



Bodies on the Line: Performance and the Sixties Poetry Reading (Contemp North American Poetry)

Raphael Allison

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Bodies on the Line offers the first sustained study of the poetry reading in its most formative period: the 1960s. Raphael Allison closely examines a vast archive of audio recordings of several key postwar American poets to explore the social and literary context of the sixties poetry reading, which is characterized by contrasting differing styles of performance: the humanist style and the skeptical strain. The humanist style, made mainstream by the Beats and their imitators, is characterized by faith in the power of presence, emotional communion, and affect. The skeptical strain emphasizes openness of interpretation and multivalent meaning, a lack of stability or consistency, and ironic detachment.

By comparing these two dominant styles of reading, Allison argues that attention to sixties poetry readings reveals poets struggling between the kind of immediacy and presence that readings suggested and a private retreat from such performance-based publicity, one centered on the text itself. Recordings of Robert Frost, Charles Olson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Larry Eigner, and William Carlos Williams—all of whom emphasized voice, breath, and spoken language and who were inveterate professional readers in the sixties—expose this struggle in often surprising ways. In deconstructing assertions about the role and importance of the poetry reading during this period, Allison reveals just how dramatic, political, and contentious poetry readings could be. By discussing how to "hear" as well as "read" poetry, *Bodies on the Line* offers startling new vantage points from which to understand American poetry since the 1960s as both performance and text.

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