

The Poetry of Capital: A Reading from a New, Multi-Genre Anthology OUTLINE

I. INTRODUCTION (as prepared)

Delivered by Clare Rossini and Benjamin S. Grossberg

Hello. Welcome to *The Poetry of Capital: A Reading from a New, Multi-Genre Anthology*. Let's begin by introducing our moderator:

Clare Rossini is Poet in Residence at Trinity College in Hartford. Her most recent book is *Lingo*, published by the University of Akron Press. Her poems and essays have been published and anthologized widely, including twice in the *Best American Poetry*, and have been featured on NPR and the BBC.

Benjamin S. Grossberg is Director of Creative Writing at the University of Hartford. His books include *My Husband Would*, winner of the 2021 Connecticut Book Award, and *Sweet Core Orchard*, winner of a Lambda Literary Award.

We'd like to begin by thanking AWP for bringing these three wonderful poets here today to talk about "the poetry of capital" – poems that explore the realities of money, investment, wealth (and its lack), labor, consumerism, and so on. We collected such poems in our anthology, titled *The Poetry of Capital*, which was recently published by the U of Wisconsin Press. You can pick up a copy at the U of W booth in the conference bookfair.

When we started working on the anthology back in 2015, a tiny group of Americans—far less than 1 percent—in fact, one TENTH of one percent—controlled more wealth than the entire bottom 90 percent. Forty million of us lived in poverty—including one in six American children—while six-hundred families in the US each had a net worth of more than a billion dollars.

Since the COVID pandemic, the distribution of wealth in the country has become even more skewed. Over a hundred Americans entered the ranks of billionaire since the pandemic began, even as the rest of the economy is only now bouncing back to pre-Pandemic levels. The US has more folks with 10-figure incomes than any other country in the world: we have 724 billionaires in the US. They are collectively worth \$13.1 trillion – to put that figure in context, it's enough to fund the Biden Administration's "Build Back Better" bill, the largest social investment in generations, seven times over.

What kind of a society does such inequality create? What are the human costs? Is the trend of wealth concentration reversible? If not, what are the long-term implications for the future of our country?

Of course these questions are political. Increasing wealth inequity may well be incompatible with the founding tenets of our democracy, such as the decentralization of power and a sense of shared values between the governing class and the governed. But the question of how wealth is distributed in a society is sociological, too. In the U.S., money reaches deep,

structuring our relations with each other in the way age or social caste does in other societies. In a consumerist society like ours, capital also takes on a psychological dimension. Where we live, what we eat, drive, wear—all our “stuff,” including our bank account—helps define our sense of who we are. Money shapes how our minds work: how we value ourselves, how we understand our place in the world.

The goal of this anthology, *The Poetry of Capital* – and of our panel today – is to explore how contemporary American poetry addresses this issue—one we believe is among the most pressing of our time. We believe poetry lays bare human stakes in a way nothing else can, often with a vivid directness which, at the same time, manages to get at difficult realities. Poems allow us to *feel*, and to feel *whole truths*. If you really want to understand the shape of something, its complexity and its textures, go see what the poets have to say.

The Poetry of Capital includes poets of many backgrounds, across gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, region of the country. Our goal was to represent as much of the contemporary American experience with money as possible, since our experience of capital is so often inflected through such categories. (Though we must admit, we did have trouble finding any super wealthy poets to include (ha ha).)

The three poets here today will share their poems from the anthology and talk about their own experiences with capital, how it shaped them as poets. And from there, we will have a more general discussion about how poetry addresses the role of money and wealth in contemporary America. [If you have questions or thoughts, please post them to the chat!]

The panelists today are:

Afaa M. Weaver is a poet, playwright, editor and translator. *Spirit Boxing* is his 5th poetry collection. His awards include 4 Pushcarts, an NEA, a Fulbright, the Kingsley Tufts Award, the Phillis Wheatley Award, a Guggenheim, and the Botolph Club Foundation Distinguished Artist Award.

Sheryl Luna's *Magnificent Errors* received the Ernest Sandeen Prize from the University of Notre Dame Press and will be published in February 2022. *Pity the Drowned Horses* received the Andres Montoya Prize. *Seven*, published in 2013, was a finalist for the Colorado Book Award. Sheryl was recently elected to the Texas Institute of Letters.

Mark Doty's nine books of poems - most recently, *Deep Lane* - have received the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the T.S.Eliot Prize. A new prose study, *Walt Whitman, What is the Grass: Walt Whitman in my Life*, appeared from W W Norton in 2020. A Distinguished Professor at Rutgers University, Mark lives in New York City.

II. POETRY READING

Afaa M. Weaver:

Ivory Soap, a Whiteness

In the hot houses the soap waits
in innocence, purely white, soft, hard,

cut up from the long tubes of ooze
from the vats where men sweat, knobs

for the making of the clean, washing
the souls like the Akan priests, sage work,

Adams letting the Eves fall from them,
Eves gathering dust to make the Adams,

all histories writ and rewritten anew,
again and again, until the company is awash

in profit hallelujahs. I open the door,
let the steam of Ivory soap whiteness

fill me and take the trays to Arty, whose
work is to feed the bars to the machine,

its stamps of logos, guarantees of purity
embossed in the writing, the bosses of America's

dirt watching to see that the machines
do not rest from the perfect form of bars

of soap sliding down the rubber belts,
under the spray of salty water, into the metal

stamp plates, the wrappers with hot sealers
for paper, Arty, an Aikido master of the line,

stopping to tell me the details of Russia
from his last summer vacation, to ask

my opinion on Islam, the Arab slave trade,
the business of taking masters' names,

the thump and slide of the motor pulling
the rubber belt, the bars of Ivory a broken

whiteness marching out to stores to wash
away the sluggish shame of being dirty,

cash registers counting the money we make
for masters who sit in invisible places,

designing our wages, what wages can buy,
while men like my father, black and white,

wash bodies aching with layers of sweat
from mills and the holds of ships filthy

with what it takes to make a life in a nation
obese with forgetting, hungry for what is new.

Repack Room

A coffee pot, chairs for tired joints, the morning paper,
our warehouse was a kinder place to men in their late years,
old timers who hobbled from leg to leg on sore knees
that had climbed up onto forklifts for forty years, had fallen,
slipped and fell on the cement floor when it took on ice
in winter and the galvanized walls made winter sharper
when we forgot our thermals or forgot we were getting
too old to be without them. This was the company's
blind eye turned to men who could not still keep up
with production lines and quotas for loading trucks,
men who had fought in WWII and Korea, who had
loaded shells on giant anti-aircraft guns on ships at sea,
defending home and coming home to make what was
a fortune to the poor and pennies to the rich. One sore
knee to the other, one strained back to the other, one
set of clogged and swollen arteries to another, trading
pictures of their grandchildren, planning trips to Mexico,
in the evening of a life of duty, and now in my evening
I think of duty, of who owns us and what gifts we give
now that I am old enough for the repack room, the slow
job of salvaging good bars of soap from busted boxes,
the spirit of my old worker sitting in an office with books.

Sheryl Luna

Not One Red Cent

I steal toilet paper,
boil beans and garlic,

bless and baptize pennies.

Kabala: forbearance
in face of insult.

America, I am a connoisseur
of the divided dollar.

For some, a sticky nickel found
comes as joyous as love.

E Pluribus Unum sounds dirty.
Graven image beneath a dirty thumb,

each of my cents declares
someone else's trust in God.

Some say, *God is everywhere*—
even in a copper smelter's lungs.

I count them out on the counter
while the clerk rolls blue eyes,
sets her hand on a fat hip.

She sighs, moves them two by two
into the arc of her palm.

I want to write about whales,
think of Jonah in the belly of one,
punished then expunged onto land.

I walk unlike Jonah,
wool cap pulled over my ears thinking,
I am not welcome anywhere.

Chico's Tacos

A huge roach skitters along your white stucco
outside wall, streets fill with Impalas, Chevys,
cholos, abuelas. Fathers sit at formica tables;
the tile peels. Counter workers speak Spanish.

Women wear polyester and sandals.
Men don letter jackets from years ago.
The lone striped suit and slick expensive shoes,

always some style. The young in tight jeans,
high heels—nothing like a late-night dance break
at Chico's where caliente red water y dried red chilé-
soaked flautas piled high with cheese, extra cheese,
and indulgence comes like sizzling cola.

The border refinery streams and twin barbed-wire
stretches across the river to protect freedom.
It's really cash, and everyone feels it
subliminally in the paper cups.

*

The Indio-beggar, baby hanging off her slanted back,
an old styrofoam cup held out, eyes dusk.
In the past there were droves, Juárezñas, aliens,

now scattered like tumbleweeds across the desert.
The flame at Asarco once ablaze, now snuffed.
Copper smelting killed the land; children can't play
in the sand. Languages mix—

There will be no celebrities, no Lexus,
no thin models, maybe Oscar de la Hoya, mariachis,
the musical song of a city drowning
on the edge of nowhere.

*

You won't find a beach.
Some days sand blows hair hard and skin feels
pecked by a chicken in the valley, near Ysleta,
where the Tigua Indian Casino closed
after East Texas oil men lost their wealth.
Underground water near Hueco Tanks bartered
like people's lives—but you can always find
Chico's tacos being devoured. A small pleasure
for the poor, and those who grow rich return to
Chico's because it's something of home,
something to be found nowhere else.

And why would anyone care—
it's no bluegrass bar, it's no rock-n-roll café—
no, it's slimy, crowded, sweaty. It's full of Mexicans,
a few gringos, y viejitas. Great U.S.A., patriotic home,

this is your hidden pleasure domain.

Maquiladora workers in Juárez murdered,
Mexican-Americans hating Mexicans, cumbias,
rancheras, dollar dances, quinceañeras, gay bars,
maricones dance in the streets of Juárez.
Scenic drive overlooks a million lights.

*

There is no full circle back for some.
It's all dry joblessness. Chico's, Lucky's,
and always the wretched university
with its Bhutanese architecture
large and looming on the smoggy border
like some paradoxical crime.

The Loser

Although I lost the car, the house, the better job,
my eyes wander everywhere and nowhere.

I'll dive deep into the water, splash
my animal hair. My torso sunned
and bare. I'll grow strawberries and melons,

and my vegetables will bloom dark green.
I'll dream and un-dream a million old things,
own a gazebo, a stone bridge, a palomino.

My imaginary cottage will have birdsong
and shade. The sun will purchase my gaze.
I'll count heaven in my forgotten language.

Weary of salesmen who want me to sell time,
I wander lush-lazy to and fro, sing
while trees are taken by light.

Hustlers wear their shoes shined. I am barefoot
in the stream. They left us behind
among daffodils floating in the light.
Crabapple blossoms ebb white with sky.

Mark Doty

Air Rights [exerpted]

The French Church—red brick,
never much on looks, leaning
in the direction of Romanesque—

settled into modest circumstances
how many decades on W 16th?
Nothing divine in the details,

veneer peeling from doors never
meant for here, never open: no light,
evenings, through colored glass,

though by day you could make out,
twenty feet above the sidewalk,
Christ stepping onto the waters

of Galilee, sea and savior oiled by exhaust,
nearly indistinguishable. Weeknights
lamps burned downstairs,

where a dozen groups renounced at length
alcohol or crystal, skin or smoke,
and what each circle resisted glowed

at the center of their ring of chairs,
almost visible. There you could consecrate
relinquishment, or find someone

already ruined to pursue whatever made you,
for the night, unsinkable. The coins collected
each time they passed the hat kept the church

afloat. Of the congregation eight souls
remained, Haitian evangelicals. Only once
did I see someone mount the stairs

toward those slapdash doors
—who could have missed her?
Under a plane tree clearly considering

giving up all ambition, an idling Town Car's
rear door opened, she stepped out,
and I knew at once that if she'd ever

for a moment been thwarted, she simply
summoned more of some alloy of metal and will
she drew up from beneath the pavement,

maybe from Haiti itself, from generations
that stood unbending in her, compromising
with nothing. In her green hat,

in the forgiving archways of her green dress,
her capacious purse, she conquered the stairs,
and raised her hand to open the door.

Just once. The meeting schedule disappeared
from the basement entry's wire-gridded glass,
the rooms stayed dark, addicts no longer

smoking and talking under the miserable tree.
Twilights, before they were gone, I'd walk
through a climate so thick I could almost

taste it, meet the gaze of men whose eyes locked
into mine. Was this the night they knew
was coming, the night they'd fall?

I recognized them, I wanted to put my hand
into the wound at their sides,
that we might be real to one another.

A barrier went up around the entry, papered
with signs and permits, an "artist's rendering"
descended out of the blue: fourteen stories

clad in bluestone, suspended above
the freshened brick of the dwarfed church.
A flyer in our vestibule said they'd sold

the space between their sanctuary
and heaven for a cool eight million, and units
in what would be the highest stepped-back

Nineveh tower on our block: raise the faithful high,
plunge the neighbors into shadow.
Lord thou preparest a banquet for me . . .

Workers boxed the plane tree's trunk

in a cage of 2 × 4s, heavy equipment scooped
a new foundation, hammered the pilings in.

How do they stand it, in Cairo or Rome,
when any shaft in sand reaches down
five thousand years? Bad enough in New York:

artifacts of quarantine and revolt,
bullets that did or didn't strike the rioters,
squatters or immigrants, Irish or black,

cemetery slabs etched with the hex of David's star,
oyster middens, pipe-stems, earthenware
stamped with eagles and shields.

And in the Historical Society, dug from a site
like this one, the object I can't forget,
plutonium half-life still ticking,

nightmare thing: brass shackles, finely made,
locked into place by a brass bar,
sized to fit the wrists of a child.

That sign the angel placed outside
of Eden, forbidding re-entry?
No arrow, but these joined zeroes

fetches up out of the mud,
though their poison goes on
seeping into the water table.

The backhoe clawed, rebar spiked
its way up, and some days traffic stopped
while the concrete mixer's big rotating drum

poured into place more of the substance
of our block. The city stopped work more than once.
I saw, where they'd poured the footing

a little short, workers float a three-inch layer
along the foundation-top: sure to crack,
perhaps one day to bring the whole thing down?

Though walking home, after hours, late winter,
I found towering at the center of the night
what seemed a vertical representation of heaven,

stacked episodes of the exaltations of light
—a model of the spirit's progress,
a pilgrim ladder, and where did it lead?

Unfinished, a swath of black netting
veiling the lamps left burning within,
that building would never be so beautiful again.

Up there, above the streets, might not desire
be articulated, spoken till seen through?
Now the Bradford pears open against

scaffolding crowning the new Barney's
down the block, and black girders sketch out
more floors above a French Church caged

in spars of steel, wave-walking Jesus shadowed
by bristling supports above. Do the faithful
look up toward a future in a world of light,

more square feet? More power to them
if they do; who doesn't want a privacy to fill,
or the luxury of amplitude, room for the self

to billow out in dreaming? The shadow
pooling in my street's grown cooler,
gained in depth. Sometimes I walk

a city block and notice that everyone's looking
at a screen, or talking to someone who's somewhere else,
so that *here* seems to thin out,

dispersed and characterless. I miss the addicts
—you understand I've done time in that school
of longing and resistance, sometime citizen

of the knot I threaded nights on my way anywhere,
under what the builders have chopped
to a broken arm of a tree.

Nearly everything we said beneath it
concerned our endless desires,
the thing that doth shine and so torment us,

our coins passed from hand to hand

until their inscriptions all but wore away.
Those old longings—at least

we said them to each other. *We are*
of interest to one another, are we not?
The evangelical woman, she of the superb hat,

will she look down from that glassy paradise
and find me of interest, or the men and women
who unroll blankets over flattened cardboard

under Barney's stainless awning,
its steel-cloud sheen? They sleep
and dream before a chamber

gleaming with refusal all night,
inviting no one in, sealed plate glass
displaying—ready?—necklaces,

shown on featureless, streamlined busts
under relentless halogen
the better to foreground *shine*.

Three yards away, tulips fenced
in iron spear-tips wrap wings
around their furnace flames,

heat drawn up from the center
of the earth: a strength never bridled yet.
Even the mutilated tree aura'd

in a froth of green: no intention to quit,
none whatsoever. The tower's blank surface
offers fewer chances to engage,

an old church's ramshackle intimacy
shrinks beneath what we all see coming:
a seamless façade interested only in itself,

hulking over the red brick it doesn't crush
because—why should it? The air rights
are for sale. Fit yourself around

whatever it is you want, pay them
some fraction—enormous, in their eyes,
but nothing to the unreal numbers

you'll accrue. Build, and keep on display
what you swallowed to erect this chilly
Babel tower on my block.

I'm all judgment, I know; the Congregation
won't regret the sale of light and air,
and those who sleep on Seventh Avenue,

their midnights raked by precious glitter—
on the space between their skulls
and the empyrean, no one puts a price.

The new tower's a glacial expanse.
The tulips ember in their spiky bed.
We dwell down here in shadow and in spring.

III. QUESTIONS FOR AWP PANELISTS

1. Perhaps we can begin can by asking the three of you to talk about your own experiences—how your relationship with money or capital shaped your journey toward becoming a poet?
2. Can you talk about how and why the reality of money (in all its guises) came into your writing—why addressing capital as a subject matter came to seem necessary to your work as a poet?
3. [In last five minutes....] Given current economic issues and the state of American capitalism, what do you want to read about in poems right now – what subject matter would you like to see addressed in “the poetry of capital” in 2022 and going forward?

Thanks to our poets for participating in this panel. To AWP for hosting it. And to all of you, who have joined in virtually! A reminder that the anthology containing poems and essays by these three remarkable writers—and 40-plus more—is available from online booksellers and at the AWP Bookfair.