

KATE SCHAPIRA & DEBORAH POE

A Conversation with Bernadette Mayer

Bernadette Mayer is the author of more than two dozen volumes of poetry, including Midwinter Day, Sonnets, The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters, and Poetry State Forest. A former director of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery and co-editor of the conceptual magazine 0 to 9 with Vito Acconci, Mayer has been a key figure on the New York poetry scene for decades.



In Lyn Hejinian's 1985 essay "The Rejection of Closure," Hejinian quotes Bernadette Mayer: "It's true, I have always loved projects of all sorts, including say sorting leaves or whatever projects turn out to be, and in poetry I most especially love having time be the structure which always seems to me to save structure or form from itself because then nothing really has to begin or end."¹

The following conversation itself seems to resist beginning or end. Here you'll find exchange around poetry and the political, experiments, exchanges, how to write, poetry and love.

We recorded the two-hour conversation and transcribed all of it. However, in the interest of space we couldn't include everything. What you won't find here is our conversations about poets' butts, octagonal houses, the colors of letters and the sounds of different languages.

We hope you enjoy the results of our experiment.

POETRY COURT

BERNADETTE MAYER: Well, I'd just like to say at the outset that I've read all of Kate's questions. And I thought of one answer to all of them. I don't know. (DEBORAH POE laughs)

KATE SCHAPIRA: So, you want to stay with that? You want to rest with that, or do you want to try and figure out things you do know?

BM: What are you going to do? Sue me? You going to take me to court?

1. www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237870

KS: Yeah. Poetry court. (BM laughs)

POETRY, CHANGE, AND THE WORLD

DP: I read the interview with Adam Fitzgerald from the Poetry Foundation. He asked what it was like being brought up in a "staunchly serious Catholic household."² You replied, "Even at that point in time, young as I was, I couldn't believe that one person would hate another person because of his religious beliefs. I found that hard to fathom. All I had to do was sit around and listen to some boring conversations about Eisenhower to realize this was not the world I wanted to live in." I want to know, Bernadette, the first moment you remember engaging poetry to create the world you wanted to live in?

BM: Hmm. Well, I don't think I ever did. But I used to really enjoy having the freedom to hang out with other poets instead of my stupid parents and their stupid friends, discussing Eisenhower and insurance frauds and the Knights of Columbus. We need to stay away from those things. No, I loved having . . . I loved the fact that there was a world of poetry. I just loved hanging out with other poets instead of whatever the future was supposed to be for me.

*

DP: Do you think there's a responsibility for writers or poets or artists to connect the poets with the non-poets? To connect the poets to the people that might otherwise . . .

BM: Well, how could you not? I mean responsibility is not really an applicable word.

DP: But the bridges happen, the bridges are constructed by the nature of what poetry is. Is that what you mean?

BM: I mean you have to live in the world, so of course you have to know people that aren't poets.

KS: But do you have to talk to them about poetry? Is that what you were asking?

DP: Yeah, that's what I'm trying to get at.

KS: Like if you know people who aren't poets, do you mostly talk to them about things other than poetry? Or do you . . .

2. www.poetryfoundation.org/article/241398

BM: Well of course, they would be bored if you talked about poetry. They'd think you were crazy (laughs).

KS: So hold on. When you're talking about "they'd be bored," would they be bored by talking about . . . like talking about other poets might bore them. But would they be bored by talking about the stuff that poetry is about? I mean, does that make sense? We see stuff, or we think stuff, and we write poetry. But they see the stuff.

BM: Right. No, you can talk to them about all those things that we write poetry about. Definitely. But I don't think you'll really get a rise out of your neighbors by talking about sonnet form.

DP: Well, I mean even in terms of conversations about poetry that are not focused on the formal elements of poetry, like from my Dad's side of the family and immediate family . . . it's been a frequent statement: "You think too much, I don't understand your poetry." In addition, we didn't grow up in a family that had real discussion or debate. That wasn't how conversation was at our dinner table. The idea of intellectual debate over family dinner is (or was) foreign to me.

KS: The idea that you would talk them around. There's no procedure for that.

DP: No. There's not.

*

DP: When we drafted the *Drunken Boat* call for the Bernadette Mayer folio, you mentioned "writing to change the world" or "art to change the world." How do you think writing from certain spaces, such as the experiment of writing between waking and dreaming states, contributes to a radicalization or a challenge to live in the world better or change the world? How do you relate those? Do you know what I'm asking?

BM: Yeah, but I don't know the answer. I hope it does. In the 1970s, I had a workshop at The Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, and I used to have my students . . . we'd get together for overnight . . . like a sleep session. And what we were doing is attempting to dream together to end the war in Vietnam.

DP: That's awesome.

BM: I mean, pretty brazen of us (laughs).

DP: But wonderful. When I think of how such states might “change the world,” or radicalize ways of thinking, it’s by getting inside of language in a different way . . . a language that is bereft or unable (sometimes) to allow us, as a country, to live properly.

*

BM: . . . I don’t know, it gives me something to do. Like, when I’m sitting here and everybody’s busy—you know I’m a little bit crippled—so everybody’s busy doing something that I can’t do—like one time people were outside making that table, the octagonal picnic table, and I said, “Well, what can I do?” So I started typing a transcription of their making that table.

KS: So is the transcription—is that part of the table? I mean, I know it’s not built into the table but is that how you got to be part of making the table?

BM: I don’t know. I published it (laughs).

KS: And there’s the table.

BM: Exactly.

EXPERIMENTS, EXAMPLES, AND EXCHANGES

KS: I have a question about how physical your poems are and how you create physical conditions in which to write them, whether your sleep state or just the physical condition of the porch, and you place your body here. But they also seem to come from the body and have the body in them—have your physical body in them—and so I was just kind of curious about where in your body they really come from or . . .

BM: Well, I don’t think I know the answer to that, but I was thinking about what you were saying and your questions, and I realized that the answer is that I’ve always used myself—as a person—as an example. And that’s how I write. I have an example of the emotions and other feelings humans have in the twenty-first century . . . (laughs). Uh, anarchists, left-wing humans, not many of us, right? But yeah, I’ve always very rigorously used myself as the example because that’s what I have available to me. And for free, right?

KS: So, using yourself as an example. An example of a human. Like a sample human.

BM: Yeah. I realize that I got this idea when I was reading the books of John Lilly, who writes from the point of view of a scientist—a very non-traditional scientist who studied dolphins. He had a very rigorous attitude towards experimentation with himself, and for a long time he put himself into those sensory deprivation tanks and took LSD and recorded how he felt. So it's like that, based on that kind of thing.

KS: So there's the experiment, but then there's also the rigorous recording of the experiment, as it goes along.

*

KS: Well, that was a question that I had too—this is for both of you actually—what does writing do to your mind or in your mind when you're doing it? Is that a transformation? Is that a change, as you write?

BM: What's your answer? What would you answer? This is good, we get Kate to think of all the questions and answer them.

KS: I don't think anyone wants to hear an interview with just me.

BM: (laughs) No, I'm curious what you would think.

KS: I think it makes me more alert or more responsive, in a way. I'm responding to the words I already had the idea for, and then I'm responding to what else they might want to do. And then I'm responding to whatever the thing is that made me start writing. You know what I mean?

BM: Yeah.

KS: So I think it's like . . . I'm more easily swayed. Is that right? But I also like the moment of it. Somebody else's turn.

D (to B): Yeah, how would you answer?

BM: Uh, Kate gave a great answer.

KS: No, you have to answer. (All laugh.)

BM: Oh no, I was trying to avoid doing it by making Kate do it.

DP: I think there's a calming for me. There's a presence. There's an immediacy and a presence that writing gives to me. I mean, one of the things that calms me the most is reading. And I would say that if I'm anxious and I just go read, I will calm down. And I love words. And I think that writing has a similar effect on me. Not only calming but also an ability to take me to the moment in a way that few things can.

KS: So when you're writing, you're in writing.

DP: I'm in it. I'm in whatever it is that I'm in, whether it's "Potassium" or Magritte or a handmade book for Kate or Bernadette.

*

DP: So, Kate, I know you to be an extremely prolific person in what you make and what you write and what you do. And I just wondered, what is your perspective on that? How do you make all that go?

KS: (sighs) God, this fucking question. (BM laughs) Now (to B) I know how you feel. The thing is I don't think I'm prolific, I don't feel prolific to me.

DP: Yeah, but everybody that knows you, that's the word they use. So you just have to face the music.

KS: Yeah, I know, but do you know what I mean though? It's like you do the amount that you do, right?

BM: Yeah, right. You know when I was talking to Phil yesterday, he said to me, "Whatever you do, don't let them ask you why you're prolific." (All laugh.)

DP: So (to BM), we won't ask you. This doesn't (to KS) get you out of this question.

KS: No, that seems to be the order of the day. But I don't know. I make when I wanna make something. Or when something's bugging me I try to figure it out.

DP: I knocked myself against that brick wall of business America for so long (ten years) that if I don't continually create, then I'm just in the same situation I was then, which was barely able to write—let alone publish. I never had time to send out work for publication. And so I feel like that if I'm merely consuming rather than producing, something is seriously wrong. I want to create, as much as possible.

KS: Okay.

DP: And that's why when I describe you (to KS) I always say what amazes me about you is that you consume very little and produce very much. That's one of the reasons you've been such an inspiration to me.

KS: Aw.

DP: Just so's you know. (BM laughs)

KS: I mean, I love doing it. When writing is going, it just feels very good. I don't know. Is writing something (to BM) that feels good when you're doing it?

BM: Oh yeah. Otherwise, I wouldn't do it. For me it's like a compulsion.

KS: Hmm. You have to. What happens if you don't?

BM: Oh, I've tried that. In one of my experiments . . . I just only wrote when I felt absolutely compelled to write. I never did that thing where, you know, I sat down at my desk and tried to produce a certain number of pages in a certain number of hours.

KS: So was the stuff you wrote different when you were doing this experiment than it would have been maybe otherwise? What was it like?

BM: It's moving. Pretty moving. Yeah. And I just piled the pages up in reverse order on the top of my desk. And that was the book. When I got to a certain number, I just stopped.

DP: And there you go.

KS: Did it feel different? Well, I guess all the experiments probably feel different? Right?

BM: It was an interesting thing to do, because you know, I was living in the country, and I was very busy with the outdoors. So I didn't really feel like writing generally. I mean (en)forcing myself to write. Or whatever. So.

DP: Have you ever tried to see how long you could not write? Or would that just be self-torture?

BM: Yeah. Uh, no, I guess I never have. Should I try that, do you think I should?

KS: Maybe your next one.

DP: How long?

BM: Like a year?

KS: I don't think you could do it for that long.

DP: I was already thinking in terms of less than a week (all laugh).

BM: Well, that's an interesting thing to try. But I don't know when to try it.

DP: And then how do you know when you're at your wits' end? And is that really useful? To torture yourself . . .

BM: Yeah, exactly.

GIVING BOOKS TO PEOPLE

BM: So I have a question for you, Kate. Are you averse to publishing your work?

KS: No, not at all. What made you ask it?

BM: Because you seem to be going in the direction of creating your own kind of book.

KS: I mean, I like to do both. I'm not at all averse to publishing my work. I get a big kick out of it when something appears in print. The book that I gave you, when I got the news from Bill [Marsh, editor of *Heretical Texts*] that they wanted to do it, I was like "I'm going to have a book! I'm going to have a book!" People were like, "Don't you already have books?" And I was like, "This one has a spine" (all laugh). But I also really love making things. I like the feel of making things. I like being able to decide what it looks like. And I was actually going to ask you about that too. You (to DP) also like to make things. (To BM) Deborah and I have been sending each other little handmade books . . . the ones that she showed you . . . for a while now. And we send each other materials and other things. For you, Deborah, when you do something like that, what's the connection between words and the things that you make?

DP: What's the connection between words and the things that I make?

KS: Yeah, or the process of making it and then also the thing that you get to hold in the end.

DP: Well, I appreciate the materiality of the objects. And I like embodying the text in some way that's fitting and conceptually relates to what the book looks like. I think I like to make things, but there's more thinking about how a text might manifest itself in the world as an object, and conceptualizing how that text might best be represented or articulated in a different form. I remember, even in my 20s

I would paint every Sunday. And I'm a terrible painter. It's like third-grade art. But through painting, I appreciated a different relationship to the spatial and was able to articulate both emotional and logical responses to the world in a different way.

KS: Here's the idea in its word form. And here's the idea in its color form or its texture form.

DP: In its materiality. Yeah. I think that that's well put. I'm very interested in transformation between mediums and concepts to respond emotionally and analytically to the world. I'm at this intersection of analytical and emotional, and something about the process of making those books allows me to engage the world more fully at that intersection.

BM: So what if you don't respond to the world at all?

DP: Then I'd die, probably (DP and BM laugh).

POETRY AND LOVE

KS: One of the questions I have is: What happens when poetry gets into someone's mind? What can happen in the mind of that person? In a way this is more like a reading question. When you read something and the poetry gets in your mind, what happens?

BM: Explain further.

KS: So, there's your mind before you read the poem. And there's your mind as you're reading the poem. And then there's your mind after you've read the poem. That's an experimental question. What's happening in the mind through reading?

BM: Mmm. I don't know. I don't know.

DP: What did you see happening with your kids in terms of that?

BM: Oh, they were subjected to a lot of poetry readings when they were growing up.

DP: Did they get potato chips for that?

BM: No, chocolate bars (laughs). But, uh, I don't know if they heard any of them. They certainly did grow up interestingly. But I really don't know the answer.

DP: What do you think, Kate? Because you work with children. What grade?

KS: I work with 9- and 10-year-olds. For them a lot of it is more about making poems. They read them, and they'll listen to them, and we'll read them together. And we'll talk about them a little bit. I'll ask them if there are any words that sound good to them. Or, "Does the poem make you imagine anything?" But mostly what they really like is the thrilling power that they have to put words on the page.

DP: So you get more of that aspect than reactions or responses or assimilation or whatever happens when we're reading.

KS: I think that's partly how school is. I do it at the school. And the school doesn't usually ask what they think. So they're not used to talking about what they think about something that they're experiencing—not just poetry, anything. But they definitely get very satisfied by making.

DP: Mmm-hmm (laughs), like, "I made this!"

KS: Yeah, and they want to know if I like it. Okay, so this is a question. (To BM) Do you care if people like your stuff, what you write?

BM: Oh yeah. I've been thinking a lot about this lately, and I think I write in order to make people love me because you know after my parents died I figured there was nobody to love me. So I think that's why I started writing, to make people love me.

KS: Did it work?

BM: Yeah. A resounding success.

KS: So there you go. I see that a lot with these little guys too. Like they want . . . they love writing. But they also really like the approval. So if I'm walking around like . . . you know, sometimes I'll ask a question about their poems or I'll be like, "I really like the way those words sound together." And then they all want me to say that.

DP: Yeah, even college students are like that. You can't just affirm one student's poetry.

BM: "Give me some ice cream."

*

BM: The being loved thing, I think it has to do with my parents dying, and feeling like I wanna be loved! and I'm not sure that anybody will.

KS: Which is not a crazy thing to want. And it works. I mean, I think the key to that is that it works.

BM: Yeah.

KS: So you keep doing it, right? I mean, if it didn't work, like if you wrote and nobody loved you, then you would have to try something else.

BM: Oh, well, I did that for years. But I didn't stop writing anyway.

POETRY AND POLITICS

KS: Well, you deprive yourself of sleep. You deprive yourself of food. People do . . .

BM: Love.

KS: Sure (BM laughs). Deprivation . . . deliberate deprivation.

DP: A deliberate deprivation experiment.

KS: Which always creeps me out a little bit in the, "Isn't that nice for you that you have the luxury of giving this thing up that some people just don't ever get." Whether it's love or ... I don't know. Maybe that's a little harsh.

BM: That is a little harsh (laughs). You know, "People are starving in other countries, so . . . eat, eat!"

KS: Yeah, right. I did not . . .

BM: That's not exactly the problem . . .

KS: Right.

BM: (laughs) Eat your peas . . .

KS: Yeah. I think I'm just interested in . . . because that's an accusation that people make, that poetry is a luxury and—

DP: Audre Lorde wrote that essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury."

KS: And this is an idea that's probably been tossed around since humans have been doing things.

BM: Oh, only Americans could think that. Really I don't think poetry is a luxury, and I don't think that's commonly thought in other countries.

DP: No, it's not. I think in other countries, it's valued and even honored in ways that it's not here. Many countries, like China, Slovenia. . . .

KS: Yeah, China, except the Chinese government also locks poets and artists up.

DP: That's true.

KS: They take it seriously but they take it seriously as a threat.

DP: Yes. There's that Robert Hass quote: "Because rhythm has direct access to the unconscious, because it can hypnotize us, enter our bodies and make us move, it is a power. And power is political." I always thought that was interesting in considering poetry and the political.

KS: I had a question about poetry and politics coming together, but I don't remember what the question is.

BM: Oh good.

DP: So talk about poetry and politics, Bernadette.

BM: Oh shit (laughs).

DP: Maybe an interesting way to think about poetry and the political is how you think the relationship between politics and poetry has changed over the years.

KS: Mmm.

BM (to KS): Do you want to answer that?

KS: No, I don't have as many years as you do.

BM: That's a poor excuse.

KS (to BM): No, you first.

BM: (laughs) Shit. I don't know.

DP: I mean maybe it hasn't changed because you were saying that you were trying to dream the end to the war in Vietnam. And you would do something similar . . .

BM: Yeah, but that was kind of ballsy and

DP: Brazen, as you said . . .

BM: Yeah. I mean just to think that could be done. I mean my doctor said to me at one point—I said something also very brazen about end-

ing the war in Vietnam. And he said, "Bernadette, the people of North Vietnam ended the war in Vietnam. Not us." So, yeah. I don't know.

HOW TO WRITE

KS: We were talking about things you write about. When you set out to write, how do you sort of make room for the world or what's going on around you in your writing?

BM: I don't understand. Explain that more.

KS: Do you go, "Oh, I have an idea for something I want to write about. I'm going to sit down and write a thing about that." Or do you go, "I'm going to sit down and I'm going to write. And then something's going to come into my mind that I want to write about."

BM: Mmmm. Well, you know, in this environment, where there are lots of windows, mostly what I do is I sit down and write about what I see.

KS: So you start with what's in front of you.

BM: I can write on the front porch too. And someone said once to me, during a newspaper interview: "Do you consider yourself a member of the blah blah blah school or the blah blah blah school?" And I said, "No no no, I'm a member of the porch school."

DP: That's great. Maryrose Larkin is a poet that visited Pace this past semester, and she said something really wonderful to my students and I after her reading and during the Q&A. She has a writing studio, and it's just a little space. And it has nine windowpanes in the door. So, for her last book, she imagined a different world through each pane. She wrote the many "worlds" through these panes. I like that notion very much.

KS: That each one is a different—

DP: —reality to go into, or world to write.

*

BM: Oh! Oh, I have one thing I wanna say, which I think is very important. I read this interview with John Ashbery recently, it was one in an old *Paris Review*. He says whenever he wants to write poetry, it's like a little river that's always flowing, and you can just dip into it and write. I think that's a great analogy.

DP: It is really beautiful. It's a pretty Buddhist sensibility, don't you think?

BM: Well, maybe.

DP: It seems like it to me.

BM: It's true though, yeah? About poetry?

DP: Yeah, I like it.

KS: That poetry is sort of there to be written whenever you want it?

BM: It's always there, and you just have to dip into it. And take out a few dollops.

KS: I like the dollops.

*

KS: What do you do, or does this even happen, when you fear that you're getting on the wrong track with something that you're writing, or is there no wrong track?

BM: Well, it's funny you should ask that question, because Zach, who used to be my daughter's boyfriend and lived here for a long time, is a sculptor who now lives at the Salem Art Works. When he was living in this house—he lived here while we were kind of tearing down the walls and stuff, and he helped us with the woodstove—Simon called him a one-man army—Zach used to read my poems and he would say, "Oh, my God, Bernadette, you've really gone too far." And he was always right!

KS: So would you change it?

BM: So I would change it, or else just scratch it. I mean, because I would get lost in some detail, and start going more and more in that direction, and get totally going nowhere. But now that I don't have Zach to do that for me, I have to do it for myself.

KS: But you can do it for yourself? You can recognize that?

BM: Yeah.

KS: And you will change it?

BM: Well, usually I just throw it away.

KS: Oh, okay. Wow. And start a new thing.

BM: Yeah. Because I mean, you can tell when something is hopeless.

KS: But I guess the thing for me would be like, what if you wanna do the task, or the experiment, or you wanna ask the question that you started the poem for, but this isn't the way to do it?

BM: I'm not sure I ever do that, if I'm understanding you right.

KS: You're not sure you ever start with a task in mind, do you mean?

BM: Right.

KS: Okay. But you do start with an experiment in mind.

BM: Well, I usually start with something in mind.

KS: But you never go like, "Oh, this isn't the way to look at this something, but maybe some other way would be"? You don't do that?

BM: Ah—I don't think I do.

DP: Maybe talk about the Guggenheim piece as an example. How did you start that one?

BM: Oh, well, the Guggenheim piece is a funny example, because originally I found out that Amy, the artist, was doing the show about the fact that Socrates and the Cynics, which were what the philosophers were called, believed in conversing with shoemakers. They had unearthed in Greece a shoemaker's shop, and they found evidence that those philosophers had been there. And that's where he used to hang out with all the young boys and stuff. And Aristotle, who was a member of the opposing group of philosophers, believed in conversing with kings. So of course we know what side of that question we're on, right? So I wrote a long poem about—ah—being barefoot, because the Cynics were notorious for being barefoot, whereas the Aristotle philosophers wore sandals. So my essay was about being barefoot. And then I had been studying paleontology at the time, so I wrote a long poem about paleontology, and I just interspersed them together. And it actually worked. I mean, it might not have, but it did.

DP: Yeah, it did, I think it did work. And I wonder what Zach—I think Zach would agree (all laugh).

*

BM: Well, the great thing about [the Guggenheim poem] is that Amy made all the ink from soot from the various boroughs, so when she printed my poem, it was printed with soot from Brooklyn. Isn't that great? So there's another chance element that probably nobody knows about, except me and a few others. I think it's so great. I think everything about that poem just happened in this really interesting way.

DP: Yeah. I love it because it has so many swerves, and you're there for every one of them, to take the swerve (BM laughs).

KS: How do you set that up though? Like how do you put yourself into the spot where stuff just happens?

BM: Weird, eh?

KS: It is weird. This is related to your prolific-ness question, I think, Deborah, because I feel like that's what people are asking me when they ask, "How are you so prolific?" What they really wanna know is, "How could I do it?" Like, what is the process of putting yourself in the spot—

DP: In the mode . . .

KS: . . . where you can get your hand into that river and dollop the dollops out? How do you get yourself there? Or how do you realize that you are there?

BM: Well, you just have to sit there all the time. And be there when you're ready to reach in (laughs).

DP: Be open to reaching in, also.

BM: Don't use the word open.

KS: What's bad about open?

BM: Open's just too New-Agey for me.

KS: Do you have a substitute to suggest? (DP laughs) What is the—the nature or the state of being or mind or whatever you wanna call it that you're in when you're by the river—

DP: Open to the world, yeah. Maybe we just have to think of metaphors all the time?

BM: We have to say "dull." You have to be willing to be bored a lot.

KS: Yeah, but I feel like—"dull," I think like something that you can't strike a spark off of. When you say, "You have to be dull," I don't think, "You have to be bored," I think, "You have to be boring."

BM: What I'm saying is there's a lot of down time.

KS: Oh, right right—where *nothing's* happening, you mean.

BM: Right. So it's not really the most exciting thing in the world, always.

KS: So you're saying you have to wait for it to happen, it sounds like.

BM: No. I'm just saying—

DP: It happens.

BM: —maybe there's a moment when it's not happening. Or many, many moments (laughs).

DP: And you have to sit through them? Rather than being open to the moments (BM laughs) 'cause that "open" thing is the problem.

BM: Right.

DP: New Age—that's interesting. To me it's not New Age.

KS: To me it's a risk. Like something that is open is—like, stuff can get in there. That's how I think of it.

DP: Yes. Risk-taking—

BM: Yeah, like an open wound.

KS: Like it's raw (BM cracks up)—no, seriously! It's raw, it's exposed—it's vulnerable maybe, or there's like a—it can be moved, or it can be harmed, or it can be changed.

BM: Mm hmm. Yeah.

KS: So it's not like a—I personally don't think of it as a sweetness and light sort of state.

DP (yelling from the kitchen): What about the term "closed text"?

KS (yelling back): I don't even know what that means. What's a closed text, Deborah?

DP: Lyn Hejinian talks about it in an essay from the '80s. A closed text would perhaps be dogmatic, or like a master narrative that locks down or closes off alternative realities or imagined realities. I mean, that's the way I remember it.

KS: Like you could only understand the text or the poem or the book one way?

DP: Right. There's not a multiplicity to it, it's closed.

BM: What's an example?

KS: Yeah, that's a good question.

DP: Something very different from *My Life*.

BM: Huh. Never heard that phrase.

KS: Well, okay, so then the opposite of that would be something that makes room for multiple meanings, right? or that you can read in a bunch of different ways.

DP: Yeah. But you can't say, "Remain BLANK to multiplicity." You still have to use that word.

*

DP: (To BM) Do you have any other questions?

BM (laughs): What do you wanna tell me?

KS: To tell you—

BM: Important things.

KS: Important to who?

BM: To you and me.

KS: I wanna tell you that reading—well, reading *Studying Hunger* I think in particular, but reading also just some of the shorter stuff from here and there, made me feel really free to write.

BM: Ah. That's good. Wow.

KS: And one other thing I wanted to ask *you*—what makes you feel free to write.

BM: I don't know. Why would I not?

KS: I don't know. I mean, probably not for the same reason that I might not (BM laughs).

BM: I was thinking that—you know, John Giorno has this great poem, a new poem that he's written called "Thanks for Nothing," and it's all about being a poet, and how—it's a very illuminating poem, because it's all about how he couldn't figure out that he could be anything else. Nothing else made any sense to him. And I kinda feel that way too.

KS: That it's the only thing that makes sense for you?

BM: But how did I even know that it existed—poetry? I have no idea.

DP: But once you saw it, you were like, "This is the stuff!"

BM: Yeah. Because, you know, you can incorporate everything. You can become as knowledgeable or not knowledgeable as you prefer. So—ah—and there's no money involved—

KS: So you never have to worry about that.

BM: Isn't that great?

KS: I actually love that too. It's like, well, no matter what—

DP: You know you're doing it for the reasons that are right in your world.

KS: Or no matter what you do, no matter how I write poetry, it's not gonna get me money, so I might as well write what I wanna write.

DP: Yes.

BM: Yeah, when I first met—years ago—Phil's family, and he was kind of saying, telling them what a great poet I was, and one of his relatives said to me, "So, you're such a great poet, have you ever been on the Johnny Carson show (laughs)?"

DP: What do you say to that? "We're just on different boats."

KS: But then there's this love equation. I definitely think I write to get love also, so I recognized that when you said that, but I also think I write *to* love, like to try to love other things or people, sometimes.

BM: Oh, okay. That's tricky.

KS: It is tricky. I don't think it always works.

BM: Huh. I would be surprised if it did.

KS: Well, so that's maybe what I'm thinking about in terms of going in the wrong direction. Maybe that's the wrong direction.

BM: Oh, I wouldn't say wrong. Wrong is the wrong word. I mean, right, wrong, bad, good, let's get rid of all those words.

DP: I wouldn't say that I write to attempt to love things or people, but I do write—there's a continual drive to meditate on language and connection (or community) that is very strong in my writing. I believe this comes directly from moving around my whole life, and not having a strong foundation in terms of place until living in the Pacific Northwest. That drive to consider connection/disconnection, community and identity, language's abilities and shortcomings might be one reason Buddhist sensibilities appeal to me.

BM: I think writing is a regular human impulse. And, uh—you know, maybe there used to be a time when you could do human things that didn't involve money, and we're still doing that. I think—I mean, unfortunately we don't fit into the world very well (laughs).

DP: At least the American world.

BM: But we try, don't we.

KS: Yeah. Well—maybe this is how we fit into the world.

BM: Exactly.

KS: I mean, if there really weren't any room for us, we'd all just die. So there must be—

BM: Well, we all have a way of earning a living.

KS: There must be some sort of place that we're hooking our little claws over that is wanted despite all—despite all of the unusualness of doing something not for money.