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### Assembling evidence of the alternative: Roots and routes: Poetics at New College of California

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ASSEMBLING EVIDENCE OF THE ALTERNATIVE: *Roots And Routes* POETICS AT NEW COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA

Anthology editor Patrick James Dunagan presenting material co-written with fellow anthology editors Marina Lazzara and Nicholas James Whittington.

abstract

The Poetics program at New College of California (ca. 1980-2000s) was a distinctly alien presence among graduate-level academic programs in North America. Focused solely upon the study of poetry, it offered a truly alternative approach to that found in more traditional academic settings. Throughout the program's history few of its faculty possessed much beyond an M.A. degree, if that, (indeed the longest serving core faculty member David Meltzer possessed no degree whatsoever) yet the vast majority—and all of its core faculty through the years—were published poets actively publishing and pursuing further opportunities outside of academia. An early program brochure outlines Poetics as being "that which treats of the science and art of poetry in all its dimensions and questions, all of what may be said to be proper to poetry." The program thus sought to bring together faculty and students aligned, as well as allied, under this broad mandate. In order demonstrate and preserve evidence of various endeavors undertaken within the confines of this unique program we have assembled an anthology of critical writing by alumni and faculty. We have gathered material contributors produced during their time of association with the program, including samples of coursework alongside extracts from theses, in addition to lecture notes and documents (such as interviews) contributed to outside publications edited by students during their tenure in the program. This paper presents an outline of the project along with a brief history of the program and explores the thinking around poetics which defined the parameters of the program's curriculum and structure.

*The Graduate Poetics Program at the New College of California[‘s]...intent was not to replicate other writing programs, but to study the lineage and process of the poetic traditions informing us. It was to concentrate on the roots and routes of making poems.*

—David Meltzer, *Two-Way Mirror* (City Lights, 2015)

## INTRODUCTION

*Source. Structure. Line. Rime.*

*Neither a variation on ordinary graduate studies in literature, lacking students’ and faculty’s primary commitment to the vocation itself...[nor] a glorified creative writing program, lacking a thorough, sound acquaintance with the values and knowledge of the tradition of poetry..., our program undertakes to address what we see to be the character and intentions of [that] tradition...—a tradition we know to be real and which we endeavor to observe.... We see [poetry] as a singular spiritual discipline whose primary embodiment is in its own art of language, and whose motives and consequences lead out to a knowledge equal in magnitude and completeness to any other.*

—Duncan McNaughton, 1980-1981 Poetics Program Catalog

For most of its nearly thirty-year existence the Poetics Program at New College of California was concerned far less with tutoring future teachers, fine-tuning individual poems, or honing the voices of young poets, than with helping students find their way to sources that might feed their own intellectual and artistic practices throughout their lives, and with helping them find their place in some meaningful poetic lineage. The emphasis was on a sense of history—literary and otherwise—akin to the Greek *‘istorin*, or “finding out for oneself,” as Charles Olson, one of the program founders’ key poetical and pedagogical forebearers, put it, as well as on a sense of knowledge as *gnosis*, a distinctly personal cognition. “Book learning” took on a whole new meaning for the participants in the Poetics Program, as erudition and technical analysis went hand in hand with visionary interpretation and personal exegesis.

Who was reading a poem was understood to determine how it was read, and who had written it, how it was written. The type of critical writing the faculty modeled and encouraged feigned neither distance nor detachment, but proudly claimed and displayed its personal investment and poetical engagement. Such writing often concerned itself with academically peculiar subjects (or peculiar aspects of academically common ones), and often took idiosyncratic form, but remained nonetheless rigorously analytical in nature.

To quote further from the first Poetics Program catalog, from which the epigraph to this introduction comes:

Our subject is poetics, which is to say..., that which treats of the science and art of poetry in all its dimensions and questions, all of what may be said to be proper to poetry. The endeavor is immense, and we do not propose ourselves competent to address more than a small portion of what poetics may actually and legitimately include.<sup>1</sup>

The faculty is comprised of persons who cannot be said to be in any easy or specious agreement on the terms of their vocation..., a faculty which is responsible to the subject as poets and teachers..., working artists who, while their procedural bases vary greatly, as do their respective dispositions to the tradition, nonetheless share a common commitment to open scholarship and to mature investigation of the subject.... The subject does not ask agreement. We expect division and contest to exist within this faculty, and we believe our differences can yield formal benefits for all of us.<sup>2</sup>

Such study was deemed far more useful, in both the short term and the long run, for the young student-poets, as it gave them a ground from which to work, rather than merely a context, i.e. the workshop, within which to work. As critical evaluations of the Creative Writing MFA industry continue to build on the work of writers like D. G. Myers (*The Elephants Teach*), Mark McGurl (*The Program Era*), Eric Bennett (*Workshops of Empire*), and others, we intend for this

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<sup>1</sup> Poetics Program at New College of California, Catalog statement (San Francisco: New College of California, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

collection to illuminate certain alternative, indeed fundamentally different, ways and means of teaching the methods and materials of what we call Poetry to young practitioners of the art.

While David Stephen Calonne points out “...the approach at the New College—as well at Naropa—was distinctive in its effort to consider literature within the context of an ongoing historical continuum of the spiritual and philosophical quest.”<sup>3</sup> such a pairing is somewhat uneven. Calonne’s reference to the poetry program at Naropa founded by poets Anne Waldman and Allen Ginsberg may appear a natural seeming match-up, yet the Poetics program in fact differed strikingly from Naropa’s in that there was never a singular ideological literary, spiritual or other ‘tradition’ to the instruction—whereas Naropa was undeniably founded upon a Buddhist/Beat Generation poetic lineage.

In addition, our gathering offers a glimpse of the formative years and ideas of a number of poets who have gone on from their experience in the Poetics Program to become key contributors to the national poetry community, as writers, editors, publishers, teachers, and even directors of writing programs at various institutions, extending the lineages they came to recognize through their studies in the New College Poetics Program.

### *Some Basic History*

New College of California was founded in 1971, just across the Golden Gate from San Francisco in Sausalito, offering classes to an undergraduate student body numbering fewer than twenty. In 1977, the full-grown and fully accredited New College moved south into the city. Coincident with this move, Louis Patler and Duncan McNaughton created an emphasis in North American Poetry and Poetics under the general Bachelor of Arts in the Humanities degree

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<sup>3</sup> Calonne, *Diane di Prima: Visionary Poetics and the Hidden Religions*, 177.

offered by the college. In 1980 the Poetics program developed from out this undergraduate degree emphasis.

To join them in forming the original core faculty of the graduate Poetics Program, McNaughton and Patler recruited poets Robert Duncan, Diane di Prima, and David Meltzer. All three were well-established and widely-respected among counter-cultural and anti-academic circles of poets in the Bay Area, and increasingly across the country, with Duncan's work beginning to be taken seriously at various universities, as well, but it is worth noting that while McNaughton and Patler each held a PhD (from SUNY Buffalo and Wayne State, respectively) neither Duncan, nor di Prima, nor Meltzer had graduated from college. As Patler put it, "We wanted the absolute best minds we could [get] regardless whether they had degrees or not.... We always had in mind that it should be poets teaching poetics, not academics. If a poet of substance also happened to have a degree, fine, it wasn't something we'd hold against somebody but it wasn't a criteria." Indeed, the program was designed in express opposition both to traditional studies in Literature and increasingly popular studies in Creative Writing. There would be no writing workshops; faculty would teach subjects, but these subjects would be decidedly non-traditional as far as academia was concerned. In large part arising out of the faculty's own dual intellectual and artistic investments, but decided upon by faculty and students alike in regular department meetings, they tended to focus on the occult, hermetic, mystical, magical, and visionary properties of the art, and were approached via a radical pedagogy very much alive and responding to "real life" events as they occurred. For example, di Prima humorously recalls suggesting Duncan "[...]do a course that covers nonorthodox threads of thought in the West, maybe from the caves to the present. Give us some sense of continuity, how it all relates to one another, Gnosticism and the heresises and this and that.' He said, 'I think you're supposed to

teach that, dear.’ I said, ‘Robert, I don’t know anything about it.’ He said, ‘Well, that’s why we teach, isn’t it?’”<sup>4</sup>

Few students formally graduated in the early years of the program. Aaron Shurin was the first to take his degree, in 1982 writing an inspired thesis witnessing Charles Olson’s Projectivist Poetics in Whitman’s expansive line, and Carl Grundberg took his in 1984 covering Troubadour Bernart de Ventadorn, followed by Dawn (Michelle-Baud) Kolokithas in 1986 whose thesis, a series of letters addressed to Jack Spicer accompanied by original collages, was the first to fully embrace the attempt at capturing the creative-yet-critical response to poetry the program sought to develop<sup>5</sup>.

By the end of the sixth year of the program, Robert Duncan had become too ill to continue teaching, institution, faculty and students alike resigning en masse effective at the end of the seventh year. Yet when a planned relocation of the program to San Francisco’s Antioch College fell through, many of the students returned to New College to continue their studies. And the Poetics program was reconstituted. Adam Cornford was enlisted by the college to oversee the reconstruction, and he hired poets Tom Clark, Gloria Frym, and Juan Felipe Herrera to form a new core faculty, with himself at the head, enlisting Philip Lamantia as a visiting faculty member and welcoming David Meltzer back as visiting faculty as well. However, the program also incorporated student writing more fully into the curriculum, with Frym offering a hybrid workshop/seminar investigating the prose poem and Clark offering the first Poetry Writing Workshop.

After the first year Herrera left the program and Cornford reinstated Meltzer to the core faculty. The new core curriculum, “rather than attempting to cover history as a continuum…,

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<sup>4</sup> Meltzer, David. *San Francisco Beat* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001) 17-18.

<sup>5</sup> Excerpts from all three of these theses are included in our anthology.

[was] built around four moments of rupture and rapid transformation”<sup>6</sup> initially dubbed The Birth of the Modern, 1580-1660 (Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Herrick, and Milton); The Romantic Revolution, 1780-1830 (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and the Shelleys); American Vistas (later changed to Making It New), 1820-1870 (Dickinson, Whitman, Emerson, Melville, and Poe); and The Great Divide (later changed to Shocks & Breaks), 1900-1950 (Crane, H.D., Hughes, Moore, Olson, Pound, Stein, Stevens, and Williams). Coursework was “designed to teach not only history but two different axes in reading and textual analysis... the *technical-interpretive*: reading for poetic craft and denotative content,...[and] the *historical-analytic*: reading for ideological assumptions, for structure, for relation to genre, to the vernacular and other discourses of the period,”<sup>7</sup> with each semester offering twinned classes: a historical-analytic “survey” course (i.e. context, as poet Robin Blaser describes in his own 1975 class proposal for "The Arts in Context: Outline of a course in the Renaissance Context" at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, “the course should present the way the art of the period entangles men and women with the world---their beliefs and disbeliefs included.”<sup>8</sup>) and a technical-interpretive “major authors” course.

As we gathered materials for our project and reflected upon writing this thumbnail history of the Program, we came to a general agreement that there were three distinct periods of development: 1) there was the initial incarnation of the program in the early and middle 1980s, 2) the reincarnation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and 3) the final phase of its existence,

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Miriam Nichols, *A Literary Biography of Robin Blaser: Mechanic of Splendor* (Palgrave, 2019), 144.



which can be dated to the middle-1990s when the Program underwent another major structural change with the introduction of the MFA.

### *Our Project*

The majority, though not all, of the work included here was submitted by the authors in response to an open call we first circulated in the Spring of 2015 to those we knew to have been affiliated with the program in one capacity or another, and which we then circulated ever more widely in the months and years to follow as names were added to our list. To ensure that our project truly reflected the community ethos behind the program, we have tried to include work from everyone who responded to that call with a submission that arguably fit our parameters: critical prose written at the time of the author's affiliation with the program. "Critical prose" was here construed quite broadly to accommodate a wide range of forms and degrees of formality, but we refused "poems" so that we might focus on the type of work that made the Poetics Program distinct. Moreover, while our preference was for work written in the context of the program proper, e.g. Masters theses and class papers, we also accepted work written outside the bounds of coursework, e.g. editorial statements for independent publication projects, understanding that the curricular and the extracurricular are ever in direct conversation.

Unfortunately, some former students and faculty we would have liked represented here were unable to turn up decades-old work from their New College days that fit these parameters, and others, of course, never responded despite our attempts to reach them. Happily, we were able to include many pieces that were not submitted but which we located while on our own research dives into one or another little magazine or in various archives housed at Stanford, SUNY

Buffalo, and the Universities of California at San Diego and Berkeley.<sup>9</sup> However, inevitably there remain a number of omissions that we sincerely regret. It would have been impossible, of course, to include everyone who ever took part in the program. No collection can be comprehensive in that way, but we do believe ours is at least representative.

We have included work from prominently published poets with established careers alongside work from poets with little or no publication record to speak of, and we have been guided in doing so by some words of Duncan McNaughton, from a Poetics Program brochure statement included in this anthology, where he writes:

The old bourgeois/aesthetic yoking of suffering and creativity has made a totally false romanticism out of which poetics must cut itself and poetry and the future of poetic action. I am interested to see if the sort of basic schoolwork we are doing here can provide some concrete accomplishment in that direction. And I have already seen, in the work of students, what I believe to be real work that I and others can use. More and more, I think, the work from students will show me, and the program, the way.

With this as our guiding ethos, and in an effort to reflect the Poetics Program's anarchic community of inquiry, we have gathered together a diverse assortment of material, including excerpts from Masters theses, briefer essays, even briefer response papers, notes, talks, interviews, statements of poetics, and other prose writings from poets who either taught or studied (or did both) in the program over the course of its nearly thirty-year existence. We have divided the nearly 50 contributions into three sections, roughly representing the three principle historical periods of the program, as identified above: first, from its inception to its reconstitution (roughly 1980-1987); second, from that reconstitution to the institution of the MFA option (roughly 1988-1999); and third, from the institution of that option to the ultimate demise of the college (roughly 2000-2008). A strict chronology, however, was neither possible nor desirable.

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted, too, that one of the hallmarks of the program was its openness to the city and its vibrant poetry scene, and many who were not officially affiliated with the program participated quite actively in it, but these persons, too, have been left out.

Many students and faculty bridged two or more of these periods, but more importantly the types of work included here represent a range of timescales, and thus overlap and interpenetrate, as did the studies out of which these works arose. Within each of the three sections we have arranged materials by affinity (rather than by any strict categorization by subject, approach, or stance), providing an opening editorial gloss to give the reader a sense of the arc, while providing additional context for selected works. We have allowed resonances between sections to speak for themselves. What has emerged is less an anthology, per se, than a collage, or a triptych of collages, which, taken together, we hope gives some inkling of the intellectual milieu, critical modes, and pedagogical methods of the Poetics Program.

An undeniably key figure in the first manifestation of the Poetics Program was the poet Robert Duncan, who had also been central to the San Francisco Renaissance and Black Mountain movement, and whose influence reverberated throughout much initial building of Poetics curriculum. This anthology weaves Duncan's words around fellow faculty and alum in order to ground the book in his particular unique style of thinking and teaching. Throughout the anthology we have interspersed selections from transcripts of Duncan's Basic Elements lectures. These transcripts are by turns autobiographical, chimerical, antagonistic, and mesmerizing, a whirlwind of Duncan's verbal virtuosity, the topic at hand is poetry in the many-levelled occasions of his imaginative engagement. We scattered these excerpts throughout the collection as pause-breaks and signposts, elemental lore, as it were, behind much of the other writing we've gathered. We have sought to show "the way" this one small program navigated the larger waters of the academic world, cultivating a communal devotion to a practice of attention towards poetry that is wholly unique in our time.