

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Mall Poetry

Robert Wood · Wednesday, September 23rd, 2015

A certain class of American spends part of the summer in Paris drinking café au lait and visiting Shakespeare and Co. Another will venture upstate or to the coast, maybe the Cape, or set off to the country. Still others yet go to Washington DC, which is where I found myself earlier this year. It was as much to catch up with friends as it was to visit monuments, galleries, museums, parks and public spaces. I was both a visitor and a tourist.

In DC there were tourists a plenty. They came in all sizes and shapes and from all over. Plastic sandals and denim shorts, sports shirts and sports caps, linen blazers and white pants, pearls and pastels, bumbags and backpacks. As many readers will be aware DC's main tourist area is the Mall.

The Mall is home to the Air and Space Museum, the National Gallery of Art, the Museum of the American Indian amongst other monuments and museums. It runs from the Lincoln Memorial in the West to the Capital in the East. A museum about the African American experience is under construction.

The question I asked myself as I walked around the area was: Should poetry have a place on the Mall? This is not to discount the Library of Congress or the National Archives. It is though to ask the question: can poetry be housed in a monument of national significance in such a way that recognises the richness of history and promotes the art as it lives right now?

To be certain there are other ways that poetry is remembered and enlivened in the daily life, and this goes not only for the United States, but various other places as well. In Central Park in New York there is recognition of Robbie Burns; in London there is Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey; all over the Middle East there are statues recognising great poets of the past; and in Australia there are parks named for various people.

But what though would a monument that is national look like now, especially when the nation as a category of inquiry is being thoroughly critiqued by transnational scholars?

In other words, what might a national poetry house look like and do? The closest corollary might be the Poetry Foundation here in America, Australian Poetry in Australia or the Poetry Society in the UK. From these organisations, and drawing on various other groups, we could construct some sort of ideal about what a national meeting place for poets would look like.

A poetry museum could advocate for an increased public presence of poetry, provide a permanent

meeting place for readings, performance, meeting and research, and offer a repository and space for exhibitions. One could imagine, for example, displays of biographical information. We could read about Whitman's Civil War days. We could listen to recordings of Fred Moten. We could watch readings and lectures in a public space rather than in the privacy of our own studies and homes.

This is, of course, not to dismiss the role that national libraries and archival resources do. It is though to scale up what many universities currently participate in – namely creating a poetic community and culture and sustaining and nourishing the art.

That so many of the buildings and exhibitions on the Mall have a questionable politics and an outdated aesthetic suggests that a call for a new structure must be added to a request for a sizeable outlay and renovation of existing ones. The Air and Space Museum, though beloved, is in need of funding to make it more current. That the Museum of the American Indian stands head and shoulders above the rest is due in part to its contemporariness. In our mind's eye a new building would capture the zeitgeist and stand as a memorial to the past as well as the moment it is from.

A call for poetry on the Mall builds on work already done by organisations I have mentioned and would require co-ordination with countless estates and universities. But it is work that to my mind would encourage a flourishing of poetic culture in a way that excited the tourists of DC.

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