



Clive Matson

All Poetics Are Local: Louis Cuneo and the Berkeley Poetry Festival

For 16 years the Berkeley Festival has presented a vibrant spectrum of local poetry. As management changes, Louis Cuneo reveals how it was done.

“It’s a community-based effort, first and foremost,” says devoted poet and entrepreneur Louis Cuneo, founder of the Berkeley Poetry Festival. The event has been a visible and joyful gathering since its inception in 1998. But last year Cuneo delegated the organizing to two teachers at Berkeley City College, Sharon Coleman and M.K. Chavez. And, while in many ways the 2013 Festival continued the tradition successfully, to some poets it seemed to falter. Controversy brewed during the event and spawned a flurry of confusing and inflamed emails.

Known worldwide for its radical politics, Berkeley, California, is nonetheless something of a small town. This allows the issues to be plainly visible – issues that reflect what confronts the literary world at large, especially today, with the

economic slump having tightened and limited our venues. It seemed appropriate, since I'm outside the conflicting groups, for me to interview Cuneo and sort out what's going on.

Cuneo and I are standing on the busy Telegraph Avenue, a few blocks south of the University of California. I'm feeling him out about the Festival and, since I missed it last year, I don't have a lot to go on. Cuneo now sells postcards of iconic scenes around the Bay Area at a booth across from the former Cody's Books. And that's the back story to the problem: Cuneo wants out. His second occupation, photography, is consuming his attention and, after 42 years in the poetry world, he's ready to move on.

"Would you call the Festival democratic?" I'm curious whether Cuneo has an underlying philosophy. "Yes, in the spirit of Joe Flowers," he says, and the light in his eyes shows the question is in his wheelhouse. "Remember his list of open readings? On a single page?"

That page, handed out freely in the early 1970s, was the first contemporary indication of the vitality of Bay Area poetry. Poets knew that others worked in the medium, of course, but locating readings, and finding the poets themselves, was a haphazard venture. Joe's listing revealed the substrate of poetic activity. Cuneo was captivated, and this propelled him into a variety of projects, first with his organization "Mother's Hen" and the "Touch of a Poet" reading series, which he later transformed into the Berkeley Poetry Festival. In 2004 the centerpiece to the event became the "Fred Cody Lifetime Achievement Award," given annually. This prize, through Cuneo's promoting, became sponsored by Councilman Kriss Worthington and the City of Berkeley.

The friendly atmosphere of the Festival was underlined by last year's awardee, the late Mary Rudge, who said, "Where else can we be with our long-time, forever poet friends?" She noted that there's no competition, and the books on tables in the auditorium showed a remarkable range. "The entire spectrum, academic poets to self-proclaimed poets to street poets, is represented." This feel-good ambience was a happy result of Coleman's and

Cuneo's efforts, but in other ways last year's Festival didn't quite measure up. Many devotees did not attend, recognizing that the readers were mostly teachers at Berkeley City College and Mills College, not the accustomed spread of local poets. And most previous awardees were not on the roster.

When, in the past, previous awardees read, this gave the Festival a special flavor. There were, of course, congratulations all around, as one would expect. And the result was a palpable sense of continuity, that poets are not only present in our town, but that we've been here for a while. At the pinnacle of the Festival is a speech by Worthington and the keynote reading by the current awardee, and spaced around this is a carefully organized reading. Along with prominent local poets, in the past the earlier awardees presented their latest work, too, showing off what they've done since their recognition. You might think this isn't special, but in the odd world of poetry, it's very special. Unless you're a star, you don't get what the Festival offers anywhere, or certainly not often. It's a public forum, and it's visible.

The awardees are not being honored for the quality of their poetry, however. Rudge was spot-on in acknowledging that the Festival is not a competition and spot-on in relishing the feeling. It's rare. "This has nothing to do with your poems," Cuneo said, holding my eye when I received the Award in 2012. "It's recognition for your contribution to the community." Every candidate heard the same speech. Nonetheless, each awardee had a platform on which to perform one's recent work. The reading in 2012 was spectacular, and one poet said it was the best reading she'd been to in several years. I concur, for I heard superb work by poets I knew well and by many I knew only slightly. I would say the same of previous readings I attended, too, the 2004 reading at Civic Center Park and even the one in 2010 in front of Cody's Books.

Louis Cuneo could feel the heartbeat of poetry in our community. Exactly what the virtues of the Festival were, and how they can be repeated and developed, is the question here. It would be unreasonable to assess last year's event without articulating Cuneo's legacy. It doesn't help, though,

that Cuneo didn't write down his vision, and he himself may not be fully cognizant of what he set up. The Festival is more a reflection of his temperament than of anything else.

Cuneo circulated throughout the poetry world and let his intuition inform his judgment. While academic poets were represented at the Festivals, they were rarely featured. This probably isn't a bias of Cuneo's, for many of the performers hold advanced degrees and work in academia. But academics themselves didn't often register on Cuneo's radar. The pulse he feels has something to do with a questing, authentic energy, as if poetry matters. Such searching is present in academic writing, of course. But it's often obscured by cleverness, or highlighted intelligence, or meditative acuity, or adroitness with language, or the intent to create a rewarding puzzle. I think Cuneo warmed to poetry that displays its questing nature with less overlay.

Not that Cuneo was against cleverness. The late H.D. Moe, considered for a posthumous Award, wrote vast, energetic streams of apparently unrelated words which, on first hearing, seem clever in the extreme, even beyond comprehension. But Moe's work gravitates toward a personal grail. This isn't easily perceived and Jack Foley, the Award winner for 2010, displayed the awareness that made him a candidate when he identified Moe's legitimacy. Foley referred to Thomas Wolfe in *The Web & the Rock*, "...some hundred thousand magic words that were as great as all my hunger, and hurl the sum of all my living out upon three hundred pages—then death could take my life, for I had lived it ere he took it: I had slain hunger, beaten death!" The quote shows Foley's contribution to the community. He sees what traditions work through our writing, even when poets themselves don't know what those traditions are.

Cuneo takes some pride in the Festival as "street-level poetry" and many see that as a virtue. The phrase, however, is a red herring in one regard: it doesn't add to our understanding of the Festival. You could submit Julia Vinograd, the "Bubble Lady" who won the first Award in 2004, as an example of street-level poetry, because many of her

subjects frequent Telegraph Avenue. But Vinograd, who holds an MFA from Iowa, is a shrewd observer of people and of human nature, and you'd be hard pressed to find her equal anywhere in literature today. Cuneo regards her contribution as significant because of her insight into our culture, and that the poems often take place on the street isn't a requirement. It's happenstance.

In an earlier period, when there were Beats and squares and very few others, the distinctions were stark. Today, formulating the legacy of the Festival is made difficult by the blurring of those boundaries. That becomes obvious when Professor Robert Hass, who has contributed much with attention to the environment, especially through the "Watershed" event every fall, identifies what we're about. "I believe," Hass asserted at Columbia University in 1988, "that poetry is at the very core of the culture."

Charles and Gail Entrekin expand this in the mission of Hip Pocket Press: "...arts are the embodiment of the soul of a culture,... Poets...give us a clearer understanding of ourselves and of the culture which defines us." Cuneo would agree. Both quotes fit Cuneo's unarticulated vision and, in addition, they're parallel to Shelley's "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Shelley even presumes that poets shape the culture.

How we're shaping the culture, though, might be mysterious. In Berkeley one expects a spread of endeavors, since the town is a platform for our searching nature, and the greater East Bay adds diverse cultures to the mix. We anticipate esthetics that are as various and as radical as Berkeley's politics. Try, for one, the intersection of religion, politics, and sexuality as a foundation for poetry. The need to discover and express who we are is a major impulse running through our culture, and poetry enhances this journey more generously and more precisely than any other art.

Cody's Books at Haste and Telegraph was for a long time a loose center for this activity, along with *Poetry Flash*, the one-page listing that was picked up by several people and eventually Joyce Jenkins, the Award winner for 2009, teamed up with Richard Silberg and expanded it into a twelve- to twenty-

four-page print journal. Essays on esthetics were featured and it became a forum for poetic efforts of all kinds, Language poetry and Black poetry and feminist poetry and Beat poetry and mainstream poetry. Every few months stacks of *Poetry Flash* appeared at coffeehouses and bookstores, from downtown Albany to Gaylord's on Piedmont Avenue and east, across the Bay and into Marin and Sonoma Counties, all the way up to Portland and Seattle and down to L.A. The list of readings was complete. The Salamander of the 1970s and Cafe Babar in San Francisco in the 1980s, the Coffee Mill on Grand Avenue in the 1990s and Mother's Hen in the Pacific Film Archives building on Durant Street, Priya on San Pablo Avenue and currently the SLAM at the Starry Plough on Shattuck. Even a sketchy outline threatens to overwhelm this essay. The *Flash* currently sponsors readings in various bookstores, including Pegasus, Diesel Books, and Mrs. Dalloways. Lately, though, *Poetry Flash* has gone on-line and, while that makes it financially viable, it's no longer visible in the stores and in the cafes. With the demise of Cody's Books, more and more falls on the shoulders of the Festival. Today it seems the only prominent, public venue for local poetry.

Cuneo built the foundation of the Berkeley Poetry Festival by showing up at a wide variety of readings. His close-cropped hair and slightly splayed eye gave him a startling appearance. What was important, though, was his level of involvement. He always talked about the Festival and this advanced its publicity, but he wasn't at events just to drop off flyers. He listened. He talked to people. He partook of whatever esthetic was offered. He was receptive, and this gave him the ability to notice where creative energy flourishes. It may be that no one could expect to equal what Louis accomplished. Follow him around for a month at a time over several years and we could get a fair idea of how he did it. But we no longer have that chance.

Perhaps a team could do as well as he did. Coleman and Chavez are reasonable candidates, because of their connection with Berkeley City College and especially because of Coleman's

popular poetry class. But the job, as they no doubt discovered, is more complex than it appears. First, new organizers need liaisons with several others who have a broad awareness, like Cuneo's, and who circulate widely through poetry circles. That's key, since the heartbeat of creativity is evolving and needs an open mind to be accurately observed -- or even to be found. Second, publicity, if not distributed by hand as Cuneo did, must be ubiquitous, in order to reach the eddies and tributaries of the poetry world. Third, by way of maintaining the connection with our history, feature the previous Lifetime Achievement Award winners. Fourth, and most important, is to continue Cuneo's democratic vision.

It would be natural to make over the Festival to suit one's personal aesthetics. This, after all, is what Cuneo did, from the beginning. Or new management could invite stars, put the Festival on the map of the elite poetry world, and present it as a rung on the ladder toward national recognition. By the same token it would be expedient to give Cuneo a Lifetime Achievement Award, honoring the sentiment of those who want to keep the tradition of earlier Festivals. Or the Award could, on the other hand, be an affirmation that Cuneo's mission will be followed vigorously.

Coleman and Chavez have come on board with a strong statement that the Festival should be even more diverse. "It's a question of developing a truly multicultural social fabric," Coleman wrote me, after an interview. "I see our country struggling with a culture-social backslide, and have consistently worked against that by promoting diverse voices." She wants more diversity of all kinds: ethnic, age, and sexual orientation. She also indicated that she won't achieve this by cutting into what Cuneo has built, but instead by adding to his foundation.

What does adding to Cuneo's legacy entail? His vision asks to be expanded and reformulated continually, in order to keep pace with what's happening. That means an ongoing exploration. One might begin by talking with others who are active in the poetry world: Jeanne Lupton and Richard Loranger and Adam David Miller and John Oliver

Simon come to mind, as does Rossmore's Marc Hofstadter. But a productive list would be exponentially larger. And the allure of poetry brings in new people and spawns new venues constantly. There are circles upon circles in the community, and they are expanding. There are various Latino circles, from Sara Campos and Irma Herrera to KPFA's Avotcja Jiltonilro; many Asian communities, some represented by Susan Ito; the Hip-Hop and Rap scenes, with Paradise and many others; Spoken Word and SLAM circles with Betsy and Lucky Seven. Each of these scenes, when I've dipped into them, contains vigorous, authentic, even explosive energy. And there must be student groups at the University.

That's the reality we expect the Festival to encompass. Somehow! Where else can this activity be given credit and, as Cuneo states it, "Put poetry before the public"? Last year's Festival, and most of the preceding ones, had a mechanism for including voluntary readers, so anyone can apply for the open reading. But the diverse communities won't appear unless delegates from the Festival reach out into their scenes and invite them. Or, at the very least, make them feel welcome. This Cuneo did. It's an unwritten and crucial strategy of his vision.

The entire poetry world could be expressing, with more or less success, the core of the culture. Betty Kulis puts it in an interesting way: "We are all poetry needing to be written." Poet Andrew Heath adds a metaphor: "We're building the roads," he said. "We've got our picks and shovels and we're leveling the ground. We're pouring the foundations. We're raising the studs." His implication is not that we're building something that will stand, but that our effort, properly, continues at ground level in perpetuity. "We're not up in some plush rooms, composing rhyme and meter." (Well, some of us are, but it's a strong point.) Barbara London contributes, "Oh my God, look at that! Poetry is nipping at my heels."

These quotes evidence the life and vigor of poetry. Dana Gioia created a stir in 1992 with his essay, "Can Poetry Matter?" and this was followed a number of years later by Robert Pinsky, our national Poet Laureate at the time, making a valiant

effort to set up venues across the country where people read their favorite poems. That these rarely became annual events shows the difficulty of bringing poetry into the foreground. And this underscores the importance of the Berkeley Poetry Festival.

In 2010 the Festival took place on the sidewalk plaza at the former Cody's Books, next to where Louis Cuneo and I are standing. "Did you approve," I ask, "of moving to Berkeley City College?" Cuneo answers in the affirmative. He mentions that the auditorium is spacious, quiet, has good acoustics, and offers a state-of-the-art microphone. But there's a trade-off: people walking by on Telegraph Avenue were drawn to the performances and joined the audience, sometimes for a few minutes, sometimes for the remainder of the Festival. It could be that, now, only those already aware of the Festival will attend.

That trade-off may be larger than it seems. Cuneo moved the Festival from venue to venue, from year to year, as a deliberate ploy. He wanted to catch the town by surprise. It's as if the Festival says, "Stay on your toes! Poetry is all around. Poetry appears where you least expect it." The Festival will lose that surprise by staying at City College, but with foresight it will keep presenting poetry of the vigorous sort that Cuneo admires. He doesn't put refined or highly organized work at the top. His preference, instead, is work that's deeply felt, authentic, and expresses directly the powerful, ongoing impulse to write and to explore.

Cuneo answers Gioia's question, "Can Poetry Matter?" with "Yes" and the Festival augments that with a demonstration of how poetry does matter. Poetry has a life-like force. Berkeley should be proud of its Festival, perhaps unique among all the gatherings in the country, for it aspires to stay close to poetry's heartbeat.

Clive Matson (MFA Columbia University) was drafted as *Chalcedony's* (kal-Said-'n-ease) astonished scribe in 2004. His early teachers were Beats in New York City, and, amazingly, his

seventh book was placed in John Wieners' coffin. He became immersed in the stream of passionate intensity that runs through us all and has finally stopped trying to go anywhere else. He writes from the itch in his body, to the delight of his students, and that's old hat, according to *Let the Crazy Child Write!* (1998), the text he uses to make his living, teaching creative writing. His essays have appeared in a variety of journals, including *Poets & Writers*. He enjoys playing basketball, table tennis, and collecting minerals in the field. He lives in Oakland, California, where he helps bring up his teenage son, Ezra. The City of Berkeley awarded Clive a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012. Visit Clive at www.matsonpoet.com.