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Where We Need to Be: #90X90 and The Summer of 2014

Loretta McCormick · Wednesday, May 3rd, 2017

I learned about 90×90 at the 2014 Seattle AWP Conference. It was at a panel featuring editors from Kaya, Tia Chucha, Les Fignes, Siglio, and, of course, Writ Large Press. AWP, for the uninitiated, is a conference that happens once a year in which thousands of writers and publishers descend upon a city to talk about writing and publishing, sell books, drink, read, and do a lot of schmoozing. Even though I was working the *cream city review* book fair table and had been serving as the *ccr* fiction editor for about a year, at times I couldn't help feeling like I was wandering around the periphery of a private club I didn't belong to. But I also remember reading the description for that panel on LA publishing. "Think people in LA don't read? Wrong! Indie presses are not only flourishing in LA, they are working to create a vibrant literary metropolis from inside the sprawl...these presses are changing the culture of literary LA—and in the process, innovating new models for publishing." I thought, yes. This is where I need to be.

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What stood out to me the most about the conversation at the panel was the way the editors talked about community and about Los Angeles. They worried about how art and artists work within Los Angeles communities and how art can and should come from within those communities, rather than alienate or push people out. They were asking: Can we do that? How? Where are we failing? How can we do better? Somewhere in the conversation, Chiwan explained Writ Large's ambitious 90×90 project and I don't remember much that followed, other than my excitement. I also remember calling my partner, Carlos, later that day to tell him 90×90 is what I wanted to do over the summer and that his immediate response was, "Let's do it."

The year before, I had left my home and my family and moved from Los Angeles to Milwaukee to begin a PhD program in creative writing at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. My father was very ill, my sister was going through a difficult divorce, and Carlos had to stay in LA for work, taking on a lot more financial responsibility so I could pursue this selfish, preposterous, uncompromising goal. But it was also an exciting time—terrifying in the way that I imagine scuba diving or space travel might be. My peers at UWM were (are) so accomplished. They awed me, pushed me, inspired me. They still do. But even as I found my place in the program, I was traveling back and forth from Milwaukee to Los Angeles as often as I could, and I knew I would eventually be returning to LA when I finished my degree. So, when I told Carlos about 90×90 and we decided to "do it," I wasn't exactly sure what we had decided to do. I just knew it had something to do with the excitement I felt about the ambition and dedication the project would

require and that expansive idea of community we were all discussing during the panel.



The first 90×90 event we went to was pretty early on, June 29th. We took the expo line into downtown, to a restaurant with a spacious upstairs space and a French pastry case near the front entrance. The readings that night explored home as an ideological and physical space. Seriously. Home. We didn't choose that night over all the others because of the theme. We didn't have a plan when we headed to downtown that night, other than listening to some poetry and maybe talking to a few LA writers. But, while I was so happy to be home, that night became about asking myself what I could do to resist those who wish to act as gatekeepers of our homes and our narratives.

We also met Chiwan that night, discovered we had good friends in common, and that he and Judeth were about to begin the same long distance journey Carlos and I were on once Judeth started grad school in the fall.

We went back downtown three or four times a week to hear poetry readings, participate in workshops, listen to writing advice, talk about art. Some days just a handful of people showed up, sometimes it was packed. Then 90×90 moved to Traxx bar inside Union Station and, of course, we followed them. We would have followed them all over LA no matter how many times they had to relocate. Traxx –a transitory, interstitial space— is a seemingly unlikely place to hold months of consecutive literary events. And yet, the powerful randomness it fostered made it perfect. The events continued to draw aspiring and established artists and friends. But, every night men and women rolling bags behind them and hefting bulky packs across the station, slowed down to hear a poem or a discussion on art or music or whatever. Maybe these random travelers went home with the words of a poem in their minds and mouths. Maybe they came back for more. Did they tell their friends? I did.



Many of my friends from CSUN were also coming down to Traxx and I was excited to be organizing one of the 90×90 nights, one that would showcase the amazing writers I had worked with while I was getting my MA at CSUN. I invited one of my mentors, two writers I had done some of my earliest workshops with, and a new friend who started CSUN after I finished. The event took place just a few days before I had to head back to Milwaukee. For me, it was the possibility, refusal to compromise, reconnection, renewal and resistance, I needed. And I took it with me as I went back to Wisconsin by myself.

I wasn't surprised when I saw the announcement that Writ Large was planning another 90×90. Awed, perhaps. But not surprised. And I hope to be able to organize a few events this time around. Because right now we need all that possibility and refusal and reconnection and renewal more than ever. Writ Large has even encouraged others to organize their own versions of 90×90, 60×60, or 30×30 in their own communities. I look forward to seeing who will be brave and committed enough to take up that challenge. Wherever they are is where we need to be.



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