

Introduction

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POETICS AND PRECARIETY IS THE FIRST VOLUME of a series that we anticipate providing reflections and explorations on the work of poetry today, in the past, and as we see it extending into a spectrum of possible futures. Every volume will center around one or two lectures from the University at Buffalo SUNY (UB) series of Robert Creeley Lectures on Poetry and Poetics. This series was inaugurated in April of 2016 with Nathaniel Mackey's lecture "Breath and Precarity," and in this inaugural year the lecture was followed by a conference marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the UB Poetics Program.

The SUNY Press series of Robert Creeley Lectures in Poetry and Poetics is intended to disperse and encourage conversation around the annual Creeley lectures and around the continuing reconception of poetry and the poetic. It takes as a given that poetics is as much a process of generating conceptual modes as it is a practice resulting in poetry. As the series' first editors, we anticipate that the UB Creeley Lectures and the ensuing SUNY Press series will feature contributions that shift the ground we think we know to enable new ways of bringing language to bear and of hearing the language of earlier and contemporary poetics.

As a lecture and publication series that seeks to situate poetry and the field of poetics as a perpetually open question in the context of heterogeneous affiliations or communities, the Creeley Lectures appropriately bear the name of Robert Creeley. Creeley taught at the University at Buffalo from 1966 to 2003. During these years and throughout his

life, Creeley's work pointed toward the larger matrix of poetry, poetics, cultural work, and affective and intellectual inquiry. As many have testified, he cared about poetry in the world and he carried poetry into various contexts outside of the academy. In the city of Buffalo, it is hard to overestimate the breadth of Creeley's influence. Everyone seems to have a story about him, as a poet or a neighbor, from construction workers to community poets. Deborah Ott has written that her founding of Just Buffalo Literary Center began, in essence, with her hearing Creeley read "Love Comes Quietly" on television when she was a teenager—an event that inspired her to move to Buffalo to study with Creeley, who then inspired her dream of centering poetry in the heart of an urban community.¹ Jonathan Skinner remembers "Creeley in the doorway of Village Voice Books in Paris, sticking his phone number in my shirt pocket, saying come to Buffalo."²

Many students, fellow poets, and scholars came to work with Creeley. One of them, Peter Middleton, asks, "What I learned? That the indirections of anecdote could be more precise than focused analysis. That answers might not be what were needed." Creeley's colleague for decades and the maker (with Diane Christian) of two films on the poet, Bruce Jackson, writes that Creeley "was the most collaborative artist I've known: writing poetry is solitary stuff, but he also did important projects with painters, sculptors, and musicians: Georg Baselitz, Francesco Clemente, Jim Dine, Robert Indiana, Marisol, Steve Swallow, and others." Charles Bernstein, another of his colleagues at UB, writes that "For Creeley, the ordinary is not something represented but rather something enacted word by word in each poem. . . . Creeley was exemplary in his support of younger poets . . . [And] he was necessary company to those of his own generation who risked the most in their successful transformation of postwar poetic thinking." Susan Howe, also at UB in these years, remembers Bob and Pen Creeley's "Firehouse" home as "a domestic but rebellious force field inside frame fields. It was good to come in. To *return* in Robert Duncan's sense of poetry as a common property open to experiment and risk at the same time teaching." We like to think of

Creeley as being, in spirit, part of the “company” (to use one of his favored words) that these pages host and that this series will continue to gather.

While at UB, in 1991, Robert Creeley participated with Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, and Dennis Tedlock from the English Department and Ray Federman from Romance Languages and Literature in founding the Poetics Program. Former English Department chair Albert Cook and Robert Bertholf, director of the UB Poetry Collection, were important fellow travelers. The program’s initial brochure describes it as “composed of five literary artists” with “an interdisciplinary approach to literary, cultural, and textual studies.” Its programs would include, the brochure states, “Visiting Writer Residencies”; “Common Place” (a monthly informal meeting for discussion and “exchanges on range, qualification, definition, and bibliographies” of poetics); a series of lectures called “State of the Art” “by prominent UB faculty in all fields,” including the sciences, law, and medicine—“on the poetics of each discipline as it relates to questions of human knowledge and action”; graduate seminars; affiliation with the Poetry/Rare Books Collection; a series of Nonfiction Writing workshops and consultations designed to develop and investigate “new approaches to critical writing”; translation; an emphasis on teaching innovative works of literary arts to undergraduates; and fellowships. Susan Howe remembers these early years of the program’s planning and initiation, during the late 1980s and ’90s, as a time of “ambitions, furies, hilarities, criticisms, enthusiasms, and disjunctive leaps.”³

The students and faculty already involved in Poetics at UB soon attracted others interested in “poetry as process.” As the program’s statement of “Philosophies” in this same initial brochure continued, “Every doing carries the potential of something new, emergent, something not already predicated by poetics. Practice overtakes theory, practice changes theory . . . To write is to produce meaning and reproduce a pre-existing meaning. . . . Fiction or poetry is never about something, it is something.” Calling poetics an “unruly, multisubjective activity,” the program itself acquired a reputation for unruliness, variously understood.

Nathaniel Mackey is mentioned in these early documents—a fact we did not know when inviting him to be the 2016 inaugural lecturer, although one that makes his prominence at that occasion even more appropriate. In a June 18, 1991 letter regarding Poetics fellowships, English Department chair Bill Fischer wrote to Robert Rossberg, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Letters, that “The Poetics Program of the English Graduate Program gives institutional definition to [the] stature [of current faculty Creeley, Federman, Tedlock, and new faculty Bernstein and Howe] and organizes our artistic and intellectual possibilities into a productive process. The English Department intends to nurture and support it in every possible way—indeed expand it, if possible, with the appointment of African-American poet-scholar Nathaniel Mackey.”⁴ Writing from Waldoboro, Maine, Creeley rejoices in the administrative support given the new program: “Dear Bill, Forgive the casual note, like they say, but I wanted to keep even in passing touch about the whole Poetics Program Fellowships proposal. . . . Happily it seems to be moving along with amazing grace.”⁵

From its inception the Poetics Program was definitively interdisciplinary and collaborative. Its own legacy of innovative writing contributed to and was generated by the larger legacy of innovative work in the Department of English and in the other arts at UB, both before and after the 1991 founding of the program proper. In music, John Cage’s visits presaged the June in Buffalo series established in 1975 and the Center for 21st-Century Music founded by David Felder in 2006. The Center for Media Studies (now a department) was founded in 1972—one of the first programs of its kind—and was home to faculty such as Hollis Frampton and Tony Conrad. It now hosts the Electronic Poetry Center, founded (1995) and directed by Loss Pequeño Glazier. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery recently hosted an exhibit titled *Wish you Were Here: The Buffalo Avant-garde in the 1970s*, which included poetry readings, media and film art, and Buffalo-affiliated artists such as Charles Clough, Robert Longo, Roberto Mufaletto, Cindy Sherman, and Helene Winer. The English Department itself included at various times Charles Olson, John Wieners, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Samuel Delaney, John Logan, and

J. M. Coetzee. In short, to study in Buffalo has long meant to have the opportunity to engage in a range of making in a community of innovative makers. The Poetics Program was designed to be future-focused, looking toward the incipient and “unruly.” This SUNY Press Creeley Lecture series will, we hope, broaden that legacy. “Poetics: (The Next) 25 Years” was imagined as an occasion for intensive reflection on the possibilities and agencies poetry and poetics bring to bear on trajectories of the now and histories-to-be. Over three hundred people attended the conference and its related events: a “Creeley and France” symposium organized and sponsored by Jean-Jacques Thomas, the Melodia Jones chair in Romance Languages and Literature; and the Creeley Lecture and Celebration of Poetry as well as the conference itself—both coorganized by Judith Goldman, Myung Mi Kim, and Cristanne Miller.[‡] Poets and critics from Australia, Canada, France, Korea, Mexico, and the United States engaged in panels and workshop seminars, organized to maximize discussion and minimize formal presentation. Appendices 2 and 3 document the range of conference participants and concerns.

Poetics and Precarity both anticipated, in its 2015–2016 inception, and marks, in its late 2017 completion, a cultural period of profound precarity. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, wars, acts of terrorism, ecological degradation, and climate change have intensified. Isolationism, misogyny, and ethnic divisiveness have been given distinctively more powerful voice in public discourse than in the late twentieth century. At times, language seems to fail, to have failed. And yet, the thinkers and writers gathered in this volume grapple with the continuing potential of language to address discord and precarity. They negotiate ways to understand poetics, or the role of the poetic, in relation to language, the body politic, the human body, breath, the bodies of the natural environment, and the body of form. Such negotiation seems daily of greater significance in a world where ideological extremity and deafness to both fact and nuance seem to reign. While these concerns were in the air as we planned the first Robert Creeley Lecture and Celebration of Poetry

‡ <https://poeticsthenext25years.wordpress.com/>

and the “Poetics: (The Next) 25 Years” conference, we did not raise them as a theme. The participants in that event, and the contributors to this volume, spontaneously forged the intersections represented here.

Contributors to *Poetics and Precarity* concern themselves with urgent issues that poetry makes audible and that poetics may help to theorize into critical consciousness, but also for which poetry functions as a *cri de couer*: late capitalist imperialism, misogyny, racism, climate change—all the debilitating conditions of everyday life. Hubs of concern merge and diverge; precarity takes differently gendered, historied, embodied, geopolitical manifestations. Some of the essays collected here take bold stands, with the ring of a manifesto. Most articulate a poetics that renders more generally what has not yet been crystallized as discourse into fields of force. They work with ideas in a plastic moment of conception, both cherishing the plasticity and listening for a mode that might help to frame questions that contribute to or affect change. Many of the same contributors also acknowledge beauties of sound, of poetry and music, and celebrate the power of community. They mark the surge of energy that can occur at a particular place at a particular moment and the significance of individuals who build community and keep it alive across boundaries or borders and in the face of hostilities or austerities. It is our hope that the conversation within this volume will build through its readers into a vortex for further conversation that prospectively imagines the concerns of poetics as a continuously emerging field.

As the initial contribution to this series, this volume attempts to position the conjunctions of poetry, precarity, and poetics in the most expansive sense. As its editors, we want to foreground the question of why it is urgent to keep poetics germane in a world of precarity.

For us, as for many of the contributors to this volume, poetics is a practice that faces the predicament, first, of understanding the political, cultural, and historical ways in which new knowledges have been produced and, second, of resisting the impulse to reinscribe what we already know under the banner of the new. While the conditions of precarity can be described with great distinction and factual clarity, the *figure* of

precarity goes beyond cementing what we know about rootlessness or fragility and devastation. It allows us to explore how we can return to those scenes and reinitiate the force of their contact. Poetry and poetics that work the ground of precarity open themselves to thinking through categories without reifying them. Conjoining the known and the not yet imagined prompts reflection on how to experience and produce knowledges through language. How do we write the humane—or its opposite, dehumanization, the inhumane, the inhospitable?

In the context of such questions, poetry requires fluidity, the possibility to use its forms—or its resistance to form—to unveil regimental cultural norms. It allows access to the problematic—not the problem—of how certain kinds of historical matter, or registers, get articulated or excised. Language potentially corrals sense. As a social convention, language is expected to perform as perfunctory or transparently available communication, relating narrowly to meaning. Poetry, however, can create a proliferative mode of communicating. An intensive engagement with what language is and does, through poetic form and syntax, can move language away from coercive expectations of meaning. Poetics is a way of reorienting, of listening, of recalibrating conceptions or acts of belonging and kinship. It pluralizes paradigms for meaning-making, contributing to new configurations of affiliation, both local and global.

This volume begins with Nathaniel Mackey's Creeley Lecture, "Breath and Precarity." In this essay, as in his body of work, Mackey traverses the liminal. He reroutes the contours by which we might approach the interrelation of poetry, music, literary criticism, and cultural critique.⁶ He unsettles disciplinary lines not simply to produce interdisciplinarity but to embolden what transdisciplinarity might initiate in critical discourse, aesthetic practice, and social othering. This inquiry undergirds Mackey's meditation on breath to register the disavowed, the unutterable, and the abrading of racially marked bodies.

"Breath and Precarity" parses the turn toward "breath" or "breathing" in American experimental poetics of the 1950s and '60s, associated with concepts such as open field composition, composition by field, and projective verse and with poets related to New American poetics, such as

Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Creeley. Mackey connects the acute attention to breath in New American poetics with “black music’s preoccupation with breath” embodied in the work of jazz musicians such as Archie Shepp, Ornette Coleman, Roscoe Mitchell, Sonny Rollins, and Sun Ra. This interanimation, for Mackey, embeds the precarity of a post-World War II, post-traumatic historical and political landscape, which produced a cultural psychic economy driven in equal parts by “primal/primitive doubt” and the need for “primal/ primitive assurance.” Mackey suggests that when the very ordinariness of breath or breathing becomes “an object of attention, no longer unremarked on, no longer taken for granted, no longer an uninspected given, anxiety is also in the air.”

By articulating an alliance between “black music” and “radically pneumatic poetics,” Mackey points out that “breath, especially imperiled breath, matters,” and further, that “transmutation or alchemization, the digestion and sublimation of antiblack violence, harassment, and predation, has been one of the jobs of black music, black art, black cultural and social life in general.”

In the volume’s next essay, “The Ga(s)p,” M. NourbeSe Philip responds to Mackey’s cultural and political exploration of poetics in the middle and late twentieth century by turning to feminist alternatives and grounding for the experience and perceived histories of breath and precarity. Philip asserts that “someone breathes for us” before we begin our own breathing in life, and then explores how the fact of maternal breathing affects our experiences of being, connectivity, and precarity. Reflecting on the labor of birthing in relation to writing, through the figure of breathing for others, Philip concludes by turning to her own long poem *Zong!* as she perceives its “ga(s)ps.”

Jennifer Scappetone’s essay, “Precarity Shared: Breathing as Tactic in Air’s Uneven Common,” also takes a feminist approach, using Ariana Caverero’s philosophical challenge to Western metaphysical promotion of disembodied cognition (*logos*) over the “spirit”/breath of speech to argue for the recuperation of embodied breathing and spoken interchange as crucial to understanding human thought and experience. Sites of political interaction are directly related to the immediate shared “medium of

vocality,” or air, which has “material conditions that determine one’s ability to participate in the political realm.” Poetry, Scappettone proposes, takes *inspiration* literally, and thereby enables us to contend with the question of how to survive what is in our air, or “flawed commons”—a proposition she examines in the work of poets from Coleridge to Claudia Rankine.

The following two essays, by Elizabeth Willis and Vincent Broqua, echo Mackey’s representation of Creeley’s historic contribution to our sense of the sound and rhythm of the poetic line through focus on the UB Poetics Program, Creeley’s intellectual home for so many years.

In “On Not Missing It,” Willis remembers what it was like to be a student in the years preceding and following the founding of the Poetics Program, with reflections on belatedness and the serendipities of timing that could not have been planned to produce the energies of innovation they did. In “Here and Elsewhere,” Broqua rehearses more formally the history of the program’s importance, both in its relation to Creeley’s conception of community and in poetry communities later developed in France and the UK, which were modeled on the UB Poetics Program.

Joan Retallack’s essay, “Constructive Alterities & the Agonistic Feminine,” continues questioning what she has pursued in earlier work on “the agonist efficacy” or “productively contentious agency” of experimental feminine dynamics in relation to alterity.⁷ In particular, Retallack presents her concept of “poethics” as a feminist counter to the ethical implications of Emmanuel Levinas’s “asymmetrical formulation of feminine alterity.” Thinking through definitions and histories of the “Anthropocene,” with reference to Sherry Ortner, Naomi Klein, and Simone de Beauvoir, among others, Retallack concludes with examples of several poets whose work arises from singular sociopolitical contexts and engages agonistically with other texts or questions in ways that (as she says of Stein) “swerve minds out of gender/genre-normative geometries of attention.”

In “Precarity, Poetry, and the Practice of Countermapping,” Adalaide Morris and Stephen Voyce address forms of precarity visible in the “globally constructed information and surveillance culture” of the twenty-first century, looking at maps, countermaps, and ways that poetry might

participate in the discussion of disparities of resources and surveillance vulnerabilities, while maintaining the kind of “pulse and urgency” Mackey calls attention to in figuring precarity through the practice and concept of breath. Critical cartography’s representations of direction, process, method, and place can, they argue, also be used to describe “multimedia poetry and poetics that troubles the distinction between close and distant readings” through modes of attention that zoom out and in.

Sarah Dowling’s essay, “Supine, Prone, Precarious,” focuses on a different kind of geography or mapping in an extended reading of Bhanu Kapil’s *Ban en Banlieue* to query ways that the “I” of poetry resonates with theories of precarity. By focusing more on bodies—especially supine or prone bodies—than on the “I” of abstract, legal, or lyric personhood, Dowling speculates that bodies on the ground may “serve as representative figures for our time.”

Heriberto Yépez, in “The Opening of the (Transnational Battle) Field,” takes on a different element of embodiment, calling attention to the “Mexican episodes” of writers like Charles Olson, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Kenneth Goldsmith, to point toward the colonial appropriation of collections of Latin American documents and source texts by North American writers and universities. In contrast to such “Eurocentric” or neoliberal transnationalism, he identifies a somatic or “*melanotropic*” field of transnational writing that “force[s] the ‘experiment’ / To become a program of world revolution / Without world coloniality.”

The volume concludes with three appendices. Appendix 1 reprints James Maynard’s “Poetry in the Making” bibliography of publications and presentation series organized by graduate students in Poetics from 1991 to 2016, together with what Maynard calls a “personal introduction to a public history.” In this introduction, he traces his own understanding of what Poetics has been and is, given his experience in Buffalo from when he entered the English PhD program in 2001 up to the present, in his role as curator of the Poetry Collection. Appendix 2 provides the schedule of events for the long weekend of the 2016 inaugural Robert Creeley Lecture and Celebration of Poetry and Poetics. Appendix 3 gives titles of papers presented and discussed at the twenty-fifth anniversary Poetics

conference, either in panels or in seminar workshops. All three appendixes will, we hope, contribute to mapping the richness of exchange in which the essays here participated and from which they have developed.

The conjunction of precarity and poetics, as we see it in this first SUNY Press Robert Creeley Lecture volume, foregrounds nonreductive, nonessentializing modes of conceptualizing difference and alterity. It imagines (and attempts to model) the bringing of poets and critics (and poet-critics) engaged in such thinking together in ways that support multiple fragilities as building toward an always shifting conception of the poetic. This conjunction lives on the boundaries of linguistic, ecological, formal, and political change—born of distress and of hope, of profound listening and of practice, of precarity and of breath.

NOTES

1. Deborah Ott has related versions of this story several times in public, and a part of it appears on the Just Buffalo Literary Center website, <http://www.justbuffalo.org/about-just-buffalo/>.

2. This and other recollections cited on this page are taken from a pamphlet titled “Remembering Creeley,” prepared for the inaugural April 2015 Creeley Lecture and Celebration of Poetry. It is available through the UB English Department website, <https://www.buffalo.edu/cas/english/news-events/alumni-news.html>.

3. Ibid.

4. Correspondence in the UB English Department Office Poetics file.

5. Letter from Robert Creeley to Bill Fischer, 14 June, 1991, on UB English Department stationery, return address PO Box 384 Waldoboro, ME 04572. Taken from the UB English Department file on “Poetics.”

6. Mackey has long worked at the intersections of language and music, citing both jazz musicians such as John Coltrane and Don Cherry and poets as early influences on his exploration of how language can engage with tonal and rhythmic structures as a form of improvisation. His books of poetry include (among others) *Outer Pradesh* (2014), *Nod House* (2011); *Splay Anthem* (2006); *Song of the*

Andoumboulou: 18–20 (1994)—which was also recorded with musicians; *School of Udhra* (1993); *Eroding Witness* (1985); *Septet for the End of Time* (1983); and *Four for Trane* (1978). His prose work (to date) consists of a series of four novels collected as *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. Also a critic and literary theorist, Mackey is the author of *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (2004) and *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (1993). He has coedited *Moment's Notice: Jazz in Poetry and Prose* (1993), *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century* (2000), and the journal *Hambone*.

7. For example, Retallack's *The Poethical Wager* (University of California Press, 2004).