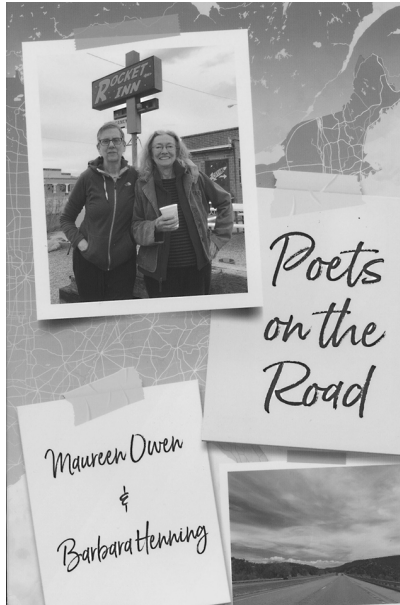


# POETS ON THE ROAD

**Maureen Owen and Barbara Henning**

City Point Press (\$18)



In early 2019, two poets drive across the country, stopping to read their works to audiences in bookstores, coffee shops, museums, botanical gardens, university classrooms, art centers, and artists' co-ops from coast to coast. Their journey takes them through the South, the South-west, and the West, beginning in Brooklyn and ending in Denver. In all, they give fifteen readings in two months and drive 5,547 miles in a 2007 Honda Fit.

Unlike the protagonists of Jack Kerouac's legendary novel, these two travelers, Maureen Owen and Barbara Henning, are accomplished poets, publishers, and teachers who have influenced and mentored generations of young writers. Their wide-ranging experience—and their commitment to one another as sisters in poetry—affords them the confidence to venture out into the hinterlands on this epic tour, come what may. Despite rain, wind, cold, frustration (no decaf in Texas), a scheduling conflict in Los Angeles (the Oscars), and Bay Area traffic jams, they meet every challenge with aplomb, relaxed and open to whatever comes next.

More than a book, *Poets on the Road* is a multimedia project that includes journal entries, poems, photos, recordings, and links to the web pages of participating host organizations, poets, editors, and publishers. Journal entries by the writers alternate, so that we see some of the same scenes from different perspectives. As the episodic

narrative unfolds, we get to know them both and come to see their friendship as a strong bond rooted in a feminist *esprit de corps* and inspired by the spirit of poetry.

*Poets on the Road* is also a detailed documentation of regional poetry communities in America. For anyone who thought vibrant poetry scenes were the exclusive province of cities like New York and San Francisco, the book demonstrates the fact that poetry is alive and well in many areas of these disunited states. Owen and Henning are met with keen attention and genuine warmth at every stop along the way; they get to know their hosts' spouses, partners, friends, associates, and even pets. Meals are occasions for celebration. The visiting poets bring the imagination into sharp focus for each community, refreshing the creative urge for all involved.

In the course of their travels, the authors meet a virtual who's who of American poetry in the 21st century, including such celebrated personalities as Margaret Randall (Albuquerque), Jerome and Diane Rothenberg (San Diego), Harryette Mullen (Los Angeles), and Diane di Prima (San Francisco), among many others. To this prestigious cast of characters are added a host of younger poets and organizers presently engaged in building the poetry communities of the future—an acknowledgement of the continuity and longevity of artistic relevance amidst the idiocy of a divided body politic. We witness the interpenetration of professional, personal, and community life, including a visit with Owen's mom in Denver. We become aware that poetry can be a bridge that connects people from different generations and walks of life, and a spirit that persists for generations.

The road trip dates from January 16 to March 20, 2019. Such a tour would have been impossible twelve months later and might even be difficult today. Reading it now, *Poets on the Road* evokes a nostalgia for better, more free-wheeling times. Yet history enters the flow through keen observations of dire signs of the times. In Los Angeles, Henning gets a massage for a painful shoulder from a young woman who "was tense about her next client, a man, and it was kind of late by then, 9 p.m. I asked her why she was working so late and she said, 'I need the money.'" At Venice Beach amid skateboarders and joggers, Owen spots "a couple of old timers sitting on the benches . . . tired and worn, probably having spent the night in a makeshift nearby."

The book closes with three appendices; the latter two offer helpful listings of tour dates and links to a fascinating meta-network of poetry communities, but the first provides a selection of poems by each writer—a vital inclusion. In closing I'll comment briefly on a poem by each writer.

Owen's "Dazzle Camouflage" is a kind of cubist rendering of a summer's day; it appears in three short stanzas followed by a coda of three lines. In the first stanza, the word "green" appears in each line to describe a forest landscape, as in "the great green cargo of these branches." The second stanza tells of children at a roadside stand chanting, "Toys for Sale!" The poet intuits their ulterior motive: "they plan to buy ice cream with the money." The third stanza choreographs the patient rearrangement of chairs in and out of the sun to ensure the continuous comfort of a loved one, perhaps the author's mother: "try

to find a level spot for her chair in slantedness / keep moving as sun / moves tall shadows of the pines.” Owen’s writing weaves specific observed particulars into a fabric of connection and care—a rare gift—but can also zoom out, as in the coda which evokes the surrounding auditory environment:

screeching Steller jays. Dark-eyed junco

no summer insects sing not one utter silence breaches

it’s the last of the 8th Giants up & leading 3 to 1

Henning has developed a form of writing that is neither poetry nor prose; in solid paragraphs made up of short phrases separated by em dashes, she deftly combines the syntactic flexibility of lineation with the forward-streaming momentum of the storyteller. Using this technique, the poet narrates episodes from daily life in vibrant detail while inserting memories, dreams, scraps of news feeds, and commentary on global politics. Here is the beginning and ending of one of these densely packed and utterly rich masterpieces, “String Ball”:

—the body’s organized—on a square—so says Yogi Nevine—I walk around Tompkins Square—all four corners—surely this is the center—of the universe—the goal in life—should be joy—in Larung Gar—the Chinese—are tearing apart—Tibetan monastic—dwellings—plan your life—like a chess game—move analytically—with intent—it’s very practical—the way to attain joy—even for civilians—trapped in Aleppo—with artillery shelling overhead—

.....  
—life expectancy in the US—declines slightly—be careful—it’s like a string ball—if we keep going around—in the same direction—we will surely unravel—

These representative passages illustrate the attention to detail and the sense of open-ended possibility that both Owen and Henning make manifest in their work. This beautifully designed book, replete with a generous helping of photos and reproductions, serves as an excellent guide to the possibilities of poetry in community for the unfolding century.

—Kit Robinson

## POETECHNICS / POETÉCNICAS

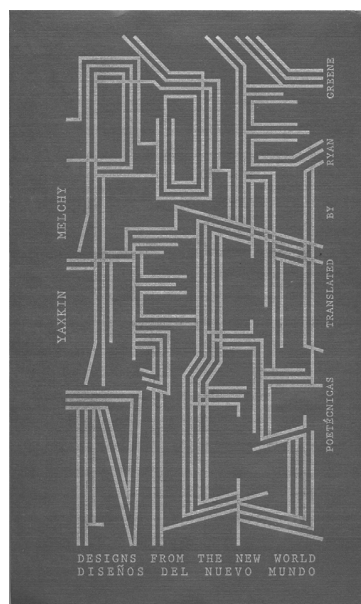
Designs from the New World

**Yaxkin Melchy**

Translated by Ryan Greene  
Cardboard House Press (\$23)

In Yaxkin Melchy’s *Poetechnics*, the reader is an electron, at once universally vast and at the same time tiny, buzzing, and valent. Melchy’s poetry lilts upon and often resists binary formulations of the world, allowing the reader not to have to choose between being digital or analog, say, but rather to float between the discrete and the spectral. The author’s background in industrial design is evident throughout—there’s a sensitivity to the forces of science, progress, and product—yet even as his poetics appreciate industry’s illuminations, they muddy the common conception of these forces as a path forward.

*Poetechnics* also includes what feels like a nod to new materialisms: “Carbon,” Melchy writes, “is an elemental notion in poetry.” So the reader becomes attuned to their carbon-ness, to the connections between models of the world and its materials. Perhaps it is the carbon in one’s pencil while writing, or the carbon in a paper’s cellulose—a material layer atop or within a tradition of concrete poetics. Perhaps it



is also an invitation to be re-embodied—after all, it is the body’s lifeforce that sustains language.

Melchy, a Mexican and Peruvian-Quechua poet, deftly enters in conversation with concrete poets such as Amanda Berenguer, who oscillates between interior and exterior spaces and uses equations as a poetic landscape. The text of *Poetechnics* introduces multi-valent, multi-versal registers of syntax, casting light on the logos of the world. Here the grapheme also becomes alive; while climbing an algebraic

function, readers are both a straightforward line in two dimensions and simultaneously “feel the wind and won’t ever think about sadness again.” The technology of language is rendered concrete, is challenged to hold near-infinite registers—it mutates between notation and feeling, between algorithm and affect.

What new axioms? What possible originating points? In histories and presents and futures of science, *Poetechnics* offers restless, green imaginations and electric possibility.

—kathy wu