

# Creative

## In Defense of Postnorth

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Contributor

The yearly poetry event Postnorth, a thematic reading series – the truth, for love, etc – has received a disproportionate amount of negative criticism from self appointed gatekeepers of the northern poetry community; there is a narrow range of poetic content they consider moral and politically correct, and anything outside of these boundaries is questioned and/or discounted as evidence of the “isms” they religiously believe in. The blacklist is composed of guilty or suspect names, and in the case of Postnorth, the list accuses the event’s organizers and some of its readers of being unethical (and worse). For example, in December 2011, a sign was placed over the John Harris Fiction Award submission advertisement poster:

PO  
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ERR  
OR

The sign can be read as STOP TERROR or POST ERROR (in addition to other nonsensical word combinations). Whatever way it was intended, the sign appears to be a passive-aggressive complaint against Postnorth and the John Harris Award, which I also organize. Being responsible for terror (as in terrorism or terrorist) is a serious charge – and I will try and explain how myself and others close to Postnorth have become the subject of this kind of attack.

Matt Partyka and Alex Buck and I started the Postnorth series in 2007 because we were bored with most of what we had seen and heard from the local poetry scene. One particularly boring literary event stood out. Partyka, Buck and I attended a reading at the PG Public Library featuring landscape poetry by three established local writers. After the reading, we were stuck with the image of one of the poets wearing a heavy poncho weaved by his father that he explained represented the prairies. I left the reading feeling like the prairie-poncho was a sign of what was absent at this and most other recent readings: risk. The poncho was also a sign of the political situation poetry had found itself in: the father weaved a poncho for his son/ said poncho represents childhood and father/ said father is a weaver and son is a poet/ no harm done here. I believe

there is room for landscape poetry and its prairie ponchos; equally, I believe there is room for a measured response.

Two years after the first Postnorth (and a diarrhetic flow of complaints about the events), I read an article in the Rolling Stone Magazine about Sasha Grey – then one of porn’s biggest stars. She is the 2008 Adult Video News Female Performer of the Year; a muse to rock stars like the Smashing Pumpkins and the Roots; a crossover sensation starring in Steven Soderbergh’s *The Girlfriend Experience*. She was also someone I imagine whose work would not successfully pass through the same filters that had red-flagged my organizing work with Postnorth. Some of what she said resonated: “Most of the XXX I see is boring, and does not arouse me physically, or visually.” Most of the poetry I had been reading and/or hearing was boring and did not arouse me physically, or visually. In respect to her feelings about the porn industry, Grey says, “I am determined and ready to be a commodity that fulfills everyone’s fantasies.” I was determined and ready to be an organizer of a poetry reading that I would want to attend.

*“I left the reading feeling like the prairie-poncho was a sign of what was absent at this and most other recent readings: risk.”*

Rather than try and cause conflict, I think that, like Grey, the organizers of Postnorth were trying to fill a void with new actors and new content and subsequently attract big, diverse audiences.

Grey is an alternative to the mainstream idea of a porn star. She says this about the mainstream: “As far as I’m concerned, Suicide Girl types with black hair and tattoos are the new blondes with bolt-on tits.” Her admirers see her as more natural: “At five feet six and 110 pounds, with straight black hair that shoots to her lumbar spine, Grey’s naked body is exquisite and natural, with taut skin free of blemishes and tattoos ... her affect is ... a mix of languor and brutal hauteur.” Grey stands up for herself: she co-founded and operates Grey Art, a production company, and stars in its videos, the first of which was a masturbation scene; she has a list of strict sexual taboos;

and she claims to have “genuine orgasms at least three-quarters of the time on set.” Although the parallel with Grey is uneven, Partyka, Buck and I wanted to offer a new vision of northern poets: young hipster and exiled writers mixed with famous poets, each benefiting from the energy of the other and their audiences. The readers lists are built by choosing poets we want to hear read.

Grey says, “If I’m working out any issues through porn, it’s anger at society for not being open about sex.” If I was working out any issues by organizing and reading at Postnorth, I felt/ feel angry that postmodernism and its chip-on-the-shoulder versions of feminism and post-colonialism are working to outlaw desire – and with it sex, nudity, and much of the felt reality of lived experience. Poets are charged with analyzing and showing the hypocrisies of institutional rhetoric. Feminism and post-colonialism are important base-plates of contemporary theory, but when either devolves to supersede critical thought, it becomes dogma. I should note that I do not screen the material that is read at Postnorth events. The poets who are asked to read are given complete control of what and how they read. No poet or poem will be liked universally, and occasionally, there will be problems with the material. I am unafraid of the potential mistakes because I think it is the poet’s job to risk. And it’s my job too.

Despite her successes within the porn industry, Grey has suffered from at least the following example of our culture’s numerous double standards for women: be sexy, but not too sexy. When asked about Grey’s crossover opportunities, Soderbergh says, “Porn is beyond mainstream now, to the point where everyone on TV looks like they’re in porn, but there’s still an attitude that porn is wrong.” Consequently, at the time of the interview, Grey was having little luck finding a good Hollywood agent “because they’re worried their clients wouldn’t want to be on a list with a porn star.” It is suspicious that Grey represents a physical and intellectual alternative to the stereotypical porn star. If porn couture is mainstream, it is how Grey operates as a porn star – not that she is a porn star – that makes her unpalatable to the gatekeepers of pop culture. Similarly, it is how Postnorth facilitates poetry that offends the gatekeepers.

In 2007, when Partyka, Buck and I visually articulated our distrust of the academy’s prescribed ethics on poetry by choosing Mike Mardell’s infamous kitsch poster design rather than a politically benign poster (drawn by one of the poets from Postnorth I), we unintentionally started a poetry war. The poster, reading list



POST  
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Feb. 10 2012  
The Twisted  
Cork 7:30 PM