

Poetry and Social Movements

Budd L Hall

Victoria Public Library

February 2, 2022

How I became a poet-

Definition of a social movement- Marge Piercy

What is a social movement?

It goes on one at a time

It starts when you care

To act, it starts when you do it again after they said no

It starts when you say we and know what you mean, and each

Day you mean one more

A timeless tradition

Perhaps second only to themes of love, poetry has a rich and nearly timeless connection to social movements, to the protection of the weak, to the causes of hope, and as a mantra against hopelessness. Poets such as Dante, Milton, the Italian political theorist, Antonio Gramsci, Bertold Brecht, Agostino Neto of Angola, Kenneth Rexworth, Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda of Chile, W.B. Yeats of Ireland, Anna Akhmanova of Russia, Adrienne Rich and Marge Piercy of the USA, William Blake of England, Saadi Youssef of Iraq and thousands of the better and lesser known have built bridges between poetics and politics; between image and imagination, and between voice and voicelessness. And of course we know of the legendary heritage of Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali Nobel Laureate who visited Victoria and gave a speech in April of 1929.

Hear his prescient words from 1916,

"I know what a risk one runs...in being styled an idealist in those days when the sound that drowns all voices is the noise of the marketplace, and yet...I

feel that the sky and the earth and the lyrics of the dawn and the dayfall are with the poets and the idealists and not with the marketmen..."

What is the relationship of poetry and social movements?

Some poems are written by people in the movements themselves – for example here are two short pieces from poets of the Black Lives Matter movement.

A Praise song

Angelo Geter

Praise the bullets

That called in sick to work.

Praise the trigger

That went on vacation.

Praise the chalk

That did not outline a body today.

***Ode to the Head Nod* by Elizabeth Acevedo**

didn't we learn this early?

to look at white spaces

& find the color

thank god o thank god for you are here.

Black Tears

Hafsa Abdiqadir, 23

*“How many more times can we shed tears for the loss of our men?
 Until the tears dry and we painfully say goodbye.
 Before we shed tears for the next black guy.
 Heartbroken mothers die, questioning themselves why?
 I just want you to imagine the life of the black man in America.
 Mamas teach them from young to behave and keep your hands where they can
 see them.
 ‘They’ as in the police who are supposed to protect them from danger.
 But how is that possible when they see the black skin which equates to danger?”*

Or this piece by Canada’s Poet Laureate, the Indigenous poet Louise Bernice Halfe – Canada’s Parliamentary Poet Laureate

April 30, 2014

Weeds are flattened beneath last year's tire tracks
 others lay burden by the winter's heavy snow.
 The crocuses labor through this thick blanket.
 I am sun drained from the bleakness
 of the weeks before. Now a tick
 I've carried in my hair runs up my neck,
 festers on my chin.
 I show it no mercy.

the lake-ice is rotting diamonds
 where water seeps hungrily through its cracks.
 Beneath the birdfeeders
 goldfinches and juncos scratch.
 Two mallards strut
 crane their necks for the roving dogs and cats.
 Sharp tail grouse lay low in the thicket believing

they cannot be seen, their rust-colored wings
match the frost-bitten ground.

This morning we were woken by a knocking
on our skylight, the yellow feathers
of a flicker splayed against the window.
I cradle a striped gopher, it heaves so slightly
against my palm, a leg broken
and one eye bloodied shut.
I lay it against the mountain ash and beg
it not to suffer.

This afternoon I have my hearing
for Truth and Reconciliation.
I must confess my years of sleeping
in those sterile, cold rooms where the hiss
of water heaters were devils
in the dark.

I want to walk these thickets
to that far horizon and not look back.

Still others speak of Poetry as Insurgent Art

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, one of the great beat poets of the 1950s, 60s and 70s in San Francisco shares his thoughts on the responsibility of a poet in times like ours in his piece *Poetry As Insurgent Art*.

I am signaling you through the flames

The North Pole is not where it used to be

Manifest Destiny is no longer manifest.

Civilization self-destructs. Nemesis is knocking on the door.

What are poets for, in such an age? What is the use of poetry?

The printing press made poetry so silent it lost its song. Make it sing again.

If you would be a poet, create works capable of answering the challenge of apocalyptic times, even if this means sounding apocalyptic.

You are Neruda, you are Tagore, you are Keats, you are Attwood and you are Blake and you are Rahman, you are from every part of the earth, you can conquer the conquerors with words

If you would be a poet, write living newspapers. Be a reporter from outer space, filing dispatches to some supreme managing editor who believes in full disclosure and has a low tolerance for bullshit

If you would be a poet, experiment with all manner of poetics, erotic broken grammars, ecstatic religions, heathen outpourings speaking in tongues, bombast public speech, automatic scribblings, surrealist sensings, streams of consciousness, found sounds, rants and rave—to create your own limbic, your own underlying voice, your ur voice

If you call yourself a poet, don't just sit there. Poetry is not a sedentary occupation, not a "take your seat" practice. Stand up and let them have it.

Have wide-angle vision, each look a world glance. Express the vast clarity of the outside world, the sun that sees us all, the moon that strews its shadows on us, quiet garden ponds, willows where the hidden thrush signs, dusk falling along the river run and the great spaces that open out upon the sea...high tide and the heron's call...And the People, People, yes, all around the earth, speaking Babel tongues. Give voice to them all.

The Poetry of Witness

Anna Akhmatova, Russian Poet

In the terrible years of the Yezkov terror of 1937, I spent 17 months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there):

“Can you describe this?”

And I said, “I can”

Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.

A Toronto poet and social movement educator Barb Thomas sent me this piece about the migration and the displacement of the world’s people

Gangplank to Hope (by Barb Thomas)

listen no one with good shoes

risks swamps trailless cliffs

botflies scorpions human and spider

Darién Gap linking Columbia and Panama

no person with a job or valid visa

would carry their 3-year old faded photo

Maman left in Haiti

ragged cup of yucca

to watch their daughter get raped

mud thick at the bottom of another hill

garlic-tied ankles shield against vipers

flip-flops stumbling

starving into a camp with no food

this could be your mother

banished from the corn by a copper mine

my brother preyed by armed teens with no schools

our father nose against locked factory door

your sister huddled under razed roof

my cousin crumpled by the latest quake

are we saying they should sit in the rubble

till their babies' cries stop for good

listen now

there are no legal

routes to safety migrants are meant to suck it up

not be a nuisance

borders barbed-wired to protect

us from them

even though my great grandmother with cholera on the boat from Ireland

was given medicine

even though your Spanish grandfather

was rescued from war

our world is still fleeing

colonized homelands on spiked footbridges of Chunga palm

walls will never stop hearts

reaching for

a minute without fear an hour of rest

a day of clean water a life cupped

by clean thatch and green belonging

Peace movement

Margaret Atwood –

The Loneliness of the Military Historian

Confess: it's my profession

That alarms you.

This is why few people ask me to dinner,

Though Lord knows I don't go out of my way to be scary.

I wear dresses of sensible cut

And unalarming shades of beige,

I smell of lavender and go the hairdresser's;

No prophetess mane of mine,

Complete with snakes, will frighten the youngsters.

If I roll my eyes and mutter,

If I clutch at my heart and scream in horror
Like a third-rate actress chewing up a mad scene,
I do it in private and nobody see
But the bathroom mirror.

In general, I might agree with you:
Women should not contemplate war,
Should not weigh tactics impartially,
Or evade the word enemy,
Or view both sides and denounce nothing.
Women should march for peace,
Or hand out white feathers to arouse bravery,
Spit themselves on bayonets
To protect their babies,
Whose skulls will be split anyway,
Or, having been raped repeatedly,
Hang themselves with their own hair.
These are the functions that inspire general comfort.
That, and the knitting of socks for the troops
And a sort of moral cheerleading.
Also: mourning the dead.
Sons, lovers, and so forth.
All the killed children.

Instead of this, I tell
What I hope will pass as truth.
A blunt thing, not lovely.
The truth is seldom welcome,
Especially at dinner,
Though I am good at what I do.
My trade is courage and atrocities.
I look at them and do not condemn.
I write things down the way they happened,
As near as can be remembered.
I don't ask why, because it is mostly the same.
Wars happen because the ones who start them
Think they can win.

In my dreams there is glamour.
 The Vikings leave their fields
 Each year for a few months of killing and plunder,
 Much as the boys go hunting.
 In real life they were farmers.
 They come back loaded with splendour.
 The Arabs ride against the Crusaders
 With scimitars that could sever
 Silk in the air.
 A swift cut to the horse's neck
 And a hunk of armour crashes down
 Like a tower. Fire against metal.
 A poet might say: romance against banality.
 When I awake, I know better

Despite the propaganda, there are no monsters,
 Or none that can be finally buried.
 Finish one off, and circumstances
 And the radio creates another.
 Believe me: whole armies have prayed fervently
 To God all night and meant it,
 And been slaughtered anyway.

Brutality wins frequently,
 And large outcomes have turned on the invention
 Of a mechanical devise, viz radar.
 True, valour sometimes counts for something,
 As at Thermopylae. Sometimes being right –
 Though ultimate virtue, by agreed tradition,
 Is decided by the winner.
 Sometimes men throw themselves on grenades
 And burst lie paper bags of guts
 To save their comrades.
 I can admire that.
 But rats and cholera have won many wars.
 Those, and potatoes,

Or the absence of them.
 It's no use pinning all those medals
 Across the chests of the dead.
 Impressive, but I know too much.
 Grand exploits merely depress me.

In the interests of research
 I have walked on many battlefields
 That once were liquid with pulped
 Shells and splayed bone.
 All of them have been green again
 By the time I got there.
 Each has inspired a few good quotes in its day.
 Sad marble angels brood like hens
 Over the grassy nests where nothing hatches.
 (The angels could just as well be described as vulgar
 or pitiless, depending on the camera angle.)
 The word glory figures a lot on gateways.
 Of course, I pick a flower or two
 From each, a press it in the hotel Bible
 For a souvenir.
 I'm just as human as you.

But it's no use asking me for a final statement.
 As I say, I deal in tactics.
 Also, statistics:
 For every year of peace there have been four hundred
 Years of war

The Environmental Movement

A Victoria poet and environmental activist, Serap Brown sent me this poem

Climate Strike

Local, global

national, international
It starts with one person
in one heart, with one beat
reaches to another
with a movement or a sound

In Stockholm, at school
Greta felt the importance
of climate
left her class on a Friday
a school day
a day to learn
a day that keeps her
away
from the Climate way

Did Greta know?
what she felt on Friday
will connect the hearts
reach out populations
form a tsunami wave
floods the hearts
across the world

Did Greta know?
Climate way
her way
would be my way, your way,
national to international
local to global

It starts with one person
in one heart, with one beat
reaches to another
with a movement or a sound

September 27, 2019

the members of the United Nations
 witness
 the earth
 standing up
 In people's heart
 the beat is
 ONE
 UNITED
 for earth
 and its sound
 matches the beat of
 Mother Earth.

.But where did poetry come from?

The Origin of Poetry

I wrote this piece about 15 years ago prior to a trip to Uganda. I had done research on the origins of poetry and these words fell from a moon lit sky into my office in Victoria like meteors in an August summer

Creation Song: A Revelation – Budd Hall

Our cries of fear and pain
 Our cries of joy of happiness
 Were our first poems
 Before words
 Before sentences
 Before grammar
 Before language

We imitated birds and other animals
 And found that with our sounds we could share
 Our experience and tell a story
 With each other

Our first sounds/poems
Creating community through
A common sense of who we were

We put our sounds together
We repeated them to each other
We created memory through sounds

We changed the pitch in our voices
We changed the rhythm in our delivery
And we had song
And we had story
And each of us was a poet
A storyteller

Our poems were of the earth and the water
Of the rocks, the trees, the other animals, the grasses
And at night with full moon's light, we shared our stories
The Old, talking to the young

And when we died
The poems remained
The stories remained
Our words
Our language
They reminded us of who we were
Where we were going
Where we had been

Our poems and songs became our culture
We gave birth to these poems and songs
And in return, the songs and poems gave
Life to us in families, communities, and kingdoms

With our stories we existed
Without our stories

Without our words
We were not alive

The world was therefore sounded, cried and spoken
Into being
Our lives were sung into existence
And over the thousands of years
As we drifted and filled the earth with people
Our languages gave us our identity
Who we were, and importantly
Who we were not

We were the people of the River Deltas
We were the people of the large mountain
We were the people of the standing stone
We were the people of the large Salmon River
We were the people of the broad savannah
We were the people of the Nile Valley
We shared stories of 20,000 years and more

And although through time our words and languages
Have come to be distinct
The first purpose of language has always been to foster community
Not to drive us apart
And never to use language to say that some ideas and some people
Are more important than others
And not to say that one language alone can be a global language
While other languages are good only for small ideas
Ideas of the village or the home

Who am I then?
Who am I to come to Africa?
Who am I speaking in the language
As those who brought colonial oppression and genocide to the land, we call
Canada today?

The same language as those who send armies into Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere

The language which facilitates greed and corruption in the Global market?

What is the meaning of my movements?

I am made humble by the presence of so many gods and Ancestors
Among us here today

I am lost at this moment and have no real answers for myself
Let alone for any others hearing me today or reading these words

I know only one thing

That our words, our languages, our differences, our dreams and our
Feroocious anger at injustice and poverty and cruelty
Must be shared

And I know one more thing

That the feeling of the soil on the soles of our feet
Or of our hand dipping into our rivers or our seas
Or of the sounds of birds at sunrise
Or of the cries of newly born children and other animals
Or of the sounds of drums and xylophones
Or of the singing together in celebration that hope still exists
Or of the memories kept alive in our Mother Tongue

Are carried in our words

With our poetry

With our songs

Words and songs born of African soil

And carried in our hearts to every corner of this planet

Still carrying life

Still rejecting despair

Still making resistance possible

Still conveying tenderness

Still linking friend to friend

Still expressing our love

Close with a Street poem –

**I say good
You say Evening
Good Evening
Good Evening**

**I say Hope for
You say Justice
Hope For----Justice
Hope for----Justice**

**I say let's end homelessness
You say, Now
Let's End Homelessness – Now
Let's End Homelessness – Now**

**I say COVID
You say, Get Lost
COVID ---Get lost
COVID – Get lost!**

**I say Gender
You say Justice
Gender----Justice
Gender----Justice**

**I say Thank
You say YOU
Thank----you
Thank-----you**

I say that's

**You say---All
That's ---All
That's ---All**