

INTRODUCTION

In an older, more civilized day than ours—a day at least when subtle thinkers and skilled practitioners of the experimental arts seemed less at variance with the ruling powers—a range of schools opened their doors to wandering writers. There were halls of training in China where poetry comprised the standard curriculum for scholars and civil servants. On the island of Lesbos, it is conjectured by scholars and poets, Sappho's *moisopholon domos* or "house of the muses" enjoyed a lively reputation, one of several such houses. In diverse *akademis* or oak groves throughout the Hellenic world, philosophers and rhapsodists met to talk, debate, swap poems and songs, or test out theories. The annals of these "schools" comprise one of our precious heritages.

In probably the largest, most visionary experiment yet attempted on our planet to house this sort of education, a string of *vi-haras* sprang up across North India between the fifth and eleventh centuries. Part monastery, part college, part convention hall or alchemist's lab, these massive universities welcomed not just contemplatives, wizards, hermits, and yogins of the Buddhist world, but all manner of artists. Wandering the sandstone courtyards and cool hallways, writers, sculptors, dancers, actors, editors, logicians, and linguists encountered one another. Pilgrims from T'ang Dynasty China visited, as did *gymnasts* from Greece. Of these centers, best known was Nalanda University—in present-day Bihar State you can see ruins of the buildings that housed as many as 10,000 scholars at a time. The renowned teacher and Tantric adept Naropa served as abbot of Nalanda for a spell, before setting out from its symposium halls and shrine rooms to pursue further studies elsewhere.

When sophistry grows, however, or information comes under rigid control, schools that can accommodate an activist, engaged gathering of scholars and artists come under siege. The siege may be explicit or subtle, but in response an adversary or "outrider" tradition develops. Scour history and you'll find heretical schools which were persecuted, some swiftly and cruelly destroyed—the Cathar Troubadours of southern France come to mind. Other schools never

dared make themselves public—only whispered accounts remain—like the School of Night to which Chapman and Marlowe may have belonged, if such a school in fact existed. More commonly, the schools simply slip out of sight, away from the public eye. But like monasteries of the European Dark Ages which survived along the wild Irish coastlines, they keep lit some flame.

This continent has seen countless experiments—socialist, utopian, antinomian, countercultural, Fourierist, buccaneer, radical, dissident, heretical, underground. The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics resembles these “outrider” experiments more than it does an ordinary college, not least because it sets up shop on the grounds of The Naropa Institute, first Buddhist college in North America, direct descendant of the *viharas* of India, and the only college this side of the Bering Straits to found itself upon a tradition of contemplative practice.

The Kerouac School is an *akademi* of writing and poetics at which a peripatetic faculty gathers, disperses, and gathers again—a faculty that is out in the world—active, doing things, engaged. The flavor of their teaching is as various as their jobs, their lives, their travels and love affairs, their studies—it is informal, inflammatory, activist—a socratic rap or rhapsody that takes up issues as various as militant naturalism, race, feminism, ethnology, and of course Language. Yes, we invite them here to transmit their secret hard-won knowledge, to address the fronts on which they’re active, to magnetize and instruct apprentice writers and like-minded seekers. These high-altitude grounds in Boulder, Colorado are grounds which incite acts of poetic license. Grounds on which students move toward acts that in contemporary America seem profoundly subversive—clear seeing, trust in the wisdom of one’s own mind, compassionate action, and the development of a tough-minded language.

Crafted language. Hence *poetics*—which is the theory and technique of *making* something out of words. Tough work, this making—fragile as the breath it stirs upon, delicate as books, delivering messages and maps for the apprentice traveler. Is the intention of poetry so important then, this concern with how one makes it? Of course. It is likely that since humans began to speak they have

noticed how swiftly accurate language dispels confusion—lively language, free language, language that crosses conceptual boundaries to return with reports of what lies beyond. Poetics is not about rhetoric, not about the old verse-against-prose contest. A poetics by nature harbors contradictions. It takes in the vagabond phrase, the unarticulated desire, the thought that has nowhere else to sleep. Not consistency, but “what works”; what survives and lets others survive—poetics is a bag of tricks like Krazy Kat’s, and newcomers, interlopers, mavericks embellish it at each turn.

This book locates not a poetics but many poetics, variegated and outspoken as the writers involved. Each essay printed here is a *disembodied poetics*—a spoken poetics revisited. Our faculty air their ideas orally, their voices come alive for a second time—this time on the printed page. Some speak spontaneously, others spit upon and polish a well-cadenced phrase; a few request some other voice to animate their own, thus the interview. Some write manifestos, others mythologies; some investigate history and revise the past; others examine the flickering of celluloid, or the flickering out of biological species. What rises from the page is of interest, of passionate interest. A community exists to listen, and to challenge the thoughts as they come forth. We offer the same to you.

Andrew Schelling and Anne Waldman

12 October 1993

Boulder, Colorado

COUNTERPOETICS STATEMENT

PREAMBLE & STATEMENT FOR A COUNCIL ON COUNTERPOETICS

On the weekend of September 16, 1989, the undersigned group of poets, artists, environmentalists, and scholars met together under the auspices of the Telluride Institute in Telluride, Colorado.

Our purpose was to discuss the relationship of ethno-poetics—the poetry-and-culture nexus over diverse space-and-time—to the contemporary crises (ecological, political, ethnic, and spiritual) that continue to confront us as a single but divided species on a single but divided planet.

In the light of that meeting it became clear that what we were seeking in common was an activist poetics that would expand from an ethno-poetic base to incorporate concerns with ecology, language, polis, tradition, and those alternative human models—cognitive, social, and spiritual—that have always been the foundations of what we take to be a true and germinal ethno-poetics.

A poetry so centered in its mission, we felt, was suffering today from a sense of fragmentation and alienation—from the segregation of individuals and groups that, taken all together, might exercise a force larger than any of its particular manifestations. And we recognized further that what was true for poets was also true for other artists and for those whose humane practices lay outside the arts as such.

It is our firm belief that what we are setting out here is not a minority poetics but one that represents the true mainstream of the world's poetries (both deeply traditional and militantly avant-garde), wrongly seen as marginalized from the still dominant western perspective.

With that much as preamble, we offer the following statement of our concern for what a truly contemporary poetics might include,

along with our proposals for a loose alliance and interchange between poets and other cultural workers in the various worlds, local and specific, that comprise our global system.

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STATEMENT. There exist today, as there have throughout this century, poets and groups of poets and cultural activists driven by a sense of planetary urgency toward the exploration and enhancement of a deeply-rooted human and natural potential. While this takes different forms, dependent on the needs and views of individuals and groups and regions, we feel that there is a widespread desire today to accomplish the following:

- 1 to encourage local forms of expression within a global perspective—both multicultural and intercultural in intention;
- 2 to remember the sources of poetry in an earth consciousness (“earth as a religious form”—Eliade), thus to support moves toward an enlightened relation to the natural world in which we live and to those fellow species with whom we share the planet;
- 3 to recognize that advances in technology are not merely a danger to be resisted but an opportunity to advance those principles of interpenetration and communication on which these proposals rest—not least for those of us for whom language is our “proudest tool”;
- 4 to encourage the recovery and expansion of our pre-technological repertoire of powers: of body, of voice, of performance, of deeply-rooted ritual acts, of private and interconnected dreams and dreamworks;
- 5 to avoid ethnocentrism and a naive provincialism by setting song and speech, spoken and written forms of language, performance and text, on an equal footing, and by recognizing and fostering common goals across the range of human arts and sciences;
- 6 to oppose with an awakened heart all forms of racism, sexism, and cultural chauvinism, and to encourage an active

interchange with third and fourth world peoples on terms of mutual assistance and respect;

- 7 to resist all forms of repression and censorship, and to defend thereby the acts of the individual (that most local and most threatened form of human life) against the restrictive pressures of the state, of organized religion, and of the vigilante actions of those who live in fear among us;
- 8 to revitalize a view of artistic experiment as a form of political and social action, and to move beyond that to break down the barriers between art and other forms of human enterprise;
- 9 to foster alliances between poets, artists, and other cultural and intellectual workers, by reinforcing and creating networks of cultural activists toward an exchange of ideas, information, and projects in common;
- 10 to transmit to the century ahead of us that sense of mission that has invigorated and justified the formal experiments of our own time, and to bring the work of poets and artists so committed once more into the public sphere.

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Constituting ourselves therefore as a preliminary council for the furtherance of such a counterpoetics, we are committing ourselves immediately to the following steps and are inviting all in basic agreement with us to join in their fulfillment and expansion:

- 1 we are establishing a newsletter as a platform for making the ideas and activities described above available and visible both to those now engaged with them and, by "interventions" in the public arena, to those who may later come to share in our concerns;
- 2 we are soliciting brief contributions of an informational and ideological nature and assistance in the compilation of an international mailing list, focusing on individuals and groups committed to the range of goals we have heretofore projected;

- 3 we are actively planning a series of further conferences and gatherings to focus on specific aspects of the sort we have outlined in our preceding statement;
- 4 we are hoping to develop from these beginnings an ongoing organization of cultural activists and to connect, for purposes of assistance and exchange, with already existing organizations, including those outside the poetry nexus as such;
- 5 with recognition that many of us—American poets and artists in particular—are engaged in the profession of teaching, we are inviting a continuing dialogue, to supply models for new approaches to curricular revitalization consonant with the principles and goals set forth herein;
- 6 we will be looking for ways to encourage and promote the arts of translation, both written and oral, and to recognize that the ways in which we translate each other are keys to how we learn to live together on this planet;
- 7 we will begin to take steps toward the establishment of an archival repository of documentations (tapes, videos, newsletters, magazines, etc.) that can serve as a resource for those involved in the kinds of poetics we are proposing to support and reinforce.

Our home base for the time being will be the Telluride Institute in Telluride, Colorado, which has generously offered to coordinate our first activities as a poetics institute. We ask those whose concerns parallel ours to join us in this enterprise, with the awareness that what we have set forth here is only an attempt at a beginning, the later form of which will be the joint work of all who come together in these acts of sighting and of transformation.

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NOTE

This is a document of aspiration. Many of these initiatives have been put into practice at various locations, including the Jack Kerouac School which regularly holds classes and forums on ethnopoeitics and related concerns. The newsletter and archives have not yet come into existence—a task of the future for poets and cultural workers.

—Editors