

December 20, 2020

Dear Community,

Thank you for your patience while awaiting a further update on why, on December 11th, we removed the Open Letter to Poets House from this space.

We remain committed to the conversation initiated in our letter. However, a week ago, we became aware that ad hominem actions had been taken against individual members of the PH Board, referencing, among other things, the [Hyperallergic article](#) featuring our letter. That our letter would be used in a targeted manner to damage the reputations of specific Board members upset us and some of the letter's original signatories greatly. We took the letter down in order to help de-escalate the situation and allow the larger conversation to continue in good faith. We believe that this has been achieved.

The debate on calling out as political action is continuous, but many or most of us who consider ourselves part of the Belladonna\* Collaborative find ourselves politically and psychically opposed to this sort of retribution—especially as it was and is most often used against people who are more our friends than our opponents and, in this particular case, the few poets, as well as women and folks of color, who sit on the Poets House Board. These attacks were deeply disturbing, and even triggering, to members of Belladonna, to signatories of the letter, and to several former PH staff, who now no longer feel it is tenable to organize through the semi-anonymous FKA Poets House Staff group.

We would like to believe that it is possible to protest, resist, and argue within our community without taking retaliatory action. We would like to resist the temptations of enemy-formation as a tactic and continue talking. The problems that led up to the desire to unionize at Poets House are serious but are not, as we noted in our letter, by any means unique to that organization. The mass layoff at Poets House was shocking and upsetting for many reasons, and the organization's Board and leadership realize that initial communications elided many of the issues around the layoffs in ways that did not inspire trust or confidence.

To be clear, the writers of the open letter stand behind its content and intent. We are publishing it [here](#) in a non-editable PDF version, alongside a detailed [response](#) we just received from the Poets House Board. A week ago we recognized that the situation was dynamic in many respects and, most of all, that the Board took the community's demands quite seriously. We began to hear direct and public address of the matter by Board members. We wanted to hear what those members had to say.

We don't see ourselves as arbiters of the dispute between former PH staff and the PH Board and management; we see ourselves as part of an engaged community. We hope that a more clear and sensible correspondence between the Board and the community is established as a porous and breathing body that informs the shape of the next iteration of Poets House, especially one that includes former staff and stakeholders of Poets House.

And we hope that other organizations within our community will use this situation as an opportunity to look inward and address problems within while supporting solutions all-around. We at Belladonna\* have already begun an internal process to better support the brilliant people on our staff materially and in terms of sharing expertise and time. This will be an ongoing, and perhaps difficult process, but we are committed to it.

We are so grateful to the nearly 400 poets and arts workers who signed our letter asking for community dialogue and a deeper accounting of what led to the abrupt closure of Poets House and wholesale layoff of Poets House staff. We are grateful to former staff for speaking up when they felt that a critical piece of this story was being obscured by the initial press release announcing the immediate and indefinite closure of Poets House due, exclusively, to a financial crisis precipitated by COVID-19. We also appreciate the PH Board of Directors' readiness to engage in an open dialogue with their community about organizational breakdowns and avenues for remediation.

It is our hope that the display of engagement and solidarity that coalesced here will be channeled to organizational self-reflection and action—for all our organizations. For a fuller accounting of the events leading up to and immediately following the closure of Poets House, we recommend this [Poets & Writers article](#).

In solidarity, with love & respect,

Belladonna\* Collaborative