

The Tolerance Project Redefines M.F.A.

BY ANA BOŽIČEVIĆ
What kinds of meanings do collaborative, polyvocal works of poetry reach for, as opposed to poems built on the bulwark of the much-relied-on (and-awarded) Western-individual Authorial Voice? The Voice is an identity politics and a poetics that makes elision of source its standard, and it's also one of the building blocks of M.F.A.-in-Creative-Writing culture. Poetic jewels-in-the-rough enter writing programs, wherein the

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impurities and imitations shall be sloughed off each Voice and its valuable "original" strains amplified in the hothouse collectivity of the workshop. M.F.A. programs are premised on this alchemical narrative of learning—that the many will help the one find One's Voice. And true, collective ritual often does work some form of magic, but to what extent the resulting change in pitch is a "mastering"—or a harmonizing with or tuning in to received poetic culture—is up for debate. And what happens when the complex experience of M.F.A. collectivity, with all of its dead-ends and dead-ends, is standardized into a calling card, an initiation ritual required for a successful "poetic career?"

The Tolerance Project, spearheaded by Rachel Zolf, is a radical and necessary intervention on the current narrative of M.F.A. collectivity. Zolf is an award-winning Canadian poet whose fourth full-length book of poetry, *Neighbour Procedure*, was recently released by Coach House Books. Her partner got a tenure-track job in the United States, and, since American immigration authorities don't recognize same-sex unions, Zolf

enrolled in an M.F.A. program to obtain a U.S. student visa. She is also a poet who collages poems through meticulous research and sourcing (*Neighbour Procedure* contains only three "original" phrases) and doesn't believe in "originality or the supremacy of the authorial voice."

It is no surprise, then, that Zolf's M.F.A. project should build and implode on its context. She invites 85 writers, artists, and thinkers from across North America to donate written and visual material from which she constructs poems for her M.F.A. workshops. She uses these constraints to examine those in her poetic and political life. She also blogs about the poems, inviting comments and stimulating controversy by sharing (anonymous) workshop critiques online. Donors

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receive barcodes they can use to find out when the poems sourced from their "poetic DNA" are being discussed. Zolf calls her project a "reality poetry show."

And what of the poems? As ever in project-based collaborative and collaged poetry, the process, the seams, are right there on the surface. The poems of *The Tolerance Project* swerve from meta-chat on violence and feminism and gay dogs, to fragments in a Big Brother manual discussing the necessary containment of hope, to language-DNA word-strings, performing themselves above the always present, cacophonous chorus of commenters

and critics. There's much elation, arrogance, and violence to their movement—and they're never not funny. From Poem 23, "Useful Bullshit":

You call this a performative nature? In my lustrelessness, norm, form and function are revealed as blithely editable. I want my terminal degree, but we're not competing. We're all encased in plastic, then turned into an intonation beyond the irrigated "pirate" mind. Why not center your poems - both physically and theoretically?

Polemic is a bad riposte against the triumph of "whimsy," but I want poetry to be funny. You might want to give up entirely, learn to write linearly and do your memoir.

Thinking through these questions has been a difficult but pleasurable exercise.

Some are written as themed class assignments ("Write a biography poem," "Write a caplan poem."), and their week-to-week cycling maps M.F.A. programs' thematic and temporal territory. But beyond its work of dissection and real-time insitu critique, The Tolerance Project accomplishes an unexpected magic: inverse from that of the workshop narrative's test tube/cauldron. Zolf, the project's one initiator, provides a platform for the many to find their Voice(s) and shows-and-hells the process that the authorial legend would discard as scaffolding. The portion of authorship separates into its base DNA elements, and they sing each to each.

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