

# New York City Poetics and the Idea of the Mimeograph Revolution

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## New York City Poetics and the Idea of the Mimeograph Revolution:

### Reflections on Teaching

Rona Cran

The mimeograph revolution arrives just after the half-way point of my ten-week advanced undergraduate course entitled “‘multiple voices’: New York City Poetics 1960-1985,” which I teach at the University of Birmingham. This is a module about the poetry that accompanied New York through the second half of the twentieth century. It is about how poetry is made and how it is disseminated and who reads it and what it says. It’s about how canons are formed, and what gets left out. It’s about place, and space, and time—*where* poets are, as well as *when* poets are. It is interested in poetry—but it is also interested in urban studies, material and visual cultures, the history of New York, queer studies, gender studies, critical race theory, ecocriticism, cultural studies, and more. This essay is a reflection on where the mimeograph revolution sits in relation to all that, and what I learned by including it on the course.

The course takes its title from Anne Waldman’s long poem *Gossamurmur*, published in 2013. The poem is an activist’s call to the transformative power of poetry and the necessity to preserve it and keep it alive in what she calls “the Archive of the multiple voices.”<sup>1</sup> In doing so—in preserving what are essentially counter-discourses, narratives, and evidence of those narratives, that push back from the margins against the mainstream—she wants “to preserve breath and intellect...to let humans of the future know that some of us were not just killing each other.”<sup>2</sup> Waldman’s “Archive of the multiple voices” is simultaneously “shelter” and “a consciousness” that “tells many stories,” that invites us to meditate on the everyday social constructs and identities we so often take for granted—but it is also, to quote the poem, “endangered.” My hope is that the course aligns with these ideas: it comprises written and oral poetry that is sometimes canonical but primarily non-canonical, that is sometimes out of print, transient, and marginal; poetry that calls attention to the everyday, tells many stories, and invites us to scrutinize language and approach the viewpoints of others.

The course also takes its title from bell hooks, who reflects in her essay “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” on working “to change the way I speak and write, to incorporate in the manner of telling a sense of place, of not just who I am in the present but where I am coming from, the multiple voices within me.”<sup>3</sup> “We are wedded in language, have our being in words,” hooks writes, and yet “language is also a place of struggle.” I ask my

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Waldman, *Gossamurmur* (New York: Penguin, 2013), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, No. 36 (1989), pp. 15-23, p. 16.

students to think about the course in this context too—as being about poetry that embodies the struggle to come to voice, to articulate those multiple voices in, to quote hooks, “a language that will not bind you, fence you in, or hold you”—a language that recovers, reconciles, reunites, and renews—a language that is “an action, a resistance.”<sup>4</sup>

These two iterations of the idea of “multiple voices” are our point of departure: the idea of “multiple voices” speaking within a particular set of contexts in order to tell, and preserve, many different stories. By the time the students encounter the mimeograph revolution, they have also encountered New York—the course has brought them closer to the city by asking them to think about spaces and places, orientations and geographies, the internal and the external, from the streets and avenues to the movies and galleries, apartments to the Cedar Tavern, the Staten Island Ferry to the Grand Central Shuttle. We have begun to examine the relationship between poetry and the city, asking what we learn about New York by paying attention to its poetry (and, also, what we don’t learn).

The week they spend studying the mimeograph revolution is designed to introduce them to ideas and narratives about

- publishing;
- canon-formation, subcultures, counter-cans, and transmitting alternative ways of making literature and art;
- the ways in which the anti-establishment is inevitably enmeshed with various institutions including universities, the church, and the government;
- the physical, intellectual, and affective labor involved in how poetry gets disseminated and read (and how it stays read, or stops being read);
- the kinds of communities that create or are created by mimeograph publishing;
- audiences, readerships, and access;
- the intermedial, material, and visual significance of the mimeos and other small press or one-off magazines.

This is a research-led week. Rather than setting specific poems to read, as I usually do, I instead ask them to carry out their own research. For some of these students, such work is relatively familiar: at Birmingham we are well-served in terms of modernist magazines by the [Cadbury Research Library](#), and my modernist colleagues build the materials held there into their teaching. But for others, this is a totally new field of study; and being located in Birmingham, in the UK, and having just a week to spend on this topic, such research is inevitably predicated on access to digitized materials, broader questions about access, and the exploration of the *idea* of the mimeograph revolution as well as or even instead of its particular publications and their contents.

I recommend certain key points of departure, including:

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

- Rodney Phillips and Steve Clay’s rich, encyclopaedic [“from a secret location”](#) website (the legacy of a book of the same title published by the New York Public Library and Granary Books; itself the legacy of a 1998 NYPL exhibition);
- <http://mimeomimeo.blogspot.com/> (“artists” books, typography & the mimeo revolution’);
- Reality Studio’s [“bibliographic bunker,”](#) which includes archives of *The Floating Bear*, *Yugen*, and *Fuck You/ a magazine of the arts*, available for download;
- [Independent Voices](#) (an open-access digital archive containing over 15,000 issues of alternative press newspapers, magazines, and journals, including an notable inventory of magazines relating to New York City poetry);
- Emory University’s Digital Danowski project [“Networking the New American Poetry”](#) (which uses data from a dozen mid-century poetry journals to visualize and debate the schools of poetry established by Donald Allen’s anthology *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*);
- Nick Sturm’s wonderful blog, [Crystal Set](#), for his reflections on mimeo sources, scholarship, and pedagogy.

I also ask the students to read two pieces of scholarship, one a reflection by Lorenzo Thomas on *Umbra* and the Black Arts Movement, published in *Callaloo* in 1978 (“The Shadow World: New York’s *Umbra* Workshop & Origins of the Black Arts Movement”), and one a recent article by me, called “Space Occupied: Women-Poet Editors and the Mimeograph Revolution in Mid-Century New York City” (*Journal of American Studies*, 2020).<sup>5</sup> I set these two articles partly in order to foreground the intersections of race and gender in the context of the mimeograph revolution and partly in order to model different kinds of approaches to our research and discussions during the week.

I ask the students to be ready to answer three questions in response to their research: Which magazines did you research? What did you learn or notice about them? What’s your take/angle of thought? Their responses in the two years I have taught this course took shape across three formats: in seminar conversations (three separate groups), in an online discussion thread, and in essays submitted at the end of the course. The rest of this essay presents my students’ findings and our consequent discussions.

Popular choices for research were *Umbra*, *0-9*, *C: A Journal of Poetry*, *Angel Hair*, *Fuck You/ a magazine of the arts*, *Yugen*, *The Genre of Silence*, *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, and *The Floating Bear*. Some students spent time reading the magazines themselves, where they were available, and reflected thoughtfully on the ways in which the content had enabled them to better understand “the working and personal relationships between many of the poets we have explored” and had further helped them to think through “the interconnectedness of mid-century New York poets.” Such reading led to new

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<sup>5</sup> Lorenzo Thomas, “The Shadow World: New York’s *Umbra* Workshop and the Origins of the Black Arts Movement,” *Callaloo*, Oct. 1978, No. 4, 53-72; Rona Cran, “Space Occupied: Women Poet-Editors and the Mimeograph Revolution in Mid-century New York City” *Journal of American Studies*, 55.2 (2020), 474-501. doi:10.1017/S0021875820001073.

encounters with work by poets whose names and poems were already familiar (LeRoi Jones, Diane di Prima, Joe Brainard, Frank O'Hara, Lorenzo Thomas). A particular favourite was the discovery of Joe Brainard's recipe for mashed potatoes ("everyone raves about them") in *Poet's Home Companion* (the PDF of which was generously shared with me by Nick Sturm), by a student who had previously highlighted Brainard's line "I remember not liking mashed potatoes if there was a single lump in them" as one of her favourites in *I Remember*.<sup>6</sup> Such reading also led to encounters with poets the students met in the pages of the mimeos for the first time (Joe Ceravolo, Ree Dragonette, Tom Dent, David Henderson, Tuli Kupferberg, César Vallejo, Ruth Krauss), and the students talked about the ways in which they realized that names make people visible. It also led them to resituate within this new milieu authors such as William S. Burroughs, Tristan Tzara, Jack Kerouac, Bob Kaufman, and Hubert Selby, Jr. with whom they were familiar from other contexts. One student was particularly struck by Ed Sanders sending the first issue of *Fuck You* to all of his "heroes around the world, from Charles Olson to T.S. Eliot to Marianne Moore, from Castro to Samuel Beckett, from Picasso to Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg,"<sup>7</sup> noting that the interdisciplinarity suggested by this list indicated that Sanders was making a claim for the global political, artistic, and literary validity of his magazine, and that for her this also highlighted Sanders's "personal and proud engagement with the work produced that I had not really associated with editing."

Reading the mimeos' content also led to reflections on the ways in which they enacted various forms of resistance to aspects of mid-century US culture (including to the mimeos themselves). One student read in the work published in *Fuck You* a resistance to mainstream religious values performed through language. In their essay, they argued that the poetry included in *Fuck You* "relocates religious language" into a realm of "erotic worship" which is emphatically prioritised over "God-worship." Another student found an interchange between Eileen Myles and Bernadette Mayer in *The Poetry Project Newsletter* in 1982 that seemed to illuminate the perceived pros and cons of the mimeo format itself. As this student explained, Myles asks: "Won't people take your poems more seriously in a great typeface with a far-out cover, expensive, and in colour," concluding: "I want to go on record—Mimeo—I don't like it. All books should be bright & shiny and look like books."<sup>8</sup> Mayer offers a rebuttal in the next issue, defining mimeo as a "momentary and urgent dissemination of poetry, which is also full of pleasure...a kind of cupbearing for the knowledge and pleasure of poetry."<sup>9</sup> As we discussed, these arguments raise key questions about ideas of "seriousness" and how poets get "taken seriously" (or don't), and what the expectations around this are. Myles gestures toward aspects of mainstream publishing that are enmeshed with capital and consumption—the art object as marketable, attractive, and likely to sell well. And this relates, the students discussed, to the idea of the author as extra-temporal genius, someone whose work will be read (in book form) for decades to come, the author as commodity in turn reaping the profits

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<sup>6</sup> Joe Brainard, "Mashed Potatoes," in *Poets Home Companion*, ed. Carol Gallup (1969), n.p.; Joe Brainard, *I Remember* (New York: Granary Books, 2001), p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> Ed Sanders, Woodstock, New York, October 1997; cited at <https://fromasecretlocation.com/fuck-you-a-magazine-of-the-arts/>. [Accessed November 30<sup>th</sup> 2021].

<sup>8</sup> Eileen Myles, "Mimeo Opus," *The Poetry Project Newsletter* 89 (March 1982), pp. 8-11.

<sup>9</sup> Bernadette Mayer, "Mimeo Argument," *The Poetry Project Newsletter* 90 (April 1982), p. 7.

(intellectual, monetary). We also noted our suspicion that Myles is being deliberately provocative here. Mayer, as the student observed, places an emphasis on a kind of writing that is “valueless”—that exists in the moment, is urgent and pleasurable, that may not last but that will be replaced (repeatedly) by other urgent, momentary, pleasurable writings.

The students also thought critically about these texts as objects, exemplars of a particular kind of material culture. In their discussion of the materiality of the mimeos, several articulated their interests in the magazines’ covers, including Andy Warhol’s photographic silkscreen cover of *C* (“like a photo accidentally taken on a disposable...doubled and overlapped”), the first issue of *Fuck You* (“has a candid and hand-drawn aesthetic...two pencilled images, an Egyptian eye and a lake, which taken at surface value look like two scribbles one might make in a notebook during a boring meeting”), and the cover of *The Floating Bear* no. 30 (November 1964), featuring artwork by di Prima’s young daughter Jeanne. Such cover images prompted questions about DIY as both concept and practice—we wondered about the extent to which it is the same as mimeo culture, with one student productively gesturing to Janice Radway’s work to argue that like zines, the mimeos are “complex aesthetic performances that defy and disorient those who would try and make sense of them in conventional ways.”<sup>10</sup> This led us to think too about authenticity in the context of DIY culture: the students wondered about the performance of a DIY aesthetic and the importance of emphasising process and experimentation over “perfect, meticulous products.” If error and accident are seen as traces of intellectual or artistic development, rather than as something to throw away or be otherwise ashamed of, they wondered if this might lead to a tension between supposedly “authentic” DIY culture, and the DIY as something performed, that does in fact have a very genuine interest in what the final product looks like. Di Prima’s daughter’s drawing proved a particularly generative talking point. Students read it as emblematic of the mimeograph revolution’s dismantling of the notion of “high art,” a version of what Thomas calls “non-literary” literary production. But they also identified it as deconstructing both “ideas of 1960s suburban idyllic motherhood” and literary tradition (a male succession of literary “geniuses”), a gesture aimed at creating a “new countercultural family” in which the next (female) generation is “given a presence within the magazine’s pages.”

Many students took a conceptual approach to the week’s research, embracing the difficulty of the task at hand in terms of actually accessing what was published in these magazines. Instead, they focused on the mimeograph revolution as an *idea* which, they came to understand as they read *about* the mimeos rather than primarily *reading* them, enabled them to ask provocative questions about a range of thematic concerns relevant to our course.

Their research, they told me, had illuminated their awareness of the sometimes-liberating, sometimes-limiting intersections of gender, race, and labour in relation to literary canons and cultural production: they reflected on the ways in which “the common search for identity can be at once inclusive and exclusionary,” on how the promises of community and

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<sup>10</sup> Janice Radway, “Zines, Half-lives, and Afterlives: On the Temporalities of Social and Political Change,” *PMLA*, vol. 126, No. 1 (January 2011), 140-150, 148.

collaboration were at once real and illusory, and on the work that goes into “claiming space” through creating networks. They were particularly energised by the ways in which the labour required to edit and produce little magazines seemed to fall disproportionately to women, and intrigued by the sometimes detrimental, sometimes beneficial effects of this on women’s lives as writers. They were also struck by Thomas’s discussion of *Umbra*’s “strong commitment to ‘non-literary’ culture,” by its “affinity for non-Western approaches and ideas,” and by his assertion that the Black Arts Movement, which had its roots in the Umbra Workshop, recognised that “artists are ‘of the people’ themselves, not a rare breed.”<sup>11</sup> Such conversations further led to considerations of the mimeos and New York City in relation to capitalism, Cuba, the Cold War, decolonization in Africa, the Vietnamese war, second-wave feminism, and Black Power, and to a discussion about the use of the term “revolution” in these contexts.

New York was found to be a crucible for experimentalism, accessibility, forms of resistance, and, as one student astutely put it, “the opportunity to write strangely.” But they argued too that it was also a catalyst for these things—a space in which a revolution might be brewed, a different future imagined, but a space, too, in which a revolution, a different kind of future, was also *needed*. My students understood New York as a space to be particularly apposite in terms of creating allegiances and articulating strategies for different kinds of literary and artistic production. They imagined walking past the now-demolished Peace Eye bookstore and picking up a copy of *Fuck You*, talking about the ways in which our physical presence in a given space enables access, per Sara Ahmed, to the objects that might serve to reorient us.<sup>12</sup> But they also wondered how they would get themselves on di Prima’s *Floating Bear* mailing list if they wanted to read it but didn’t know her or anyone in it personally, and posited that the mimeograph revolution replicated some aspects of the cultural gatekeeping associated with the big house publishers, despite the intentions of its editors. Others expressed interest in the mimeograph revolution beyond New York. One student read and recommended Laetitia Zecchini’s 2020 article “‘What Filters Through the Curtain’: Reconsidering Indian Modernisms, Travelling Literatures, and Little Magazines in a Cold War Context.”<sup>13</sup> Another researched *El Corno Empulmado*, the Mexico City-based 31-issue magazine edited by Sergio Mondragon and Margaret Randall. “In combining American and Mexican culture, Randall and Mondragon simultaneously exposed both sides of the border to poetry that was previously barricaded by language,” the student wrote, suggesting that “this reconfiguration of poetry by a female translator represents a method of rewriting the machismo narrative around the creation/production of poetry to allow women to occupy a space that was once closed off from them.”

In our seminars we also discussed the implications of communality on individuals, thinking about how personal ideas and group behaviours are related; we liked the idea of

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas, p. 54, p. 58, p. 70.

<sup>12</sup> See Sara Ahmed, “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 12.4 (2006), 543-74.

<sup>13</sup> Laetitia Zecchini, “‘What Filters Through the Curtain’: Reconsidering Indian Modernisms, Travelling Literatures, and Little Magazines in a Cold War Context,” *Interventions*, 22:2 (2020), 172-194: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369801X.2019.1649183>.

artists helping each other, but we wondered about tensions arising, even between friends, and how these might have been navigated. We explored the notion of the mimeos as a kind of echo chamber (even, in one student’s view, as somewhat “cult-like”) and the complexity of what seemed to emerge as a binary: support and nurture from a close-knit group of friends and peers versus fame and fortune achieved through going it alone. And we wondered what had been lost, for us, in reading the mimeos online, imagining holding them in our hands instead, lifting them off our bookshelves, passing them around the room. Their affective materiality was somehow missed, or yearned for, in my students’ discussions of the sensuous, raw dimensions and physical processes of this kind of literary production, described in their reading of interviews with editors including Maureen Owen, Hettie Jones, and Bernadette Mayer as predicated on touching, feeling, carrying, feeling tired, feeling energized, having poems embossed on brains after typing them up all evening. This led us to think about the limitations of mimeo in terms of reach and readership, format, and what you can reproduce on paper, and to ask about their bibliographic treatment: why have some mimeos been digitized and studied, whilst others, even if preserved in archives, have been overlooked as “unstudyable”? We talked, in relation to this, about the value of ephemerality and transience, and conversely, about the subsequent fetishization of the mimeos by scholars and collectors: about Carol Gallup emphasizing that *The Poet’s Home Companion*—printed in a run of just 100 copies—“will never appear again,” about how such copies might now fetch hundreds of pounds at auction, about the seductiveness of a text that has passed through the hands of our poetic heroes (we all loved seeing Patricia Spears Jones holding up copies of Maureen Owen’s *Telephone* and her own one-run mimeo *WB* at a recent poetry reading<sup>14</sup>), about the meaning of the process transcending, gloriously, that of the product, and about how, as one student put it, “the fact that the mimeograph revolution *happened* matters more than any physical texts it produced.”

I ended our seminars by asking the students to write a sentence on the aspects of our discussion that they had found most interesting. Here are some of their reflections:

- “I found it interesting how this technology allowed authentic Black literature to become a reality because it was so independent”;
- “The tension between the New York poets wanting to subvert the mainstream whilst also being recognised by it. Also the legacy of their subversion now that many of the poets have now been canonised”;
- “I thought about the link between the mimeograph revolution and zines, and how pivotal this revolution has been on how poets work and operate and share their work today”;
- “I found the idea of how the magazines themselves and the process of making the magazines is like a performance. I haven’t really thought about performance of poetry being anything other than it being spoken out loud so it is a really interesting contrast”;

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<sup>14</sup> Network for New York School Studies Inaugural Poetry Reading, 9<sup>th</sup> October 2021: <https://www.nnyss.org/media.html> [Accessed 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021].



- “I like the form of the mimeograph: the fact that there are limited copies and therefore the art will not reach a mass audience except through word of mouth. It creates a sense of the unknown to the extent of its movement and reception”;
- “tension between the mainstream and the margin. And what it means to be on the margin of the margins”;
- “Whilst the way in which poetry and language is spread has changed from the time of the mimeograph, the idea of sharing with others work you have created is still prevalent, and I found it really interesting to trace the roots in mimeographing into the 21st century.”

The mimeos may be, as Michael Leong writes, “an underrecognized corpus,”<sup>15</sup> whose many archives are scattered and, in the main, inaccessible to my students as well as to me, but it is nonetheless possible to teach and to learn from them: as a concept, an idea, it proved generative and illuminating. For me, as for the students, the discussions we had about the mimeograph revolution enriched and illuminated our thinking about both New York City poetry and poetry more widely, in terms particularly of how canons are shaped and formed and how we come to encounter the particular literatures that we encounter in education and our wider lives, what it means to occupy space on or in the margins, and, above all, what multiple voices look like and sound like and feel like in the pages of little magazines.

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Leong, “Teaching the Little Magazine,” *Among the Neighbors* 10 (2019), pp. 1-31, p. 24.