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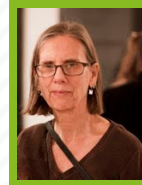
BETWEEN THE MOUNTAINS: MY POETRY GROUP IN TUCSON (2006-2010) & // AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES ALEXANDER AND TENNEY NATHANSON.

A month ago I moved from Tucson back to 7th Street and Avenue A in New York City. The financial crash brought the rents down in the East Village and I was able to find an apartment on the same block where I used to live, smaller and a little more expensive, but with a big window looking out on the park. When I walk down the street now I pass some of the same neighbors, now older, walking older dogs, and we nod at each other as if no time has passed. Four years ago, I packed up my old Honda civic and moved to the Southwest, spending most of that time living in Tucson with its wide open blue sky, on a desert plain between four brown mountain ranges, on a stretch of land where much of the violence and passion of the west unfolded and then transformed into a medium size mostly working class Mexican/American desert city with lots of artists, yogis, healers and retirees, among others. I was happy to discover that Tucson was also a poetry town.

Simon Pettet told me to be sure in Tucson to meet Charles Alexander. So when I arrived, I called Charles and he invited me over to the Chax Press studio [<http://www.chax.org/>] in the Steinfeld Warehouse, a space he shared with his wife, the artist, Cynthia Miller, a cavernous warehouse space near downtown Tucson that housed a number of working artists and also Dinnerware Gallery where later I attended a number of readings and where I once read with Sheila Murphy. When I first walked into Charles' studio, I felt at home with the smell of the old building. It brought back memories of my life in Detroit in the seventies, when artists and poets banded together, collaborated, partied together and lived in close proximity with each other. Affordable space for artists in towns where rents do not take up 80% of your pay check. Charles and I drank tea together and exchanged books and began our friendship. It was 2006 and he was also running a reading series at the Cushing Street Bar. I remember reading there in June with Paul Naylor.

Charles was also hosting a Charles Olson seminar at his studio and he invited me to attend. I'd always loved Olson's essays and it was great to read Maximus and talk about it with a group of poets and someone as knowledgeable as Charles. That class evolved into an on-going reading group. We'd meet every month at various houses downtown, in the foothills, at Chax and while I was there we talked about Robert Duncan, James Joyce, John Ashbery, Lorraine Neidicker, H.D., Juliana Spahr, Ted Berrigan, Herman Melville, Laura Riding, Wallace Stevens, Jack Spicer, Ed Dorn, and so many others. Some other regulars in this reading group were Dawn Pendergast, Paul Klinger, Tony Luehberman, Frank Parker, Sue Carnahan, Chris Sawyer

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Tom Klinger, Tony Lubberman, Frank Parker, Sue Carnahan, Chris Sawyer, Jake Levine, Lisa Cooper, Rodney Phillips. Just as I left town Wendy Burke and Eric Magrane started attending. On and off John Wright from Bisbee would appear.

Then I was invited to join the board of POG. Tenney Nathanson explains that POG is an acronym for poetry organization or poetry group, for a collective of folks interested in attending readings and performances and then talking about them on a listserv. Check out www.gopog.org. The POG board decides who reads in their reading series and they do the work involved in hosting the writer and running the reading. I was surprised to discover how much work was involved—writing grants, pr, corresponding with writers, making fliers, setting up dinners and potlucks and fund raising activities, entertaining the writers, and endless phone calls, meetings and emails. I remember at my first meeting when the first call for volunteers to do something, how I hugged into myself (after years of volunteering at LIU), and whispered loudly, "I'll only write bios." But that only lasted for a short time and then I was doing this and that and that and this. While I was there, on and off some of the board members were Charles, Tenney, Cynthia Miller, Carlos Gallego, Rodney, Tony, Frank, Dawn, Jake, Lisa Cooper, Bonnie Jean Michalski, Anna Fulford, Laynie Brown, and Sue Carnahan. These folks became an important part of my daily life and community, my poetry family.

Today I'm looking out the window at the pale blue, almost gray New York sky and the criss-crossing branches from the trees in Tompkins Square. In Tucson perhaps I'd be biking across Campbell, taking a deep breath as I coasted into U of A, the most unusual looking campus I've ever seen, with expansive space and the mountains in the distance, before, behind and all around. Two rows of palm trees cut the path through the campus, their shadows following the movement of the sun. It always felt like I had entered a grand palace on a universal scale and the palm trees were the soldiers lined up along the side, waiting for the king and queen. And I'd be the stranger passing through from another time zone on her bicycle. Sometimes football crowds would gather on the lawns with their tents or soldiers would be marching and recruiters standing around at tables enticing young people to join the army. (Be a hero, go to college, and we won't tell you all the other bloody details.) At Mountain Avenue I'd turn right and swoop down under Speedway Blvd. and emerge on the other side near Helen Street and The Poetry Center, one of the biggest Poetry Centers, with one of the largest poetry collections in the world. <http://poetrycenter.arizona.edu/>

I'd lock up my bike and upon entering the library, I'd spy my friend and ex-New Yorker ex-Berg Collection librarian, Rodney Phillips, leaning over his computer. I'd stop and talk and then Wendy or Bonnie or Christine or Cybele would stop by and we'd chat. So many young and not so young poets and lots of poetry books and endless classes and events. I was happy to teach three classes at the Poetry Center while I was in Tucson, one on "Poetic Prose and the Prose Poem," another on "Borderline Genres," and another class I organized and co-taught with Tenney, Charles and Laynie, each of us doing two weeks on our individual take on "Experimental Off-Center Poetry." When I first came to Tucson, a poet-student I had worked with in Writers.com classes, Siri Lisa Phillips, took me to the poetry center the first time and introduced me to everyone there. It was kind of like I was blessed by Siri and Simon with their introductions. Thanks to both of you.

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The POG board would plan their reading series a year in advance, six to seven people deciding on the four to five out-of-town poets to invite. Tug and pull, but then relatively easy negotiations. When an out-of-town poet who was not on the schedule would contact one of the board members to say he or she was coming through town or was on a book tour, we'd often pull it together to put on a reading. Quite often though Charles would do most of the work. And Frank would show up with his sound equipment. We'd call these unplanned readings, drive-bys. I remember once when I received a phone call that Nanao Sakaki was in town and reading at the Drawing Studio on 4th Avenue. Peter Warshall and Diana Hadley had worked together with Charles through Chax Press to set up the reading. I dashed over and the place was full of an audience I'd never met before. Many poets live in the outskirts and don't come regularly to readings. Drummund Hadley (of Douglas Arizona) was sitting next to me, leaning over to see what I was writing in my notebook. In the middle of Nanao's reading, he stood up and read a poem, a tribute to Nanao. He had known him in the past. That night Harris Schiff sent an email to me asking me to pass his regards to Nanao, they had travelled together years earlier in Europe, but Nanao was already out of town and on his way to another US city. Now he's out of his body all together. But three years ago he was vibrant and alive and I was happy to listen to him. Some other very memorable drive/jet-bys were Eileen Myles and Gloria Frym. I remember walking under the old 4th Avenue bridge at night with Gloria and she was surprised that we felt safe there. Now it's been replaced by a shiny new structure. Gloria was staying at Casa Libre and she loved it there, a hidden compound of apartments for poets and another venue for poetry readings. In 2007 David Meltzer and Michael Rothenberg were on a book tour and they gave a vavoom beautiful reading in the garden at Z Mansion. When David was reading and smiling and loving the words, that's when I secretly fell in love with him. Living in Tucson with its laid back cost of living and friendliness gave me the time to meet a lot of poets. I remember sitting at my kitchen table drinking tea and chatting with Norma Cole about how we knew things about each other through a shared friend. In New York there was so much going on that sometimes it was easy for me to just stay inside at night and maybe now and again wander over to the Poetry Project, and then zip back home quickly after the last line. I remember when I was at one of the first readings in Tucson and Siri was encouraging me to go out afterwards. I said, well maybe, and then she followed me in her car and caught me turning off to go home. She pointed in the direction of Kingfisher, and I followed her there. That was the beginning of lots of after poetry parties.

There were also numerous readings at the Poetry Center. One of the highlights was a controversial Conceptual Poetry conference led by Marjorie Perloff . You can scroll down on my blog to see my response [<http://barbarahenning.blogspot.com/2008/06/dark-labyrinth-of-conceptual-poetries.html>] Also the Poetry Center recently held a month long series of readings and talks about eco-poetics. I was happy to taxi-talk, dinner-talk, and/or poetry-listen from the airport to their rooms or restaurants or readings with Juliana Spahr, Lila Zemborian, Rosa Acala, Elenie Siklianos and Jonathan Skinner. And Chax Press put on a lot of readings, too, some of them were co-sponsored with POG. POG and Chax were so close that sometimes you couldn't tell the difference. The really memorable event

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with Chax (for me), was when Charles Alexander organized the Charles Olson conference. I wrote an essay-poem on Olson's lecture, "The Special View of History" for the panel. Re-reading Olson, searching for clues about Tucson and writing the essay helped me rethink my own poetics. There were presentations by Anne Waldman, Tenney, Cole Swenson and Steve McCaffery. You can listen to us reading Olson and you can read our essays at <http://chax.org/eoagh/issuefive/olson.html>

There were also events that (for me) seemed to spin off of Kore Press and Lisa Bowden's action-oriented life in Tucson. <http://www.korepress.org/> I'm sure others were involved and maybe even more involved in directing these projects, but Lisa invited me to participate. "The Invisible City Project" was an event where local writers, artists and dancers went to locations in Tucson with spontaneous artistic eruptions.

<http://invisiblecityproject.wordpress.com/> I'm spontaneous initially but then I like to spontaneously rewrite and rewrite. I wandered around with a pen and pad, wishing I was an official dancer so I could twirl across the bridge. Then at the "Parade of Lights" opening the holiday season in 2007, Lisa and others organized a group of women (I think again mostly artists, dancers and writers) to participate in the parade. They called themselves Dorothy Thomas's [<http://www.actiondownthere.blogspot.com/>] We dressed in black, carrying white shopping bags with various slogans for peace and a candle inside each bag. We didn't speak, but instead passed out flyers against the war and asked for donations to various groups that promote peace. The Dorothy's won the grand Marshall prize. Walking in that parade reminded me of the "Take Back the Night March" (against rape) in Detroit in the seventies; when we marched quietly down the street in Detroit though, some men threw stones at us. In Tucson, we won the prize.

Frank Parker took me to the Desert Museum the first time, and after that I regularly took many visiting poets there. I remember going with Harryette Mullen, Lewis Warsh, Kit Robinson, Mark Wallace, K. Lorraine Graham, Jonathan Skinner, Lila Zemborian, Maureen Owen, Jeane Hueving, and Leslie Scalapino. Maybe there were more. Some poets like the restaurant best, some like the animals (I like the javalina), or the saguaro cacti, others like to study the language on the signs. If you visit during the week, it can be a meditative walk through a desert terrain, but on the weekend it's sometimes a push and shove with crowds of children and tourists.

I remember when I first arrived and the POG folks on the board asked me to do the talk to ask the audience for donations. After a dramatic lovely reading by Alice Notley in St. Andrews Episcopal Church, everyone was quiet and I went up to the pulpit and started talking about the benefits of an organization that brings off-center experimental poets to Tucson. Apparently the take was bigger than usual, but so was the audience. At a potluck afterwards at Gail Browne and Francis Sjoberg's house, Geoff Young--who was in town staying at Casa Libre--reminded me that Pound first said, "Make it New," not Williams. Did I say Williams? Yes, you did, he argued. Oh, well, early dementia.

I remember sitting in El Minuto with Renee Gladman, Laynie and Frank eating Mexican Food and really liking Renee's easy going thoughtful in the moment presence. I remember sitting on a picnic table in Himmel Park with

Frank talking about local POG politics. I remember going into down dog right next to Laynie Browne at a class taught by my good friend, Lisa Schremp. I think Laynie and I were sometimes in Lisa's classes together years earlier in New York City. I remember sitting in the garden at the Poetry Center listening to Norman Fischer talk about zen poetics and then walking over to have tamales at Bentley's Cafe. So many dinners with so many poets--Mei-meï Berssenbrugge, Charles Borkhuis, David Gitin, Tyrone Williams, Michael Kelleher, Anne Waldman, and many more. We ate Mexican. We ate Indian. We ate. We ate. At our potlucks, we ate Tenney's sesame noodles, Cynthia's enchiladas and my salads. I remember Eleni Sikelianos talking about Paris and poetry, and this and that poet, at Charles and Cynthia's dinner table. Driving Beverly Dahlen to the airport. She was alone in the poet's cabin without a cell phone. Meeting Denise Uyehara in a health food store and knowing instantly that I would like her and her artistic performances. I remember getting antsy in my seat while listening to Jefferson Carter's witty poems about women's aging bodies. I remember acting in Leslie Scalapino's play with Laynie, Tenney and Charles. "As: All Occurrence in Structure, Unseen." It was a serious-nonsense upside-down love and death and humor and confusion. I remember a fund raiser at the Hut on Fourth Avenue, Carlos, Charles, Cynthia and Tenney dancing rock 'n' roll to Mr. Free and the Satellite Freakout and Robert Palmer's Women.

My POG pals. Just a few months ago after I read with Myung Mi Kim, there was a small gathering at Charles and Cynthia's house, with Roberto Bedoya, Sue Carnahan and Tenney. We sat until relatively late in the evening laughing and telling stories. Friends. We also helped each other through difficult moments in our lives. I remember Cynthia and Charles driving me home from the hospital after a one day procedure and I was groggy. Tenney and his wife Lynda with their line of children from all different countries at a reading at the Poetry Center. Tenney gesticulating and laughing at one of the best readings of the whole three years, reading with dear Maureen Owen and her delicate precise visual poems. Crawling down the Tucson side streets with Sue at the wheel and we're talking. Driving through the mountains near Tubac with Sue and we stop so she can slide a rattler over to the side, but he goes up inside the wheel well. Where is he? We don't know. Maybe in her garage. Sitting in Charles and Cynthia's living room, listening to Frank play his flute and read his poems while his son strums on the guitar. And Laynie's little boys proudly reading their poems at all of the open readings, their poems equal to any of ours. Jake Levine with his Aural Pleasure reading series and his warm appreciation for all the students who engage in word pleasure and after the party pleasure, too. Rodney taking up the camera (after Christine retires) as his weapon-disguise as he floats around the Poetry Center readings, no one even noticing him, but he is always there. Click Click. Click. Bonnie, Dawn and Paul doing just what I said as I stood in front of them as a yoga teacher and had them lift their arms up, their spines up and then down into down dog. You are a haiku! A grimace on Dawn's face later turning into a smile. Yoga teachers can be dominatrices. It's good for you, I said. Tony Luebbeman sitting on his veranda reading Juliana Spahr's poem about 911 out loud. Behind him, the mountains, the sun and all of the cacti in his garden.

Another off shoot of POG (for me) was Tenney's Desert Rain Zen group that he started last year. Every Saturday at 4:30 at the little Chapel at U of A,

there would be a group of zen-followers sitting and walking silently for an hour and then having tea together. Someone once said, one of the interesting things about this group is that there is such a presence of poets. <http://www.desertrainzen.org/>

I missed a lot of readings while I was in Tucson because I was traveling. But what a great three and a half years I spent there. Thanks everyone.

You can see some of the photos from my personal erratic photo album. Sometimes I'd take my camera with me and other times, I'd forget.

<http://gallery.me.com/barbhenn/>

THE INTERVIEW ON POG

In July of last year, I started an interview of Tenney Nathanson and Charles Alexander about the history of . We never got to finish that interview but I want to include what we talked about here, as fragmentary as it is. Please add your thoughts, questions, and recollections in the comments.

7/30/09

Barbara: How did POG come into being?

Tenney: I could start with the very first part because that's when you were still in Minnesota, Charles, right?

Charles: Yes, although I might want to trace back to some models.

Tenney: Why don't you do that. So do the Chax stuff before POG.

Charles: Chax press has almost always had some kind of reading series or public events particularly when we got non profit status in 1986 and we had artist residencies, bringing poets and writers here, sometimes two or even four at time. We had a series of talks by writers and artists called The Magritte Sessions at Cafe Magritte and we had for about three years a series called "Hear and Now".

Those Magritte Sessions also included artists (visual artists, musical composers, and more) as well as poets. That kind of non-separation of various arts has been a basic premise in my work for a long time, and it is also a big part of my life, being married to and sharing a studio with Cynthia Miller, who has from the beginning been a big part of POG, either as one of the directors, or through me, since she has a lot to do with everything I do (and vice-versa). She was a great supporter and planning helper for the Magritte Sessions, too. That was a cafe, by the way, begun by artists in Tucson, and, while it lasted, at the center of the downtown art social life.

In that series, and others, we brought people from all over and had pretty good support from grants and everything. When I left Tucson in 1993 and was in Minneapolis for three years, that is probably the next part of the story when Tenney comes in for the pre-POG plan.

Tenney: Was it really 1993 when you left?

Charles: In 1993 I left . . . it was in July, however I was gone for a while in May to find a place to live up there and then I came back in August of 96.

Tenney: I compressed that in my head into a slightly shorter time. I got here in 85 and met Charles almost right away because he was hosting Eli Goldblatt giving a talk and I knew Eli. I didn't know who you were, Charles. I didn't know the connection to Karl Young or anything but I knew Eli from my year in Philly at Temple. We both knew Toby and Gil and those people so I went to hear Eli give a talk and I met Charles that way. Until Charles left it was just a fantastic poetry community because there was the poetry center stuff, but then there was all this stuff I really cared about, bringing Bernstein out, and it was really done through Chax Press. Chax was mostly a press but it had a very serious somewhat, sporadic isn't the right word, selective, there wasn't like an event every month. But every year there were several things that were really interesting to go to and then when Charles left, it took a while to realize it, but it really changed. There was really nothing there except the Poetry Center which was terrific, but sort of big and institutional and only intermittently of interest to people doing the kind of stuff we were doing.

A few things dovetailed. I had a couple of advanced poetry graduate students, most notably Dan Featherston who was already pretty well known as a poet and was editing ABACUS at that point. And then Jill McCartney who was not a poet but was writing her dissertation with me on Ashbery and other people. And there were one or two others, Jason Lagapa, who was also around. They were done with course work and also when I did the Contemporary Poetry Course, I thought that I always had to start with the same old people so there was no advanced poetry context for them, and no links between the academic stuff, and what Dan was doing as a poet, so I got this idea that we would start this discussion group that would be sort of people at the university and people outside. Another kind of model for that was the first year that I was here in 85. I taught a senior undergraduate seminar and Charles and Cynthia Hogue and Karen Brennan all decided to sit in. So they kind of co-taught. Well I did most of teaching but for certain sessions they were interested in, they taught or co-taught so it functioned half way between a university course and sort of a community poetry seminar. So I thought I would start something like that and then just about that time I got word that Charles was coming back and I remember saying that this was great because I missed all the programming. But Charles said, "I don't think I'm going to do that much programming this year anymore. I want to focus my attention on publishing books." So I thought that in a way this might slightly trick him back into community poetics and stuff.

Charles: Now I learn . . .

Tenney: A commitment to get a lot of people to share the burden with him if

he would do some of it. And the rest of us would try to be equal partners in it.

Barbara: What year was that? 96?

Charles: That must have made sense to me because I had been doing it at that point for twelve years or more. Even before I came to Tucson in Madison Wisconsin. Some of that on a very professional level. At the Center for Book Arts in Minneapolis, I was the head and I had a salary and I planned these things and paid people very well who came. Even the kind of grants we were getting in the 80's from the State Arts Commission and we got NEA money. It was a great event, a great series but I did take it pretty much all on me, so the notion of doing it like that again didn't appeal to me but the notion of doing it with a group of people, particularly with Tenney who was both a great friend and I can't imagine anyone in the poetry world who I have more respect for. Fantastic.

Barbara: So before you put POG together, Tenney, Charles had already been running a very elaborate series here—with a three year gap?

Charles: It was a real mix of local writers, regional writers, national writers and once in a while international writers. And some of those years I was also the director of the Tucson Poetry Festival. One year we'd be bringing in Robert Creeley, Nathaniel Tarn, and Daphne Marlatt from Canada, and Sheila Murphy from Phoenix and a few others.

Tenney: One year you brought in bpNichol to the Poetry Festival.

Charles: bpNichol, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nate Mackey, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and then the last one I helped plan but I left the Poetry Festival directorship before it actually happened was Anne Waldman, Allen Ginsberg and Amiri Baraka and the jazz pianist, Cecil Taylor which was like... I was in heaven doing that.

Barbara: Sounds quite a bit different than now. What year was this?

Charles: That was the festival that took place in 1992. I was still in Tucson but I was no longer directing the festival by the time it occurred. I had done enough of that.

Barbara: So during this gap when Tenney you were here, but Charles wasn't, suddenly there wasn't any off-center poetry.

Tenney: The thing that was slightly variable was that I think the Poetry Center has gotten better and better but when Lois Shelton was director, she actually took more direct input from the board.

Barbara: Who is on the board now?

Tenney: I think it is usually one person from either the English Department faculty or one person from the Lit faculty. So I've been on it two or three times. At any rate when Lois was on it, it turned out to be pretty good, pretty much a pork barrel, four or five of us on the board and each one of us would

pretty much name somebody. So the years when I was on the board, I was able to get a few people like Kenneth Koch and so on. But it was maybe one or two things a year at most. Charles was not doing the Poetry Festival then. That generally seemed not to be the off-center stuff we like, so I didn't go to much of that stuff when he wasn't directing.

Charles: There was a little part of that period though in the very early nineties, a group that came out of the program that called themselves "Among Other Things" and they had a fairly regular program of readings in art galleries and things downtown too. So it seemed like there was a lot of activity.

Tenney: Karen Falkenstrom was one of the people doing that for a while, wasn't she?

Charles: Karen, Roger Hecht and Bill Marsh. Also, probably the most visible member of that group was Rebecca Byrkit.

Tenney: And they brought Norma Cole down. I remember that. Did they bring Tom Mandel or was that you?

Charles: I brought Tom.

Barbara: So sporadically the people in the MFA program are interested in doing more radical things with writing . . . If you come into a program and your only goal is to get published and you aren't that interested in all the possibilities with language, you might not be so interested in going off at an angle with your poetics, besides representational or expressionist modes.

Charles: I can put it in other terms which I think were still in effect when I moved here at first in the mid 80's. I don't think I see this model around any more, but that is the graduate model is to keep on ploughing your writing and your work and pretty much alone without a community in mind with the hopes that you'd be discovered or win a contest or an award and all of a sudden the career will take off. Or your work would find a bigger audience. In my mind that's the kind of writer-think that encourages loneliness and depression and alcoholism.

Tenney: What I remember from the program a long time ago and I think is very different now is that the aesthetic was a little more focused, more things were pretty clearly beyond the pale. It was quite competitive and everybody sort of knew who the "best" students were. And I think that is very different now. So one of the things that encouraged was this quick facility so people would kind of figure out a thing that they could do well that somebody was praising and just do that and I think that in the last few years there is more a sense of willingness to try different things and not be so polished and see where it goes. Sometimes in the past, sometimes students were told that they were not ready. They shouldn't be doing that. They are only students now. I think that in that situation, too, POG had a really crucial role to play because we are sort of the place where people can go and begin to build community projects with poetry.

Charles: But I also think that what I have been told by some people in the

program is that POG and Chax Press have consistently treated people as colleagues even if they are students, younger colleagues, older colleagues, but never lesser colleagues, whereas people tell me that the MFA program has a more hierarchical attitude about those kind of things, with notable exceptions throughout the years. Early on one of the people I knew and gravitated to her work even before I knew Tenney was Lisa Cooper. She was an MFA student at the time, and Mike Magoolaghan who also was an MFA student. At the time they even edited an issue of Sonora Review that had a sort of alternative writing section that I participated in and through the years there have generally been anywhere from one to as many four or five poetry students who have been really important people in my local community and certainly to the events POG has tried to create over the last decade.

Barbara: So POG being here, inviting in graduate students and having this experimental venue, it becomes a place where students who are interested in alternative poetics can listen to other poets and find alternatives.

Tenney: In the past, I think the MFA Program probably looked down their nose at our aesthetic, but I had probably looked down my nose at theirs, too. In the last decade or so they have actually been pretty positive about letting people work with me, feeling happy when people go do POG stuff and things like that. I also think that the Poetry Center has been pretty consistently supportive.

Charles: I think that's fair.

Barbara: Could you talk about the different poetry groups in Tucson. We have talked about the program and the Poetry Center. And as I see it now the Poetry Center tries to offer to offer writers and programs that cross over different interests, including POG.

Charles: Well there has been a long standing reading series called the Lamp Light Reading Series (run so long by Roberta Howard) which has always been almost exclusively local poets, once in a while with a friend of a local coming in to read, in a once a month series that also has an open reading as a major component of that and when I first moved to Tucson that had been already been going on for a while.

Barbara: Is it still going n now?

Charles: Yes, it is still going on now. One of its key central people at that time was the poet Will Inman who has a long history in poetry and is a very Whitmanic bardic poet and he unfortunately has been in a home for the last several years. Great guy. Difficult, curmudgeonly guy, helpful and still sometimes difficult. I love him but we have not always gotten along.[Will Inman died this past year on October 3, 2009.]

Barbara: What kind of poetics?

Charles: I think of his poetics as somewhat political, definitely humanistic. Not the school of quietude. It is not always that studied and trained by the

academy. It is not academic. It relates to the academic, to the spoken words, but it's been a populist poetry movement. If you are around Tucson long enough, you'll probably be invited to read. I've been invited, have you ever?

Tenney: Never

Charles: Roberta Howard was such an important part of that group.

Barbara: Who runs it now?

Charles: I'm not sure. I believe their monthly thing was happening at a Best Western Hotel on Stone. I think it moved somewhere else.

Barbara: I think when Michael Gregory read and I went to that hotel for the National Writers Union Series.

Charles: That's different. That's a relatively new series. That's David Ray, primarily. He moved to Tucson much later but there is a little scene of friends around David Ray and long time National Poetry program on the radio from the East Coast somewhere or possibly the Midwest. I'm not sure. There is intermixing though our friend Tim Peterson who was here in Tucson as part of POG, part of the program and also got together with David and Judy Ray and almost on a weekly basis talking poetry and poetics. I do think of that as a fairly populist political group and it has stretched out to include somebody like Michael Gregory in Bisbee.

Barbara: Michael's work is political.

Charles: Michael's work is political and aware of a modernist tradition but it has a little bit of trouble embracing some aspects of the modernist tradition. I have a lot of respect for his work

Barbara: Is there a group of performance poets?

Charles: In the last ten years there has been a spoken word/performance/slam poetry group—Theresa Driver who was until fairly recently director of Tucson Poetry Festival has been at the heart of that. They now have a series at Bentley's once a month.

Tenney: Do you remember Dennis Prieto? There were also terrific undergraduates around. Dennis was a lit creative writing major, a nice guy who went on to do an MFA at Iowa and then got a law degree and is now a lawyer in Newark but Dennis actually created the slam poetry at the Club Congress in 1990. That was pretty cool, I thought.

Charles: That takes me back to that period and even the mid 80's when part of my community here was verbal performance art. I wouldn't call it slam poetry but it included the performance group, The Little Dinks that were Imo Baird, Dan Buckley and Craig Zingg, included some of the work of the artist Dennis Williams. These were performed more in art galleries and on the street. They were really smart. Some of them were visual art people and there was a performance scene at the Club Congress that was run by Robert Bray, I think that was his name, who ended up becoming really active in

AIDS Foundation work. There was a scene and there was interaction between visual artists and performance arts and at least my end of the poetry world. I at times read with these people and did things on the street and performed with them and was in plays by Dennis Williams and it was exciting.

Barbara: Have we pretty much covered the groups?

Tenney: Annie Bunker, the dance thing was part of that too.

Charles: Yeah Annie Bunker and Orts Theater of Dance often found poets and asked them to get involved with performances and different kinds of poets. And there was also the Casbah. They had a tea house Buddhist poetry scene with Tom Cox. . . I'm sure I'm missing things too

Barbara: I'm trying to get a sense of this. If in the middle of these groups, Charles leaves and you notice something is missing, what is it exactly that is missing?

Tenney: Charles has more energy than me and I'm also centered in the university so I wouldn't have been as enthusiastic and patient with going around to a variety of things that aren't exactly what I was interested in and seeing what the community scene was. For me what was missing was the thing that comes out of the New American Poetry and that again may be very narrow to say that that wasn't going on here. There was probably some of it. But I think what Ron would call formally innovative poetry that I would associate with the Donald Allen anthology. It just wasn't here.

Charles: I got a lot of shit when I was first in town from some communities that thought I was only about language poetry and I brought language poetry to Tucson and what a terrible thing to do. But in fact I was always Language Poetry plus objectivist poetics and black mountain poetics and New York School poetics. I was interested and involved in all of that. It was never that narrow for me. And if you look at the Chax Press publications from the very beginning, it was never that narrow.

Tenney: We started POG as a discussion group.

Barbara: Why did you name the group POG?

Tenney: We wanted an email list with a short tag. I picked POG as having some relation to poetry group, then Dan Featherston said it was a cool name because there's some kid's game called Pog (but pronounced poge) and so we started calling ourselves that. Plus in some way it really doesn't stand for anything, and we liked that.

Barbara: Who else was there besides you and Dan?

Tenney: Dan, Jill McCartney—not a poet, getting a Ph.D. here, high level soccer player from North Carolina—so when she was a graduate student here she became the assistant coach to the women's soccer team and so she left to take a job in southwest Minnesota to become the soccer coach. She was teaching also half time for the English Department—if she finished her

dissertation—and the other half was the soccer coach, but she ended up not finishing. But the first couple years of POG, Dan and Jill, Charles and me were doing the grant writing and things like that. Kali Tal was an American Studies person from Yale and she got a job here and she was a poetry publisher of working class political poetry through Burning Cities Press and a magazine Vietnam Generation.

Charles: I think she has to have been one of the most radical professors they ever had at the University of Arizona and I mean that in a very loving and positive way.

Tenney: She ended up getting fired and suing them and winning and it was a very nationally visible thing, very complicated. She was very forceful but with people she liked she was incredibly sweet. She was one of the main cooks for the benefit dinner we did the first time. She was great. Lisa Bowden was a participant. When Lisa founded Kore, she disappeared from POG.

Charles: That's not right. She and Karen Falkenstrom got equipment when I left to go to Minnesota and they formed Kore right then. So Kore was an ongoing thing but maybe Kore hadn't blossomed yet. She worked with me at Chax for five years.

Tenney: For a while there was some ambivalence for some people about the public programming part, but Charles really wanted to do that. Lisa Cooper was more interested in the discussion group part.

Charles: Dan Featherston really wanted to do public programming. I remember having some ambivalence about it myself. I was kind of happy when it happened, but I didn't want to lose the discussion group, getting together to present what we were working on here in the community, to each other and we did lose that.

Tenney: Yeah we did lose it. It disappeared for a year and then we tried to revive it and Lisa actually came to one or two things but the attendance was really low, two or three people, so we gave up on it. I think that the POG-at-home stuff that we started right when you got here Barb was an attempt to revive some version of that. but again that faded. I guess partly because it ran into the potlucks and the need to make money. So the notion that we were going to meet every second month.

Charles: I kind of wish Cynthia was here. I don't remember her at the meetings with Dan and Khali and all, but she was at least peripherally involved. And when we started doing the very first events, they were often in our studio or in an empty space next to our studio and included presentations by visual artists, including Margaret Baily Doogan and Jim Waid and that ended up becoming an important part of the POG directive for the first several years. Sometimes it still surfaces when we have an artist or musician present. And Cynthia is now more involved than ever—plus I think my own involvement would be impossible without hers.

Tenney: What do you think happened to that? Why don't we do it anymore

Charles: Well I think that one thing that happened was that I sort of

exhausted the people I was closest to in the visual arts community who I knew could really do a good job and then it was going to become harder work to find others and I guess I felt like Cynthia and I would have to drive that part to keep it going.

Barbara: Well we don't have other visual artists on the board, except for Cynthia.

Charles: Now it seems as if the majority of persons on our board are totally uninterested in that.

Barbara: I don't think they are totally uninterested, but I think our reason for being on the board has to do with poetry and writing even though we are interested in visual projects, too.

Tenney: Sometimes they were kind of flat, but sometimes they were really interesting. Annie Bunker's dance thing was fantastic.

Charles: Victor Masayeva video art thing was great. Barbara Penn's things with great. Jim Waid paired with Will Alexander. That was dynamic.

Tenney: And Eno Washington . . . incredible. He's a dancer and a dance historian.

Charles: It wasn't always visual artists. Musical stuff. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge read and we had an event at the Pima Music Hall.

Tenney: That was great.

Charles: Larry Solomon who is an avante garde composer and pianist was paired with her. He presented a prepared piano event and it was great.

Tenney: It was when an artist would do some combination of performing and talking about what they did. So he talked a lot about what he did. There was always a sense that we had done something fairly right pairing the two people so that they implicitly or explicitly combined well.

Charles: I thought the events, maybe except for one or two, were consistently really good. What I hoped would happen in terms of interpenetration with audiences didn't often happen. For some reason the other artists, visual, dance, weren't able to pull their community into going to what they perceived as a poetry event. So it was the artist doing their thing for the poets. Or the musicians doing their thing for the poets. which was satisfying for me and the audience but maybe not entirely for them.

Tenney: We were hoping in some way to stir the waters a little and get the poetry out and make the poetry more interesting. There was a year or two where we were kind of committed to doing half the people as visual artists and I had a feeling from you and Cynthia that it ceased being a pleasure and became more like racking your brains for somebody plausible. From that point it seemed a little forced.

Charles: And then one of the last people we tried to get was Greg Benson. I

thought it was his problem but then it seemed like it was a misunderstanding. He didn't show and I remember being so disappointed with that. Can I do this again?

Tenney: A local Hispanic filmmaker, Pablo Toledo—Joanna Hearne was the contact person who got him on our radar and I worked with him for two years, an endless amount of work to pin him down for a date. One time he cancelled the date and the other time after 30 emails back and forth, he stopped answering. I felt like I was spending way more energy than I should for the little part I was doing. Charles did almost all of it.

Barbara: I just want to back track a little bit. POG started as a discussion group and so the discussion group was bringing your own work and reading it and talking about it.

Tenney: There was a third thing. I'm not sure if it was POG or not. We met at the poetry center, the thing you guys are doing when you meet and talk about a writer. We had a version of that with Barbara Cully and others. It might not have been have been officially a POG thing but it was the same people who were doing POG—Dan, Jill.

Charles: I think it was a thing. Yes, I think several of us were interested not just in presenting our own poetry, but our work of reading, writing about, and coming to understand other poets, poetics, etc.

Barbara: I think of our reading group as kind of a POG reading group.

Charles: Well, at first the reading group came out of classes I had begun as a teacher, first for the Poetry Center, then privately in my studio – but it's true that one or two members were always part of the reading group. We were pretty new then too and we didn't know where to do it. We never developed a consistent identity in terms of where to do things, at the poetry center, in our houses. . . It never fully reached full fruition. When we started doing public programming, some people loved that so much that it became what we wanted to do it.

Tenney: And other people like Lisa Cooper walked away.

Charles: I remember Dan Featherston only wanting to do the public events.

Tenney: The board is so good now and there is really a sense that there are five or six of us who are really essential to keeping the thing going. Back then there were fewer people so it became an energy thing really quickly.

Barbara: How much work do you want to put into it..

Tenney: It was the same two or three people nudging people. Pretty quickly you say I don't want to do all of this.

Charles: We have a great board right now. We're all great but I'm not sure we are kind of willing to work as hard as we did per person in the earlier years. Some of us are of course getting older and some of us have families all kinds of reasons but even the kind of thing.

Barbara: I guess as poets we're all working on our projects, our families, our lives and like anybody else you have to pull back and look at what you are doing..

Tenney: This could be wrong because Tucson has a very serious writing community. But in some sense in terms of the poetics or something like that you are sort of making it up whole cloth when you do it. So some ideas talked about in recent board meetings of running a series without a lot of work miss the community building aspect of it and I think in some way the context there for the readings to happen only because of rolling around and trying to be communal.

Barbara: All of us have to do so much to make a living. And I've been teaching too much, to have a minute in between to do something, some writing, seems amazing but at the same time I have this thought—wow POG could be like a school, we could have our poetics, so many things to do, but you have to have the energy to do it. We talk about reading groups and discussion groups and magazines and classes.

Charles: I'd love to see POG bring someone out for two weeks and work for the community. . . One thing interesting we didn't touch on in the interview yet is the number of activities carried on elsewhere by people who came through and were involved with POG & Chax, i.e. Tim Peterson and Jesse Seldess.

Barbara: I think that this is a good question, Charles. What poetry projects do you think have spun off of folks' involvement with POG? Can you say a little bit more about this?

Charles: A few people who were involved with POG as students, and involved with Chax, too, have gone on to other sorts of community organizing in poetry and poetics. Two who come to mind right away are Tim and Jesse. Both were somewhat involved with POG, perhaps Jesse more so. I remember having a couple of pot lucks after readings or just to get together, at Jesse and his girlfriend Stacy's apartment, one of those lovely pink adobe complexes that we have in Tucson, in the midtown area. Jesse and Tim also both did internships with Chax Press, and otherwise spent time in the Chax studio, and were a part of my local poetry community in all ways. Jesse went on to found Antennae magazine, very low key (somewhat like him), i.e. unidentified on its cover, yet distinctive in its size and design -- a terrific magazine, since the beginning. Still going, now in Berlin. He was also the founder of a reading series for awhile in Chicago, after he left here, called the Discrete Series. And Tim has done all kinds of things, including the Analogous Series of talks on art and poetics when he went to Cambridge, Mass, after he left here. He also helped get Leonardo, from MIT Journals, off the ground -- that's a journal of digital poetics. And since he's been in New York the last several years, he's curated the Segue Series at the Bowery Poetry Club for at least 3 seasons, and he's started a reading series at Unnameable Books in Brooklyn, and most recently, he's begun the Tendencies: Poetics and Practice talk series at the CUNY Grad Center. Earlier in my life in Tucson, others who worked with Chax went on to found other literary projects, too, like Lisa Bowden's Kore Press, Joe Kish's Ready Press,

and a couple of others. But Tim and Jesse are the ones who come to mind who participated either tangentially or fairly strongly in POG.

Labels: **Barbara Henning, Charles Alexander, Chax, Conceptual Poetry, Poetry, poets, POG, Tenney Nathanson, The Poetry Center, Tucson**

posted by Barbara Henning @ **2:36 PM** **5 comments**



Thursday, February 11, 2010

New Review of Rosebud

A new review was posted today for *Thirty Miles to Rosebud* at *Paradigm Shift*:

Review of Thirty Miles To Rosebud

posted by Barbara Henning @ **3:49 PM** **0 comments**

