Mimeo Fever: Sixties Small Press within a Global Context

N. R. Lawrence
University of Warwick, UK

> If the invention of the printing press inaugurated the bourgeois era, the time is at hand for its repeal by the mimeograph, the only fitting, the unobtrusive means of dissemination. (T. A. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 51)

The following is a case-study work in progress and a position paper for thinking about some less theorized aspects of culture in current American studies. I focus on two poetry magazines from the 1960s that offer an early instance of the way the mimeograph revolution in small-press publishing challenged national conceptions of poetic community and audience: *The Floating Bear* (which ran from 1961 to 1971, edited in New York first by Diane di Prima and Leroi Jones, then by di Prima alone) and *El Corno Emplumado* (running from 1962 to 1969, edited in Mexico City by Margaret Randall and Sergio Mondragón). Both magazines were the product of a collaborative partnership, both highlighted specific forms of political awareness through the agency of poetic exchange, and both drew on an internationalist understanding of poetry's scope. In my comparative examination of *Bear* and *El Corno*, I focus on the first years of their production, coinciding with the early-sixties advent of alternatives to the monolithic Cold War geopolitical model, in order to pose three related questions: In what ways does editing function as an extension of writing within the world of mimeograph publications? How might the increasingly global perspective of certain strands of the New American Poetry in the 1960s be counterposed to previous literary ideals of belletristic cosmopolitanism? And how, in the convulsed atmosphere of 1960s politics

(global and "domestic"), were political questions articulated through the medium of mimeo poetics?

Framing these questions are a further set of meta-level issues related to the project of a new American studies, which, given the particulars of my case study, may as well be tabled up front. The first concerns the importance of media-specificity in assessing cultural forms. Recent Americanist scholarship has suggested that, in the humanities at least, we tend to deal in 'texts rather than material existence.' One corrective here is to engage with texts *in* their material existence, a materiality that extends from the form of their publication to the material conditions of their production and distribution. What's distinctive about mimeograph publishing, for example, is the way that it alters and in some cases collapses the relations between writer, editor, reader, and publisher. A logical extension of this claim is that the appearance of a poem in a mimeo magazine is not the same as its appearance in a book published by Faber – that they need to be read differently in each case.

Second, we need to learn to read magazines and other periodicals as social formations in themselves, not simply as the products of a previously existing group or set of individuals. I take this to be in part the point of Raymond Williams's injunction in his essay "The Future of Cultural Studies": "You cannot understand an intellectual or artistic project without also understanding its formation. … The crucial theoretical invention [is] the refusal to give priority to either the project or the formation" (151). Applying this insight to the rise of cultural studies itself, Williams goes on to stress the importance of what typically gets lost or distorted in intellectual and literary histories: "So often the history of each phase of Cultural Studies has been tracked through *texts*. Such accounts talk about this individual having done this work; this tendency; this school; this movement labeled in this or that way; which looks very tidy as this type of idealist history … always is" (155). What gets lost, then, is precisely the ongoing activity out of which a social formation, together with its range of intellectual and artistic projects, arises.[1]

Third, our understanding of the nature of literary and intellectual collaboration is still largely rudimentary. We tend to assume, as with the relation between project and formation above, that collaboration involves the joining of two recognizable and separable identities, rather than the plural and provisional creation of a new one, with a new set of capacities. We tend, too, to naturalize such questions as the division of labor, the address to an audience, and the distinction between writing and editorial functions, particularly as these bear upon the interpretation of collaborative work. Collaboration remains under-theorized in our field in part because it poses a challenge to singular models of authorship, but also because it introduces a more complex set of social and material determinants than the kind of idealist history criticized by Williams is able to accommodate.

Finally, the welcome and long overdue arrival of various internationalist paradigms for American studies requires equal measures of revisionary energy and critical scrutiny. Whether we adopt a 'production' model for assessing the specificity of American capitalism or a 'commercialization' model that traces its contiguities with those of other market economies, whether we stress the role of politics or of culture in parsing the limits of US global awareness, we would do well to continue exploring alternatives to exceptionalist narratives of national distinction – to refuse to take national categories at face value. A reflexive national identification continues to bedevil even well-intentioned attempts at analysing US cultural relations with the rest of the world. Rather than pose the question, What can a European American studies do that a US version can't, it may be more fruitful to analyse those forms of transnational engagement that don't depend on consolidating and reifying national identities. Only in this way, I'll argue, can the promise of earlier attempts to break free from the constraints of a monolithic national imaginary be sustained and continued. It's in this spirit that I cite the conclusion from Fredric Jameson's otherwise irascible dissection of the discourses of modernity, with its call for restoring a much-needed utopian dimension to the horizon of temporal sameness that currently encloses us:

> What we really need is a wholesale displacement of the thematics of modernity by the desire called Utopia. We need to combine a Poundian mission to identify Utopian tendencies with a Benjaminian geography of their sources and a gauging of their pressure at what are now multiple sea levels. Ontologies of the present demand archeologies of the future, not forecasts of the past. (Jameson 215)

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Popular histories of the decade often posit 1965 as the start of the "real" sixties in the United States, when the antiwar movement gathered strength in tandem with the escalation of troop levels in Vietnam, and the San Francisco counterculture began drawing national attention. Yet from the perspective of already radicalized segments of the left, the sixties proper were inaugurated on January 1, 1959, when Fidel Castro and his guerilla army finally drove General Fulgencio Batista from the island of Cuba. Indeed, as Jameson notes in his essay "Periodizing the Sixties," it's difficult to overestimate the impact of the Cuban Revolution on the imaginations of those seeking an alternative to the petrified oppositions of the Cold War. What was distinctive about Cuba to sympathetic onlookers in the West was its spirit of unexpected breakthrough, of romantic improvisation in the face of entrenched global Realpolitik. Equipped with its own revolutionary *foco* strategy, Castro's mobile army broke from the classical models of revolution based on unified class struggle, whether rooted in an urban proletariat (Russia) or a rural peasantry (China). Instead, as outlined by Régis Debray in his 1967 guide for the perplexed, *Revolution within the Revolution?*, the *foco* or guerilla action proceeds from neither a city nor a farmland base, but rather from a no-man's-land territory located beyond both city and country—instigated by a motley assemblage of workers, students, peasants, and outsiders operating from the margins of society, for which, in Cuba's case, the remote mountains of the Sierra Maestra offered a compelling image. It's not difficult to see how the eventual improbable triumph in Havana might provide a potent metaphor, endowed with its own laws of export, for the disaffected elsewhere, including

activists but also writers and artists—those for whom, in the words of Amiri Baraka, "the Cuban thing seemed a case of classic Hollywood proportions." Both the *foco* and an accompanying media savvyness will reemerge, for example, in the case of the Zapatista insurrection in Chiapas led by Subcommandante Marcos.

To trace the initial impact of Cuba on two American poet-editors of the sixties, Amiri Baraka (then Leroi Jones) and Margaret Randall, is to discover reasons why the *foco* metaphor offers particular applications to the use of mimeograph technology. As Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips note in their survey of the mimeo revolution *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side*, the essence of mimeo publishing was its speed, autonomy, and collaborative sociality: using relatively inexpensive means editors were able to quickly assemble a magazine issue by calling on the efforts of friends and colleagues to help with the work of collating, stapling, and mailing. As with the Cuban model, mimeography offered a 'third way' toward seizing the means of textual production, bypassing establishment periodicals (*The New Yorker, Poetry*) and academic quarterlies (*The Kenyon Review*). At the same time, it represented a shift in the division of labor associated with new writing: instead of work selected and distributed by a separate editorial function, mimeo magazines allowed writers to edit and distribute their work, as well as those of their peers, on their own terms. The emphasis was on pace and circulation: Diane di Prima writes of her collaboration with Leroi Jones on the mimeo newsletter *The Floating Bear*, "What we did have in common was our consciousness that the techniques of poetry were changing very fast, and our sense of urgency of getting the technological advances of, say, [Charles] Olson, into the hands of, say, [Robert] Creeley, within two weeks, back and forth." With a much greater geographical reach, the bilingual magazine *El Corno Emplumado*, edited by Margaret Randall and Sergio Mondragon, nonetheless managed to distribute the work of Latin American writers to their North American counterparts and vice versa with a similar sense of urgency.[2] In both cases, the mobility, restless opportunism, and relative independence of underground publishing was

buoyed, in part, by the then sharp demarcation between official and unofficial culture, a distinction since blurred if not erased by the twin processes of assimilation and co-optation.

Both Jones and Randall visited Cuba early in its revolutionary state, and each was changed as a result: "The Cuban trip was a turning point in my life," as Jones put it, "I carried so much back with me that I was never the same again" (163, 165). If *The Floating Bear* marks a transitional phase between Jones's conception of writing as "cultivation of soul" to writing as political weapon, then, as in his letter to Di Prima included in the magazine's fifth issue, editing becomes a way of "localizing" the production of literature – marking it in place and time, returning to it the dimension of lived activity that Williams argues is missing from most literary-historical accounts.[3] The project of a localized activism would subsequently move Jones from a largely white downtown bohemia to Harlem in his pursuit of a black nationalist politics. Randall's editorial conception, by contrast, takes inspiration from the example of Jose Martí and others in imagining a pan-American convergence of writers and activists, united in the effort to produce the new. "*El Corno Emplumado* was never just a magazine," she wrote retrospectively, "*El Corno* was a network—letters going back and forth between poets, between people. It was a meeting of poets like spontaneous combustion." (Note how the romantic rhetoric of spontaneity mimes that of third-way revolutions like Cuba's, at the same time drawing attention to the political potential in networks based on correspondence.) At the same time, what both *The Floating Bear* and *El Corno Emplumado* demonstrate is that 'literature' itself could no longer be taken unproblematically as constitutive of community – whether local or international. Instead, the evocation of community interest depended on the active and reciprocal construction of a shared discursive space beyond the literary. What's especially distinctive about both magazines is the inclusion of information, correspondence, pseudonymous editorializing, scene reviews, pastiches, and so on – all material designed to provide a commons for increasingly disparate constituencies.

The faultlines in these projects became clearer over time. Both editorial partnerships were split along lines of gender and ethnicity; the prevalence of racism and sexism in the avant-gardes of the 1960s, as in the larger culture, has been well documented, and unavoidably exacerbated tensions arising from issues of relative visibility and the division of labor among the editors. Other tensions were structurally rooted in the mimeo enterprise itself – between the self-enclosed nature of coterie audiences and the boundary-dissolving propagation of networks. At its inception *The Floating Bear* was virtually unique in bringing together a diverse array of poetic communities and schools while remaining centered in New York – the Beats, Black Mountain, the New York School, and later the San Francisco Renaissance writers all found representation in its pages. But its principled eclecticism broke down as the 1960s advanced and its various groupings turned increasingly inward. Likewise *El Corno*'s attempt to bridge the linguistic divide between progressive writers from North, Central, and South America fell prey to the exhaustion occasioned by political turbulence in the decade of Vietnam, and effectively tailed off in the wake of the 1968 massacre of students in Mexico City.

> I was certain New York was the center, the hub of the action. . . . A piece of information I was sorely lacking – and which would have saved me much grief had I known it – was that these energies, these movements are *worldwide* when they happen. That New York City was not *the* center, but *one* center. (di Prima 283)

I want to close, however, by addressing a third tension inherent in the mimeo practice of magazines like *The Floating Bear* and *El Corno Emplumado* – between the local and the global, what might be termed micro and macro scales of awareness, particularly as these translate into strategy, aesthetic commitment, and modes of address. If Cuba, and more generally the de-colonizing and anti-imperial movements of the early 1960s inpired the political orientation of small-press publications by supplying an 'embedded' alternative to the

reified binaries of the Cold War, it must be acknowledged that in practice their aesthetics diverged significantly. Where *El Corno* adopted the vatic stance and address of liberation rhetoric under the banner of a transcendental allegiance to Art, di Prima's and Jones's magazine evolved during its early phase into a graffito-scrawled kiosk of ironic interventions, whereby the 'local' served as an acknowledged inadequacy for representing conflict on a global scale. In such circumstances, aesthetics and politics, like Adorno's rueful characterization of the form-content relation, become torn halves of an imagined whole, indexing the damage of a structural condition. In 1963 *El Corno* included back-to-back reports from correspondents on two momentous occasions from that year – the Vancouver Poetry Conference, first of its kind to assemble representatives of the most progressive trends in postwar writing in North America, and the NAACP-sponsored march on Washington. Neither report mentioned the other, and any possible links between the two were left unexplored by the editors. In *The Floating Bear*, however, it can be said that the *foco* strategy left its mark not simply on the editors' political commitments but on its registration of a shift in discursive practice. The language of politics itself had changed, manifesting itself less in explicit content and more in the ways writing laid claim to social significance in its forms of publication and address. To the degree that Jones's and di Prima's collaboration opened up a preliminary pathway toward reconsidering the nature and function of political writing in the 1960s – later to take the form of asserting the commutative equivalence of the personal and the political – *The Floating Bear* became an early harbinger of the asymmetrical figuring of global-local relations we see (for example) in contemporary web publications. It conjoined heterotopian and utopian impulses on an intimate scale, and in so doing marked the ethos of a transitional era with parallels to our own.

Endnotes

1. See also Cary Nelson's comment on the hybrid genre of the little magazine: "The challenge, at least in some cases, is to read journals as if they were themselves coherent and mixed genres, as if they were books like *Cane* or *Spring & All* that meld and juxtapose traditional genres. Not all journals, of course, are such coherent enterprises, but some are, and offer perspectives on American culture that are simply unavailable in volumes by individual authors" (Nelson 181).

2. "If Ernesto Cardenal in Colombia is right in saying 'the poets are the true Panamerican Union' and Miguel Gringerg in Argentina is promoting this vision into reality with his newly founded Inter-American League of Poets, the mirrors most publicly reflecting this common vision are the NEW MAGAZINES" ("Editor's Note," *El Corno Emplumado* 7, 1962).

3. In a letter to di Prima published in the fifth issue of the Bear, Jones/Baraka underscores this point: "I wd say perhaps exerpts, quotes, steals, &c., from some pertinent matter would at least pull in some things that might give at least a de facto existence to all the shit we know & use & reject each minute. As letters giving situations . . . pure banalities, &c., wd give a sense of place . . . as well as the literature, which, after all, we will come to anyway. . . . God, it's huge where we are . . . our insistence should not be limited to a formal area of emotional response that, as I sd, is going to be available (in a short time) to whosever got the price of some book. But what that book won't have is where we are! (Jones, "Letter to Diane di Prima," *Floating Bear* 5, 1961).

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