artist in the shiny surface the bowl makes but she is not there. She is over here holding up a piece of clay. Sometimes people see the shine & say, "Every witch must have a knife." And then someone else will say, "Hey, I just cut myself on that image." While someone else will take it and bury it in their enemy's heart. That is what I mean by "socially useful." That is what I mean by "moving art."

ROBERT CHRISMAN: Hearing the varieties of experience and frames of reference, I believe a number of points in common are being made. Starting with the most basic statement, one can say writing is a political action that expresses consciousness and shapes reality. Too often we take one part of that triptych rather than seeing the whole. Some of my political militant friends have a certain amount of scorn for art because it doesn't *do* anything. On the other hand I just read in *Gramma* that the national poet of Cuba, Nicholas Gillion, founder of the Negritude movement in Cuba and a member of the Central Committee, donated 50,000 Cuban pesos to the Territorial Militia. These were royalties from his books. I haven't seen Norman Mailer give that much to the Black Panthers (laughter).

Having established the relation of writing to action, I'd like to emphasize the importance of criticism. Art expresses consciousness but also exists in the consciousness of other people so the process of growth comes from the *interaction* of consciousness. That interaction, evaluation and exploration is called criticism. I stress this because, as Alejandro mentioned, writing in the '60s and '70s too often lacked criticism. I don't mean the kind you'd get in *The Saturday Review* or *New York Review of Books* which maintained that class or ethnic militants weren't artists because (1) they're ideological or (2) expressing political content, had no craft. That kind of criticism, of course, is the most ideological of all. (laughter) The *New York Times* represents monopoly capitalism at its highest form.

The criticism we need is the interaction and evaluation among our own communities. Art is an intellectual and passionate activity. Too often many of us coming from a class or ethnic content base fell into what Alejandro called sloganeering or what I call mindless emotion. A recent history of anti-intellectualism in the Bay Area has contaminated almost all of the movements of any persuasion. I've lived here since 1948. I remember a time when people talked about what they thought or had read, not just about the hot tub or the weed they're smoking or who they're screwing and how and why and other sensations.

For me, the movements of the '60s—Black Militant, Hippie, Ecology, Drug Consciousness or Feely Movement—suffered from a real contempt for the intellectual process. People would say, "That's Establishment" or "Man, that'll mess up your consciousness," or "You're eating too much steak. Don't be so aggressive," or "It's patriarchal." All kinds of reactions came against the attempt to use one's mind as an instrument to shake and transform reality. Now where did that anti-intellectual contamination come from? The bourgeoisie do *not want* intelligent people. They want ignorant, mindless people. (applause) Anything that will destroy your mind they will let you have in this society. Name your dope, your dance, your tv show—you'll get it. If it's mindless, they'll subsidize it.

So we have to see, regardless of intentions, anti-intellectualism reinforces a reactionary class position. If there's one problem with the American people, despite an extraordinary dialectical struggle against reaction, it's the abysmal lack of political education and political consciousness. (applause) So we can have a war lord like Alexander Haig questioned for the post of Secretary of State and someone can say, "What about Watergate? Didn't you run the White House for three months, call up the generals and say, 'Don't listen to Nixon, he's incompetent.' " And someone else will say, "Oh, forget about it. That's in the *past.*" And we *accepted* it. When that occurs it's an abysmal moral, social and political ignorance. And it's encouraged and swallowed.

Other problems are what I call Scholastic Marxism and Nostalgic Nationalism. (laughter) The first concerns people who are serious about developing a political tool but somehow seem obsessed with obsolete arguments: The Stalin vs. Trotsky argument, "What did Lenin mean in the second message to the Dumma?" (applause) The problem with that—and I call it scholastic because it reminds me of colleagues at UC Berkeley who research footnotes to Shakespeare's *Henry V*—is that Marxism is a dynamic, progressive science. And a practice. The conditions that existed for Stalin or Trotsky in the '20s no longer exist. One could say the current internationalist spirit verifies Trotsky's thesis, the Cuban support of Angola, for instance. The difference is that now there are ten to forty socialist-oriented states. So the *conditions* for Trotsky's and Stalin's theses have changed. Cultural workers have to see their own ideology existing in a present and future tense in the real world.

The problem of Nostalgic Nationalism afflicts the movement I'm closest to, the Black movement. By this I mean brothers and sisters feel, and quite rightly, that much African and Black integrity was destroyed by the process of colonialism and slavery. But this process began in the 1400s and we cannot *return* to a mode of feudal organization whether it be the subordination of women to men or a kind of veiled militarism where the war lord and political leader are the same.

Life is a dialectical process. In the process of criticism we need to make a constant analysis of what the bourgeois media is doing. I think the most important development today lies in the very basic shift from print to the electronic media. The infrastructure of capitalism was historically stored in the printed word: encyclopedias, dictionaries, textbooks, etc. This even generated certain forms like the novel. Now information is stored electronically. This doesn't mean we return to an earlier oral state or to the antithesis of the written but we are moving into a new stage in how we receive stimulation and in the way things are expressed. (reads a poem written in the '40s by Margaret Walker about Harriet Tubman) One of the things we learn by reading is that the Revolution didn't begin five minutes after we joined the movement.

DISCUSSION:

DAVID MOE: Alejandro, what position do you take on all the writers imprisoned in Russia, Romania, Afghanistan and elsewhere?

MURGUIA: If you're asking me if I support the torture and imprisonment of writers, no.

ALLEN COHEN: This is supposedly a community conference but as I look around the audience I see mostly white people. I'm wondering if the energy of this conference might be a little misdirected.

CHRISMAN: In this society is a universal culture represented by the national media. It's an extraordinary ambiguity wherein we're both integrated and segregated. If there were an equally monolithic reaction to that oppressive "universal" culture we'd be in a civil war. But what we have are different communities in which are different levels of development attacking the dominant culture. And different agendas. For instance, the Native American culture has a completely different context than does the Black culture. But the recognition (of the need to struggle) exists in all the cultures.

WOMAN IN ORANGE SWEATER: In response to what Alejandro said, I feel there's a process in Left history that's stifling, a kind of patriarchy or wet dream of uniformity. I object to the elevation of men in the socialist movment such as in Cuba.

GRAHN: I see patriarchy as an umbrella (inaudible section). So there's not as much a contradiction as it first seems.

MURGUIA: The question posed is intricate. I'm not sure what you mean by "always being oppressed by 'Great Men' " because in Latin America there have also been women who have been liberators. (gives examples) So I'm not understanding this constant antagonism toward men. Concerning Cuba, there's faults there as there are everywhere but to criticize a society that's trying to create a new man—and by that I mean new man and new woman—isn't where it's at when there are so many problems in this society that perpetuate colonialism and imperialism. So just because Cuba isn't advocating lesbianism or homosexuality, it's because they're trying to solve problems 100 times more acute and more important to the people. (applause mixed with booing)

ABBOTT: There are going to be disagreements. (laughter) I think it's a starting poine that we're

sitting down in one room and talking about these things. And I hope we can talk about them and not just boo or hiss.

CHRISMAN: I've visited Cuba seven times since 1972. One of the interesting things about the revolution is that it's created a realistic interlude for social change. In the USA when we say something takes time it means we're not going to do it. Here what's got to be changed is so embedded and locked in it can't be changed. it has to be destroyed. Cuba has destroyed the roadblocks against change created by patriarchy, capitalism and racism and the *flow* of the people is moving forward. This doesn't mean there's not debris, individuals who tell racist jokes, for instance, but, structurally, no one can *benefit* from being a racist whereas in this society the whole premise is that you can *only* benefit by being a racist.

In reference to Cuban movement on the gay question, in their latest standard textbook on sexual education, they do *not* list being gay as a social or biological deviation. One of their most distinguished cultural theoreticians and vice-president of their largest publishing house, Roberto Vedimar, recently said in a conference that the harassment of gays in Cuba in the '60s was a mistake.

MURGUIA: Cuba also passed a new constitution wherein a woman's equality is guaranteed by law and, in marriage, the law states a man must share half the housework.

SUSAN CHESINE: I'd like to speak as a feminist in response to what Alejandro said. One process in Left history that's been most stifling (is) a kind of patriarchy or wet dream of uniformity. I entered the movement not as a feminist but as a Marxist Socialist and spent (many) years working under a model of liberation involving a cult of pure militarism or "The Great Man." While I express full solidarity with Cuba, expecially regarding its anti-racism and anti-imperialism, I find the elevation of "great men" antagonistic to true cultural progress. Women have been persecuted under socialist as well as capitalist dictatorships. Yet many of my separatist friends who've worked primarily among women for years are now realizing we need unity and to express our views on history openly and in a spirit of solidarity.

JUDY GRAHN: My visualization at this point is of patriarchy as an umbrella with monopoly capitalism as a method of white and male supremacy as the motivating monster . . . those things go together everywhere . . . (they) go together historically and they'll be overthrown together.

RUBIN BARR: Not all writers are heroes. Some are villains and betrayers. Solzhenitsyn is an example. Nothing's perfect in an imperfect world . . . but the struggle for progress must never end. Mistakes in socialist countries will be rectified sooner than those in the fascist and imperialist world. (applause)

TEDE MATTHEWS: The American Psychiatric Association tells us one of every ten people is homosexual. A lot of straight Leftists and Marxists still think homosexuality is bourgeois decadence even though they've been going to Bay Area demonstrations for a decade and (should have) noticed *more* than one out of every ten people there is, in fact, gay. And proudly gay. I think the American straight Left has done its best to hide behind the skirts, or actually jockstraps, of patriarchy (laughter) and has made a fetish out of "great men" to look up to. I think it's our duty to support socialist revolutions. I support Cuba. But I think it's also our duty to criticize them as comrades. We're not criticizing them to assist American imperialism but to assist gay sisters and brothers in Cuba. I think it's time for straight Leftists to stop trying to gag gay Leftists on these issues. (loud applause)

RON SILLIMAN: I'd like Nellie Wong to (discuss) freedom of the press when it comes to attacks on groups of people (as in) the Carol Berge poem in *Beatitude* #29.

WONG: There was outrage in the Asian American community but also among feminists I know, so we wrote letters to *Beatitude* and to *Poetry Flash* to let them know what we thought. Berge later wrote to Karen Brodine saying we should have checked with her first. Our point wasn't to advocate censorship or to say she shouldn't write that because every writer (anywhere) has the right to say whatever they wish. *But* if you're published in a magazine read in a community like San Francisco and if a segment of the community sees it as sexist, racist and homophobic, then we have a right to criticize it. A poet is responsible to answering that criticism instead of saying: "Well, I studied the Chinese when I lived with this Chinese man and I know all about them." (laughter and applause)

Alejandro Murguia addresses question from audience during first panel. Photo by Ed Kashi

How can a non-Asian tell us Asian Americans we can't criticize (such a poem)? I hope this conference (will realize) racism is for all of us to fight.

Carol was talking about capitalist oppression and sure, Asian men are involved in that, too. We see it in the I-Hotel struggle . . . We see it a lot in Chinatown. Progressive Asian Americans are fighting that. It's a degradation of our people and we won't accept it. But I will also challenge any comrade for racism, sexism and homophobia. I'm a straight woman but I stand with my gay sisters and brothers. (applause)

SHEPHERD BLISS: I was formerly a correspondent in Cuba for *The National Guardian* but stopped writing for *The Guardian* because of its refusal to cover issues around sexuality. I support the Cuban Revolution and think Alejandro was correct to bring that issue up, but it's also important for both gays and non-gays to begin thinking more about sexuality in its *fullness*, involving the right of all people to have full control of their bodies. This involves abortion and a whole series of interrelated issues that we tend to see as isolated. There are three great political questions: class, race and sexuality. As writers we need to look at the complicated relationshp between these variables. We should at no point back off from our determination to support anyone in these struggles . . .(applause)

CHRISMAN: Very well said. And as San Franciscans we should look at the interaction (of these struggles) as they take place in our own city because these are basic, strategic issues that have to be addressed. I'm aware of animosity between Blacks and gay concerning real estate development in the Western Addition. (I'm aware of) attacks on gays by Third World men. We have to examine these difficult, knotty questions in our own communities where we can do something about them.

LISA BERNSTEIN: Robert raised an interesting point about the electronic media. I'm in love with print media but it seems to be becoming less relevant. I'd like you to expand on that.

CHRISMAN: Print media's no longer the mass media of our culture. The novel isn't what it was in the 19th century; poetry, you print a thousand books. TV and film are now the mass media, and *very expensive* mass media. It costs $10 to $20 million to put out a feature film and they're collectively done. We have to think how to use visual media, either become visual artists or exploit it in ways Brecht used, film strips, music with verse. (We can) use alternative and bootleg media systems like cable cassettes. This conference could be video taped and it could be a very effective vehicle for organizing people.

— transcribed and edited by Steve Abbott

Past Political Lessons: An Overview of Left Writing Workshop

George Benet, San Francisco Longshoreman associated with Watefront Writers' Workshop for three years
David Plotke, former editor of *The Socialist Review*
Robert Gluck, moderator. author of *Elements of A Coffee Service*. housepainter

GEORGE BENET talked about the changing subculture of the longshoremen, and about writing, especially working class writing. He described what life was like on the Bay Area waterfront before 1960 where:

. . . a lot of the jobs were horrendously tough, like shoveling bones where you get bones in your nose, or working steel or barbed wire or copra with bugs . . . and I thought, God, these people work like they're Phoenicians, 2,000 years ago! What's modern about this? I understood and many of the longshoremen understood, but not all of them understood, that somewhere along the line there'd be a day of reckoning.

Nevertheless, the waterfront was their territory; they worked, lived, and played there, and it "wasn't uncommon for a longshoreman or a teamster or a seaman to never go uptown for ten years."

But things changed. In the 1960 contract Harry Bridges negotiated with the Pacific Maritime Association, the workers agreed not to strike and to allow mechanization and automation. In return the contract guaranteed no layoffs and cash payments for retirees. Since then the number of Bay Area longshoremen reduced from 6,000 to 2,000 not by layoffs, but by attrition.

As soon as the contract was signed, the ship owners started automating and using containers brought to ships by trains and loaded far inland by people paid low wages and with no association with the docks. Since San Francisco property was too expensive to use as storage areas, Oakland soon became the big dock area. As the San Francisco piers started to shut down, the Chamber of Commerce and the San Francisco Realty Board quickly helped to "Manhattanize" the city by encouraging the building of such places as the Cannery, Ghirardelli Square, and Pier 39. Dramatic change was also brought about by the ending of the Viet Nam war. San Francisco had been *"the* war port on the West Coast," because of the Army docks and base and the Navy supply center. So when the war ended San Francisco became a more depressed port than others on the West Coast; LA, for instance, was not really bothered, because it depended on junk cargo from Japan.

As a result of all these changes, youth was excluded from being longshoremen; a dead industry had been created. In ten years, George predicted, there would be a thousand longshoremen at most in this area, a cadre of technicians. George, who is himself a crane driver, a wench and a forklift and a straddler driver, explained that he felt like Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times.*

George read three of his poems: "The Year They Invented Poor People," "Daughter"; and a poem about the poet Lew Welch, a clerk on the docks who was one of George's drinking buddies. This last poem caused George to talk about writing:

Lew had a tendency to become very downbeat. I don't know how many times he told me about how as a poet he was being crushed. But I have a totally different idea about art and writing. I don't think that artists are the primary thing in this world . . . a woman that has a child is doing more in this world than anybody that writes a novella or a poem or a book. I think it's all kind of co-equal. A guy that builds a bridge or that works as a carpenter and puts a good door frame in a house, he's an artist in his own way . . . I think writers sometime get the mistaken idea that they're the chosen people and that their line of bullshit is the only bullshit in the world and when you begin to believe your own bullshit, you're in trouble.

George then talked about the Waterfront Writers. They were a group of "literary guys" working on the waterfront, some clerks, some longshoremen, with a variety of political views who decided to get together and have poetry readings. Right off, Herb Caen wrote them up in the *Chronicle,* KPIX news put them on local TV and, eventually, they appeared on the NBC Today show.

At first they were anxious for media attention; they wanted to present their working clas view. But the media became so intrusive and exploitative, the writers began to disagree on how to deal with the publicity and control their participation. Eventually, Harper and Row decided to publish an anthology of their work. But the editor demanded two-thirds of the small $3,000 advance, leaving only $100 per writer. George, disagreeing with this arrangement, left the group.

George also disagreed with the Waterfront Writers aesthetically. He felt they restricted themselves by their intention, as they would say ". . . not to write about butterflies and bees and all that crap . . . we're going to talk about work, we're going to talk about brutality and loading coffee and closed coffin funerals." George declared, quoting Ernest Cardnell, that ". . . the roses don't belong to the rich. In the revolution we'll have roses too." George felt that writing is mostly bad because it is writing in which "an idea is expected to carry everything," and, consequently, insufficient attention is paid to matters of craft and beauty.

Responding to a question about taking political stands, George insisted that he did take outspoken stands on political issues, but that "as a writer . . . I don't write about the way things can be, or should be, or might be, I try to look at something and present it as it is, as I see it."

Another questioner wondered if George was being provincial and insensitive to Third World consciousness in some of his poems and declared that "the philosophy of the working class is that they in fact are concerned with the slums in Nigeria." George countered:

Well, there's no way I can answer that. You believe that. Believe that. I've worked in about six industries. I worked in a foundry when I was about 16 . . . I'll leave you on a note. The working class is much more American than any other class in the United States . . . The left wing made the big mistake of trying to approach the wrong class. If they had approached the rich, they would have made a success, because the rich will sell to anybody. They would send laser beams and tanks and atom bombs and computers over to Russia to make a profit. The working class is usually the one that does not want to do that. Every war that was ever fought in the U.S., good or bad, was fought by the American working class.

DAVID PLOTKE wanted to focus upon ". . . the single most common accusation made about left writing, whether it's a political statement or a piece of poetry or fiction—that it's rhetorical." To illustrate, he selected the following Preamble from a pamphlet being passed out at the conference:

"Unhampered by the hangovers of feudalism, USNA capitalism by the end of the 19th century had fully entered into its aggressive, moribund, final stage—imperialism. The USNA multinational state is the international hangman of revolutions and the enemy of the peoples of the earth. The working class of the United States of North America is locked in a life and death struggle with the capitalist class. This struggle is evolving under conditions where the workers have had no general staff—no Marxist-Leninist Communist Party—to guide them. In the struggle to form and develop such a party, the Marxist-Leninists are carrying out their historic responsibilities. Basing ourselves on the *Communist Manifesto* and the program of the *Communist Inernational,* the Marxist-Leninists of the USNA set out to rally the revolutionary working class around the following program."

David identified two problems characteristic of leftist writing. First, "the piece is inaccessible to most of the people to whom it was directed." And secondly, it is: "triumphalistic, by which it makes grandiose claims for itself that, because anyone reading this program knows that these claims are so far from the reality of this group today . . . become a parody of political aspiration."

David questioned why "this problem arises so persistently as such a deep tendency within left writing." "Finger-waving speeches" are not sufficient; if it were simply a matter of bad intentions or bad attitudes on the part of the writers, this could have been corrected long ago. Before attempting an answer to his question, David first defined rhetoric in two ways. Rhetoric may ". . . mean something inauthentic, something emotionally dishonest . . . analytically shallow . . . something that is not expressive but pretends to be." But rhetoric may also be "a means of expression, as a strategy for creating and communicating with an audience . . . The problem is that for the left this rhetorical strategy is used as a way of creating conventions of language, of imagery, conventions of symbolism that seal or bind a community together. Now this is not a serious problem if what you're trying to build is a church . . . because when you build a church you want to create a tight network of symbolism that marks off believers clearly from non-believers, that brings people in and allows

them, once in, to experience the whole world through the prism of this set of symbols and this rhetorical architecture."

This tension occurs between a left interested in transforming society and communicating with people, and one sealing itself off through its language and symbolism.

David believes the rhetorical character of leftist writing has worsened over the last few decades. Why is this? First, he [illegible] the audience amplifying what he meant by comparing the left to a church. A church, he said, "is constituted around the idea that there are more or less permanent dogma that are true, have been true, and will be true in the future, and that these dogma not only need to be believed by people, but they need be expressed in an ongoing set of ceremonies and rituals which confirm the existence of the church And so building that church means you try to recruit more and more people into believing those points of scripture or dogma, and you try to get them to identify with the emotional meanings around a particular set of ceremonies. That seems to me to be what a church is. And the left in a lot of ways overlaps that with its theoretical and organizational attitudes. I don't think this is completely terrible. There's some elements of that stance we would want to keep in the future, but it's a very different thing than a political movement."

1980's political cartoon on flyer announcing open public planning meeting for conference

But why has rhetoric intensified? First, when the left constructs itself as a highly internalized, secular church, its language becomes more introverted, archaic, and at odds with its original impetus. Ironically, it becomes marginal to its own existence.

Citing an example of what he called this "cycle of marginalization," he said that "if someone were teaching a course on the Romantic Movement in early 19th Century Arts and Literature and put the *Communist Manifesto* in that course, passages could be selected from it from which it would do very well alongside a whole tradition of Romantic poetry of that period. If you take those same exact words and put them in your party program today, they don't have the same passion, the same meaning, or the same social context."

Secondly, political debate and struggle have become increasingly specialized as they become increasingly incorporated into social science analysis. For example, in 1930s magazines such as *New Masses* or *Partisan Review,* cultural analysis and political strategy were seen to be closely interrelated. But in the last 20 or 30 years, a separation has occurred. Political writing has consequently suffered. Insisting that writing and thinking must be linked, David pointed to two rhetorical strategies used by many leftists which are unsuccessful.

The first is the insistent repetition of dogma using specialized terminology or jargon in the belief that this will eventually destroy false consciousness. The second imitates working class language in hopes this will in itself convert people. David posed the contemporary problem of the left to be at the "level of language and rhetoric . . . how do you maneuver between a phony effort to sound popular, and a sectarianism that's so abstract and rigid that it isolates you from the people you want to reach?"

David concluded with an analogy between this problem and the debates of art and literature critics concerning the Modernist problem of being *avant-garde* in a contemporary period.

He asked if . . ."as artists, as film makers, or poets, or writers, should we seek to define an *avant-garde* strategy that clearly articulates a cultural way forward? Or should we seek to relate to the broadest popular audience through the language and the forms they understand? . . . *avant-gardism* as a cultural and political movement has collapsed. You can find endless discussions of that. If you go through these discussions and substitute vanguard and socialist organization when you see *avant-garde* . . . you'll find a host of problems that bear on the socialist left's own problems of thinking about its relationship to society."

In subsequent discussion, a woman felt we should stress positive examples of left writing, such as Nellie Wong's speech in the morning session. This woman felt David was guilty of "internalizing some kind of anti-leftism . . . like some people internalize sexism and racism."

Next, a man complained that the problems David discussed were not really problems of the left but of our whole soicety, our non-verbal culture in which mass media exert tremendous influence and pressure. This man, while believing that academic rhetoric could be divisive, also believed it important to those involved in the "science of socialism" to develop a fitting language.

David responded that "I don't want it to be thought that I'm making some sort of anti-left thing. Obviously, I'm addressing this within an audience most of whom consider themselves on the left, so that's the framework for making these criticisms. On the other hand, I don't think we get out of this stuff by projecting onto the enemy. Sure, TV is rhetorical, but that doesn't make it OK for us to be.

On the "science of socialism" he noted that he was "not opposed in principle to printing specialized stuff, and God knows, *Socialist Review* prints some impenetrable articles to people who aren't educated in certain ways . . . But there's a big difference between the science of socialism and the science of biochemistry . . . The science of biochemistry does not presume to say that everyone should become a biochemist; whereas, the science of socialism, so far as it's a science, has as one of its predominant theses the idea that everyone should be able to be able to participate in the mastering of their own lives and their own affairs . . . and that difference places a much greater demand for clarity and lucidity and openness on the vocabulary that socialists use among themselves, than it does in biophysics."

— transcribed and edited by Calvin Doucet

Native American Writing Workshop

Wendy Rose, moderator, on Native American Studies faculty at UC Berkeley
Frank La Pena, preserver-creator of ceremonies and songs
Jack Forbes, historical writer, novelist, poet and a professor at UC Davis Cultural Center
Janet Campbell, novelist and poet from Washington State
Maurice Kenny, poet, critic and editor of New York magazine *Contact II*

WENDY ROSE introduced workshop members and began by speaking of the reasons such a workshop was needed: ". . . we are not recognized in so-called mainstream literature, even in the small press world . . . people shake their head and say, 'gee I didn't know there were any Indians who were writing.' She said a few years ago she was looking for a novel by N. Scott Momaday at City Lights Bookstore. She was directed to the anothropology section. Momaday is an American Indian Pulitzer Prize winner of 1969 and the book was not about anthropology.

They answered: "Well, he's an Indian writer and that's why we put him in anthropology and that's where he's going to stay." She tried to argue the point and was informed that there's not enough Indian literature nor enough Indian writers for them to be concerned with these issues. This experience prompted her ongoing project of compiling a bibliography of booklength works by American Indian and Inuit (Eskimo) writers on every possible genre. The bibliography contains, so far, 3700 books, some as old as the 17th century and some still in progress.

She said that ". . . there is and always has been a Native American literature, both the oral and the written forms, not necessarily on paper and not necessarily using what the white linguists would call alphabets, but still, nonetheless, written forms."

She continued to speak of the segregation that she and other Native American writers presently experience in publishing, not being included in general American literature anthologies. The same segregation is to be found in poetry readings.

"At least 8 out of 10 times that I'm asked to do a reading someplace it is with someone else who is Indian," she said. "That's fine . . . (but) the people organizing the reading are putting us into this category, meaning that we will only be exposed to people who feel that they're going to go hear something distinctively Indian."

Further segregation includes the reluctance of critics to do reviews. She said that " many times I've been told that they don't want to review *our* books because they don't feel qualified, don't have an anthropology background, they don't know about American Indian culture so they don't feel qualified to review our work.

"Regardless of how much of this 'anthropology' actually appears in our work, I know I write in English. I don't know another language well enough to write in it. I'm the product of creative writing workshops in colleges and universities, like anyone else. And so it seemed a little funny to me that my work was too esoteric to be reviewed with the works of these people."

After pointing out three display tables of Native American books in the room, she introduced Frank La Pena.

FRANK LA PENA is a preserver-creator of customs, ceremonies and songs. As this was called a conference of writers on the left he spoke of his approach to politics. He believes that the act of maintaining customs and ceremonies of Native Americans and not just becoming a part of "the American thing (where) you melt . . . is a political action, one of the most concrete and direct kinds of things than an Indian person can do." An example of such a political action was when he was asked to join a group to plan an action against the Rancho Seco nuclear power plant. Frank went there, prayed to the directions, sang a blessed song to the earth. He believes the earth then heals itself and that we may have noticed "Rancho Seco has been off and on, *down,* quite a bit and that's more the Indian way of doing things . . . a passive way that I have learned from my elders." A line from one of his poems read at Rancho Seco describes the action of Frank La Pena, traditional singer and dancer.

a song is a vibration so
too is our footsteps on the ground
and the earth responds

Frank writes poems of ecology, records stories of creation, reveals philosophy learned from his elders and medicine people. He himself has dreams/visions and writes of them.

He read a poem about the salmon in which he told how he used not to be able to count them and is now able to "count each individual fish/each egg/each fin/counting 50's by the long way." The poisons are "killing the fish and people/their passing reminds us that we are connected to cycles of the salmon and the river". He concluded the poem, "and each session is a lesson in improper mathematics and long division."

He then spoke of the Wentu story of creation. In that story the people are in the 4th time of creation. One version, after a time of destruction and change, as the water recedes from the land, has the eel as the first sign of life; another version, a turtle. He believes if one looks at the land and its diversity, at the plants and animals and their variety and thinks of the stories that it is easy to see the truth in such stories.

Frank La Pena spoke of Al Thomas, an Indian doctor, a number of times. Al told him many things. In one story Al told how to find out if you are meant to be a singer:

"If you want to find out if you are meant to be a singer, or if you want to be a singer crawl into this hole and start to sing, and it will close in on you. Then you must sing for the opening to get big enough for you to get out."

Frank also "wrote our history for the Smithsonian Anthropology thing and I wanted to start out with the creation. People said oh, you can't do that: it's gotta be a theory of behavior and a bunch of things. I find as I've talked to the old people the story about the long marches, that if you know very much about the long trail, and the big march and the peace; well, California had them four major times. I started writing a history but it got so doggoned big. I was getting all emotional about it so I took it down to (something) smaller and it's called: *Red Fawn.*"

"Comes the fording when/ the blood of dead lay silent floating/ in the red red water/ where prancing hoofprints grease/ the edge of dreams that ran down on our feet/ the bodies cold were running northward/ headless in the snow that formed/ moutain fed yet blood cleft/ red fawn/ water fawn on bloody island."

JACK FORBES was the next speaker. He went right into his poems. The first was *Ghost Dance.* He speaks to the Ghost Dance which did not stop the bullets, did not bring back the buffalo and has not made the whites go away. An answer of why not is suggested in the line: "It is said the Ghost Dancers talked freely with anthropologists and did not keep the secret knowledge."

But that the story is not over yet the poem tells us:

But lately there are whispers of the buffalo returning, of the
Indian race taking over California,
of native blood pouring in from Mexico,
of the collapse of the white empire and South America

Another poem, *Now Let Us Pray,* inspired by the moral majority, dedicated to all the famous preachers, is a hallucination of white Christian horror and hypocrisy. Watching a TV preacher, the poet asks:

"Am I insane, is it madness/ To see his expensive suits, hundred dollar shoes/ Used car salesman's cheeks/ Right wing campaign buttons/ and huge bank accounts/ In his southern drawl/ he tells us that the lord's work is his work/ and that the lord's money is his money."

His vision continues with Jesus returning to fight the TV preachers. His Jesus is brown and kinky-haired, an angry Balosha Jew who smashes the TV against the wall. The rebellion is met by white preachers who pierce his flesh, by a "Pontius Pilate turning the Black Jew leftist over to the tender care of mobs . . ."

Forbes hears Jesus, the real Yesquah, shout: "You stand for everything that I was against/ and you try to speak in my name you stand for war you stand for rich you stand for racism you stand for the exploitation of other peoples/ for dictators which you arm and train/ you mock everything decent/ and in my name."

The vision continues in the poem of marchers carrying signs which said, "We support the sanctity of the unborn, protect the human fetus." The poet counters: "human life is sacred as long as/ it is here in this country/ and as long as it is unbirthed . . . And so the backs of the signs were slogans/ denouncing welfare mothers/ and people using food stamps."

He saw a "blank sign which said nothing at all/ about Indians being murdered in Brazil/ or 15,000 missing in Argentina/ Or sugar cane workers without unions in Dominica/ Or maids/ Or farmworkers/ or the tortured in Iran, Uruguay, Indonesia, the Philippines."

This "dream" of racism, Christian capitalism and imperialism, torture and poverty, historical and now, he concludes in bitter irony:

"A nightmare of insanity/ was all dream . . . millions murdered in Europe's christian crusades/ the millions buried beneath our feet/ brown, black, and white/ I dreamed it all/ And when I awaken the pink chubby white man/ smiling with polished teeth was saying/ 'Send your checks to Box 711, Tulsa, Oklahoma/ And now let us pray.' "

JANET CAMPBELL spoke of how she came to be published. She received a special delivery letter in the middle of the night from Doubleday. They had read a short story of hers written in high school for the student paper. They wanted to see a full-length manuscript. Janet no longer had one but she reconstructed a first chapter and a synopsis. On that basis she got her contract.

The publishers did not promote her book but after it was reviewed by the *New York Times,* she says, "from then on everyone was trying to be my baby, publishingwise . . . now they wanted me, I guess because I had already been published. So, it's not hard being published anymore."

MAURICE KENNY protested the last statement: "Small presses have been severely cut. I would say at least cut in half, if not down to a quarter."

Campbell, who has a master's degree in journalism, remembers that when she was at Bekeley they always told her not to write about Indian subjects because prospective employers would see her stuff and think that was all she could write.

She read an excerpt from her novel, *Owl Song.* The passage illustrated contemporary themes of Native American life: drunkenness, love between a son and his father, and manhood. The father comes home falling down drunk, his lip swollen and cut. It has been raining hard all night and Billy is greatly relieved to have his father home safe. He tries to help Joe, his father, to bed. The older man resists, insisting that he can walk by himself. The father tried to walk and fell to the floor. Billy waited until he was sure that Joe would not try to get up again by himself before he would go again to his father's aid. Then he helped him to bed removing his shoes and undressing him. The son returns to bed and his father begins to sing his manhood song. A traditional understanding of manhood is being passed from father to son in this part of the excerpt: "He sang loudly, drunkenly. A manhood song is a man's strength, helps protect you. Billy remembered Joe had told him once how he had sung that song when he was a young warrior, then fighting the Germans over in France. He told Billy how there had been bullets passing by in the air, so near he could feel the wind they made. And no bullet would touch him as long as he sang that song. Yet other men were falling down dead all around him. Billy went to sleep again listening to his father singing his manhood song."

Janet concluded with her experience of finding her novel, *The Owl Song,* in the anthropology sections of bookstores, and juvenile sections, especially in libraries. Even her publishers advertised this adult novel as a juvenile book in their own catalog.

MAURICE KENNY said that he "came to this conference from New York City not as an editor or publisher but as a writer to address the question of the writer's state in the present political climate in America . . . with the hope that fellow writers would share the conditions and attempt to reach some solutions to our concurrent problems: public apathy, federal cuts in the budget for the arts, especially literature via NEA and the various state art councils. Can we writers reach a larger audience for our writing?

"I believe in community, and not merely the writer-community but that of people who've been turned away from literature, especially contemporary poetry. We've turned our backs to that community in error and consequently it's turned its back upon us. No, it does not read our published

works and it certainly does not buy them. I feel it's our fault. We've become a club unto ourselves. This is abominable.

Here at this conference I've attended several workshops and have (mostly) heard poets reading their poems to each other . . . and not reading good poems at that. We're a most insular group. We've fallen into the mystique of poetry. We do not serve.

In tribal days there was a definite place and need for the storyteller, the singer of songs, the painter. We must reclaim that place. Until then, writers are wasting their time upstaging each other for star position. I am angry. This is not what writing is all about. The larger, wider community needs us as sorely as we need it. For example, where are the teachers at this conference. Where are the librarians? It is (they) who will take our work to the community. I see no effort to involve the teacher or librarian in our needs here. We do not need more writers in this conference, we need more people.

(The tape ended here with none of the following discussion recorded.)

— transcribed and edited by Murray

Black Writing Workshop

Deborah Major, moderator, poet-in-residence, African-American Historical & Cultural Society
Sha'am Wilson Hayes, writer of fiction and non-fiction; independent television producer.
Darryl GAUFF, poet, photographer.
Clyde Taylor, chairman of Black Studies, Mill College; critic and essayist

MAJOR: . . . When we decided to participate in the Left conference and put together a workshop, it was with some ambivalence . . . The assumptions being that if one calls oneself "Left," one shares certain commonalities with other people who call themselves "left," at least in a negative, oppressed sense, and possibly in priorities . . . We came together hopefully to make a presentation dealing not with assumptions but with where we felt Black writers should come from or go to, in specifics, rather than speaking to the . . . larger issue of uniting (the) "Left" whatever.

(Reads two paragraphs from *Blueprint for Negro Literature* by Richard Wright (1937), a work that was brought up repeatedly throughout the workshop.)

The first speaker is going to talk about the actual problems of survival . . . Most of us, particularly Black writers, don't have "a room of our own and 500 lbs.," and therefore if one calls oneself "political" on top of that and faces a double oppression, the question of survival is a prime one.

HAYES: . . . The problem of financial survival is often overlooked. It's very basic and addresses all writers, specifically Black writers, who are the true "starving artists" of all time.

(Outlines four basic "survival problems" for Black writers: enough money "to feed the machine that produces;" enough time off from "survival struggles;" a means of surmounting production and publication discrimination once the end product is ready for distribution, and finally the need for a supportive environment, "a spa for the psyche," to develop ideas and discuss problems with other like-minded writers.)

I see three basic recourses for financial assistance. First is self-help. Second is "relative assistance," or "assistance from your relatives." (laughter) The third is manna from foundations, and the Feds hopefully granting manna, which is of course rapidly drying up. There's few new blooms in sight, under the leadership of Shah Reagan.

(Describes some sources of grants: National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship, California Arts Council's Artists in Social Institutions program and related residencies, San Francisco Foundation, California Poets in the Schools.)

Currently I'm involved in a training workshop in Tiburon, of all places. I had a kid write on skiing, because that's very germane to the Marin schools since they take a ski recess for two weeks every year. The Marin coordinator I'm working with right now is like an alien from another planet as far as survival issues go. We were expected to go to these dinners in the middle of the week, and strange meetings in Tiburon that are more like social cliques. I was told to go to one meeting, that it would be *very* important. I said I had to work, so I was told again that it would be *very* important, and "you really ought to make it, you know." I said, "Well, this may sound foreign to you but it's financial survival to me." That didn't get across. This woman was on a program just to transmit, and her receptors were all shut down, completely inoperative . . .

If you can find a job that's arts-related, t's really helpful as far as your writing (is concerned). Black arts programs are very supportive. Then there's the possibility of working in the horrible financial district, which often has temporary positions that pay well—clerking, secretarial and that kind of thing, especially when nothing else materializes. And in some of the corporate-related sections of my novel, I found it very helpful to work there for a number of reasons. Those jobs are usually availabe in spring or summer. Then there's substitute teaching which allows freedom of movement, particulary in the Oakland schools which are hiring, unlike those in San Francisco. One major drawback of that job is that it tends to become all-absorbing. You have a responsibility to the children. Our sensitivity as Black writers, who've been stunted in our own schools, gives us an extreme commitment to the kids. I found my own writing drying up when I was a substitute teacher. The kids were even in my dreams and I need my dreams for work, right?

I'd like to see a newsletter, too, especially among Black writers, to share arts-related job openings peope see but can't use for some reason. I think we really need to plug each other into different job openings that we see.

MAJOR: Assuming you can get it together enough to be able to write, then the question is, what are you going to write? What is your responsibility, if any, to the community you come from? What are the alternative roles you can play? . . .

GOUGH: Negro writing hasn't been burdened with the art-for-art's sake and self-expression that is rampant in quite a few other writing communities. We don't have the "advantage" to try to do something like that. We have to be dealing with social issues, it's almost forced on us even if we don't want to.

I think it's important that (the actual realities that are occurring) be dealt with. Because if we look at the history of Negro writing, the most profound writers that have developed in the U.S. have been people who dealt with social issues, tried to come to grips with what the realities were. Richard Wright immediately comes to mind, and among modern writers, Amiri Baraka. If the *Wall Street Journal,* the various electronic media and so on, are the only sources of information—then what's going to happen is that the people will be disarmed. The only thing they're going to get is what the state and the ruling powers want them to get, and they don't want them to get the truth, obviously. So that, to me, seems to be the most important area for Black writers to get into today.

MAJOR: . . . Clyde Taylor is going to speak about Black writers and their orientation to the Left, in terms of being our own Left.

TAYLOR: What I'd like to do briefly is to characterize how I see contemporary Black writing. And then, because I see contemporary Black writing as being in a kind of comatose condition, generally speaking, then to suggest what I'd like to see take its place.

One place to begin is with an article I did called "Scoping the Seventies: Writing In A Comatose Decade." I gave the paper at a writers' conference at Howard University, and for the occasion I thought it would be useful to look at the Black writing I (was) in contact with during the '70s, the '80s and the '90s.

Looking back, I said that to visit the Black writing community of 1978 is to come upon a scene of disorientation, transition many would call it, caused by the lingering traumas of the '60s, and the inability to put those traumas aside and face the challenge of the new era. Another point I made was that the malaise which was evident was also quite deep. After having spoken about the quantity of Black writing that was not being published, I speculated that even had more Black writing surfaced, it was doubtful that it would have squarely addressed the problems of the times

because. for supposedly intellectual activity, Black writing was asking very few serious questions. New critical perspectives waited. Cultural commentators polished their past positions.

There was no study of Black literature as an institution and how it functioned, something which, by the way, would help in the kind of survival questions that the sister was just raising a few minutes ago. The sociology of Black literature wasn't subject for discussion until 20 years later.

Richard Wright used to speak of his love for the novel as form, because of its possibilities for revealing character destiny. Most of the writing of the period I'm talking about tended to emphasize the character, cultural character, more than destiny. The writing dwelt on who we are, rather than what we do and its consequences. Had we studied our destiny as much as our character we would have been forced to consider the economic and political realities that swamped us in the '80s and '90s and, indeed, continue to plague us today. Instead, fictive writing turned to myth and fable, in celebration of legendary personalities, with magical and symbolic constructs of increasing color and brilliance; preoccupied with a hip, mysterious, vivid cultural profile.

Both the '20s and the '60s and '70s saw the justification for this program as a means of extending Black folk culture into a survivable skill. Yet, without the necessary socio-economic underpinnings, artists who would claim to be extending Black folk culture really had been exploiting it.

As far as the old individualistic literature of the '70s, once it was clarified as a more sophisticated form of commercial ethnic entertainment, it proved harmless enough. My love for some of its practitioners, who are old friends, remains undiminished, and I confess to enjoying some of their works in my leisure. Although they are superlative entertainers, it is unfair to compare them to the Black actors of the early Hollywood days. A better analysis (would be to compare them) to the role of the Black preachers of the '50s. They celebrated a Black cultural mythology, instead of a religious one, with much benefit to our often-discouraged spirits. But they did not much enlighten us as to serious problems facing us in the actual world.

I ought to clarify that I don't think many other communities are exceptions to this kind of mindlessness, looking at literatures in broad scope. But I do think there has been a significant lapse in consciousness in Black writing. When I try to think of the works of the '70s that had an important impact on Black writing, I am reduced to *If Beale Street Could Talk,* which is a good book within its limits. Then there's John Williams' *Captain Black Man,* which is a very entertaining work dealing with the role of Black soldiers in the military, to summarize it rather crudely.

But I think there has been a falling off. Not so much a falling off happened in poetry. Poets are able to turn their attention, their focus, sharply on issues, and clarify, make some powerful statements. I do think social consciousness in Black poetry is still there, along with other concerns. But I'm forced, when looking at the situation as a whole, to look hopefully at new combinations of movements . . .

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So I'll summarize what I see as an exciting possibility . . . a fusion of Black Nationalism and Marxism. It seems to me that is an idea whose time has come around again. To me there is possibly an oscillation in Black American history from periods of "Left" persuasion and periods of "Nationalist" persuasion, and I think we may be moving into a period where the value of Left ideas may be increasingly apparent to Black people and Black writers. Wright, of course, was very aware of the possibilities of a kind of reactionary Black Nationalism being in existence during his time. And perhaps the preachers of his time were one manifestation of that. He was not at all convinced that was the only kind that existed or could exist.

I think we are moving toward an era of a clarification of Black Nationalism and its role on the American Left generally. I think that clarification may come as part of a move from Black writers

to offset Left cultural imperialism, which is a threat to the kind of community this conference tries to establish. Not to mention Left racism, which is also a threat. There is a kind of imperialist, didactic—let me call it "commissarism"—that often emerges on the Left where there is an inclination to dictate to smaller communities—even though they may be communities that have been in struggle longer than the momentary dictator—as to how they should proceed in their struggles.

Sometimes there is a racism disguised as a sophisticated knowledge of the latest Marxist texts. I should mention that I find this kind of dogmatism equally offensive when it comes from certain BlackMarxists.I find pointless dogmatism in tone and rhetoric coming from Baraka's writing and speeches, even his poetry, which does not find the tone that can reach Black people as well as he could at another period.

So I think that's one of the achievements that a new Left poetry can try to aim for, to try to offset some of the cultural imperialism in not only the industrial culture—ABC, CBS, NBC—but from the Left culture as well . . .

A very vital cultural question emerges in the socialist nation of Cuba. They know very clearly they must fight a cultural battle against the United States when Radio Miami pumps disco music all the time . . . Therefore if you check out the Cuban film industry you will know they're very much aware of the need for all nationalist cultures to face the struggle against international imperialism—which wants to erase them all. So not all cultural struggle (in the nationalist sense) is backward, though too often on the Left we get that impression.

I think Black writers have a role to play on the Left in demystifying the media. Sometimes I think we get very much bogged down in our form, whether it is poetry or the novel or essays or whatever. We have to demystify these other media, rather than allow ourselves to be mystified by them.

I would like to see, as kind of a critical challenge to the Black writing, a shift in focus that goes something like this: What I see today in novels particularly is cultural questions placed in the foreground with some insight into oppression placed in the background. What I think we need to do is form a Black writing whose oppressive circumstances are in the foreground and socio-economic causes then playing a role in the background, in a relationship to these oppressive conditions.

(Lists some works that "bear on these questions" and some that will "play a part in the emergence of a Black Left literary movement in the '80s: *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* by Harold Cruse, the *Introduction to Afro-American Studies* anthology, the poetry of Sterling Brown, *From the Grassroots* by Manning Marable, *Black Political Forum, The Black Scholar*, a two-part work from Nigeria on de-colonization of African literature by Chimley Izu, *Dry Long So* by John L. Gwaltney. Nigeria on de-colonization of African literature by Chimley Izu, *Dry Long So* by John L. Gwaltney. works by Audre Lorde, June Jordan and Jayne Cortez. These poets are thought of primarily as gay sisters, and they are concerned with the struggles of gay people, as we all should be, but they are also concerned with the larger problems of imperialism and racism and all the other struggles that we have to put together and unify ourselves around.")

MAJOR: When we originally put this panel together we had wanted one person to speak on how to actually get the work to the community. When I went around to writers I found they said they felt ill-equipped: "That's something I'm struggling with myself, someone should talk about that." And so I don't have much to say about that other than the fact that . . . we can work together and rather than have poetry read to other poets, work *across* the arts with various people, and make a commitment to do that. Explore cable TV, go into bars and reading, experimenting with records, like they do in New York with diddy-bop beat although it doesn't have to be diddy-bop poetry. Taking care not to be incestuous with one's writing.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I would like to make a comment. I lived through the Black revolution without actually being mature enough to paticipate in it. I read a lot of Black works and I read a lot of the discussion of that period. What I hear now, today, seems to be essentially reiteration of those same principles, without anything new. What about a new kind of person who is emerging, the kind of writer who would "hate" those Blacks and whites there now? Just be bored? A writer who had sought elsewhere?

GAUFF: That's not new. It's also not progressive.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I really think it is progressive and I really think it's new. All right, I've begun to speak Spanish now. I want a different point of view. I want a different cultural outlook, and I find it in another language. I want to find a writer who has a different point of view.

TAYLOR: I find the question stimulating. The way the human mind, creativity, works, it is very

difficult to say that any kind of writing is not going to be valuable. I can't say that some of the writing you are experiencing may not be extremely valuable. Because it may open up all kinds of avenues that we don't even know about I can only encourage you to remain persistent in that direction. But there are other Black writers who pursue all kinds of avenues other than . . .

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I don't doubt it.

TAYLOR: Yes, who pursue all kinds of avenues other than the struggle of Blacks. But when you come back out of your closet where you write you are still a "nigger in the universe."

AUDIENCE MEMBER (2): . . . Why "Negro," not "Black?"

GAUFF: I refrained from changing Richard Wright's words. I was quoting him, and he was writing in 1937 so he used "Negro" and in each case I could have said "Black."

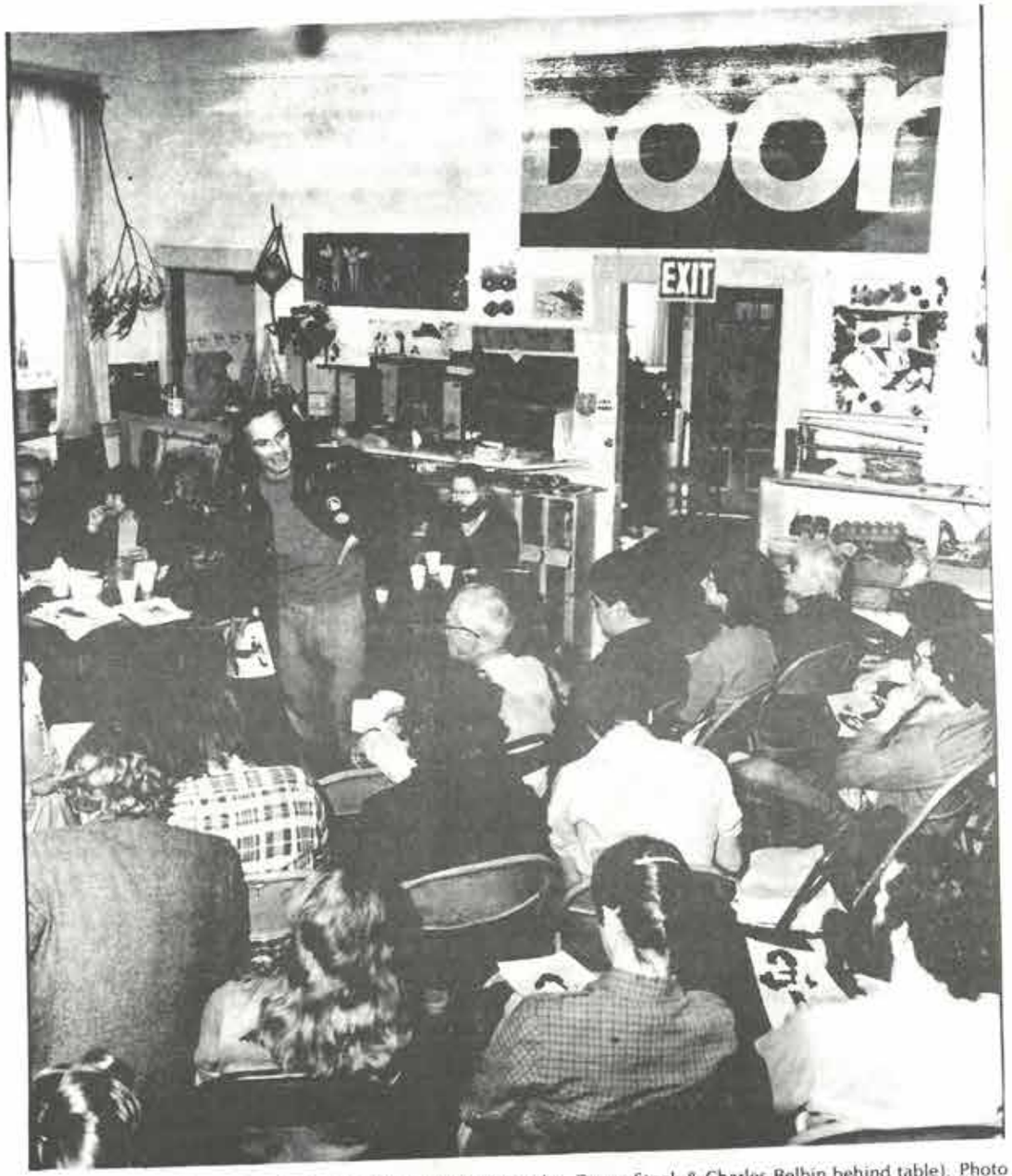
MAJOR: I think ultimately, probably, the term "Afro-American" is going to be it, because "Black" is a political term, not a descriptive one . . . I know quite a lot of people who do refer to anyone of African descent as African, whether (or not) they are African-American.

"Black" worked for a long time, but people are moving away from it because of the connotations of color as opposed to history. "Black" isn't a place and neither is "Negro," a place, which is what we always said about "Negro" . . . In the process of naming ourselves and dealing with history, you try things until they work. You don't know until they do or they don't.

AUDIENCE MEMBER (3): You skipped over publication discrimination. That's very serious. What's the solution?

HAYES: I skipped over it because I think it's a problem where we could go round and round practically indefinitely. But I think the ultimate solution is Black-sponsored publications and Black-sponsored distribution.

— transcribed and edited by C.T. Hall



Jack Hirshman addresses translation workshop (Stephen Kessler, Doren Stock & Charles Belbin behind table). Photo by Ed Kashi.

Translation As A Political Tool Against Poundism Workshop

Jack Hirschman, moderator, Russian, Spanish, French, Italian, etc.
Stephen Kessler, editor of *Alcatraz,* Spanish translator
Kosrof Chantikian, editor of *Kosmos,* Spanish translator
Michael Koch, Spanish translator
Charles Belbin, Chinese translator
Doreen Stock, Russian translator
Peter Kastmiler, Serbo-Croatian translator
Csaba Polony, editor of *Left Curve,* Greek translator

JACK HIRSCHMAN mentions selection of curreht international material at City Lights. "Let's take a certain tactic to stimulate collaboration." (Reads Roque Dalton translation from booket *Ars Poetica* in both languages, then reads Italian poem from booklet's last page.) "Dalton may mean 'you're made of love, or of art, or of guns.' Via Santo Cali I meant to say also 'you're made of the Communist party.' In other words, my intention was a political *tactic* in juxtaposing these poems as editor." (Jack Hirschman turns to other panelists for comments.)

MICHAEL KOCH: When I originally put this together (referring to a paper he had prepared for the occasion) I wanted to address or counterpoint the idea of poem as tool . . . I intuitively oppose the poem as subordinate to another project: it is *simultaneous* with any ideology. To be antifascist is part of the poet's situation, to oppose what circumscribes reality. I cannot conceive of a truly creative person not anti-fascist. A poem travels language to language & across time as common property, a portion of a greater text still to be elaborated, an "otherness" that fecundates the commonplace, a translation turns us toward the original and beyond; a process of both paraphrase & invention, it modifies the metabolism of imagination, the earth's intangible tilt. (Reads from paper.)

We live in an era of gold-standard moralities, sclerotic gods. Much of our creativity in thrall to commerce, careerism, decorative esoterica. Much "committed" art that is merely partisan or rhetorical or orthodox. And yet there are those who, in spite of and because of the acute pitfalls, via self-scrutiny and self-expression, become increasingly generous conduits for mystery and precision, who document with passionate empathy our common passage through a teetering civilization. Individuals who, by establishing their own uniqueness, remind us we are 4 billion uniquenesses and that there exists a communism unrelated to coercive state bureaucracies and official realities that reduce us to approximations of ourselves, a commune-ism that is a dynamic affinity between the living and the dead, the left hand and the right, the polemical and the detached. A community rooted in our common body, in the ambiguity and paradox of being human.

HIRSCHMAN: What about Pound, apotheosized within the bourgeois academic structure and part of any literary curriculum?

CHARLES BELBIN: Well, Pound started as a rebel against the literary establishment of his day. Though he was later co-opted and made into part of an academic orthodoxy that said: this is the *only* way you can write poetry, to the detriment of all other poetic traditions. (Belbin mentions that Ginsberg recalls approaching Pound as a Jew and Pound expressing regret for his fascism before lapsing into a prolonged silence.) The one thing *The Cantos* did was open the page to more than one language, one idiom. And Rexroth, who has a more profound and accurate grasp of Chinese culture than Pound.

KOSROF CHANTIKIAN: The point is, can you read a poem by someone who's not 'progressive'? The Nazis loved Mozart. But one can read Heidegger without necessarily condoning his flirtation with the Nazis.

HIRSCHMAN: But would you print his work?

CHANTIKIAN: I might if he's talking about Rilke and the concept of being, if he's discussing how society might be made more human by encouraging the reading of Rilke. I wouldn't, however, publish a racist poem. But you *can* read a poem by someone you don't like.

KOCH: (reading from paper) The Greek poet Yannis Ritsos, who has spent much of his adult life in jail, exile, or underground due to his revolutionary activity, asks, "could it be that which remains

wholly unexplained even for the creator him/herself is precisely that which belongs to poetry?

DOREEN STOCK: (reads first poem she ever translated) With respect to the poem as object, I'm reminded of a poem which jumped out at me, an Akhamatova poem of great simplicity. I was quite startled by the Stanley Kunitz rendering (of the word for "wife"), which altered the entire meaning of the poem. ("I love three things in the world. My wife, etc.") I began laboriously recreating many of the poems, hopefully restoring more of the simplicity of the original Russian. (Doreen asks who in the audience has translated and probably three-quarters of the room responds affirmatively.) Doreen mentions "perfectionism", how it can impede the process of "breaking the ice" of the poem which cannot be accomplished merely by linguistic and grammatical expertise. She quotes from the paper of Michael Koch: "Translation is a pledge of fidelity to what always more or less eludes us. Just as our lives need to be pledged to the creation of an elusive future whose existence is no less urgent for its reluctance to be born. A utopianism neither science nor sentiment but a point of congruence with the dangerous and lyric underworld of the child." (Doreen mentions a dream of skiing down an icy hill and having to pass through a lane of trees, then it was transformed into a back alley and it was tortuous but she was preceded by a little girl who maneuvered effortlessly through the barriers, reminding her to what little avail are adult wiles and experience compared to the child's pure instinctual capacities. She says that in translation technical skill is only a companion to what is really indispensable and essential. She cautions, however, that the translator does have a responsibility to the text and should always have a native speaker check it for confusions.

MILES STRYKER (a painter in the audience). Regarding nationalism, it seems that historical circumstances color the issue: nationalism at certain junctures may be a progressive force.

A CHILEAN WOMAN in attendance cites use of Neruda's poetry to buttress the spirit of resistance and survival among the beleagured people of Chile.

STEVE KESSLER suggests that Neruda's power always goes beyond any ideological trappings to strike at what is quintessentially human and thus universal. He is always grounded in the concrete and common, and his great genius is to make the world *accessible*.

HIRSCHMAN: And yet Neruda was a Stalinist as were most of his translators. I believe he was the most generous of the American poets: he has *named* more things of this earth and this life.

CHANTIKIAN: His poem against the United Fruit Company is terrible.

VOICES FROM THE AUDIENCE: No, it's a great poem.

HIRSCHMAN: It's a marvelous poem. What American poet almost seventy years old could write the poem he wrote against Nixon during the Vietnam War, against one of the most evil men of the twentieth century.

FRED PIETARINEN: I would be suspicious of any poet who made *no* comment on the world's political situation. One must be aware what price others may be paying so one can enjoy certain privileges.

UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: It's simply not true that one can't be a reactionary and write poetry.

VOICE WITH GERMAN ACCENT: The question is not *whom* to translate. It's *how*. Do you want to preserve the cultural uniqueness of the poem or do you want to make it understood in San Francisco? Somewhere the potato is common, elsewhere it may be a luxury.

STOCK: She talks about specific problems with a poem: translating puns. Doreen shows how she decided to render an alliterative Russian pun by an English phrase equally alliterative but lacking the double-entendre. Another decision was how to translate the end of a poem about a village terrorized by the Germans. The literal would be "HUN!/HUN!/HUN!" but the horror of the villagers is better conveyed by "HUN!/TERROR!/RUIN!" Doreen voices her general preference for the straightforward rather than the overly pyrotechnic.

Some discussion ensues about the importance of empathetic identification with the poet one is translating. Certain speakers stress the importance of ideological compatibility between the poet and his/her translator. Others emphasize that the "luminosity" of a literary work emanates precisely from those qualities which most transcend the political turmoil of the day. Kessler questions whether the division of poets into a crude system of "left" and "right" serves to elucidate anything really germane to the translator's art, mentioning, in particular, how ephemeral such labels are, how subject to the shifting exigencies of this or that partisan position. Fred Pietarinen mentions that the enduring figures of 20th century American literature are, in fact, not the apologists for the system like Whittier and Lowell but its critics, such as Melville and Whitman. Hirschman mentions a Lenin Prize winner published by the University of Ohio and that the only book of Yevtushenko not translated and published in English includes a poem for Ernest Hemingway. "Clearly there are political implications."

CHANTIKIAN: Jack, today in Moscow you can't buy a copy of Dostoevski.

HIRSCHMAN: No, Dostoevski is published every year in Russia.

CHILEAN WOMAN: Translation should be a tool of working class struggle and should also relate to the indigenous American peoples who have had their languages, cultures, and lands stolen.

CHANTIKIAN: Neruda wrote beautiful poems. Some were political, yes. But . . .

CHILEAN WOMAN: Neruda's work was political, including the earliest work like *20 Poems of Love*. He was a worker-writer, a symbol of all the best political aspirations of the Chilean people that's why the fascists prevented the people from assisting at his funeral.

KESSLER: People to the left of Neruda accused him of being bourgeois because he had his own villa and luxurious lifestyle.

FRANCISCO ALARCON: To the academic mentality, all political poetry is suspect, but the question is not politics, it is the scope and intelligence and compassion of the poem.

KESSLER: Like Yeats, he's really a local Irish poet, his fidelity to the land, the earth and stone, a reality beyond ideology . . . The first Neruda translation I read was this terribly stupid academic version by Ben Billit. Here's this great universal poet reduced to some standard academic mode . . .

BELBIN: Ideology does matter, because what the ideological bent of a Nazi means is "this is the way things are done by everyone, without exception . . ."

— transcribed and edited by Michael Koch