Introduction to Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology
by Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden

Descriptions of the Kootenay School of Writing call to mind Voltaire's notorious summary of the Holy Roman Empire: "neither holy nor Roman, nor an empire." For, indeed, few facts about this particular centre of avant-garde writing in Canada can be gleaned from its misleading name — it is not in the Kootenays, it is not a school and it does not teach writing (at least, not solely). Given such an ambiguous identity, the Kootenay School of Writing seems hardly the best place to orient oneself with respect to Canadian writing. Located in Vancouver on the extreme south-west corner of British Columbia, some 600 km from the actual Kootenays, KSW continues to find itself "misplaced" as far as mainstream Canadian literature is concerned. If one wants to learn special arts administration skills or leverage their cultural power and influence, the School would not be a wise choice for an apprenticeship. Its offices have always been small, the furniture, used and in constant need of repair. Every address it has held has been low rent and at a considerable distance from the city's better neighbourhoods. In short, as an educational institute, KSW continues to be somewhat deficient in the day to day management of its operations. Yet for most of the writers and readers passing through its doors, it is precisely the school's failure as an institution that constitutes its unique cultural and literary value.

Throughout its existence, KSW's relationship with other writing institutions, especially those of high cultural repute and academic authority, has been one of mutual suspicion. Many of KSW's founding members, including, Jeff Derksen, Gary Whitehead, Calvin Wharton and Colin Browne, among others, sought not to establish a new professional elite, but rather to dispel the myth that any set of writings should be canonised or somehow collected as an exemplary aesthetics. KSW believed that cultural institutions that took pride in offering a well-organised administration centre usually forfeited concerns about art for an interest in management.

Where traditional art institutions promoted ideas of cultural standards, KSW writers saw only cultural elitism. What motivated the school's formation was not a specific aesthetic vision, but rather one that specifically linked cultural orthodoxy with a ruling class's hegemonic influence over a society's art and literary production. To writers of KSW, most institutions of education and culture demonstrated little save the ruling class's privilege to determine aesthetic and moral principles within society. By contrast, the poetics of KSW emerged from the ruins of privilege, from a marginalised position in society originating in language itself.

Strongly aware of the complex interdependence between art and ideology, KSW introduced Vancouver, via workshops, special readings and courses to a highly politicised notion of writing. The school rejected the very idea that cultural value could be universally fixed such as the type of merit or worth one might associate with canons of accepted traditions. What distinguished one canon of art from another, these writers felt, depended solely upon the interests of whoever held capital and power. Hence these writers openly mocked any notion of a cultural gatekeeper or priestly class managing their own aesthetic affairs. To yield in one's writing to the dominant themes, tropes and voices of mainstream Canadian aesthetics was tantamount to relinquishing all control over the process of one's work. Indeed, the poets collected in this anthology rarely bothered with the dictates of traditional tastes; rather, they considered themselves merely to be writers whose primary objective was maintain dominion over their writing.

Modernist doctrines of high culture, since their inception at the end of the 18th century, have continued to pursue a highly idealised sense of art as a discourse of moral value. According to this rationale, the motivating principle behind all cultural production remains social reform, as high art takes on the social role of a moral repository. Here culture not only preserves class rule, but also at times acts as a powerful tool of coercion, especially when conservative factions in society deem the need for moral correction. Historically much of the Canadian literary canon has followed this doctrine, with the moral imperative in modern art often increasing in intensity during times of political and social instability.

Rejecting the use of culture as a source of civic reform, whether tailored by the Left or the Right, KSW has often found itself criticised by both the leftist labour community and various conservatisms of society for not providing a more representative aesthetics for specific social needs. KSW, in its poetics and programming, has never directly sought out a particular community or cultural group (save perhaps those interested in writing), nor has the school attempted to build a new canon or representative literature. The school fosters no secret language or guiding moral and social doctrine among its writers. Rather its primary aim is to provide an open space where writers can develop and direct their own work outside all mainstream cultural institutions.

This is why KSW, when pressed for a profile, usually describes itself as a "writers-run centre." As both a workspace and a performance area, the school has traditionally organised itself at the point of production, i.e., at the point of writing, rather than according to some abstract social or aesthetic mandate. It is no accident that the house organ for the first ten years was Writing magazine. Here the practice of "writing" remains both the process and product, with the collective being responsible primarily for fundraising and providing the necessary resources. Committed, in this way, to the practice of writing, KSW has garnered strong national and international recognition as a site of diverse, innovative activity. Its programming goals have always been aimed at providing local, national and international exposure for Vancouver writing, regardless of an author's economic position, ethnic background or sexual orientation. What held KSW writers together has less to do with specific social ideals or shared notions of the communitarian good, than a critical sense of language itself as a vital source behind all community. Language and the practice of writing evoke for KSW writers the very foundations of social interaction. To write is to engage in social discourse — an activity that is as culturally valuable as it is political. Without the community behind the text, there simply would be no text.

Class analysis has continued to be a prominent feature of both the work and events performed at KSW. Since the centre's inception, its programming has reflected an ongoing critique of canons and the ideological function of literary traditions. Its founding members were especially aware of the complex relationship between ideology and culture, acquiring their insight (and the inspiration to begin KSW) after the provincial shutdown of the Kootenay region liberal arts college, David Thompson University Centre.

Upon their re-election in May 1983, the provincial Social Credit Party initiated a series of deep and pervasive cuts to government services. The central campaign behind such cuts was known as "Restraint," an effort to trim in order to eliminate what the party considered to be "unnecessary government." Bill Bennett's administration, along with the new budget, presented no less than 26 bills to the legislature. When the scissors came to rest, Education was one of the hardest hit ministries. Class sizes increased, while in most schools the number of programmes decreased. In the case of David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, the entire college had no choice but to close its doors permanently.

Thanks to the harsh politics of Socred economic reform, DTUC quickly learned the significant role class structure plays in most government policies regarding education and culture. Located in the small eastern BC city of Nelson, DTUC drew its student population mainly from the large blue-collar community surrounding the area. The city, itself, had always been an important industrial centre in BC, and though the log booms and silver mines of the past seemed long diminished, it still supported an active working-class culture, much of it supported by BC's ever-important wood industries. Its many civil service offices confirmed its importance as a commercial centre. If you had to go to court in the Kootenays you had to come to Nelson. Even the RCMP substation was in Nelson. The place was full of old stone buildings dating back to the turn of the century, most designed by Francis Rattenbury, the same architect who drew up the plans for the legislature and many of Victoria's municipal edifices.

Most importantly, throughout the postwar period, Nelson remained a heavily unionised town. Even in the 1980s its many saw mills and rail-yards continued to be union run and organised. Union logging truck drivers hauled union cut timber right down main street through the middle of town, past the Chinese restaurants and the granite blocks housing the region's civil service centres. Visitors to Nelson would be hard pressed, for this reason, to find many Social Credit supporters. The political affiliations of the city were mostly left wing, with several groups edging towards some of the extreme fringes of the ideological spectrum. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, such a political climate drew many American counter-culture activists and Vietnam War protestors to the city. Hence, despite its small size of only 15 000 people, Nelson supported a surprisingly wide variety of eccentric, highly original communities and scenes. Hippie draft dodgers routinely shared the sidewalks with Russian speaking "Doukhobors" — the latter, a group of radical spiritualists who had left Russia in the 19th century to pursue their own utopia in the new world. Inspired by the promise of the western frontier, these "spirit wrestlers," as they called themselves, had travelled by way of the prairies in search of a life of peaceful toil. They shared with the American draft dodgers of this century a strong anti-materialism, though they were more disposed to violent, revolutionary acts. Every so often when the desire for earthly wealth got out of hand the radical Doukhobor "Son's of Freedom" sect might bomb the tracks or the power transmission lines or burn down a house (one of their own) that sported a television antenna. Only fire could purify the contaminating influence of western materialism.

Other purification rituals (performed by far less radical contingents of Nelson society) included the routine police incineration of marijuana crops after a particularly big drug bust. Nelson continues to be an important agricultural district for this specific product. As expected, the various counter-cultural groups populating this area kept the RCMP relatively busy here. Indeed, throughout the 1970s and early 1980s Nelson evoked a prominent Mecca for such activities, attracting more than its fair share of artists, musicians, actors and writers. At the start of the 1980s, most of Canada's more radical intellectuals had at least heard of Nelson, if not actually visited the city. Several of DTUC's founders, such as Fred Wah, made a point of returning to teach there after living in other more cosmopolitan centres like Vancouver. They, in turn, were able to attract a steady supply of writers and artists eager to meet and interact with the city's varied cultural groups and networks.

Opening in 1978, David Thomas University Centre quickly became the intellectual centre of Nelson, providing much needed teaching jobs for writers like Wah, Tom Wayman, David McFadden, John Newlove and Colin Browne. Combined with the city's dynamic cultural context, DTUC presented an almost ideal institutional setting for any students or teachers interested in less

conventional approaches to art and writing. Although it was unable to award actual university degrees, it did provide its own two-year writing diploma complete with university transfer courses underwritten by the University of Victoria. There was even an independent writing journal, the aforementioned Writing, founded in 1981, to help publish and distribute the new work being produced there. McFadden was Writing's first editor, followed by Newlove in 1982. The magazine would survive the school's move to Vancouver, becoming under the editorial collective headed by Browne and Derksen, just as essential there as it was in Nelson. As the 1980s began, therefore, the immediate social potential of this school seemed practically limitless. Centred prominently within a politically active, culturally exciting environment, far from the official eyes of Ministry of Education bureaucrats, DTUC was able to pursue a much more progressive pedagogy than other mainstream post-secondary institutions. Its approaches to teaching and education extolled an image of innovation as well as autonomy across the country. Identifying with neither conventional colleges nor large city campuses, DTUC prided itself on its fierce, almost anti-institutional independence in programming. Such a counter-cultural attitude, as we've seen, fits in well with the general political heritage of this area of BC.

Nelson continued to attract throughout the late 1960s and 1970s a significant contingent of leftist intellectuals and "avant-garde" writers and artists. Both Newlove and Wah, like many other Western Canadian writers, did time in Vancouver at the university, but they would eventually return to the interior. This is not to suggest that the university disappointed Newlove's or Wah's literary aims. Far from it. At the University of British Columbia, almost twenty years before the founding of DTUC, they became part of a group of aspiring writers collected around the theorist and critic Warren Tallman. Tallman was an important figure in the more experimental writing circles in Canada, especially on the West Coast, as he had worked closely with many prominent, poets in the US throughout the 1950s. In 1960 he co-edited with Donald Allen the New American Poetry anthology on "poetics," investigating new strands of counter-cultural and avant-garde writing then being practised south of the border. Thanks to Tallman, these students encountered, years before any other city in Canada, some of the most current aesthetic theories and poetry movements of the US. By the end of the 1950s, the west coast in general featured a host of new centres and communities of innovative writers and artists. San Francisco was already billing itself as a leading site of counter-cultural activity. Ginsberg's launch of Howl and Other Poems in 1956 inaugurated the city as the bona fide capital of the Beat movement — especially after his publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti was arrested for printing obscene material. Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookshop and the subsequent Pocket Poet Series he published there became an almost overnight cultural sensation, attracting many would-be poets, bohemians and other cultural nomads to the Bay area.

The same year "Howl" appeared in all of its notoriety, the experimental art school, Black Mountain College, formally closed its doors in North Carolina, sending even more avant-garde writers and artists westwards. For the poet, Robert Duncan and his partner, the action painter, Jess, the loss of Black Mountain demanded an immediate return to San Francisco where they were most likely to find support for their work. Once there, Duncan wasted little time in organising special events and different reading series to introduce to the city some of the work and thinking Black Mountain had produced. Charles Olson, past rector of the college, revisited Berkeley at Duncan's request to deliver a five lecture series on history and the philosophy of Albert North Whitehead. Before long, Duncan's immediate circle of poets and artists, which included at the time, Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser, became known as the "Berkeley Renaissance;" and though not as widely recognised as the Beat Movement, Berkeley's role in the New American Poetry was extremely

prominent. By the late 1960s, at the height of the anti-war movement, the entire Bay area would be synonymous with American counterculture. Even a decade earlier, no other city in the US (save perhaps New York City) featured so many experimental scenes in writing and the arts.

Back in Vancouver, Warren Tallman, one of the most important early critics of the New American Poetry, had been both professionally and personally involved with this particular contingent of avant-garde writing right from its very beginnings. Few universities and art colleges outside of Berkeley in the West and Columbia in New York had yet discovered the fascinating experiments in writing percolating throughout the US's small presses and independent poetry magazines. Tallman held tenure in the English Department at UBC, providing Wah, Newlove and a host of other younger writers who studied there with an invaluable mentor on new writing. Not only was Tallman an experienced editor responsible for some of the first critical writings on the Berkeley and Black Mountain scenes, but he remained in close contact with many core writers, including Olson, Duncan, Spicer, Blaser, Robert Creeley and Allen Ginsberg. Between 1959 and 1963, for example, he was able to invite Duncan personally up to Vancouver three times to engage with its writing scene. In 1963, he organised along with Duncan, Olson and Ginsberg, an important series of panels on poetry, epistemology and theories of writing. Two years later, Spicer joined Tallman at his house for a set of lectures and interviews on his own work. After San Francisco, Vancouver, it can be argued, was the primary port of call for experimental writers, especially those associated with the "New American Poetry."

Surrounded by some of the most important poets of this movement, writers like Wah and Newlove could not help but be influenced by their work. The Berkeley group, in tandem with the Beats, presented Vancouver with a wide array of innovative strategies in poetry. After listening to Duncan in the early 1960s acclaim the importance of "little magazines" in new poetry movements, the younger Nelson poets, along with Vancouver writers, George Bowering and Jamie Reid, were inspired to begin their own literary periodical — the anagrammically named Tish. Tish helped organise these Vancouver writing scene as a new site of literary production. Once an official movement, the Tish Group quickly established itself as the West Coast locus of "avant-garde" writing. Tish filled many functions in Vancouver. Operating foremost as an immediate record of new Vancouver writing, the periodical also strongly identified with the American literary tradition of the small, independent poetry "zine". For example, Cid Corman's Origin and Black Mountain Literary Review as well as Leroi Jone's and Diane Diprima's The Floating Bean provided important models for Tish's format. Tish endured for eight years, publishing forty-five monthly poetry newsletters and a large number of books and chapbooks.

In its content, Tish recalled not only the importance of "zine" culture at Black Mountain College, but much of the centre's poetics as well. Again, Duncan's and Olson's unique emphasis in their poetry on the local and physiological aspects of human experience proved to be highly inspiring to Vancouver's Tish writers. Wah and Bowering shared with Olson, Duncan, Spicer et al., a profound suspicion of the lyric mode, rejecting its tendency towards symbolic abstraction. In Frank Davies's view, the poetics of Olson and Corman's Origin were a major inspiration behind Tish. Origin presented, for Davies, "not the usual aesthetic object but a field of force"[1] — what Olson described as "a REENACTMENT of the going reality of (approximate, shot at) THAT WHICH IS ABREAST OF US: now, here & now,…"[2] Tish poets accepted Olson's repudiation of art as symbolic meaning, and promoted instead a poetry of "essentials." Consistent with its name, Tish kept its gaze downward

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[1] Frank Davies, "Introduction," *Tish No. 1-19* (Vancouver: Talon books, 1975) 7.

[2] Olson, "Letter to Corman," *Letters to Origin*, (London: Cape Goliard, 1970) 10-11.

towards the object and process immediately at hand. "No ideas but in things," wrote Williams almost half a century earlier, establishing what for Tish would remain the single most important credo for experimental poetry in North America. As Bowering points out in 1963, Tish poets literally "turned their attention upon the factual things that make up the world, men included among them."[3]

Many of the Tish writers later went on to teach in different universities and colleges across the country. In this aspect, they also followed the Black Mountain writers, for pedagogy had always been important to Olson's, Creeley's and Duncan's poetics. In the capacity of rector of Black Mountain College from 1948 to its closing in 1956, Olson worked as extensively on his pedagogy as he did in poetics. "It is not true," Olson wrote in a letter defending his interest in education, "that, because of the increase of knowledge, it is no longer possible, or necessary that a man seek to master it all, all (Francois Rabelais, e.g., was right, and is right, a man is the sum of it all, by whatever method he chooses, but with that as absolute end, or he is not worth our time)."[4] Indeed Olson rarely hid his own intentions to "master it all." His poetics, he believed, could provide the foundation for an entire new "stance to reality." In 1954, Olson proposed outright that "the time has come for the men of knowledge to take over the task of making a NEW ENCYCOLPEDA…on a level of attack and quality at least the equal of Diderot's."[5] Olson's encyclopaedia did not come to fruition; what should be emphasised, however, is Olson's critical interest throughout his career in reforming and revitalising American arts education to reflect a more creative, dynamic approach to knowledge in all disciplines, not just poetry. Poetics, for Olson, meant more than writing verse; to engage in poetry was to establish criteria for actual modes of perception. Running workshops and lecturing in San Francisco in the late 1950s as well as at various universities and colleges throughout the 1960s, Olson continued to stress the pedagogical as well as epistemological import of his writing. At the end of the 1960s, shortly before his death, he joined Creeley in establishing what is still today one of the most important post-secondary programmes in poetics and writing, The Buffalo Poetics Programme at SUNY, Buffalo.

The Tish poets may have possessed neither Olson's interest in epistemology nor his passion for institutional reform, yet many of them pursued some form of teaching position after finishing their own degrees in university. Bowering taught creative writing and English literature at several institutions, including the University of Calgary, Concordia and finally, returning to the Lower Mainland in 1971, Simon Fraser University. Wah and Newlove wasted no time in re-establishing themselves in Nelson where, now armed with their own poetics and a strong interest in pedagogy, they found work at the community college. When Notre Dame, one of the city's older catholic colleges, these writers found ready support among Nelson's ever growing intelligentsia to renovate the building as a new, independent college for the arts. Here again, Black Mountain College provided an important model in this pursuit. Inspired by Olson's attempt to develop both a new poetics and a reformed pedagogy for the arts, Wah, Newlove and such recent additions to the staff as Colin Browne and Tom Wayman, began offering short, but intensive workshops in almost every area of writing, including poetry, prose, journalism and even scriptwriting. As a result, long a refuge for various socially marginal groups, Nelson suddenly acquired the status of an

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[3] George Bowering, editorial, *Tish* No.20, 1963.

[4] Letter to Carl Sauer cited Ralph Maud, Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996 102.

[5] Charles Olson, "A bibliography on America for Ed Dorn," Collected Prose, ed. By Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 307.

internationally recognised centre for innovative teaching and writing. DTUC's name spread quickly throughout various writing communities across North America and soon the school was attracting well known authors and artists for special readings, book launches and extended workshops. Both Creeley and Duncan visited the school, as well as other Black Mountain alumni such as Fee Dawson in 1980. Important Canadian writers, including Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Brian Fawcett and Steve McCaffery would also make appearances between 1980 and 1983. During its short five year existence, DTUC followed closely both the structure and tradition of Black Mountain College, encouraging a new, younger generation of writers and artists to challenge mainstream, pre-accepted ideas about art and politics.

       Given its progressive agenda and reputation for radical politics and art, DTUC must have seemed to the Socreds doubly threatening as both a hotbed of leftist thought and an important source of the decadent "liberal" excesses that had permeated education throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The immediate political context of these reactions can be located in the conservatism of the New Right just then obtaining power throughout the West. In fact, in one sense, one might interpret Socred legislation as simply the application of global economic structures to the British Columbia landscape. "Thatcherism," "Reaganomics," "trickle-down theory" and "voodoo economics" were some of the sobriquets applied to similar interventions originating in the US and Great Britain. As one group of intellectuals put it, "[l]ike many people in the province, we were shocked by the government's programme. As the weeks went by, what at first appeared a random assault on everything associated with liberalism and social democracy took on an insidious logic. It was a logic made familiar by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan: the brutal logic of the New Right."[6]

       Thatcher came to power in May, 1979, while the "Reagan era" began fifteen months later in November, 1980. Hence, at the time of the Socred Party's re-election in BC in 1983, both of these earlier administrations of the new Right were already well established in their respective countries and had initiated profound changes at almost every level of society, including the cultural as well as the economic.

       In America, Reagan's economic policies offered very little that was new within the traditional conservative agenda. Like past Republican administrations, Reagan emphasised tax cuts for corporations and the high income brackets, less government assistance for social programmes and increases in the military budget. For the most part, Thatcher's economic initiatives were similar, albeit with an added, much more aggressive focus on her countries strong trade union movement and massive social infrastructure. What was particular to Reagan's brand of conservatism was its strong, dramatic sense of moral crisis regarding American social relations and the subsequent cultural initiatives the president thought necessary to address it. In other words, Reagan brought to the New Right agenda a profoundly effective social sensibility, attacking the very psyche of his country as much as its economic policies. Commentaries on Reagan's sophisticated use of the media and adept rhetorical capabilities are numerous and well known. Whether or not one may agree with Reagan's ideology, few can doubt the incredible media presence and popularity the fortieth US president was able to command throughout his tenure. Hence little can be added here to the scholarship that already exists on the subject. Some analysis of Reagan's cultural message is relevant to this study, however, since much of its content closely parallels the rhetoric of the Social Credit Party, especially with respect to its "Restraint" programme. Like Reagan three years previously, the Socreds effectively announced a crisis situation within the BC "everyday." A new class struggle had

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[6] William K. Carroll, Warren Magnusson, Charles Doyle, Monika Langer, R.B.J. Walker, *The New Reality* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1984) 13

been initiated, complete with new terms of exclusion and evaluation.

Throughout most of the postwar period, BC was a wealthy, economically stable province that seemed to require little industrial diversification. Its plentiful supply of raw pulp, combined with the resource industries to process it ensured ready employment throughout the province. As the recession of the 1980s worsened, however, such resource-based economies were hit harder than manufacturing-oriented ones. For BC's conservatives, the economic need to diversify was never more apparent. The conservative political vision, accordingly, centred almost exclusively upon removing all obstacles to developing a more solid manufacturing stratum within the province. Rhetorically, the Socreds expressed this vision as the development of a more favourable climate for investment. Within the tourism industries, the term climate had always been a particularly evocative selling point for the province. If the pleasant mildness of BC's coastal weather could be somehow identified with the province's financial health, a new influx of foreign investment might be attracted to its economy.

In practice, the reform of BC's economic infrastructure was anything but mild. In the US and in Great Britain, conservative politics in the 1980s centred upon policies of corporate downsizing and the restriction of federal powers. Deciding that the "welfare state" itself was preventing most agendas for economic growth and expansion, Both Reagan's Republican administration and Thatcher's Tories set about the massive privatisation of its entire resource and manufacturing infrastructure.

In a similar fashion, Socred restraint initiated its own distinct series of budget cutbacks, inaugurating, in turn, one of the most restrictive, politically reactionary administrations within the postwar Canada. Soon after their re-election, the Socreds wasted little time in identifying themselves as BC's official branch of the Thatcher-Reagan axis. In particular, Reagan's voice of moral concern and political crisis, Bennett found, could be easily appropriated for the situation in BC. The source of anxiety and the approaching social apocalypse, for Bennett, lay in the economic recession that had been worsening throughout Canada since the latter part of the 1970s. By 1983, BC unemployment topped 11%, a rate not seen since the 1930s. Markets everywhere across the province appeared to be in decline, including all foreign call for its wood and pulp resources. The BC legislature subsequently demanded new restrictions on expenditure in an attempt to consolidate its losses. "Restraint" and discipline, the Socreds reasoned, was the only course of action that could help regulate such a dangerously unstable economy.

Decrying their own previous administrations as bloated bureaucracies with excessive, decadent budgets, the Socreds immediately set about refining government spending. New laws were proposed in the summer of 1983 as part of the Restraint package to facilitate the mass lay-off of public workers and the de-regulation of certain social services such as employment standards, tenancy arrangements, and consumer rights. Within months, Bennett had restructured the entire public sector.

For the Socreds, the critical state of BC's foreign markets completely demanded such drastic cuts in social spending. The size of previous governments had not only hampered the province's ability to compete in the new global markets, it constituted a threat to human individuality itself. Just as government would now need to purge itself of its past excesses, so too was the BC citizen called to re-affirm his or her dignity as an individual by relying less on public handouts. As different political scientists note, the policies of the New Right carried a particular psychological agenda, summarised as follows:

There is a crisis: something must be done. And there is a voice

> within us that tells us to slash at the comforts we have accumulated,
> to attack those who have not yet suffered enough from the new
> order, to purge ourselves of the rot within. How can we deserve
> recovery unless we suffer the pain of restraint? There is no easy
> answer to this, except to say the sado-masochism is no more healthy
> in public life than it is in private.[7]

Intellectually and culturally, the ethics of conservatism demanded fewer oppositional stances to the status quo, more professionalism and a respect for canonical lineages. The strong, ethical imperatives in Bennett's agenda seem also to have been directly lifted from Reagan's and Thatcher's earlier platforms. While the official rhetoric of Bennett's administration emphasised the need to create "a favoured investment environment," this objective was to be achieved only partially through fiscal policy. Much of the responsibility for rebuilding the province lay in the individual citizen. In addition to increased self-reliance in economic matters, the Socreds argued for a more puritanical sexual code, stronger family relations led by a return to traditional motherly and fatherly roles for men and women. In the Vancouver art world, these developments heralded a return to traditional forms, including representational images, and a renewed interest in the object as a saleable commodity. Cultural experimentation, whether in music, visual art or writing, invoked for many artists and critics less radical confrontation with the mainstream and more open negotiation, compromise and, in some cases, a wilful push for legitimation. With the aura of crisis permeating both the politics and cultural visions of the Right, a stronger, better-defined relationship to ethics in general began to emerge.

The popular appeal to moral tradition was general among right wing leaders and intellectuals throughout the West. Confronting after the 1960s and 1970s what they labelled a demoralised, moribund "liberal" establishment, the new conservatism found ready public support for a social agenda based on discipline, ethics, property and traditional family roles. Pluralistic attitudes towards sexuality were countered with a more puritanical vision of self-control and moral rectitude.

When Reagan took office in 1981, America possessed the strongest economy on the globe. Whether measured in tonnes of steel or number of cars produced or the quality of high technology products, America led all other nations in production. Economically, the US had experienced massive growth for forty years, dating back to the beginning of World War II. What then, we might ask, constituted the source of the new Right's vision of socio-cultural crisis? Two oil crises in 1973 and 1979 respectively had severely challenged the US's most important industry and market, but on the eve of Reagan's inauguration, America was still running a global surplus in its foreign trade accounts, as it had every year since 1895.[8] Ironically, 1980 would be the last year the US exported more goods than it imported. By the end of Reagan's second term, America's cumulative trade deficit reached over 500 billion dollars or nearly 20 percent of the 1988 GNP.[9] Nevertheless, Reagan's administration built itself upon the mostly "symbolic" demand for a stronger, deeper, more encompassing faith in American culture. Reagan's famous 1984 "It's morning in America" advertisement depicted a community of friends and neighbours who espoused homespun values. A new bride hugs her mother. An old man and a police officer hoist the flag in a schoolyard, while

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[7] William K. Carroll, et al. 271.

[8] Steven Schlosstein, The End of the American Century (New York: Corydon Books, 1989) 4.

[9] Schlosstein 4.

students pledge allegiance to it. The announcer proclaims that "America today is prouder, stronger, better; why would we want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?" There is no mention of Reagan's name in the TV ad, yet clearly the president was popularly associated with a four year period of moral rejuvenation — exactly the type of re-visioning of society with which the Socreds aligned themselves at the same time.

And where was America in 1980 morally or spiritually? As we've seen, the US was not experiencing the type of economic problems BC was in 1983. At the end of the Carter administration, however, fewer than 20 percent of American thought their country was politically or culturally healthy; 72 percent it was in disarray.[10] Inflation at over 12 percent in 1980 was judged to be a primary cause of the chaos. Yet more significantly, it was the general future of American culture that harboured the real source of disappointment. Despite its healthy status among all other nation-states at the beginning of the 1980s, the US, its citizens believed, held disheartening future prospects. Throughout the country, for the first time in the postwar period, a substantial number of Americans began to question whether the quality of their lives and inevitably those of their children would be stable. Suddenly the entire myth of the "American Dream" had become widely suspect.

Such cultural pessimism can be traced to specific historical events. From 1968 to 1980, each subsequent administration seemed irreparably marred by both domestic and international crises. Johnson's and Nixon's respective terms had been damaged by the Vietnam War. Nixon ended his first term with strict wage and price controls in an effort to contain a 4 percent inflation rate. His second term finished prematurely in the face of the threat of impeachment by congress. In October, 1973, less than a year before Nixon's resignation, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) imposed its first oil embargo on the US, causing gasoline and heating prices to double overnight. The Middle East provided a critical focus for the Carter administration as well, after militant Muslims in Tehran seized the US embassy there, holding its personnel hostage for 444 days.

These political events certainly threatened the US economy and its status in the world. Yet at another important level, the Middle East crises deeply affected the American sensibility, painting the entire decade of the 1970s as one permissive slide into moral degradation. Considered in tandem with the US's ongoing political turbulence, the social and cultural evolution of the country seemed increasingly traumatic to much of the polity. Polls conducted at the beginning of Reagan's administration revealed that two out of three Americans considered themselves anxious about traditional American values and the perceived lack of norms within contemporary times.[11]

Into this sense of moral panic walked Reagan extolling a new vision of civic value. His rhetoric emphasised the restoration of the family, the neighbourhood, the community and the work place as vital alternatives against ever-expanding federal power. According to surveys taken for the Reagan campaign, a full 70% of voters agreed with the Republican message that the right moral and social leader could rejuvenate the entire country. As a particular political discourse traceable to distinct historical circumstances, Reagan's appeal for ethical leadership struck a chord within Canadian culture in the 1980s as well. The conservative agenda at this time was clear and unremitting: repent now. Only a return to more traditional cultural structures could faithfully address the current moral and social degradation of the West.

This conservative rationale and rewriting of history can be seen in the 1983 new Vancouver Art Gallery's inaugural show. In its particular history of modern art in the Lower Mainland over the

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[10] Patrick H. Caddell, "Crisis of Confidence: Trapped in a Downward Spiral," *Public Opinion* (October/November, 1979): 5.

[11] *Connecticut Mutual Life Report on American Values in the '80s: the Impact of Belief*, 86-97.

last half-century, almost no reference was made to the more experimental, installation-based pieces produced within the artist-run centres of the 1970s. The reason for excluding this type of work was that it departed too often from traditional moral values to be considered historically relevant to contemporary BC audiences.

In his anthology of contemporary Vancouver art, Stan Douglas describes the show as being "emblematic of the sorts of institutional intrigue" permeating cultural politics at this time.[12] Douglas is speaking specifically of the development of the new Vancouver Art Gallery and the institutionalisation of certain strands of contemporary work, such as the photo-conceptual work of Jeff Wall, Ken Lum and Ian Wallace, among others. Yet, his emphasis also recalls the ubiquitous sense of crisis then surrounding much arts production in general. The opening of the new VAG on its current site of the old courthouse at Robson and Hornby, strongly echoed, for Douglas, the wider moral vision of the Right both in BC and across North America. The new gallery, he writes, allowed 1980s Vancouver art to re-evaluate, if not re-occupy, canonical traditions and the museum as a space of representation.[13] The city's experimental art scene wasted no time in condemning the cultural politics of the VAG and its inaugural show, "Vancouver Art and Artists 1931-83," as one more tool of restraint. Just as Bennett's Socred administration quickly came under fire for its elitist dismissal of the broad electorate's interests and well-being, so too was the VAG director's Luke Rombout's exhibition critiqued as a serious displacement of contemporary local art. The most organised reaction to the VAG's inaugural exhibition was the October Show (1983), an ambitious attempt by the wider art community to give different local artists more public exposure. Thus the Socred Restraint programme generated its own cultural mood, invoking potent aesthetic as well as political responses among the newly disenfranchised. Divested of an effective ideological response to the new Right's agenda, an increasingly mobilised intelligentsia began their own investigations into the hostile environment surrounding them. From the very first months of the Socred administration, these artists were able to assess fairly quickly what the new terms of cultural support and discipline would be.

Projecting their desire for ideological and psychological purgation onto the economy, the new conservatism pursued a strict anti-statist policy, charging that the state bureaucracy which claims to "solve" the problems of unemployment, social security, crime, etc. actually causes them by disturbing the "normal" function of the market mechanism. With its "tax and spend" attitude, the Left was consistently sabotaging economic growth. Left alone, the market would take care of itself. With respect to cultural economics, this sensibility would help rationalise the type of cuts to arts funding the Socreds claimed were necessary. Only the private market was truly qualified to evaluate whether or not a particular art practice was worthy. If culture were to survive and prosper, it would have to be the consumer who ultimately decided what best represented a community's needs.

This essential idealism or faith in capital to realise its own potential remains a core principle of conservative ideologies. Reagan intoned it, as did Thatcher, allowing them to rationalise cuts to social services as a form of economic and political liberation. The welfare state, they reasoned, only limited true human capability by confining market expansion through unnecessary bureaucracy.

Bennett proclaimed similar views. Extolling their faith in the "normal" function of the market, the Socred party sought to preserve capital's autonomy and, hence, its further growth under its own terms and values. Such aims rarely invoked class interests. Instead, this new conservative

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[12] Stan Douglas, Introduction, 15.
[13] Douglas 15.

agenda emphasised a wider political ontology in which society functioned as an innately holistic structure, one best left to its own devices. In this context, "Restraint" implied a type of altruistic sacrifice for the communitarian good, not just a specific privileged class. South of the border, Reagan would continue to present himself as a man of the people. In Reagan's America, privilege itself had become rationalised as a common good. Economic reform translated literally into a universal sense of cultural improvement, a value respected by leftist, progressives as much as by right wing conservatives.

Of course, even such radical moralism has limited influence when economic measures seem unjustifiably severe. Upon introducing their budget on 7 July 1983, the Socreds managed initially to aggravate every contingent of the Left. In British Columbia, there seemed few options; and people did what people everywhere do when they are pushed too far. They took to the streets. Protest groups from a wide range of positions formed the Solidarity Coalition to co-ordinate protests throughout the province against the budget and the attendant loss of human rights. Organised Labour soon joined the fray by forming Operation Solidarity to protest the erosion of bargaining power. The two organisations were never quite at ease with each other, but given the equal threat to trade union practices and social rights, a practical coalition could be forged. Operation Solidarity announced itself only one week after the legislative package was released and included representatives from all of the province's unions as well as members from over 150 different activist groups. Its chief organiser was Arthur Kube, head of the British Columbia Federation of Labour. Under Kube a series of rallies involving tens of thousands of people took place, climaxing in a one of the largest gatherings in the province's history at BC Place 18 July. The possibility of a province-wide general strike had arguably never seemed more imminent.

However, as Bryan D. Palmer points out in his history of the movement, many of the core objectives informing this oppositional front were far from revolutionary in that they did not seek to topple BC's political economy. Rather, Operation Solidarity was formed more to preserve social institutions than dismantle them. It was the Socreds, in this scenario, who were positioned as the real threat to the communitarian good, not labour. Accordingly, both the Right and Left often expressed the same general position with respect to the State, alternating the source of danger to suit their respective ideological nuance. Each side conceded that the political economy needed serious correction; where they disagreed primarily was which areas of the province were secure and healthy and which ones required discipline.

Given this lack of genuine opposition within liberal culture, it is not surprising that conventional leftist coalitions found themsleves criticised by more radical contingents as reformist, ineffectual attempts at intervention. When the Unions, under IWA leader Jack Munro attempted to settle with the government, they were accused of selling out the intellectuals (teachers, students and activists) non unionised workers and the unemployed in order to maintain the trade union's historical compromise with capital. On the eve of a possible general strike, Munro pulled union support in exchange for the government's promise to review legislation. With the general strike at least temporarily averted, the Socred agenda could be maintained. Deals like that, Palmer points out, run the risk of painting any conventional labour movement as little more than a "reformist bureaucracy [that] carved up the class struggle into its economic (trade union) and political (electoral) halves, imposed a trade union movement, and accommodated itself to the institutions and legalistic core of state policy in the emerging collective bargaining system of post-war North

America."[14]   For the radical opposition, such moderation has always excluded them from most political discourse in general. The reformist confusion of privilege with moral health effectively eliminates any possibility of a revolutionary class position being organised and launched against capitalist coercion.

Perhaps the most important example of this type of exclusion, at least in BC, can be seen in the formation of a particular front: the International Workers of the World. In both its thoughts and activities, it operated as a non-reformist, hence, politically suspect contingent of workers. In BC especially, the I.W.W. has historically constituted an important alternative to traditional labour politics. Anarcho-syndicalist in its orientation, the I.W.W., or "Wobblies," as they were affectionately dubbed in Vancouver, once represented one of the largest unions in the entire province. Their influence surfaces still; and those in search of a less conciliatory opposition within the contingent coalition in 1983 became especially attracted to the political and cultural history of this movement. It is beyond the scope of this introduction to investigate precisely the complex vision of the I.W.W.; nevertheless no analysis of the events of 1983 would thorough without some mention of the "wobblie" sensibility as adopted by the more radical contingents of BC politics and aesthetics during the Restraint era.

Without a concept of privilege, class struggle as waged by the Left becomes immediately limited. The I.W.W. realised this conundrum and how industrialised ruling classes compensate the rest of society for the loss of genuine political change with the promise (using the media and art) of greater social harmony. Conservative ideologies, the "Wobblies" argued, ruled not by force but through moral pretence, dictating a general need within society for self-sacrifice. By contrast, The oppositional politics of anarcho-syndicalism generally rejected most calls for co-operation between political factions. For them, there could be no "normal" function of the market, no cultural consensus without the state or the owners of capital actively intervening at the point of production, whether it be in social security, ecology, law enforcement, etc. They considered no economy as essentially autonomous. Left to itself, the market mechanism was bound to destroy itself, and, that, was precisely what groups like the Wobblies wanted.

An important result of the events of 1983, as "Solidarity" revealed, was the rise of class consciousness among intellectuals as well as workers. Class suddenly appeared radically re-drawn for many labourers, whether they worked with information or with bricks and mortar. The entire BC social strata appeared suddenly divided between "bad British Columbians," i.e., workers and intellectuals who refused to sacrifice for the communitarian good, and the worthy employing class, who continued to define just what the terms of this good would actually be. Those citizens who either directly or indirectly supported "restraint" announced themselves as a collusion of workers lacking class-consciousness, a.k.a scissorbills, labour skates and those unionists who continued to make their compromise with the values of liberal capitalism.

Given the growing perceived failure of "Operation Solidarity," the students at David Thompson University Centre, and in the creative writing program in particular, also found it necessary to examine their class loyalties and assumptions. As the contingent coalition shifted in focus from a single-issue protest to concerns for an educational organisation, decisions were taken that could only come from heightened class-consciousness. Once in Vancouver, according to Jeff Derksen, the re-organised KSW even considered joining the Industrial Workers of the World. The actual decision to form or join a mixed local never progressed beyond conjecture, yet the fact the

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[14] Bryan D. Palmer, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1987) 25.

overture took place at all is significant enough to indicate more than a passing familiarity with the Wobblies' history. From a radical perspective, the I.W.W. had much to recommend it — especially during the time of Operation Solidarity. The Wobblies' brand of anarcho-syndicalism saw the general strike as the penultimate event in the overthrow of capitalism. To settle for less meant only defeat at the hands of the ruling class.

Historically, they were always strong in the Kootenays, organising over 60 percent of the workers in Nelson in the fight for the eight-hour day. In fact, their very name owes its origins to this area in BC; it was John Riordan, the Kootenay delegate to the IWW founding convention in Chicago in 1905, who insisted on the name Industrial Workers of the World instead of the Industrial Workers of America — an early example of Wobbly internationalism. It is also strangely fitting that in Vancouver in 1906 the Wobblies opened one of their first BC offices and reading rooms at 61 West Cordova, around the corner from the very block on Hastings that has housed KSW for the last ten years. This room had an extensive library of socialist material and speakers were brought in from all over.

An important source of structure for the Kootenay School of Writing can be traced to the I.W.W. From its very beginnings, its membership, consisting originally of Tom Wayman, Jeff Derksen, Gary Whitehead, Calvin Wharton, Peter Cummings and Colin Browne, has been organised collectively, at the very point of production. There are no leaders. Virtually all decisions are arrived at as a single body, an often cumbersome method that takes longer than any simple majority rules ballot box democracy. While its collective structure might not have been in complete imitation of the I.W.W., both movements were organised as a concerted attack on hierarchy and privilege. Further such principles, in turn, derived from a strong sense of class struggle and the valorisation of all workers' rights. One great thing about the working class is that you don't even have to have a job to be a worker. The only thing you have to do (besides show up) is grasp the awareness that the working class and the employing class have nothing in common.

An early poem by Tom Wayman, who was also a Wobbly, illustrates the close relationship KSW maintained with labour movements.

HAMMER

A Hammer is rising. A hammer
thrown up at the end of the day by a carpenter
with blood on the handle where his blisters have been.
A hammer. It lifts as well on the wave of steam
pouring up from the pots of a kitchen- a tiny kitchen
of an apartment, and that of a restaurant
serving a hundred customers at once.

A great cry of tedium
erupting out of papers and flourescent glass
carries the hammer higher. It goes up end over end
on a tune broadcast to a million people.
And it climbs
on the force of a man's arm alone
flung straight up from the sickness that is his life.
It rises out of the weight of a body falling.

> Nothing can stop it. The hammer has risen for centuries
> high as the eaves, over the town. In this age
> it has climbed to the moon
> but it does not cease rising everywhere each hour.
> And no one can say what it will drive
> if at last it comes down.

Wayman's interest in class struggle is evident throughout the poem. Only one year after KSW's opening of East Broadway, the school co-sponsored with the Vancouver Industrial Writers Union, an entire colloquium on what Wayman and others were calling "work writing." Among the issues discussed there was labour's unclear future within a Socred administered province. Such political uncertainty generated a specific confusion regarding KSW's own relationship to conventional labour groups.

The problem for other KSW writers such as Derksen and Browne with the labour movement by the mid 1980s can be illustrated with reference to Wayman's poem, particularly, the last two lines: the fact that the speaker cannot determine when the hammer will fall or what it will strike points toward an ambiguous interpretation of class warfare. Every good wobbly knows exactly what the hammer will drive, and has no doubt that it will fall, if not today, tomorrow. Within the framework of anarcho-syndicalism, the ending of the poem might be re-written accordingly:

> When the hammer comes down
> it will drive capitalism from the face of the earth.

Another similarity between the IWW and KSW stems, as mentioned previously, from their respective exclusions from both poles of the ideological spectrum. When Pulp Press published East of Main, an anthology of poets living and writing in East Vancouver, many of the book's strongest criticisms came from the Left as opposed to the Right and their main target was often the section dedicated to KSW writers. Left leaning Brian Fawcett reproved KSW writers for abandoning what he termed a full alliance with the labour movement.

Fawcett, himself, had been influenced, both politically and aesthetically, by many of the same postwar countercultural writers that influenced the Nelson group in the 1960s. At that time Fawcett's mentors included such refugees from the San Francisco Beat scene as Stan Persky, Robin Blaser and George Stanley, as well as Tallman's Tish group. For these writers, much of the later work being produced at KSW in the 1980s seemed strikingly ambivalent to the concerns and motives behind these earlier movements. Where the poetics of George Stanley might showcase explicit social commentary, or, in the case of Robin Blaser, an aesthetic celebration of individual creativity within mass culture, KSW held to few ethical principles outside the concerns and function of writing.

Again taking its cue from some of the tenets of anarcho-syndicalism, the Kootenay School of Writing organised itself at the very point of production as opposed to that of reception. The school was rarely interested in showcasing established writers. Hence, older countercultural activists and writers such as Fawcett continued to criticise KSW for lack of fixed methodology and/or political stance. Without a more systematic strategy of cultural opposition, Fawcett felt, social relations could never be reformed effectively. Far from envisioning new cultural standards around which a series of institutional alliances might be built, KSW conceptualised instead a very different relationship to writing itself as both a process and ideological framework.

It is, perhaps, worth noting here that most KSW writers would likely have agreed with Fawcett's criticism, since social reform had never been a "collective" interest. Given his position

Fawcett was right to be critical of KSW aesthetics. As a poet of the New Left, he held a much more romanticised vision of the artist's political exclusion from mainstream society. To experience cultural struggle and the marginalisation of serious art within popular markets, as both he and Blaser pointed out, was to confirm one's individualism.[15] By contrast, KSW never accepted any easy equivalence between social exclusion and individual autonomy within the state. To be politically disenfranchised did not automatically guarantee an objective perspective on social matters. The Kootenay School of Writing in its theory and practice has always been wary of the discourse of individualism for this very reason. Rather than signifying an artist's sovereignty from the constraints of capital, social exclusion signified to KSW writers little beyond class oppression. The Kootenay School of Writing has never claimed to be a visionary organisation in the leftist (or any other) ideological tradition. The school's primary political concerns focused instead on whether language, whether in art or writing, could effectively reform a system that works for the few at the expense of so many.

Distinct political and aesthetic influences behind the KSW's development appear in a variety of different art and writing movements outside the school itself. In particular, the work associated with the journal, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and Ron Silliman's essays on the New Sentence provide important touchstones in the evolution of a KSW "aesthetic". A full year before Tom Wayman's "Split Shift" Colloquium on new "work writing," an equally significant series of workshops, collected under the banner, "New Poetics," brought its own politicised engagement with language and art to the collective.

The Colloquium ran for only three days in August 1985, yet its influence would be such that many of its themes and discussions would constitute core components of the school's aesthetics. Most of the panels featured debates on political and cultural exclusion, explored in conjunction with different experimental approaches to poetry. Hence the conference provided KSW writers like Colin Browne, Davies and Derksen with what would prove to be their strongest aesthetic direction.

The majority of participants were loosely engaged with "language poetry," a writing practice known for its disjunctive, non-referential use of language. Emerging in the early 1970s, primarily in San Francisco, "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" never defined itself as a formal school of poetry. Its most definitive critical statements probably appear in Silliman's essays on the "new sentence." As an informal writing scene, however, it seemed to encapsulate best the work of many of the colloquium's speakers, most noticeably, Bernstein, Perelman, Watten, Andrews and Silliman himself, among others. These writers provided fresh reflections on some of the more symbolic aspects of contemporary political violence and the complicated relationship language obviously had with ideology. The primary historical context surrounding their work lay in the Viet Nam war, especially with reference to its representation within the American media. As one historian notes on the media's relationship to this war, no previous political crisis since the Great Depression had challenged the "reproduction of values, norms and actual behaviours" as widely as this conflict had.[16] The symbolic effect of the war, as it was represented in the media, resulted in what many of these poets expressed as a severe cultural displacement, a banishment from the flow of symbolic production and information regardless of the medium in which it originated. The result, according to these writers, was an intense political scepticism that language could ever suppose itself neutral to ideological forces. Contradiction in ideology automatically presupposed contradiction and

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[15] See for example Robin Blaser's essay ""

[16] Michael X. Deli Carpini, US Media Coverage of the Vietnam Conflict in 1968," *The Vietnam Era*, ed. Michael Klein (London: Pluto Press, 1990), 18.

conflict in the modes of communication used within ideology. A key cultural response to this type of breakdown, Silliman noted, was an increased focus among writers on form and technique. Relinquished of a stable community within which both writing and speech might actually be shared among members, the contemporary writer necessarily transferred his or her labour towards methodology. Poets subordinated concerns for decoration and ornament to more elementary ones for structure and procedure. In this task, the "Language" writer follows closely the radical revisionary schemas of past modernists like Pound who thought it necessary to teach his audiences "How to Read," as dictated in his primers, ABC of Reading (1934) and Guide to Kulcher (1970). In Silliman's words, evidence of a poem's value was once "predicated upon the image of the poem as individual craft of the artisan type, while now the collective literature of the community, an ensemble of 'scenes,' is gradually emerging as more vital than the production of single authors."[17] Pound's and other modernists' efforts to instruct their respective communities on how to read their work necessitated a deliberate focus on methodology. For Silliman this interest in structure seemed even more essential among his own contemporaries. Not only did poets aware of the "discordance of contemporary life" need to instruct their audiences in method, many found it increasingly obligatory to construct the very audiences themselves. The production of poetry, according to Silliman, was tantamount to the constitution of a working community, independent of most consumer markets. Hence, the cultural exile Silliman and his colleagues had experienced during the Viet Nam war translated further for these poets into the deeper loss of their original social network, the final ruin within their society of any pretence to shared ideological codes and values.

It is precisely this oppositional stance to consumer culture at the level of production that gives Kevin Davies's Pause Button its radical class politics. Published in 1992, Pause Button presents language as a bona fide field of labour, much like any other mode of production. Bruce Andrews had developed similar ideas about poetry structure in his poem-as-field work. Given the critical situation most BC labourers found themselves in thanks to the Socred administration, it is not surprising that, for Davies, language too was at a turning point, labour-wise. The very title suggests both a cessation in production and in representation (it just depends on whether you have your media device in the playback or record function). Like labour in general, the very words in Davies's work seem somehow devalued or downsized. "The story," he writes towards the beginning, "began to get tedious / exactly at the moment of maximum frenzy. To / load together lust- / ful beasts — provoked to gnaw off / what rot lifted up against un- / equal faculties & extreme actions" (9). Indeed, even the most sincere attempts at cultural reform tend to become tedious at the moment they confront danger, compromising their conflicts in the name of communal meaning. Davies pauses or pushes the pause button in the middle of his discourse, separating the syllable "un" from the word unequal, as if he were editing a particularly indiscreet message, severing the offensive syllable from the liberal principle (equality) it had somehow tarnished.

The relationship of language to labour, Davies reminds us, categorically invokes those terms of production necessary for culture to recover or satisfy its own constitutive ruptures. This is why in conventional poetics only language, the very tool of disintegration, is able to heal our cultural rifts. Here the traditional duty of the poet is to pause and erase conflict, especially if s/he can't provide the principles of unity needed to restore social harmony. Davies may pause in Pause Button, however, acknowledging the fractured state of the symbolic order, but he does not erase that which signals the

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[17] Ron Silliman, "," The New Sentence (Roof Books, 1978) 61.

debt. What spaces do exist throughout the poem are designated as such, bracketed off within the type, alerting the reader that something is, in fact, missing.

> Information-needy, 26. Seek [   ] for [   ]. Absolutely
> Pyjamaless. Check [   ]. Yank hair into place, thrust face
> Forward, hit…

Like most workers in the postwar, information-based economy, especially in the middle of a recession, the subject of this personal ad is "information-needy." Yet the object of his desire refuses to appear, even symbolically. Davies's language stubbornly refuses to provide compensation, echoing the Socred slash of financial aid to the working class. If there is resolution in Davies's poem, it comes so violently: "Remove the rug, replace it with the floor, sit, pluck splinter, spit, / — & so got tromped on pretty / hard, stomped, made to feel silly, extra —" (8). The reader is not certain if the subject being beaten in the last line is the same one who placed the ambiguous classified advert, that is whether the violence has been meted out culturally or economically. Such distinctions seem hardly necessary in the language of Pause Button. Davies's symbolism does not represent a fractured cultural order, it enacts it on the page as it is read.
Similarly, Gerald Creede's long poem Resume (or Resumé) details a subjectivity both symbolically and economically beaten:

> I wrote him
> He didn't write
> He wrote: now that lilacs are
> In bloom she has
> Explosives.
> He painted his apartment
> A shade called Fled Yellow
> His life a series of small deals that
> fell through.

Both the "normal" functioning of the market and of discourse has failed the speaker. His letters receive no reply, one presumes, from prospective employers, maintaining a symbolic as well as economic debt. As with Davies's penchant for bracketed spaces, Creede's resume inspires little faith that the symbolic void in discourse will be eventually filled. The resume fails to resume. Creede's language actively disavows a speech in which the subject can articulate his or her position of enunciation. Instead, Creede, too, brackets off the disruption he sees within his culture, in an effort to construct his own class position outside the discourse. Creede's struggle begins in lieu of the resume, in a cultural space between jobs, often on UI benefits with little hope, or even interest, that the state will respond: "I won't watch my mouth," Creede continues, "I won't make it with you."

Rehearsing a comparable antagonism to mainstream culture some years after leaving KSW, founding member, Jeff Derksen, emphasises what he calls an "aesthetic rearticulary practice." Derksen's poetics, in his own words, attempts "to articulate links across discourses and fields in a dialogism that is aware of ideology and its effects.[18] Most importantly, Derksen seeks to avoid what he terms the "absorptive" dynamic of pluralism where political critique is compromised through a romantic sense of individual rights. Once again, rather than cultural reform, Derksen chooses as his

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[18] Jeff Derksen, "Disgust and Overdetermination," *Open Letter* Vol.10.1 (Winter, 1998: 9).

objective, cultural "inform," i.e., a critique specifically attuned to the nuances of ideology and its influence on culture. Because such nuances begin at the level of language, so, too, must their critique. Here language is re-situated, re-connected to the various political contexts in which it originated.

> "Jeanine is a living example of Noranda's attitude to
> employees."
>
> …"We many not have all the right answers, but we have
> the right car."

At first these disjunctive lines may convey little sense either together or separately; yet looking closer at the words themselves invokes specific political questions about the language being used. For example, how are we as readers supposed to imagine "Jeanine" as "a living example?" Can individuals be living examples? The answer, according to Derksen, helps underline his entire poetics. When individuals feel alienated by their own language, they are nothing but examples. Every syntactic structure creates its own exemplary figures or objects. By highlighting the paradox in this relationship between individuals and language, Derksen neatly conveys the inherent political and cultural limits in all discourse. He further qualifies his use of language as an explicit act of aggression, a "refusal to adopt broken tropes of representation, social facts torn from their backdrops and placed in uneasy irony next to other contradictory discourse, floating quotations, a refusal to cite sources, a disregard for "literary qualities," and most of all," a refusal to try and find an outside to ideology."[19] Positioned as such, ideology effectively re-surfaces from its popular encasings within a cultural discourse of value. Stripped of their pretensions to a universal sense of the communal good, of all access through language to civic or cultural virtue, seemingly benign references to the everyday are reconfigured, in Derksen's work, as explicit ideological components. As with Davies and Creede, to move through Derksen's language is to explicate quite precisely the myriad interconnections between market structures and the symbolic organisation of social relations.

The poem "Interface" (1993), for example, at first glance appears to consist solely of a series of disjunctive sentences, mostly declarative, culled from a wide range of contexts, including personal reflection, economic statistics and various news headlines. Aside from the slightly disorienting effect such writing has on the reader, a closer inspection reveals an intriguing set of "inter"relationships between the political, the social and psychological.

> The translation process that ends with "harvesting
> The necks of the infidel aggressors."
> Pure desire arrives like a train — on rails

On one level, in these lines, Derksen acknowledges the obvious social distance between acts of translation and those of public execution. Working within the book trade in the late 1980s, the poet, himself, likely experienced first hand some of the social contradictions inherent in publishing explicit politicised texts at the safe cultural distance usually befitting intellectuals. Certainly there is a sense of privilege in choosing to view class conflict symbolically as opposed to literally. Yet the contradiction made explicit in the language here expertly reveals just how central a role language plays in all areas of political conflict. Both the "harvesting" of necks and the linguistic process of

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[19] Derksen, *Open Letter* 9-10.

translation are presented by Derksen as completely interdependent cultural activities. The very term, "harvesting," implies a concept of cultivation equal to any other discursive event. Regardless of whether the objects of cultivation be human heads or foreign words, the symbolic act of harvesting remains closely associated here with basic social coercion. In the act of translation, Derksen suggests, a specific violence is being performed, a movement of cultural purification as controversial as any act of ethnic cleansing might be. Language as a form of symbolic power has always been central to the ideological structures within modern capitalism, a relation that few KSW writers take for granted; for them, class struggle begins at a linguistic level before other, more material strategies can even be contemplated.

Various other significant political issues besides those associated with capital and class relations contributed to KSW's collective cultural stance. A vital feminist politics and gender-based position continues to inform much of the work being done there. In fact, for writers like Lisa Robertson, Nancy Shaw and Catriona Strang, involvement with the Kootenay School of Writing demanded a serious redress of the disproportionate number of male writers originally constituting the collective. If language, as Silliman argues, ultimately displays "a determinate coding passed down to us like all other products of civilization," then most common, everyday writing practices must contain influences of the patriarchy as well as those of class struggle. In Derksen's view, poetry functions ultimately as a means of unveiling these "determinate codings." Yet woman writers working in and around KSW quickly noticed that most efforts to explore ideology within the school's programming tended to subordinate gender issues to those of class. According to writers like Robertson and Strang, the collective, though politically aware of the economic bearings on writing and language, rarely referenced the patriarchy in either its reading series or individual poetry projects. Hence a more explicit reference to the linguistic components of the patriarchy constitutes the poetry of the "The Giantesses," a contingent coalition that worked within KSW. The Giantesses wrote together from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s and included as core members, Robertson, Christine Stewart, Strang and Susan Clark. Clark, born in BC, edited the extremely influential poetry journal, Raddle Moon, and provided the Giantesses with a consistent organ to publish and disseminate their work. With a nod to the male-centred revisionary modernisms of the last century, these women offered a complex feminist investigation of language that began with their own manifesto.

A.   WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS TO BE SELF-EVIDENT:
1. Dissensual language is a machine of enchantments.
2. This machine, with all its archaisms, is a means of locomotion toward polysexual futures.
3. Wrenched history is our machine's frontier.

Reminiscent of some forgotten passage from the archives of Futurism, the Giantess manifesto described a type of exaggerated nationalism taken straight from the pages of the "high modernist" tradition. Such metaphors of statehood or nationalism extended to the very name of the Giantess collective. Declaring themselves "Barscheit Nation," they inaugurated their own frontiers in a loud, brazen experiment in political secession from the patriarchy. Part poetics, part social theory, Barscheit Nation modelled its structure almost entirely after a machine. Its logic was primarily technical, its vision, brutally forthright, cold, determined — in other words, "self-evident." Such a construction, it might be argued, seems hardly suitable as a feminist critique of patriarchal

culture, especially since both the language and format of this work recalls some of the most excessive strands of modernist, misogynist writing and thought. The celebration of the machine as a source of kinetic energy and social wonder seems more consistent with the writings of Wyndham Lewis or F.T. Marinetti than the literature of feminism.

Rather than evoking ideas of unlimited progress and the promise of technological advancement, however, the Barscheit "machine" is one of "enchantments" only. Here typical masculinist clichés about the machine and technological rationalism are effectively re-appropriated for Barscheit's own "anarcho-feminist" project. The fact that language intrinsically carries gendered messages has never seemed more explicit. Where older feminist strategies in literature and criticism traditionally employed intense psychologisms, combating masculinist emphases on materialism and empirical reason with a re-directed focus towards interior states of being, Barscheit Nation engaged a more deliberate constructivism. The language of Barscheit Nation, suitable to their collective stance as "Giantesses," remained pure exaggeration. In this manner they not only challenged the misogynist derivations of high modernism, but the equally problematic search by conventional women writings for an essentially feminist language or mode of thought. The political and cultural movements of the modern patriarchy continue to celebrate the machine as a paradigm of efficiency and control and these are precisely the qualities BN seek to exploit in their own poetics.

Comparable to the I.W.W., KSW has traditionally held that any form of institutionalisation, whether of labour or aesthetics, remains fundamentally in support of hegemony. Here one might recall that the I.W.W.'s political objective was not to reform capital, but overthrow it. In a similar fashion, KSW did not conceive itself as merely a new trade college. In tracing both the school's political stance and ideological critique to a specific history of leftist struggle in the 20th century, namely, that of anarcho-syndicalism, a consistent position begins to emerge amidst the myriad writing and theory projects that took place there over the past decade.

Unlike America in the late 1960s and early 1970s, BC in the 1980s was not engaged in any specific war. It would appear, nevertheless, that the strong cultural and social dissent associated with the Socreds at this time provoked a similar sense of cultural displacement among many of the founding members of the KSW. With the shutdown of DTUC, Browne, Derksen, Calvin Wharton and Whitehead, among many others experienced their own loss of a previously prominent social network. Newly branded as a source of unnecessary government spending, what was once an important independent post-secondary institute of learning suddenly found itself re-cast as a morally suspect, decadent waste of community effort. Culturally, that is, on a symbolic level, a new struggle had been initiated by the Socred political apparatus, forcing these writers to respond with a symbolic attack of their own. More than the organisation of pickets and rallies, the writers collected in this anthology saw it necessary to investigate speech itself. This shift in political strategy firmly divided them from previous working class aesthetics, just as it continues to isolate them from mainstream culture. Their work is difficult, at times astonishingly so. But it is also humorous, pointed and, most of all, extremely relevant to its place and time. Silliman's theory of the New Sentence identified difficulty in writing with the building of a new community or scene. This congruence suits KSW well. Between 1984 and 1994 the drive for an alternate poetics fuelled corresponding aspirations for a new political critique and a distinct community formation. KSW succeeded on all three fronts.

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Klobucar, Andrew and Barnholden, Michael. "Introduction". <u>Writing class : the Kootenay School of Writing Anthology</u>. Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden, eds. Vancouver : New Star Books, 1999. pp.1-47