Barbara Maloutas  
Faculty Development Report  
AWP Conference - February 11 – 15, 2009

A faculty development grant supported my expenses while attending the annual AWP (Association of Writers & Writing Programs) Conference from February 11 – 15 in the Chicago Hilton. I decided to attend the conference after Janet Holmes, editor of Ahsahta Press invited me to participate in an off-site reading with Ahsahta and Typo poets that included two nationally known poets that have visited and read at Otis, Brenda Hillman and Forrest Gander. I was also asked to sign copies on Friday afternoon of my new poetry book, the whole Marie, at the AWP Bookfair. The Bookfair was busy chatty collection of tables and booths where I was able to meet some of the publishers of my books, chapbooks and poetry for the first time. Both the reading and book signing were published in advance online, by email and in print in the large AWP handbook. The Ahsahta website for the whole Marie includes authors’ blurbs, a page with sound excerpts with me reading (potentially) of a couple of poems, an author’s long statement and an extended bio.

To link to the whole Marie, go to http://ahsahtapress.boisestate.edu/books/maloutas/maloutas.htm

The conference schedule was full and each day I attended panels on writing craft and the education of writers. My list of panels includes these favorites:

- The Aphorism: Life Is Short, Art Is Really Short—Aphorisms slow us down. There is a sting or turn in aphorisms. They are nominal, not verbal and favor symmetry. Dull verbs define. They are written from their endings. I was amazed that the room was full, another example of writers needing to meet and talk with other writers.

- The City—Real and Imagined— A city is a gigantic image that organizes and informs like Moby Dick. There is simultaneity; you can enter a city at any point as in Joyce’s Ulysses. It is an image we see all at once. It has a temporal organization rather than a linear one. There is a series of layers all at once. And its history bears down on the present. Using the name of a street in a city is to think of the world in specific terms. Kafka took the other route. Writers use specificity for counterpoint.

- Art School Confidential: Creative Writing in the Art School Environment— Artists understand writing as materials. Artist writers need a wheelbarrow to take visual poetry home. There is an interdisciplinary fire in art schools. No tradition is a limit and an opportunity. Artists are bottom up thinkers. They are people we need in the workplace. They are problem solvers. Get rid of tutorials – steward the work. Have bi-weekly meetings. The students are literature writers – there is no specific genre. They are innovative at seminars. A faculty from the Art Institute of Chicago threw books at the audience that she had invited to sit up close and on the floor in order to view her computer screen. Her writers seemed to be all fine artists. The advantages of an art school for writers:

—Relief from the collection.
—Relief from traditional literary thought.
—Permission to be writers standing on one foot.
—Discovering misrecognition.

• The Duty of a Writer—Marie Ponsot: Duty is laid on us from the outside. In the 20’s duty was not so bounded a word. The catechism spoke of the duty of your state in life and the duty of wives. The writer is bounded to the welfare of the poem. Everything is for the benefit of the poem. The notion of action is crucial. “The prize is not to the strong, but to those who enter the games.” Ignore the block (writer’s block), the action of making the poem is all. The poem tells us what the poem wants. We write what we are thinking. Feeling is a subset. Language stores our lives and with language we think. Language writes the poem. Our language identifies us and the poem is what we have in mind. Memory holds what was in our sensory experience – the language of remembered life. The action is what matters, not the response. Power corrupts and is a human constant. There is one safe power, the power of skill. It is there that you can afford to exercise power. This good power is proper to us and threatens no one. This is it – to be powerful at play in your field of language. Learning a skill is active. It is a skill and you practice it. Sharpen your ear by reading and listening, the power to pay attention. It buys us time. Noticing abolishes boredom. Poetic fame? With such fame one is master of a domain invisible to most. Muldoon: Being humble before the sense of the “other” is based on ignorance and unknowing. See language as a tool and so speak of torture. The value of rhymes and beats is getting our bodies back into poetry. Poetry if nothing else is truth telling—not cleansing. See the lie you are telling yourself. Is the poet trying to look better to himself?

• Where Yearning Meets Epiphany: The Intersection of Prose Poetry and Short Short Stories—Robert Olin Butler: author of From Where You Dream. Our mediums choose us. They are how we see the world. A character is one that yearns in the passage of time, upon a time. Existence is the desire of yearning. There can be a shining forth, a yearning right at the beginning or an accumulation and then a shining forth. Plot is yearning challenged and thwarted. A writer is an artist, she writes from the unconscious. Newness comes through voice. Believe in the demon. When in doubt, stay alert and don’t mess up page 2. Know the genealogy of a story. What’s it like? Take away all the stencils. Stories are closer to the ineffable in short form. (Minor Robberies – 145 stories in a small box.) In Butler’s workshops only he speaks. Otherwise it’s the blind leading the potentially sighted. Manifest the yearning with absolute patience. Revision – think of the implication for the reader and use the unconscious. Use the compost of the imagination. If in a short short you hear thrumb, thrumb, twang. Re-dream the twang.

It was both educational and inspirational. I greatly appreciated the opportunity to be with so many interesting writers for four days in Chicago—with fantastic weather.

Information on Ahsahta Press is available online— http://ahsahtapress.boisestate.edu.

I offer this short short as a reflection on my experience with the cabbies.
Chicago Rides
During our stay in Chicago we found our taxi drivers to be friendly and informative, for the most part. Their home countries were Haiti, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Morocco and the U.S. One of the cabbies from the U.S. talked about jazz in Chicago. The other one was on the phone the whole ride. The cabbie from Bangladesh told us we could feel safe in the particular neighborhood where he would drop us because no police lived there. He gave us his cell number to call him for a pick-up. From his talk it was obvious that he was well read and fascinated by the corruption in the city. It was the week when the Governor of Illinois was having all his problems. After the fact, we felt that the cabbie from Morocco knew too much about the commerce buildings and Chicago’s Wall Street. He pulled over and stopped the cab to point out the Commodities Building and spent a few minutes telling us how it worked. The driver from Sri Lanka said that business was so off he would return home in April after eleven years of driving in Chicago. Over the five days we were there, the price of cab rides went up substantially by order of the mayor. The driver from Sri Lanka wasn’t sure who would see the money. On the final evening we had dinner with a friend in Greek Town. A Greek cop greeted us as we drove near the restaurant. He was dressed as a cop even though it was after hours. He motioned for our friend to park in an illegal parking zone right in front of our restaurant. Our friend is married to a Greek and eats there often. Later we talked about doing a documentary on Chicago cabbies. It might get funded and most of the cabbies seemed to open up to three women poets of a certain age. In the end we weren’t sure we had the energy for the project and we didn’t know if we were ready for what we might discover.

Included images are for the Empty Bottle Reading with Ahsahta Poets:
Ben Dollar
GE Patterson
Kathleen Jesme
Rusty Morrison
Stephanie Strickland
Janet Holmes, editor

Friends of Ahsahta Press:
Brenda Hillman – has read at Otis
Forrest Gander – has read at Otis

Typo Editor and Publisher:
Matthew Henricksen

Greek Town dinner:
Larkin Higgins (poet/artist/Otis MFA grad and friend), Mary Peroulas and Barbara Maloutas

All photos are mine.