

# OPEN LETTER

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# OPEN LETTER

Fourteenth Series, No. 3, Summer 2010

Kootenay School of Writing

*Guest-edited by Gregory Betts and Robert David Stacey*

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The articles in the first section of this issue were peer-reviewed. The editors thank the reviewers for their helpful and timely work.

The cover photo, "Classroom in Henry Wise Wood High School, Calgary," is used with the permission of the Glenbow Museum Archives.



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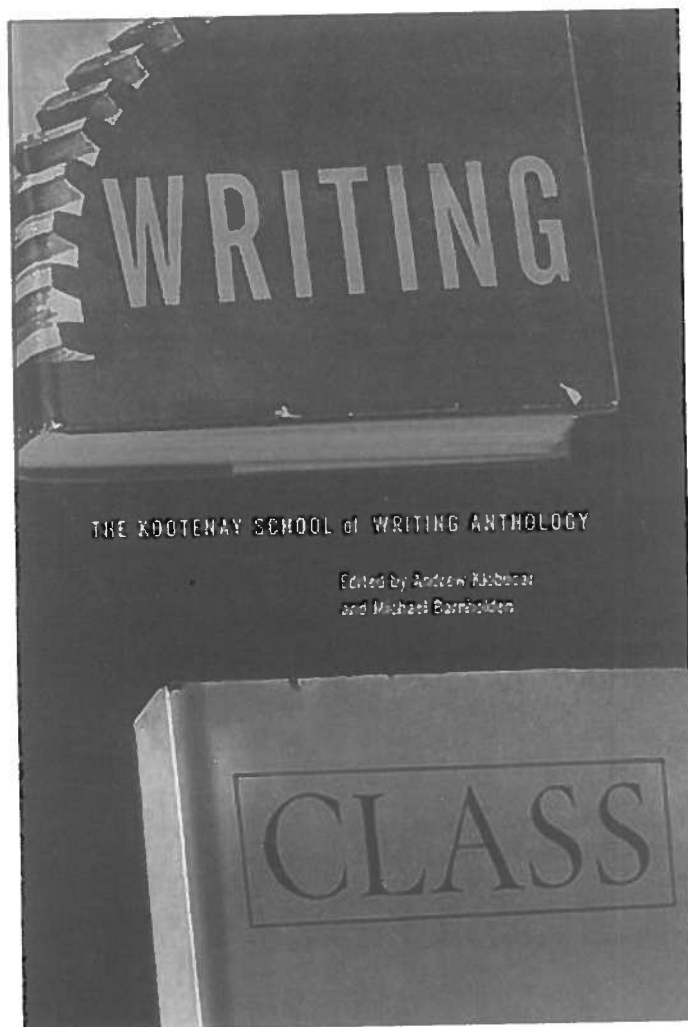
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*Writing Class, 1999.*

## Introduction

Gregory Betts, Robert David Stacey

Long overdue, this special issue on the Kootenay School of Writing naturally begins with the old joke and the ongoing problem of situating the now 25-year-old group: they are not based in the Kootenays, they are not a school, and the work they produce disrupts and defamiliarizes recognized kinds of writing. Where and what is the KSW, then, geographically, institutionally, and in relation to literary history and criticism? Working through the name of Canada's longest-running avant-garde collective provides a few starting points for coming to terms with the kinds of paradoxes and problems that have shaped KSW's poetics, politics, and history.

### *The Kootenay ...*

The KSW was formed in June 1984 in response to the B.C. government's forced closure of the David Thompson University Centre in the city of Nelson, located in the Kootenays region of the province. Protesting Social Credit's evident hostility to the arts and to ideologically-aware modes of writing and its criticism, and recognizing that this legislated hostility *vis-à-vis* certain kinds of cultural work was itself part of a broader attack on the poor and the working class, several teachers and students associated with the DTUC created two centres, one in Nelson and the other in Vancouver. It was the goal of these centres to offer a functional, structural alternative to mainstream arts education in the province which emphasized commercial appeal over other qualities. Until recently, the KSW group in Nelson continued to organize literary readings, workshops, and to host writers-in-residence. Despite being independent from the Nelson centre since the 1980s, the Vancouver branch retained the "Kootenay" part of its name, thereby commemorating its originary displacement and stressing its formation as a strategic *local* response to government policy. To this specific geographical history must be added the group's more recent theoretical engagement with neoliberal transnational capitalism and its radical restructuring of 'place' (and its various affiliations) – hence the KSW's simultaneous interest in local activism, personal networks of information exchange, and artistic collaboration across various regional, national, and international borders.

### *...School...*

The initial activities of the KSW included offering professional and creative writing courses and workshops in a manner that was analogous to its



members' work as part of the Writing Program at DTUC. They were, in a very literal manner, a school – with over 400 students enrolled in classes in their first three years (see Wharton's "Inside the Kootenay School of Writing"). Starting in 1987 with an organizational restructuring, however, the KSW shifted its collective energy away from regular and structured classes to literary events, study groups, and occasional workshops. This significant change did not entirely alter the underlying group philosophy of the organization. As an institution, the KSW has been from its outset organized laterally, in a way that reflects an ongoing commitment to collectivism and artist-oriented communities. There was an aborted attempt in 1995 led by Victor Coleman to professionalize the school and transform it into the more familiar hierarchical model of an artist-run centre with a full-time paid administrator. The reaction to this threat, as Pauline Butling notes in this issue, was emotional and intense and, ironically, helped to reaffirm the group's commitment to multi-nodal collectivism. Despite various institutional challenges, such as the financial crisis in the late 1990s after the collective lost arts funding from the City of Vancouver (see Lisa Robertson's "City of Ziggurats" as well as "Ondaatje's KSW Fundraiser" for more specific details), the KSW has maintained its independence even if this has meant existing in a perpetual state of crisis – what Donato Mancini describes as "KSW's internal uncertainties, its contestedness."

Such perpetual institutional instability can be associated with the KSW's habitual and indeed characteristic assault on its own institutional identity. This constantly calling into question of its own organization highlights one of the KSW's central ontological paradoxes: as Edward Byrne explains, "institutionalization is death in the ethos of the KSW," yet "in spite of its self-description, it always exists as an institution by dint of available grant capital" (7). Byrne's paradox highlights the uncomfortable social position that the KSW as an institution occupies inside and yet in opposition to the ideological context of transnational capitalism. This ironic constitution informs the literature which, as Jason Wiens has noted, can be linked despite all its many deviations through "similar characteristics of discontinuity and an oppositional stance" (84). As a school, then, it can be thought of as a self-conscious, anti-institutional institution defined in part by its commitment to its own constant crisis – which furthermore can be articulated as a challenge to the contextual hegemonies of British Columbian, Canadian, and North American life in a world shaped by global capital.

#### ...of Writing

A discussion of the kinds of writing that has been undertaken by the KSW and its members might begin with a brief history of the magazine named *Writing* with which it came to be associated. *Writing* was created in 1979

and published its first issue in 1980 at the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, four years prior to the formation of the KSW. A number of the eventual founding members of the group were involved from the outset. Following the closure of the DTUC, the magazine would become the publishing organ of the KSW, though the KSW and/or some of its writers were also connected with other ventures (the in-house *W*, for instance, an online publication, and the Vancouver-based *Raddle Moon*, which existed prior to its association with the KSW and continued after it).

Over its 12 year run, a total of 28 issues of *Writing* were published under five different editorships: David McFadden (5 issues), John Newlove (1 issue), Colin Browne (16 issues), and Jeff Derksen and Nancy Shaw (6 issues). The magazine attracted new work by writers across the country, including by Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, George Bowering, Audrey Thomas, Al Purdy, Daphne Marlatt, bpNichol, Steve McCaffery, Karen Mac Cormack, Erin Mouré, Gerry Gilbert, and Phyllis Webb. Though these represent some of the most iconic and auspicious names in Canadian letters, and though they all appeared in multiple issues (Bowering in 7, McCaffery in 6, Mac Cormack in 5, etc.), they are not "the poets and writers whose work defines, as well as they can be defined, the writing practices, poetics and politics of the Kootenay School of Writing" (KSW website).

The strange thing about *Writing* is that, despite it being the first publishing organ of the KSW, the writers whose works do define the poetics and politics of the collective (as well as it can be defined) appear in the magazine *far less* than the writers mentioned above. The most frequent KSW authors to appear in their own magazine were Robert Mitternath, Jeff Derksen, Nancy Shaw, and Deanna Ferguson who published 3, 3, 2, and 2 times respectively – no more than many *TISH* writers, such as Bowering, Marlatt, Frank Davey, and Fred Wah. *Writing* is unquestionably an important initial locus of the KSW, but makes for a problematic representation of the group. Dorothy Trujillo Lusk's "Sentimental Intervention" in *Writing* 25 provides a phrase that might be taken as allegorical: "None of the outer windows belong to her flat" (24). It is difficult to see 'inside' the KSW through the refracting window of *Writing*.

The problematic or ambiguous relationship between *Writing* and KSW is homologous to its members' attempts to push writing "until all parts disconnect, hinge, continue" (Ferguson 40, 43). *Writing*, in this way, becomes less a definitive collection of works by KSW authors and more a point of intersection and engagement with broader literary communities – especially those whose writing estranges, defamiliarizes, and disrupts all that seems natural about writing. The problem of writing against writing,

or of an aesthetic that employs various "strategies of counter-communication" (to quote Steve McCaffery in another context), touches upon the fundamental (and political) problem of language and the very possibility of meaningful communication. As Kevin Davies writes in the abstractly and bleakly humorous "Board Feet": "There is no way / to understand what these individuals are saying" (40).

Yet the writing nevertheless demands some form of recognition and involvement on the part of readers and reading communities, even if such recognition and involvement differ fundamentally from the sort permitted or demanded by the traditional lyric and/or other forms of expressive or narrative composition. To the extent that one can generalize about a "school" with such a long, varied, and, at times, fractious history, it can be said that the aims and strategies of KSW are broadly pedagogical, designed to reveal the ideological underpinnings and effects of both literature and other kinds of public language. Common to much KSW writing since its inception is an attention to work and its social organization and a concomitant insistence on writing as a form, however specialized, of work. To emphasize work here is merely to note the degree to which a great deal of KSW writing deals with or discusses labour processes, their organization, and role within the broader structurings of capital; to note the myriad ways that KSW writing draws attention to its own materiality and to the activities (intellectual, physical, affective) of its producers and readers; and finally to note also the labour and commitment necessary to maintaining the existence of KSW itself.

This emphasis on the workerly dimension of KSW writing must, however, be qualified with a recognition that much of the writing – especially since the 1987 reorganization of the collective – actively renounces the values of utility, permanence, and social production (read: retrenchment and reification) sometimes associated with the term. In this respect, the 'work' of KSW – always designed to produce forms of community that might complicate or disorganize the groupings permitted within 'official' culture – might productively be read in terms of what Jean-Luc Nancy, following Maurice Blanchot, calls "unworking": "Community," writes Nancy, "cannot arise from the domain of *work*," which can only produce objects – things. On the contrary, "Community necessarily takes place in what Blanchot has called 'unworking,' referring to that which, before and beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension" (32). Crucially, an emphasis on the "unworking" of both social structure and a fixed and stable literary product by way of "interruption, fragmentation, and suspension" accurately describes the key strategies of a great deal of KSW's activity, literary or otherwise.

To speak of such strategies is to speak of an aesthetic that critiques the status quo from within its given frameworks – using its own language against it, parodying and making (almost) unrecognizable its various meaning-making systems. The work of art, in other words, can no longer claim to be an unalienated or otherwise 'free' space outside the domain of capital. Such a position reflects a major break with the dominant idea of the aesthetic in operation since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and registers an understanding – however implicit – that such strategies of subversion are the only appropriate – or available ones in the context of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call "postmodern capitalism":

Postmodern capitalism should be understood first, or at first approximation, in terms of what Marx called the phase of the real subsumption of society under capital. [...] In the phase of the real subsumption, capital no longer has an outside in the sense that these foreign processes of production have disappeared. All productive processes arise within capital itself and thus the production and reproduction of the entire social world take place within capital. (15)

But as Hardt and Negri point out, the key is not to treat postmodern capitalism as a fixed *condition*, but as an on-going crisis in the production of subjectivities. Progressive or oppositional artists will therefore be those who recognize that "these transformations impose new processes of subjective constitution – not outside but *within the crisis* that we are experiencing" (11) – processes that must be properly understood so as to be tapped for their potential powers of resistance.

#### *The Issue's Issues*

Resistance – albeit articulated in different and not always compatible ways – connects the various essays gathered in the "Articles" section of this issue.<sup>1</sup> When we began developing the idea of a special issue on the KSW we anticipated any number of entry points and critical approaches for discussing the unique poetics, politics, and literary history of the KSW – an entity that we characterized in our call-for-papers as a "centre of avant-garde writing in Canada [...] that seemingly rejects the ideological implications of avant-gardism, along with centrism, aesthetic purity, and the values and assumptions underpinning the neoliberal nation-state." Indeed, the scholarly articles collected here adopt a variety of critical and theoretical frameworks for addressing various aspects of the KSW. In "Ambling in the Streets of Affect," Jennifer Blair employs affect theory in order to discuss the ways that Jeff Derksen's poem "Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically," reveals important connections between emotion, language, and spatial location. A similar attention to space characterizes Paul Stephens's reading of the work of Lisa Robertson in "Dystopia's of the Obso-

lete" in which he argues that Robertson's "nostalgic" use of obsolete genres and forms disrupts a "narrative of production" that shores up a variety of discourses including that of nationalism. Alessandra Capperdoni's essay "Feminist Poetics as Avant-Garde Poetics" explores the complex relationship between the "avant-garde" and writing alternatively identified as "feminist" in order to reveal not only the gendered assumptions implicit in the conceptualization of the avant-garde in North America, but the potential value of insisting on the avant-gardism of much contemporary "feminist" writing, in particular that of women writers associated with the KSW. Clint Burnham's far-ranging Lacanian reading of the KSW, "Empty and Full of Speech," employs the title's binary opposition, borrowed from one of Lacan's early texts of the 1950s, in order to account for the ways that the apparently "empty" speech of some KSW texts nevertheless communicates insofar as "their lack of meaning is itself a form of meaning." Together, these articles offer discussions of individual authors and close-readings of their texts along with more general explorations the complex 'institutionality' of the KSW as anti-/school, including its intersections with other radical groups and literary traditions.

While we anticipated, and are pleased to present now, such single-authored studies, what we did not anticipate was the extent to which the institutional nature of the collective (and the collectivist nature of the institution) was to shape the formal characteristics of this issue. Most prominently, this influence is evident in the number of interviews and collaboratively created texts included here. It can also be recognized in the "Historical Contexts" section in which contributions add important nuance and multiplicity to any sense of the singularity of the group's history or identity. Both of these sections corroborate the articles' displacement of an abstract aesthetic realm in favour of writing's subsumption into the social/socio-political/material world.

The three collective texts in the issue, featuring a total of ten authors, highlight the importance of the turbulent world in which the KSW resides. These texts are particularly striking for what they reveal of some of the discursive habits of KSW members. They talk to each other as creative collaborators; they ask each other about the meaning of events in a way that recognizes the diversity and multiplicity of experience; and they acknowledge the subject position they occupy in relation to the history and/or personal memories under discussion. Steve Collis, Pauline Butling, and Donato Mancini each present notably different narratives to explain the different KSW epochs, all-the-while agreeing about the importance of the ongoing commitment to KSW's collectivity and to its characteristically polymorphic consciousness. Mancini's discussion with Colin Smith corroborates a point he also raises in his historical periodization about the

importance of public venues (cafés, bars, and book stores) and intimate settings (homes and apartments) to the actual work of the KSW. The public and private lives start to blur in these collective texts, such that Catriona Strang notes that the "origin of so much is personal" while Christine Stewart adds that the KSW was "at the centre of [Lisa Robertson's] writing life." These collective texts and interviews extend the implications of KSW collectivity beyond the page, even as the work on those pages insists on their material in-the-world presence.

Fred Wah's short essay on the origins of KSW in Nelson highlights the unique combination of political frustration and idealism that motivated the initial protests and the formation of the two collectives. It was, as one of their early brochures announces, an act of "defiance" that sought to create an open and inviting venue for creative opposition: "KSW welcomes your involvement." Derksen, in his contribution, cautions against the desire to mythologize such foundational narratives of political resistance precisely because doing so can initiate the commoditization and subsumption of political-aesthetic movements. In contrast, he argues, the reality of the origin of political-aesthetic movements is inevitably diverse and multifarious and informed by an internal identity that is "plural, multiple, and unstable." KSW's radical plurality, rejection of organizational hierarchy, and embrace of institutional instability has directly and painfully cost the KSW access to government funding grants. Taking issue with Christian Bök's influential essay "TISH and KOOT" – in which Bök argues that the radical nature of KSW's aesthetic has virtually guaranteed its members restricted access to the rewards (and awards) of popular and institutional acceptance as compared with the more humanist and approachable work of TISH – Jason Wiens challenges what he thinks is an over-hasty and misleading attempt to treat the histories of TISH and the KSW as symmetrical and therefore subject to a direct comparison.<sup>2</sup> Even so, Wiens follows Bök in arguing that an earlier generation of experimental poets still occupies a disproportionate amount of space in the small world of Canadian poetry and offers some compelling reasons to account for this fact.

In *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt*, Julia Kristeva writes about the problem of revolutionary politics and the arts in the age of entertainment, when the revolutionary implications of content have been emptied by spectacle and subsumption to capital. Noting that "language, and nothing else, leads to exteriority" (57), Kristeva defines revolt in this context as "a return toward the invisible, a refusal and displacement" (10). For 25 years now, Canada's longest-running literary avant-garde movement has been following its own language "*en dehors*" to engage with the socio-political realities in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, and beyond. The institutional instability of the KSW, and its unintended but characteristic flux,

has made it vulnerable, yes, but also flexible enough to respond to the changing needs of its times and places. Somewhat ironically, but in keeping with Kristeva's understanding of revolt as a valence of "invisibility," the group's ability to identify with and within these temporal and geographical sites has been enabled by what Collis calls its "homelessness": a shifting, nomadic condition of strategic invisibility that has allowed the KSW to evade government censure and dependency (which is a form of control) as part of its broader strategy of identification with the politically and socially marginalized. The KSW, an entity that remains notably, and perhaps necessarily, invisible in the country's literary consciousness, revolts by making itself institutionally confounding to and indigestible by the socio-political forces that would otherwise erase it.<sup>3</sup>

"And yet," states Collis optimistically, "here the KSW is, after 25 years, still unstable, decentred, off balance, in crisis – and continuing." As testimony to that continuing optimism, and to the political hope that lies behind it, the essays and interviews gathered here in this issue of *Open Letter* endeavour make the various refusals and displacements that characterize the work of KSW's writers more familiar to an alternative readership – without converting, we hope, that increased exposure, however modest, into a liability.

The editors would like to thank the several readers who helped in the vetting of the papers that appear in the "Articles" section, Frank Davey for his encouragement and advice with respect to this issue, Irene Mock and Tom Wayman for their insights into the Nelson branch of the Kootenay School of Writing, the Glenbow Museum in Calgary which provided our cover art, and – most importantly – our families who allowed us to absent ourselves for long periods at the most inopportune of times in order to complete this project.

### Notes

1. Please note that all the essays appearing in this section were submitted for peer review.
2. We should note that it was Bök's provocative essay delivered at *The Poetics and Public Culture Conference* in 2005 that first inspired the idea for this special issue.
3. While in no way affiliated with the KSW, Simon Fraser University has, in recent years, emerged as an important institutional locus for the group, providing instruction and, in some cases, employment for its members. Most significantly, in 2004 the SFU library acquired the KSW archives, which are now part of its Con-

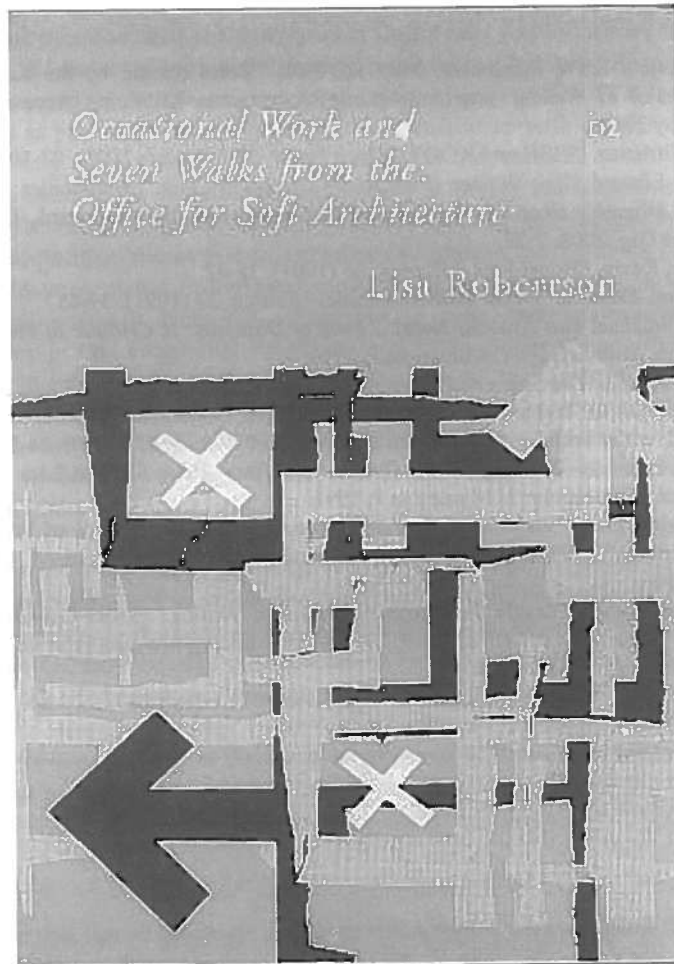
temporary Literature Collection, along with papers from several writers associated with KSW, including Lisa Robertson and Jeff Derksen.

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## Articles



*Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, 2003.

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### “The Dystopia of the Obsolete”: Lisa Robertson’s Vancouver and the Poetics of Nostalgia

Paul Stephens

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What would the utopian land look like if it were not fenced in by the violence of Liberty and the nation? How would my desire for a homeland read if I were to represent it with the moral promiscuity of any plant? These spores and seeds and bits of invasive root are the treasures I fling backward, over my shoulder, into the hokey loam of an old genre. (“How Pastoral” 26)

“I needed a genre” begins Lisa Robertson’s *XEclogue*. The phrase is resonant for a critic attempting to survey her eclectic body of work. Like much of her writing, the 2003 *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* defies simple description. The book might be best categorized as a series of prose-poetic essays related to Vancouver’s urban geography – but this would be reductive at best: the book contains photographs, a manifesto, meditations on botany and architecture, as well as a “Value Village Lyric.” The book emerges from a local context – and more specifically from a recognizably Kootenay School context: in part as a product of the school’s workshops and, arguably, as a result of the school’s funding struggles as well.<sup>1</sup> Robertson describes the book as “an

experiment in collaboration with the forms and concerns of my community.” Those concerns have largely to do with the Vancouver’s rapid growth over the past two decades. In this, the book’s purview is roughly coterminous with the Kootenay School after its move to Vancouver. Like much Kootenay School writing, Robertson’s poetry is deeply cosmopolitan and yet rooted in the local. Though utopian in its aspirations, her poetry recognizes the failure of an un-self-critical utopianism; though innovative in its use of avant-garde forms, her poetry is frequently concerned with nostalgia.

Problems of genre are frequently transposed onto problems of identity in Robertson’s writing. Obsolescent modes (such as the eclogue and the epic) become means by which to counter the inexorable progress of global capitalism. Nostalgia allows Robertson to personalize, as well as to re-imagine, historical experience. “Consider your homeland, like all utopias, obsolete” (n.p.), she writes in her introduction to *XEclogue*. Her work refers only obliquely to questions of Canadian nationalism, but is nonetheless strongly concerned with the complexities of Canadian self-identification. Her prose intertwines issues of domestic space, nationalism, and historical injustice: “The horizon pulled me close. It was trying to fulfill a space I thought of as my body. Through the bosco a fleecy blackness revealed the nation as its vapid twin. Yet nostalgia can locate those structured faults our embraces also seek” (n.p.). Having become the “vapid twin” to the space of what is not even precisely the body of the poet, the nation exists at several removes from reality. For Robertson, to engage in practices of nostalgia, or practices of the obsolescent, is to refuse to be useful, particularly to “the old bolstering narratives” of the nation. The angel of history must be assisted by “history’s dystopian ghosts” in order to rewrite the past. Such a rewriting refuses to have economic value and challenges our very notion of utility:

A system is ecological when it consumes its own waste products. But within the capitalist narrative the utopia of the new asserts itself as the only productive teleology. Therefore I find it preferable to choose the dystopia of the obsolete. As a tactically uprooted use, deployment of the obsolete could cut short the feckless plot of productivity. When capital marks women as the abject and monstrous ciphers of both reproduction and consumption, our choice can only be to choke out the project of renovation. We must become history’s dystopian ghosts, inserting our inconsistencies, demands, misinterpretations, and weedy appetites into the old bolstering narratives: We shall refuse to be useful. (“How Pastoral” 25)

If capitalist societies for most of their histories could be extraordinarily productive while excluding women from full participation in their institutions, then perhaps there is something inherently wrong not only with the political mechanisms of capitalist society, but also with its goals of maximizing pro-

duction and utility. It is only by challenging the ends, as well as the means, of capitalist production that women can resituate themselves historically. As Robertson writes: “Through gluttony we become historical” (*Office* 145). “Nice girls don’t make history,” as the bumper sticker would have it. Women’s quotidian productive labour is ahistorical; only ruptures within the narrative of production can be registered as meaningful events.

To historicize is in some sense to bring back to life the obsolete – that which is no longer useful. In the following passage from a dream sequence in *XEclogue*, she describes the nation as artifact:

In deep sleep my ancestress tells me a story:

“Ontology is the luxury of the landed. Let’s pretend you ‘had’ a land. Then you ‘lost’ it. Now fondly describe it. That is pastoral. Consider your homeland, like all utopias, obsolete. Your pining rhetoric points to obsolescence. The garden gate shuts firmly. Yet Liberty must remain throned in her posh gazebo. What can the poor Lady do? Beauty, Pride, Envy, the Bounteous Land, The Romance of Citizenship: these mawkish paradigms flesh out the nation, fard its empty gaze. What if, for your new suit, you chose to parade obsolescence? Make a parallel nation, an anagram of the Land. Annex Liberty, absorb her, and recode her: infuse her with your nasty optics. The anagram will surpass and delete the first world, yet, in all its elements, remain identical. Who can afford sincerity? It’s an expensive monocle.” (“How Pastoral” 22)

This passage typifies Robertson’s prose in its compression and complexity. Several arguments are going on at once. “Sincere” nationalism must be recoded – the emptiness of national mythologies must be exposed. Citizenship, in Robertson’s terms, is a kind of romance: personal, idealistic, transient. All nations are in some direct or indirect fashion the products of imperial divisions of the world. Robertson’s redeployment of Virgil suggests that imperialism must be excavated and reversed through parodic imitation. This would be an imaginative form of decolonization, where no one could take for granted his or her “landed”-ness. “First world” nations “remain identical” to one another in the histories they exclude, but parallel histories can and must be created. Lady Liberty is a monarch in luxurious surroundings, but she is also a monarch in isolation. Lady Liberty cannot help but refer to Canada’s southern neighbour, which Robertson seems to suggest cannot simply be ignored, but must be engaged, “recoded,” and “absorbed” – made, perhaps, to live up to her self-professed values of freedom and tolerance.

Robertson’s critique of nationalism is particularly apparent in her first two full-length books, *XEclogue* and *Debbie: An Epic*, both of which reformulate Virgilian themes in the context of a postmodern feminism that defies any strong sense of region. “The hoaky loam of an old genre” ani-

mates her eclogic and epic work, but not in the service of any specific nation, government, location, or party. *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office of Soft Architecture*, although firmly rooted in Vancouver, represents the city as something of a global bricolage – a product of conflicting, and often incommensurate, historical influences. Composed in lyrical prose, the book is strongly influenced by Situationism and by Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. The city functions as protagonist, with its suburbs as important supporting characters. The suburb of Burnaby, for example, is brought out of its blandness and made a foil to larger socio-cultural issues surrounding Vancouver's urban development. Nostalgia is central to *The Office for Soft Architecture's* challenge to Vancouver's growth; the book immediately questions the capitalist processes responsible for that growth:

The Office for Soft Architecture came into being as I watched the city of Vancouver dissolve in the fluid called money.... Here and there money had tarried. The result seemed emotional. I wanted to document this process. I began to research the history of surfaces. I included my own desires in the research. In this way, I became multiple. I became money. (1)

Like the title of Robertson's book *The Weather*, this passage alludes to Walter Benjamin's "Money and rain belong together. The weather is itself an index of the state of this world. Bliss is cloudless, knows no weather. There also comes a cloudless realm of perfect goods, on which no money falls" (481). Robertson makes herself an implicated character within the landscape (or the weatherscape). The old Vancouver may have tragically dissolved in a rain of money, but that does not mean that the old Vancouver can be reclaimed through the removal of the corroding influence of money. On the contrary, to understand money's influence on the city, the author must become "money," so as to be able to think from the perspective of capital, rather than to simply dismiss capital's effects. Robertson again personalizes the experience of Vancouver's growth, unashamedly incorporating her "desires in the research." Historical research, the book suggests, cannot be a disinterested undertaking. Desires animate otherwise forgotten histories; desires cannot be dismissed as irrational or feminine. The writer cannot be separated from the metropolis she inhabits. Vancouver's many changing landscapes (economic, architectural, ethnographic, geographic) must be particularized and experienced rather than pathologized and mourned.

Like Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York*, *The Office for Soft Architecture* is a "retroactive manifesto." Inspired by Koolhaas, Robertson performs a *détournement* on the name of his company, "The Office for Metropolitan Architecture." Soft Architecture is deliberately autodidactic and non-professional, characterized by the casual walk rather than by the sur-

vey and the blueprint. The Office for Soft Architecture is to the Office for Metropolitan Architecture what The Kootenay School is to a conventional M.F.A. program in creative writing. Robertson's architectural writing is proudly improvisatory, and restlessly moves from location to location without any kind of master plan: "This improvisatory ethos is modern. It is proportioned by the utopia of improvised necessity rather than by tradition" (178). Vancouver becomes emblematic of the attempt to create a provisional utopia out of the wilderness.

On the surface eminently modern in its lack of a longstanding cultural tradition, Vancouver is shown in fact to harbour multiple histories that remain repressed within the city's popular historiography. Vancouver is seen to have been under the influence of globalizing forces since its inception; the city's attempts to present itself to the world come under particular scrutiny:

The essays ... reflect Vancouver's changing urban texture during a period of its development roughly bracketed by the sale of the Expo '86 site by the provincial government, and the 2003 acquisition by the province of the 2010 Winter Olympics. In this period of accelerated growth and increasingly globalizing economies, much of what I loved about this city seemed to be disappearing. I thought I should document the physical transitions I was witnessing in my daily life, and in this way question my own nostalgia for the minor, the local, the ruinous; for decay. It was efficient to become an architect, since the city's economic and aesthetic discourses were increasingly framed in architectural vocabularies. In writing I wanted to make alternative spaces and contexts for the visual culture of this city, sites that could also provide a vigorously idiosyncratic history of surfaces as they fluctuate. (Acknowledgements n.p.)

Documentation provides a means both to preserve and to question Vancouver's past. The book is a loosely organized *dérive* through Vancouver and environs. Soft Architecture opts for the contemplative walk and the meticulous record of historical events as opposed to the more aggressive *détournement*. In his classic formulation, "Theory of the Dérive," Guy Debord writes:

Among the various Situationist methods is the *dérive* [literally: 'drifting'], a technique of transient passage through various ambiances. The *dérive* entails playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychological effects; which completely distinguishes it from the classical notions of the journey and the stroll. (50)

In "psychogeographical" terms, the activity of the *dérive* is more proactive than the activity of the flâneur, although in her uncertain drifting, the *dériviste* does not presume to reimagine the city programmatically on the scale of a Baron Haussman or a Le Corbusier. As Joshua Clover points out in his essay on Robertson, "soft architecture" can also be understood "as the body,

or as being" (81). As such, "soft architecture" is embodied and receptive – modest in its ambitions to remake the landscape, but immodest in its ambitions to describe the desires and lived histories of the city's inhabitants.

The *dérive* involves an open-ended passivity – which is perhaps also in keeping with the absence of large-scale conflicts or upheavals (riots, attacks, natural disasters) in Vancouver's recent past. The *dérive* may also be well suited to describing the city's perceived historical isolation:

our city is persistently soft. We see it like a raw encampment at the edge of the rocks, a camp for a navy vying to return to a place that has disappeared. So the camp is a permanent transience, the buildings or shelters like tents – tents of steel, chipboard, stucco, glass, cement, paper, and various claddings – tents rising and falling in the glittering rhythm which is null rhythm, which is the flux of modern careers. (15)

More like a navy base than a battlefield, the city is typified by the transient careers of its inhabitants. It is a navy base without much of a navy – a nuclear-free zone in a world armed to the teeth. The static wilderness has given way to dynamic urban space. Somehow the specificities of this landscape must be re-imagined. This imagining is political:

The problem of the shape of choice is mainly retrospective. That wild nostalgia leans into the sheer volubility of incompetence. This nostalgia musters symbols with no relation to necessity – civic sequins, apertures that record and tend the fickleness of social gifts. Containing only supple space, nostalgia feeds our imagination's strategic ineptitude. Forget the journals, conferences, salons, textbooks, and media of dissemination. We say thought's object is not knowledge but living. We do not like it elsewhere.

The truly utopian act is to manifest current conditions and dialects. Practice description. Description is mystical. It is afterlife because it is life's reflection or reverse. Place is accident posing as politics. (16)

Robertson offers no pre-lapsarian past for Vancouver, as for instance when she "détourns" the Situationist slogan of May 1968, "Sous les pavé, la plage," into "Under the pavement, pavement." "Under the pavement, the beach" might suit Vancouver's False Creek – site of Expo 86 and formerly a highly contaminated industrial space – even better than it would a wall near the Seine. The nostalgia for nature, however, is a form of nostalgia Robertson treats with considerable suspicion. She consistently treats the pastoral not as a genuine form of access to the natural world, but rather as "a nation-making genre" which naturalizes political and social inequality:

I begin with the premise that pastoral, as a literary genre, is obsolete – originally obsolete. Once a hokey territory sussed by hayseed diction, now the mawkish artificiality of the pastoral poem's constructed surface has settled down to a backyard expressivity.... Translate backyard utopia as mythology.... I'd call pastoral the nation-making genre: within a hothouse lan-

guage we force the myth of the Land to act as both political resource and mystic origin. ("How Pastoral" 22-23)

Despite its postmodern attempts to create myths of self-importance – in events like Expo '86 and the 2010 Winter Olympics – Vancouver seems unable to create a singular nation-building pastoral mythology. Expo and the Olympics are emblematic of Vancouver boosterism; they are international events, but it is an internationalism of tourism and spectacle, not an internationalism based on cultural uniqueness. Vancouver may lack a nation-building myth of origin, but Robertson is not arguing that Vancouver needs any such myth of origin. Soft Architecture is practical, and its idealism resides in its senses of possible outcomes rather than in direct militant action based on a utopian vision of an originary pastoral state or a definitive future identity. The sentence, "We say thought's object is not knowledge but living" (16), is a succinct definition of Pragmatism that could have been written by James or Dewey. There is no divine city on a hill, or even a divine city beneath the hills. Myths of origin are implicitly utopian in that they presume a worldview; the examination of lived history is not utopian, but pragmatic. Robertson consistently denies the possibility of utopia in Vancouver or elsewhere: "Nothing is utopian. Everything wants to be. Soft Architects face the reaching middle" (17).

In what I take to be one of the book's most important chapters, "Playing House: A Brief Account of the Idea of the Shack," Vancouver is symbolically portrayed as shack-like in terms of its architectural ambitions. Surrounded by wilderness, the city is a haphazard work-in-progress, built from the materials of its own past:

The landscape includes the material detritus of previous inhabitations and economies. Typically the shack reuses or regroups things with humour and frugality. The boughs of a tree might become a roof. A shack almost always reuses windows, so that looking into or out of the shack is already part of a series, or an ecology, of looking. In this sense a shack is itself a theory: it sees through other eyes. This aspect of the shack's politics prevents shack nostalgia from becoming mere inert propaganda. The layering or abutment of historically contingent economies frames a diction or pressure that is political, political in the sense that the shack dweller is never a pure product of the independent present. He sees himself through other eyes. (177-78)

Most important in this process of reusing is the reuse of windows. The shack must see itself through the glass of others. Not only is ontology a "luxury of the landed," so, too, is epistemology. Vancouver can know itself only through the eyes of others. As a city of immigration, it is a city of borrowed windows and eyes, and cannot be reduced to a simple notion of placeness. Its only authenticity consists in its lack of authenticity. In *Rous-*

*seau's Boat*, Robertson offers another vision of flawed utopia:

I discover a tenuous utopia made from steel, wooden chairs, glass, stone,  
metal bed frames, tapestry, bones, prosthetic legs, hair, shirt-cuffs, nylon,  
plaster figurines, perfume bottles and keys.  
I am confusing art and decay. (21)

Robertson's litany is dominated by the detritus of consumer society, but there are also elements like stone, hair, and bones, which remain unaltered features of nature. Utopia is tenuous: a mix, a living being subject to decay. Art may be utopian, but it cannot by itself create everlasting utopia. Like Robertson's other writings, *The Office for Soft Architecture* celebrates the death of the utopian ideal. In *Debbie: An Epic*, she writes: "I celebrate the death of method: the flirting woods call it, the glittering rocks call it – utopia is dead. High Loveliness was born here to cut back prim sublimity. She's a member of the lily tribe whose materials follow themselves. She's a bitch of the inauthentic; her ego's in drag" (n.p.). Utopia, like gender, is a performative erasure of complexity. Power is not a fixed attribute of the just and the good; instead, power is an effect. One can see the deep influence of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler in *Debbie: An Epic* when Robertson writes: "We invented power. Power is a pink prosthesis hidden in the forest. Between black pines we strap it on and dip our pink prosthesis in the pool" (n.p.). Nature is nothing but a pool of abstraction. It is up to humans to fuck in their fashion, and the strap-on prosthesis is inherently no better or worse than the purportedly normative phallus.

Citizenship, class affiliation, and gender roles are all likened to obsolete genres by Robertson – and yet to ignore the role of nation, class, and gender is perhaps to partake of another, more insidious form of nostalgia. Feminism in particular must continually be suspicious of nostalgia:

I must risk censure and speak of my shimmering girlhood – for the politics of girls cannot refuse nostalgia.

To be raised as a girl was a language, a system of dreaming fake dreams. In the prickling grass in the afternoon in August, I kept trying to find a place where my blood could rush. That was the obsolete experience of hope. But yield to the evidence. And do not decline to interpret. A smooth span of nostalgia dissects the crackling gazebo. (n.p.)

The "gazebo" of power, the official residence of Lady Liberty, reappears as an ambivalent symbol – feminized, vulnerable, unnecessary, open, luxurious. The gazebo is both preserved and demolished by the agency of nostalgia. One must return to "fake dreams" – (a pleonasm?) – before one can dream new dreams. The final chapter of *Debbie: An Epic*, titled "Utopia," is conscious of its own limitations in creating any kind of collective political agenda that would not be constructed out of the failures of the past:

Now it is necessary to catalogue what, in sadness and tranquility, we have failed to describe in our supple rendering of these tableaux – those objects which stand between our ardent, political address and a new, plural pronoun (inky, dubious, prolix and deluxe): the shining lure of tenderness; the stain of ruddy wildings in a grove; the oblique and quivering kite of eros; history diffused as romance; a genre's camouflaged violence. (n.p.)

The refusal to choose a genre becomes a refusal to camouflage violence. Societies do not function, perhaps, without organizing and limiting violence – but that violence can perhaps be mitigated if it is transparent in structure, or genre.

Seen through the lens of Robertson's Vancouver writings, both urban and suburban development are inescapably violent. In *The Office for Soft Architecture*, Vancouver becomes a kind of failed petty-bourgeois paradise, emblemized by "Vancouver Specials" and leaky condos. The term Vancouver Special – well known to Vancouverites – refers to a boxy, plain, lot-maximizing, two-story house. Vancouver's "leaky condo" scandal of the 1990s involved lax construction regulation and oversight during a period of spectacular growth. Such localized references serve as regionally specific symbols of the adverse effects of Vancouver's stratospheric postwar building boom. In "The Pure Surface" chapter of the book, four pages are taken up by thumbnail photos of one hundred nearly identical Vancouver specials. The leaky condos and Vancouver Specials are juxtaposed with a chapter on a turn-of-the-century Arts and Crafts mansion in Burnaby. Once the site of profitable strawberry farms and wealthy estates, Burnaby is now a seemingly unremarkable middle-class locale. The mansion represents "an idea of nature as democratic and populist metaphor, the universal paradigm of sincerity and authenticity" (98). As egalitarian and utopian as Arts and Crafts designs might be, they still find their realization in antiquated and elitist methods of construction. The mansion represents the ideal of a suburban development that might have been individualized and artistic – everything the Vancouver Special and the leaky condo are not – and yet the mansion is beyond the grasp of the working class Debbies who populate Vancouver's less glamorous suburbs.

Debbie herself loves to revel in the nostalgia of times where people of her class would have been servile in ways more apparent than in contemporary society:

I have loved history's premonitions  
urgencies these parts lovingly I speak  
in the dialect of servility  
and current conditions arms of terror  
and grammar that went into the forest



motors (n.p.)

Nostalgia enables a false return to paradise, an escape, but it can also permit a reconsideration of the grammar of contemporary social conditions. One must speak "the dialect of servility" in order to understand servitude. History is a kind of mimicking activity for Debbie. Transparency can be only sought, never attained. As she writes: "First all belief was paradise. So pliable a medium. A time not very long. A transparency caused" (n.p.). Instead of seeking paradise, we ought to seek other possible outcomes to the histories that have already taken place. Robertson seems to be speaking about Canadian society as a whole when she uses the word "this" ambiguously: "This was made from Europe, formed from Europe, rant and roar. Fine and grand. Fresh and bright" (n.p.). The ambivalence of the phrases "fine and grand" and "fresh and bright" demonstrates a clear discomfort with an oversimplified Canadian identity "made from Europe."

Debbie is described as "a moot person in a moot place," yet what makes her an epic character is her interaction with world history and with modern empire:

... I will discuss perfidy  
with scholars as if spurning kisses, I  
will sip the marble marrow of empire. (n.p.)

Debbie can be a scholar through self-willing; her interactions with historical knowledge take place as erotic experience. She precedes empire just as she perseveres past its demise:

... we were half made when the empire  
died in orgy. Because we are not free  
my work shall be obscure  
as Love! unlinguistic! I  
bludgeon the poem with desire and  
stupidity in the wonderful autumn  
season as  
rosy cars  
ascend (n.p.)

Debbie's "Because we are not free/ my work shall be obscure/ as Love!" is a targeted defence of an avant-garde writing practice. An eroticized language, as in the writing of Gertrude Stein, becomes an effective tool in resisting dominant societal roles. Debbie may be "moot" in the terms of empire, but in her mootness she is better able to observe the operations of empire. From her shack or her Vancouver Special or her leaky condo she is able to observe that "Utopia's torn plastic shanties are/ moot shells of oscillation" (n.p.). The shack is a spin-off from the continuous movement of empire and of utopia,

pia, which – given the dominant coding of language, gender, and economics – amount to nearly the same things from Debbie's perspective.

Robertson's interest in nostalgia shows itself even in her earliest book, *The Apothecary*. The kind of nostalgia that Robertson is thinking of here is sociopolitical, but also sexual, and does not necessarily liberate the individual from repression:

The extreme anxiety of self-disclosure displaces the fantasy of politics with clots of phrase, yet the phantasie gives rise to a curiously useful desperation in the sense that "a house," "a car," or "a field" compensate metonymically. I remember how a house falling reveals an observable structure for an instant, then, through a sexual process, becomes nostalgia. (28)

The house becomes a collective space, the space that feminism has attempted to recover from the patriarchal erasure of domestic labour. Isolation may be necessary for the female to overcome the conditioning of a patriarchal society, but isolation is only a strategy along the way to a fuller, more historical socialization. As Robertson writes in *The Apothecary*, memory must be surmounted and rewritten:

A dexterous genre was available to my thighs only through an aesthetic of scrupulous isolation: aggregative though tentatively emphatic, apt to somatize, dedicated to garnering yet ordinarily engorged – in the burgeoning jargon I surmount memory as if a coppery cigarette toughly sewed the shape of an inclusive object to modulate among luxuries yet I am heard not physical but erring and further inversions clog a kind of nosegay showing how only the systematic is lacking before *copula* translate as "to cure." (19)

The cure the titular "apothecary" seeks is an inclusive new system. The new system requires new genres able to eroticize and to bring pleasure – as well as to somatize and to represent pain. The new system, represented through embodied metaphors, requires the "conspicuous inutility" called for in *Debbie: An Epic*. The adventurous and varied typography of *Debbie: An Epic* could itself be recognized as a conspicuous inutility. Large type and overlaid type makes their own semantic arguments, but the book's typography can also be read as a purposeful rejection of the most economical means of conveying a poem. People must travel "vast/itineraries of error" (25) as she writes in *The Weather*. Error is a kind of luxury; revisiting the "errors" of history is a colossal form of luxury that is necessary to resist the depredations of empire. Robertson's epic (or mock epic) is like a palimpsest in reverse. Rather than reusing scarce and expensive paper or vellum out of necessity, Robertson deliberately overwrites what there is no economic need to overwrite. Obsolescence must be sought, not repressed. There is a retrospective joy in understanding the errors of history. In *The Weather*, Robertson writes: "We are watching ourselves being torn. It's gorgeous; we accept the

dispersal. It's just beginning; we establish an obsolescence" (33).

Establishing "an obsolescence" is an ongoing process meant in part to counteract the anti-historical pressures of modernity. "The tendency of the age is to forget disturbance," she writes in *Debbie: An Epic*. In other words, as "The Argument" of *Debbie: An Epic* runs, "Slick lyric blocks history." Rewriting the pastoral and the epic traditions is a gesture of remembering disturbance. Given the conditions of postmodern life, the only epic possible is an anti-epic. Such an epic, simultaneously materialist and anti-materialist, argues for reorienting social expenditure in a more just manner; it also denies that individuals are merely the products of their material conditions. It preserves some sort of philosophical idealism for poetic subjects: "I want an ingenious fibre to be treated as funny tragedy expressing a classic argument against materialism which runs like this: which changes of costume are bound to be dangerous? what code is honest and practical yet marginally corporate?" (3). To find a "fibre" may not be as ambitious as finding a new method or a new narrative of progress; finding a fibre may be the most "honest and practical" activity under the circumstances. In my epigraph, Robertson speaks of "The moral promiscuity of any plant" as an alternative to the violence of Liberty and the nation. The "moral promiscuity of any plant" is a call to a non-instrumentalized, non-utilitarian morality; hence the importance of the echoes of Georges Bataille that run through Robertson's work. The luxury of leisure time or the luxury of the unquantified time spent within the domestic space must not be feminized. Geography, gender, and economics are alike in their performative natures:

Nostalgia, like hysteria, once commonly treated as a feminine pathology, must now be claimed as a method of reading or of critiquing history – a pointer indicating a potential node of entry.... Rather than diagnosing this nostalgia as a symptom of loss (which would only buttress the capitalist fiction of possession), I deploy it as an almanac, planning a tentative landscape in which my inappropriate and disgraceful thoughts may circulate. Nostalgia will locate precisely those gaps or absences in a system we may now redefine as openings, freshly turned plots.... ("How Pastoral" 25)

The Soft Architectural approach emphasizes collectivity, as does the urban eclogue. By defining nostalgia as a collective re-possession of the past rather than as an individual loss of the past, Robertson is able to cultivate new cultural possibilities. Not uncoincidentally she employs agricultural metaphors to describe this reclamation. The collective imaginary she calls upon rejects the possessiveness of the individual lyric ego: "I deplore the enclosure staked out by a poetics of 'place' in which the field of man's discrete ontological geography stands as a wilful displacement, an emptying of a specifically peopled history" ("How Pastoral" 25). Robertson al-

ludes to a time before the Enclosure Movement – to an idyllic pre-capitalist stage, but once again she is sceptical of indulging in Rousseauian fantasies. "Eclogue Three: Liberty" of *XEclogue* is a direct response to Rousseau, and it too plays upon the agrarian origins of the term culture:

What follows is the interminable journal of culture. This neutral and emotive little word seems, in the operatic dark green woods, so harmless and legal but it's liberty totalized, an incommensurable crime against the girls. To question privilege I'm going to shame this word. I will begin by gathering around my body all the facts.... I embody the problem of the free-rider, inconveniencing, the leaf-built, the simple-hearted, the phobic, with the unctuous display of my grief. (n.p.)

To an eighteenth-century audience, *The Social Contract* represented a complete and total assault upon civilization; to a twenty-first century audience, *The Social Contract*, like *Émile*, cannot help but be a total assault upon civilization that refuses to inquire deeply into the category of gender as a social construct. "Liberty totalized" likewise embodies an oxymoronic contradiction. Even under Rousseau's scathing gaze, culture remains a "crime against the girls." No amount of primitivism, it would seem, can result in full-fledged feminism when mixed with the slightest degree of culture. To return to the problem of utility, if the labour of women goes unrecognized as it usually does in the pastoral tradition, then women are merely "free-riders." To be a stock pastoral character, a beautiful milkmaid for instance, is to be the victim of an acculturated nature or of a naturalized culture. Robertson is not content with merely demonstrating that the utility of the milkmaid's labour has been fetishized out of existence – instead Robertson is challenging the definitions of utility both within culture and within language. Consider again Debbie's lines: "Because we are not free/ my work shall be obscure/ as Love!" The "work" can be writing, but it can also more generally be any kind of labour. In obscurity can be joy, can be meaning, can be the impulse toward liberation.

Although she repeatedly stresses the importance of community in her work, Robertson is wary of utopianism on a grand scale, and she articulates distinct limits and responsibilities for her work. In an e-mail interview with Steve McCaffery, she writes:

There are traces of unbuildable or unbuilt architectures folded into the texture of the city and our bodies are already moving among them. Therefore the exploitation of complicity as a critical trope, an economy of scale. My outlook is not liberatory except by the most minor means, but these tiny, flickering inflections are the only agency I believe – the inflections complicating the crux of a complicity. More and more poetry is becoming for me the urgent description of complicity and delusional space. The description squats within a grammar because there is no other site. Therefore the need

for the urgent and incommensurate hopes of accomplices. (Robertson and McCaffery 38)

The impulse is again toward collective action and creation and away from individual imaginative compartmentalization. Just as she reclaims the word "nostalgia," with its pejorative connotations, so too she reclaims the word "complicity." The accomplice is not a criminal but an agent in the creative process, a squatter in the midst of wealth. The "unbuildable" remains as important as what has been built. Room must be set aside for "delusional space," and this space must remain counter-normative within larger shared visions. "A specifically peopled history" must be continually (re-)imagined by Robertson and her accomplices.

In the most thoroughly researched chapter of *The Office for Soft Architecture*, "Site Report: New Brighton Park," Robertson attempts to create such "a specifically peopled history." An obscure park in East Vancouver, traditionally one of the city's poorest areas, becomes another kind of palimpsest of lost history.<sup>2</sup> Like Susan Howe's writings on Buffalo, the New Brighton chapter places micro-history in the service of a larger theoretical inquiry. Robertson describes the park as "an inverted utopia," again invoking the Situationist slogan, this time in reverse, "sous la plage, le pavé" (37). The park is surrounded by heavy industry, and yet in a somewhat challenged form it offers beach access. Staked out as a town site out at the planned terminus of the CPR railway, the park is the site of the first recorded real estate transaction in the city. From this inglorious myth of origin, Robertson goes on to describe the park's many other former uses: site of a hotel, a resort, a prospective steam power facility, and a community pool. The pool is particularly significant in that it was the site of the first racial exclusion policy in a Vancouver park; Japanese-Canadians interned nearby during the Second World War were forbidden entry. For Robertson, "the spatio-economic system ... functions as a mutating lens: never a settlement, always already a zone of leisured flows and their minor intensifications, a zone of racialization and morphogenesis" (41).

The park retains traces of many of the major events of Western Canadian history. The settlement colony becomes an industrial producer and a war economy, and then a diversified economy highly reliant on leisure activities. The substitutions imposed on the landscape are not systematic or evolutionary – they are practical and unambitious adaptations to existing conditions. The landscape is unpoetic in the terms of traditional lyric: "Structure here is anti-metaphoric: it disperses convention" (41). Part of the park's unrealized potential is its sheer uselessness in economic terms: "Soft Architects believe that this site demonstrates the best possible use of an urban origin: Change its name repeatedly. Burn it down. From the rubble confect a prosthetic pleasureground; with fluent obviousness, picnic

there" (41). New Brighton Park has had its name changed; the New Brighton Hotel did burn down; in comparison to other Vancouver parks, New Brighton is a rubble-filled locale. In a sense, Robertson is creating a kind of urban theodicy out of the park. The best of all possible results has occurred, though hardly by design. Out of a certain degree of randomness has emerged the chaotic celebration of a staccato Steinianism: "picnic there." The park has no reason to be ashamed, nor do those who might go there for pleasure – as opposed to visiting cleaner, larger, better-known parks like the marquee Stanley Park. New Brighton Park is no longer a destination park; it is a neighbourhood spectre park. Robertson's own interest in the park was piqued by its proximity to her home, and its usefulness as a place to walk her dog. New Brighton Park is a perfect subject for the Soft Architectural approach because it is uncategorizable, underappreciated, and diverse. It is a sometime pleasureground of the lower middle class and of the young artists and writers who have moved to the neighbourhood in the past two decades. Depending on one's perspective, New Brighton is a good example of the reclamation of urban space or of gentrification. It points the way toward a post-industrial, non-discriminatory, transnational Western Canada, but it also points the way to a Western Canada subject to the whims of development – hardly a dystopia and hardly a utopia. As Jennifer Scappetone asks, "Is an inverted Utopia dystopian? Likely not. In describing the capsizing of plots, Lisa Robertson tracks the critical distortion in erecting a multiple pronoun, midway through the condemned hold" (75).

Robertson's work makes her readers intensely conscious of space and of location, and yet, as I have suggested, Robertson herself is not easy to situate. Lytle Shaw observes that she is a "writer whose site specificity exceeds the literal or phenomenological and enters the discursive domain" (44). No location, and no identification with a place, can be taken for granted in her writing. Like much of the work that emerged from the circle of writers involved in the Kootenay School in the 1980s and 90s, Robertson's vision is internationalist in its scope. Like the *Tish* poets of the 1960s, she maintains strong connections to the American avant-garde. But her writing – like that of other Vancouver poets of her generation such as Kevin Davies, Peter Culley, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk and Jeff Derksen – is more uncomfortable in its sense of place than that of the 1960s generation of Vancouver poets. Like the pastoral tradition in general, Vancouver may have once been "a hokey territory sussed by a hayseed diction" (*Office* 22), but it is no longer such a territory. Profoundly polyglot and multiethnic, Vancouver has outpaced traditional politics of place and identity. Its many identities are overlaid and transient, its histories only partially visible – like New Brighton Park in Robertson's description. Robertson does not disavow a traditional Canadian identity; instead she encourages us to think

of it as a genre among genres. Canada may be a comparatively benign embodiment of the genre of the nation state – but the nation state is still a genre that threatens to absorb all genres. The nation state is an economic, legal, and military construction that subsumes the local and the global. Robertson is suggesting, in other words, that Vancouver encompasses all nostalgias. Vancouver is not a world city in the sense of being a megalopolis – but it is a city of the world, subject both to the benefits and to the costs of globalization.

In effect, Robertson – who has lived in Cambridge, Paris, and Oakland – has written her native city a series of extraordinary love letters, the latest of which, *Magenta Soul Whip*, notes “This work was completed in Roman Vancouver” (66), and ends with the colophon “Vancouver-Paris-Oakland 1995-2007.” The postscript of the 2006 *The Men: A Lyric Book* reads:

(In Vancouver as the dark winter tapered into spring  
I undertook to sing  
My life my body these words  
The men from a perspective.

For all those who confuse  
Flirtation with monogamy  
I drain the golden glass

They exit and glance upwards  
Adjust their little caps)  
(69)

Although perhaps less “located” than her earlier work, the postscript gives a kind of performative grounding to an otherwise non-site specific text. The poem is a product of a vitalist body: “My life my body.” To confuse flirtation with monogamy is to upset convention, to recognize play among rigorous distinctions, to add nuance to degrees of affiliation. Perhaps one can flirt with identities without losing one’s grounding. Robertson has lived in at least three cultural capitals, and yet her writing remains tied to Vancouver. Perhaps her exilic writings should remind us that Vancouver is a site not just of immigration but also of emigration – not simply to the traditional Canadian urban hubs of Toronto and Montreal but to the world as a whole. Utopia is based upon regional exclusion; Vancouver, at its best, is not. As Robertson puts it so well: “we must recognize Utopia as an accretion of nostalgias with no object other than the historiography of the imaginary” (“How Pastoral” 23). *The Office for Soft Architecture* is such an accretion of nostalgias. Perhaps it takes the distance of an expatriate to create such an accretion. Nostalgias cannot be possessed, but they can be

shared. Nostalgias show that every project of renovation entails a loss, as does every project of emigration. Likewise, every project of nationalistic self-identification entails a simplification of complex identities and histories. As Robertson writes, “It is too late to be simple” (*Office* 76). Robertson’s soft architectural writings show that things were never simple in Vancouver. In the psychogeography of Vancouverites, the “dystopia of the obsolete” and the utopia of the imaginary may never have been all that far apart – somewhere between Surrey to the east and Wreck Beach to the west.

## Notes

1. The seven walks of the book’s title emerged from workshops Robertson led at the Kootenay School in 2001. Robertson’s 1998 article “Visitations: City of Ziggurats,” which provides an account of the Kootenay’s struggle to maintain its funding from the City of Vancouver, in many ways reads like a template for the book as a whole.
2. In recent years East Vancouver has been the centre of more controversy over urban land use than any other neighbourhood in Canada. The Vancouver poetry community and the Kootenay School of Writing have been extensively involved in advocating for affordable housing and in resisting gentrification. See in particular *Woodsquat: A Special Issue of West Coast Line* and “Urban Regeneration: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy” by Neil Smith and Jeff Derksen in *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings*.

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*Sleek Vinyl Drill*, 2000.

## Feminist Poetics as Avant-Garde Poetics

Alessandra Capperdoni

In Canada, the discourse of the avant-garde has been marked by deep seated anxieties in poetic, critical, and cultural work at large in relation to the meaning and function of the cultural, the imbrications of aesthetics and ideology, locality and transcultural geographies, and the politics of form.<sup>1</sup> The deployment of the term at different historical junctures and in relation to specific cultural formations (i.e., *First Statement* in the 1940s, *Tish* in the 1960s, the Toronto Research Group 1973-1982, the KSW and language poetics in the 1980s-1990s) marks an obvious fascination for vanguardistic practices as sites of opposition and cultural transformation (poetry and the utopia of revolution) and the longing for an active role of culture in the socio-political. This affective relation to the cultural as a potential site for social transformation is probably the only unifying factor in an array of groups and practices that do not cohere around a single movement, history, or space but which nevertheless treat the term 'avant-garde' as a possible discursive location. Yet, in this context, the position of feminist poetics is an ambiguous one. While women's experimental poetics have been an important part of the different vanguardistic fields of cultural production, more often than not these practices have been either subsumed by the group or school with which the poets aligned themselves or have been re-contained within the label 'feminist,' and thus pushed to the margin rather than being made visible as practices central to the articulation of an avant-garde project.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the term avant-garde has become almost synonymous with male writing – a condition, however, that is not unique to the Canadian context. In this respect, the diversity of critical responses to Canadian avant-garde poetics, and to their relationship with the cultural and the political, is illuminating. Experimental practices by male poets have been taken up as critical sites to interrogate and deconstruct dominant discourses of culture, economics, and race, or have been contested for their oppositional stances to the national and their transnational affiliations (e.g. *Tish*) – critical gestures which, in different ways, privilege the sign of the political. In contrast, feminist experimental practices have been critiqued for their 'difficulty' and inaccessibility to the majority of 'women'<sup>3</sup> and female readers (thus casting doubts about the political effectiveness of feminist experimental writings), or celebrated for opening up new possi-



bilities for female subjectivity.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the term 'feminist' occupies a very ambiguous position within critical reception, feminist and non, when it is either appropriated by forms recognizable within feminist critical paradigms or kept at some distance when other critical stances are foregrounded (e.g., Marxist) or different markers are privileged (e.g., language writing), thus raising once more the age-old question of what constitutes feminist writing (what Gayle Rubin, in her discussion of the relation of queer sexualities to feminism, defines as "border patrols" (477)),<sup>5</sup> who earns the title, and in whose interest. For instance, writers like Dorothy Trujillo Lusk and Lisa Robertson, though both associated with the Vancouver-based Kootenay School of Writing, have been categorized unevenly in relation to feminist writing. Lusk's and Robertson's poetics engage very differently with questions of labour, capital, and class, yet they both employ deconstructive strategies of language to make visible ideologies of language and structures of power. That the "class-inflected" poetics of Lusk is,<sup>6</sup> therefore, overlooked by feminist critics but valued by critics working within Marxist frameworks does not come as a surprise, while Robertson's poetics, which is more recognizable within the central preoccupations of feminist writing and theory, has attracted more attention and, indeed, earned a major recognition with the nomination for the Governor's General Award for poetry for *Debbie: An Epic* in 1998.<sup>7</sup> The different (and uneven) critical reception of Lusk and Robertson suggests that while the experimental practices of either poet are not in question, gender and class are seen as different and unrelated concerns, whereby one is, at best, a secondary aspect, or reflex, of the other; it also raises the question whether concerns about 'subjectivity' (traditionally aligned with the feminine and female culture) are indeed considered political.<sup>8</sup>

This dichotomy of responses within the critical apparatus, and often within poetic circles, thus suggests the implicit setting up of an opposition between notions of the 'truly political' and 'subjectivity' that reifies the dualities inherent to the sex-gender system and the relationship of subjectivity to culture – dualities which seem, in fact, to linger both in modernist and postmodern poetics. Is there a feminist avant-garde in Canada? What is its relation to the possibility of a 'Canadian' avant-garde? What challenges do feminist poetics face today? What role do they envision for the cultural? These questions underlie the discussion in this paper, which will address the work of feminist experimental poets from the 1980s to the present, as well as criticism responding to it. The poets under consideration here are associated with, or working alongside, the Vancouver-based Kootenay School of Writing. But I have chosen to read these practices also in relation to feminist poetics with different locations (geographies and practices) so as to stress that the KSW is best understood as a locus of differently situated writing

practices whose common denominator is language-based poetics engaging the political rather than as 'movement' or 'school.'<sup>9</sup> The intimate relationship of the KSW with American language poetics (itself a contested term) has often been remarked by the few critics addressing cultural production outside the national or dominant literary frameworks, and it is best exemplified by the interactions between Vancouver poets and those of other urban spaces, especially New York and San Francisco.<sup>10</sup> But more attention should also be paid to the linkages within Canada across urban locations and spaces – interrelationships that are particularly valuable for women's experimental writings. Indeed, in the case of feminist writing practices, engagement with the poetics emerging from Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal goes beyond mutual awareness and often constitutes a matrix of poetic relations marked by nurturance and cross-fertilization.

In this context, I am also interested in addressing what relationship, if any, the work of authors that marked the heyday of feminist experimental writing and poetic politics in Canada – e.g., Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, Betsy Warland, and Erin Mouré to name only a few<sup>11</sup> – bears to the poetic production of poets like Dorothy Trujillo Lusk and Lisa Robertson, poets who have been central to the work of the KSW, as well as contemporary poets either loosely associated with the KSW (like Vancouver-based Kim Duff, Rita Wong, and Larissa Lai) or responding to its practices (like formerly Toronto-based Rachel Zolf and Trish Salah).<sup>12</sup> What is, therefore, the relationship between a poetics engaging the materiality of language as a site of deconstruction of patriarchal structures and re-articulation of gendered and sexed subjectivity – *the matter* of language as textual practice for the desiring (female) body – to the work of younger generations of poets loosely associated with language writing, a poetics generally understood in terms of its engagement with the effects of global capital and its impact on bodies and identities, labour relations, rural and urban spaces? Without falling into the pitfalls of delineating a 'tradition' of avant-garde poetics in Canada, investigating the relationship between different 'generations' of feminist experimental poetics and the different spatial levels on which they operate (i.e., local, urban, national, and transnational relations) can shed light on the questions indicated above. The objective is not to come to a conclusion *per se*, but rather open up terms such as 'feminist' and 'avant-garde' which, in a Canadian context, have functioned as either tools of categorization/division or as self-fashioning markers serving various interests (I am thinking here of the deployment of the term in relation to the Montreal avant-garde and Brian Trehearne's discussion of *First Statement's* charges against the "outmoded" and "formalist" *Preview* and its "apparent rejection of contemporary social and cultural life" and "lack of range" (7), which enabled *First Statement's* self-styling

as the experimental and Canadian avant-garde, as well as Robert Kroetsch's famous, and contested, statement that Canadian literature lacked the modernist experience and transitioned from the Victorian to the postmodern).<sup>13</sup> With this in mind, in the following section I will look at a selection of examples from contemporary feminist vanguardistic practices and discuss (1) feminist poetic work that responds to the contingencies of the contemporary while bringing historical determinants into visibility in order to expose the operations of ideology; (2) poetics of excess that make visible the linkages and relations of questions of ethnicity, sex, labour, and gender as they become increasingly central to the body politic of transnational capital and State institutions. Indeed, as writing that crosses the boundaries of theoretical work, Canadian feminist poetics engage in *poesis* that demands new ways of reading and producing culture, a new role of the cultural for our times.

The questions posed above are central to a discussion of Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, whom I invoked earlier in terms of the oblique relationship between avant-garde poetics and feminist writing. A writer whose work has been thoroughly neglected by critics, Lusk writes poetry that is inherently 'difficult' and unrecognizable within both traditional and experimental reading practices which, though remaining marginal to academia, have nonetheless earned a readership. Indeed, in my research on critical reception, I found only two articles (written by members of the KSW Clint Burnham<sup>14</sup> and Roger Farr), two (creative) reviews, and three interviews.<sup>15</sup> The question, here, is not one of absorption into academia or the cultural mainstream – something that Lusk's writing both evokes and rejects – but the implication of readers and critics in 'producing' specific legible modes for poetic texts and, in so doing, reproducing the existing socio-cultural structures that they critique. (Although poetic communities, mainstream culture, and academia exert different leverages on cultural texts, they all have the potential to operate as cultural apparatus). Difficulty is not the result of coterie jargon but, rather, the poet's willingness, as she explains, to have readers do their own work. Her texts dislodge academic language from its solidified patterns. In her poetry, Lusk combines different strategies of what I would loosely call 'poetics of re,' a notion central to the articulation of feminist experimental writing in Canada since the 1980s. In the issue "L'écriture comme lecture / Writing as Reading" (1985), Lola Lemire Tostevin writes "re" as the power of rearticulation of language, a translational practice unsettling the effects of the sedimentation of discourse.<sup>16</sup> This writing strategy exposes the historical constructedness of culture, the conditions under which language was formed and knowledge administered, and the possibilities lying dormant within its folds:

rereading reverses to resist resists to reverse the movement along the curve

of return as the well-turned phrase turns on herself to retrace her steps  
reorient and continue in a different voice different because she begs to differ  
what bears repeating the peat of roots and moss the peculiar reek that  
rots into new turf new realms that open the fold of reply unfold  
refold the erection that yields to softer contours relents to edge's touch  
delays to stay within the threshold of the unthought (Tostevin, 14).

Through the disjunction of syntax that questions the border between sense and non-sense, and what Clint Burnham discusses as a phonemic re-assemblage at the level of word and sentence exploring the tension between visual and aural reading practices ("Sitting in a bar on Commercial Drive" 1998), Lusk's poetry foregrounds the constructedness of language and representational structures. The text erodes the boundaries of the legible and asks the reader to interrogate what is constituted as knowledge, what counts as 'communication,' and the way in which discursive boundaries produce social agents and communities. This process of interrogation, deconstruction, and re-assemblage operating at the level of the phoneme, the word, the sentence, as well as at the semantic level, links Lusk's poetry both to the project of the historical avant-garde – specifically, what American poet and critic Barrett Watten calls "the constructivist moment" – and the work of anglophone and francophone feminist poets in Canada which, since the mid 1970s, have engaged the materiality of language to explore, and rearticulate, processes of signification and the constitution of the subject in language.<sup>17</sup>

Yet this 'difficulty' and 'constructivist' ethos has been read primarily in terms of the 'class-inflected' language that dominates Lusk's poetry at a structural and lexical level. This should not come as a surprise, given the context of the dialectical formation of the KSW, out of which Lusk's poetry emerges, in relation to the urgency of economic and social conditions ushered in by neoliberal politics in B.C. since the mid 1980s, and the poet's individual sensibility to questions of class. Roger Farr, citing Klobucar and Barnholden in *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology* (1999), has correctly highlighted how oppositional writing, for many avant-garde writers, means that "class struggle begins at a linguistic level" (8). Yet Lusk's poetry also engages with language in relation to gender and, while Farr's illuminating discussion highlights one of the most visible instances in which her poetic engages with the notion of woman as unwaged reproducer of labour (i.e., her poem "WE'RE ALL FRIENDS HERE – A FICTION OF UNSPEAKABLE HORROR"), his privileging of the sign of the "oppositional" under class struggle and questions of stratification/recomposition<sup>18</sup> echoes a widespread reading of the avant-garde(s) that recontains the imbrication of class stratification with the sex-gender system – that is, it presents the question of sex and gender as merely one element of the way in which class stratification and capitalist rule function.<sup>19</sup>

But Lusk's engagement with the relation of language to global capital and commodification is also deeply gendered and the subject positions that are presented as inhabiting the intersection of different discourses and articulations do foreground, in my reading, the question of sex-gender. In highlighting her position of social vulnerability as a working-class woman within discursive and material sites of class structure, Lusk's poetry re-contextualizes questions of class opposition and stratification within a sex-gender politics that produces 'women' as social and material reproducers of species, language, and surplus-value:

LUMPEN PROLE BY CHOICE  
– A NOVEL IN ARIAS

He strengthens that which is marrow.  
Your confession is my earth.  
To me you totaled soul discards name  
though being here. Thinking out distant  
lighter that could fry  
us up something  
of the morning.

Lacking bread and brothers seize fond sustenance  
random Osiris magneto.

As I lack breeding and gravitas and degrees within the operation  
of the menial forefront the resounding grief and unlikeliness  
while  
gravitational rhetorics instill seminal prescience  
in waves find me  
creeping  
at the edge of the trough.

I'm fixing to age suddenly shot up I from  
out my  
wit's end to a  
Belligerent and proactive  
e n s qualour ance.

This will do me nicely, she smirked  
to chary Class mates

My Bonny Wee Light so soft, intransigent above the cooker –

Art thou troubled? Music will calm thee.

I beheld a vision  
Of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person, and I address You thus – Quack  
Get out of town!

Here, Lusk shows the interrelationships between capital, class, and gender by having them clash in the text as apparently competing and contradictory ideologies.<sup>20</sup> For example, the aestheticizing effect of the mock-Victorian line ("Art thou troubled? Music will calm thee") is infused with a gender paradigm of female fragility and, possibly, nervous conditions that are part of the construction of a discourse of female hysteria, which is made even more parodic by the poetic subject's insistence on the squalor of her material conditions ("e n s qualour ance") and the fragile position of the female subject who is not endowed with cultural or 'ethnic' capital ("lacking bread and brothers seize fond sustenance" and "As I lack breeding and gravitas and degrees within the operation / of the menial front"). Yet the insistence that these social determinants are, indeed, language that materializes in the politics of everyday life ("gravitational rhetorics") enables the deconstruction and rearticulation of language in the text, whereby the position of address (the "I address You") critically engages competing and interlocked positions: the interpellation of national subjectivity (the speech-based rhetoric of public discourse), the emergence of the subject through the encounter with the Other (I/You), and the "I"'s taking up of the position of rage and scorn (the scorned becomes the scorner). That the title is "LUMPEN PROLE BY CHOICE" (*Ogresse Oblige*) emphasizes the interlocked positionalities of class (lumpen proletariat), female reproduction (the production of offspring to which the Latin etymology of *prole* refers), but also the poet's refusal to engage with gender and class politics in terms of assimilation and, rather, foreground the relationality of all class and sex-gender positions. "By choice," here, slants the discourse of vertical social hierarchies – categories and identities to which we are assigned as social stratification – towards horizontal relationality, a move which allows her to foreground the mutually constitutive positions of class, gender, and sex, and disarticulate the effects of their force as speech acts.

Reframing Marx's question "what is a Negro slave?" (1975: 28), American feminist materialist critic Gayle Rubin reminds us that a domestic woman is "a female of the species," but "she only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the help-mate of man than gold in itself is money" (123). Rubin's notion of woman as a material and symbolic position assigned within social relations may be helpful here in engaging with Lusk's poetics of exploration, ironic intervention, and re-assemblage, of the relationality of the social (gendered) self (the "dotty-mouthed social self" of the poem RUMPLESTILLT-

SKIN'S DOTTER in *Sleek Vinyl Drill*). Position, in fact, helps us refocus our analysis on the historical determinants of the social, thus helping us envision a different future, but it also emphasizes the dynamic quality of language and the different relations of power at work in our modes of address. In "LUMPEN PROLE BY CHOICE," the notion of address significantly draws the poem to an end, amid the clashing invocations of Romantic rhetoric, the "My Bonnie Wee Lassie" figurations of the picturesque maiden (bonnie wee lassie) of folklore music, the parodic confrontations between I, You and "the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person," and the invective of the last line. Address also permeates Lusk's poetry by calling in the readers to work their way through language and be active participants within the poetic process ("I tend not to cite my source material, / so just do your homework and get back at me" in LET MY VOICE THUD THROUGHOUT THE LAND, *Ogresse Oblige*) and by acting as a reminder of the force of speech acts.

Rubin's analysis is also valuable in that it resists the notion espoused by classic Marxist theory that sees "sex oppression as a reflex of economic forces" (1975: 203). In arguing that an effective feminist analysis of the political economy of sex should take into consideration the discursive, affective, and psychological dimensions of the nexus of gender and sex, Rubin calls for a critique that is not limited to the constructedness of the sex-gender system but is also careful not to forestall "the critical implications of its own theory" (1975: 201), a move which still pervades much of current social and cultural theory.<sup>21</sup> How are gender roles construed within a heteronormative, capitalist, and ethnocentric political economy of sex? How is gender produced through desire, identifications, and gender regulations of love? What relation do class and gender bear to the notion of otherness?

In my reading of Lusk's texts, these questions permeate her poetics and make up the texture of her work without falling into preconceived critical stances. The latter concern, for instance, is unravelled in the poem "WE ARE ALL FRIENDS HERE" (*Ogresse Oblige*), where the negotiations of class within the social dynamics of social housing and its attendant collective meetings are also marked by the dichotomous construction of "the bad mother."<sup>22</sup> Here, the 'other' is set up as the abject body functioning as the (distorting) narcissistic mirror for the formation of the 'proper' social self (the 'good' mothers who sustain and reproduce the gendered social relations necessary to the functioning of the capitalist system). Though firmly grounded within the experience of the living and the situatedness of the local, Lusk's concern about the construction of motherhood strongly echoes Nicole Brossard's critique of "patriarchal mothers" (18) in *L'Amèr/These Our (S)Mothers*, a text which disarticulates "mother" as text and fiction of patriarchal discourses ("I have murdered the womb and I am writing it" 21). Similarly, Larissa Lai and Rita Wong take up the centrality

of reproduction to transnational capitalism in *Sybil Unrest* ("over and over / just a mother" 7),<sup>23</sup> while Rachel Zolf teasingly explores what I would call, dubbing Lusk, the "fiction of unspeakable horror" of lineage and family in *Masque* (2001).

The question of address in relation to gender is central to Lisa Robertson's poetry, the only KSW member to have received mainstream recognition and an influential figure in making visible writings by women within the group. In a 1999 interview with Mark Cochrane, recently published in *Open Letter* 13.6 (Summer 2008), Robertson emphasizes not only the collective work at the heart of the KSW, but also the collective Vancouver-based poetics that were anterior to it and already engaging with social poetics and questions of gender.<sup>24</sup> Yet class and gender, Robertson points out, were also the reasons KSW women writers had been "brushed aside" and not published over a period of many years, so that the poetry editors for *Front* magazine (Lisa Robertson, Catriona Strang, Christine Stewart and Susan Clark) put together a special issue called "Giantesses" in the late 1980s as a gesture of recognition, indebtedness, and visibility (Cochrane 65). The issue included work by Maxine Gadd, Rhoda Rosenfeld, Jamila Ismail, Renee Rodin, Judith Copithorne, and Trudi Rubinfeld. Robertson makes clear that both questions of class and gender were instrumental in this marginalization – though she does not specify where and how this marginalization took place.<sup>25</sup>

In reflecting on Robertson's recollection of the women's engagement with the Western Front of Vancouver's innovative culture, I am not so much interested in setting up a poetic inside (who belonged and who was doing what) against a discursive outside that construed the formation and activities of the KSW against a Canadian cultural nationalism framework. Instead, I am interested in raising the question as to how this exclusion operates in the construction of a 'male' avant-garde or, at the very best, a neutralization of women's positions in favour of class critique or counter-culture work. The introduction to *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology* (1999) is symptomatic of this move – the confinement of radical feminist poetics to a short chapter of poetics of class opposition. The question here is not why criticism focuses on avant-garde poetics that engage with class-inflected analysis, but why feminist poetics is seen as marginal, rather than central to this analysis. Even a cursory look at the poetry of these writers, in fact, shows not only a complex level of linguistic and structural experimentation but a concern with the interlocking of language and the social to which the question of the sex-gender system is not an addendum, a coda, but a central issue.

Robertson's involvement with the KSW and participation in a Vancouver-based feminist culture further highlights the productive ex-

changes and contradictions underlying different poetic and artistic vanguardistic practices. In her interview for the recently published *Prismatic Publics*, Robertson notes that, in the early 1990s, several women were part of the KSW collective: Nancy Shaw, Catriona Strang, Kathryn McLeod, Susan Clark, Julia Steele, and herself, while Deanna Ferguson and Dorothy Lusk, though not formally included, were associated with it. But she also points out that their work is inextricable from their engagement with the critical and theoretical feminist poetics developed across Canada, from Montreal-based Nicole Brossard and Gail Scott to the avenues opened up by Susan Clark's magazine *Raddle Moon*; feminist experimental work from the U.S., France and Great Britain; and the specific feminist culture developing in Vancouver since the late 1980s, which drew much of its energy from feminist conceptual artistic practices. While contemporary Vancouver culture has developed since the 1950s within the paradigms of West Coast and Pacific geopolitics, feminist cultural production has built on local innovative art by drawing from different locations (Canada, the U.S., and Europe) and practices (arts, cross-disciplinary work, literary history, contemporary poetics, and critical theory) and interpolating the international with the local (and the poetic front of the economically disadvantaged urban locus of Vancouver – downtown Eastside).

Working within classical genres like pastoral and epic and the modes of the British rhetorical tradition from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on (*XEclogue* 1993; *Debbie: An Epic* 1997; and *The Weather* 2001), Robertson critically examines the constitution of gender within 'high' genres, paying close attention to the social and cultural deployment of gendered and sexed language at large and the relationship of gender, genre, and the nation. Language is, once again, at the heart of her poetics ("Debbie" is a speech act), yet, unlike Lusk, Robertson dwells on notions of aesthetics and its fraught, constructed relation to the 'feminine,' and, therefore, sexuation in language. This also translates in a textual exploration of the nexus of writing, desire, and the body that is at the heart of the poetic and ficto-theoretical practices of earlier generations of feminist writers – from Daphne Marlatt and Nicole Brossard to Erin Mouré – and contemporary writers like Trish Salah.<sup>26</sup> This relationship is not always recognizable in the writers with whom Robertson has collaborated, though she acknowledges that questions indebted to feminist psychoanalytical criticism such as "identification, corporeality, the gaze, pleasure" (Eichhorn 371) are central to the feminist cultural production of her generation. The question of influence, even when it is understood in a non-continuous way, is always a fraught question. Although I am not interested in the construction of a lineage, I wonder whether these different levels of attention to feminist cultural work of women poets associated with the KSW have something to do with

the relation of subjectivity (a clear-cut concern of feminist theory and writing) to the political as it has been construed by male avant-garde writers or, for that matter, Canadian cultural nationalists with different intentions and effects. Is Lisa Robertson more 'recognizably' feminist? What role does 'accessibility' play in this construction? How is Vancouver-based, and KSW-associated, feminist poetics located within a node of intra- and international experimental and radically political poetics? Do we have a Canadian feminist avant-garde? Has it concluded? Is it going on? If so, what are its future possibilities?

The recent appearance of the issue *Beyond Stasis: Poetics and Feminism Today* in *Open Letter* 13.9 (2009), edited by Kate Eichhorn and Barbara Godard, and the anthology *Prismatic Publics: Innovative Canadian Women's Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Eichhorn and Heather Milne, published by Coach House Books (2009), raise questions about the relation of women's cultural production, experimentation, and feminism within a cultural climate engendering "profound ambiguities and insecurities for feminist poetics today" (Godard 2009, 13). Significantly, in both publications the discursive terrain of the avant-garde is not highlighted, "innovative," "emerging," and "experimental" being the preferred terms. Rather than a sign of disavowal, I read this move both as a direct challenge to the recent lack of visibility of Canadian feminist poetics in American feminist anthologies and critical works (e.g., Elizabeth Frost's *Innovative Women Poets: An Anthology of Women Poets and Interviews* which focus exclusively on the U.S.) and, especially, a negative critique of the discursive territory of the avant-garde as male territory.<sup>27</sup> The question is not one of labelling or terminology, but rather, of the historical conditions of production of vanguardistic poetics challenging the status quo in radical ways. As female subjectivities and subject positions are also produced through artistic practices, what are the implications of the evacuation of gender from the understanding of the avant-garde? What changes in the relation of the feminine and the radical to the political?

The significant impact of KSW feminist poetics on local and translocal contemporary writing practices is apparent in the work of younger experimental poets self-identified as feminist, where gender and sex are central questions to critical poetics interrogating the structures and effects of capital and class in neo-liberal culture – Vancouver-based poets Kim Duff, Rita Wong, and Larissa Lai, and Toronto-based poets Rachel Zolf and Trish Salah.<sup>28</sup> To these poets, KSW feminist avant-garde work has offered an important intellectual matrix to produce poetics that investigate language politically and recognize the importance of the geo-political situatedness of *poesis*. All writers engage with cultural poetics – that is, poetries that work at the level of language to make visible the way in



which ideological closure of meaning is deployed in cultural and social practices. Kim Duff's poetic investigations focus on the construction of social identities and the effects on bodies under the rule of neoliberalism. Questions of race, ethnicity and lesbian subjectivity loom large in the texts by Rita Wong, Larissa Lai, and Rachel Zolf, which critically examine the construction of Asian (Wong and Lai) and Jewish (Zolf) identities at the hand of discursive ideologies, and the way in which the signifiers of race are deployed in official rhetoric and public discourse as pedagogical and citational strategies of national address. But the interpellation of the racialized subject is also inextricable from a heteronormative sexual policing that marks the otherness of lesbian desire. It is this ex-centricity that is taken up as a site of intervention into the normalizing strategies of ideological state apparatus and explored both as language (the sign of the lesbian as poetics of excess) and its materialization (the nexus of desire, intersubjectivity, and the production of signs versus the reproduction of regulatory apparatus). Yet both poetics are not easily assimilated to identity politics – in this sense they are better defined as what Jeff Derksen, rereading Immanuel Wallerstein, calls “anti-systemic” rather than “oppositional” writing: “a text that is situated not in an exterior position of opposition but as an articulatory agent within a site,” that is “writing that consciously counters a system that seeks to interpellate a subject within a particular field of relations” (151). Their critical exploration of the relationships between global capitalism and the sex-gender system pays close attention not only to how ‘identities’ are produced and circulate but also how environmental and human exploitation depend on the prior en-gendering of ‘the natural.’ This is particularly evident in (1) Rachel Zolf's *Human Resources*, which explores codes of language that emerge from corporate dominance and its impact on bodily experience, perception, and our affective/bodily relation to the sign of the ‘natural’ world; (2) Rita Wong's *Forage*, a text of eco-feminist poetics; and (3) Wong and Larissa Lai's collaboration in *Sybil Unrest*, a long poem that explores the relation of language to capitalist structures and subject formation at the level of the body, thus showing gender, race and class as channels and effects, as well as structures, of the workings of ideology:

shrinkwrapped pushy  
condemns on sale  
dill pickle harmless  
let her strap on  
law's garters  
lend me your tars  
cunt remand  
loved fist  
loose brigand

safe sects  
nimble clamps  
over and over  
just a mother  
hole in the wall  
tribade's revelations  
wet pinch of salt  
on the stroke of midknife (7)

These contemporary feminist writing practices show the multiple directions that earlier language-oriented feminist work has made possible. Through a radical critique of language that places gender and sex at the very centre of ideological structures and power relations, KSW feminist poetics have shown that subjectivity is political, thus concretizing Daphne Marlatt's remark that “looking at language, looking at how you name what you name, is the first revolutionary or subversive act” (Godard *et al.*, 11). It is through this engagement with the cultural as a site of social transformation that a feminist politics of language can take place. An avant-garde feminist poetics that also acknowledges its linkages to transnational and Canadian feminist theory and writing, and producing a Canadian vanguardistic *écriture au féminin*.

*My thanks to Barbara Godard for reading this essay and providing me with generous yet sharp comments. Her unflinching support for my work and scholarly generosity will be much missed.*

## Notes

1. This condition obviously relates to the very origin of the discourse of the avant-garde and its revolutionary impetus of not only recognizing the much cited ‘crisis of language and representation’ but foregrounding language and culture as constitutive of ideological structures and, therefore, as primary sites for the critical investigation, and deconstruction, of structures of power. In Canada, this discourse has been further complicated by the slipperiness of notions of modernism and modernity at the intersection of colonialism, nation-building, and the formation of national culture, as well as a longstanding dominant tradition of ‘realism’ founded on the assumption that language ‘represents,’ rather than constitutes, reality. Further anxieties about an Anglophile tradition in Canadian letters, cultural nationalism, and American imperialism have infused the resistance (often embodied by cultural nationalist stances) against experimentalism, intellectualism, and (Continental) theory in ways that complicate the reading of modernist and postmodern vanguardistic practices and their objective of a radical transformation of the political and the social.

2. See Robyn Gillam's critique to Canadian feminist experimental writings in "The Mauve File Folder: Notes on the Translation of Nicole Brossard" (*Paragraph* 17.2: 1995) and Barbara Godard's challenge to her position in "Negotiating Relations" (*Paragraph* 17.3: 1995) and "La Traduction comme réception : les écrivaines québécoises au Canada anglais" (*TTR* 15.1: 2002).
3. Despite feminist theorists' commitment to deconstruct the naturalization of categories of gender and sex (the notion that the gender of 'woman' is determined by the biological category of "female sex"), some feminist critics reinscribe the category of woman arguing for the specificity of "real female experience." This is a different move from, say, Gayatri Spivak's articulation of "strategic essentialism" as a position acknowledged in its constructedness yet defended as a platform from which to organize and pursue social change in relation to the category of "gender" (and, therefore, "woman") produced historically by phallogocentric discourse. In contrast, the notion of "experience" reifies the naturalness of what has been constructed by the different historical determinants of a discourse on gender and sex. As Joan Scott aptly explains, "experience" does not reflect the reality of "lived life" but marks an allocation of gendered and sexed values and positions within which our "identities" are subsequently formed. This is a key notion to feminist theory and writing. Much of the anxiety behind these calls for "the real" hides the question of the political effects of the intervention of theory and writing within discourse and language, and the suspicion that a focus on language and discourse does little to change women's lives ("you don't organize around language"). Yet this is precisely the point of disruption within feminist movements at large – C.T. Mohanty's notion that "woman" cannot encompass women's differences along the lines of ethnicity, culture, sexuality, and class, and the recognition that the construction of "subjectivity" is deeply entrenched in the ideological structures of the social. This recognition owes much to poststructuralist, women's activist and anti-racist work since the 1970s, as well as feminist experimental practices that take up subjectivity as a primary site for the interrogation of the social and political intervention. For an early critical discussion of Canadian feminist avant-garde writing in relation to language and women's lives, see Godard's essay "Ex-centriques, Ec-centric, Avant-Garde" in the first issue of *Tessera*, and Luise von Flotow's "Weibliche Avantgarde" (1996) and "Sacrificing Sense to Sound" (2004).
4. This critique circulates at different levels – e.g., cultural activism, women's groups, academic criticism, and classroom pedagogies. The question of the marginalization of feminist theory and writing, which after the heyday of feminism in 1980s is often entangled with women's avant-garde practices, is a contested issue. Experimental women's writings are taught in academia, but less within the theoretical frameworks from which they emerge than in relation to geographical paradigms (e.g., "Canadian," "West Coast" or "Québécois").
5. In the same context, this notion ("border wars") has been explored by Judith Halberstam in *Female Masculinity* (1998).
6. I am indebted for this term to Clint Burnham's essay, "Sitting in a bar on Commercial Drive" (1998).
7. It is important to point out that Lusk's poetry does not aim to enter academia, as I will explain later. Her writing works against the framework of the "teachable" text and mainstream strategies of assimilation (see Roger Farr's essay "Against

- Stratification" on this point). Furthermore, feminist critical work is not confined to academic discourse and is still a cultural space with a firm commitment to social communities at large.
8. A parallel dynamic is shown by the different articulations of feminist theory. Materialist feminist analysis focuses extensively on questions of economics and class in relation to ideology but at the expense of subjectivity, while psychoanalytical feminist theory often fails to recognize the effects of material relations on gendered subject formation. In Canada, Barbara Godard has been perhaps the only critic to make productive use of different analytical tools in her feminist work on culture.
  9. Thanks to Roger Farr for helping me clarify this point.
  10. In this respect, it is significant to note that the New Poetics Colloquium, held in Vancouver in 1985, highlighted the irreducibility of the language poetics produced by the collective to any coherent or culturally defined 'school' or 'movement'.
  11. Protagonists of feminist theories and practices were also the Québécois Louise Dupré, France Théoret, Madeleine Gagnon, and Louky Bersianik.
  12. Trish Salah is currently teaching in Montreal but, to my knowledge, she is still part of the Toronto scene of writing. Rachel Zolf now lives and works in New York but has been based in Toronto for most of her life.
  13. Several feminist critics have addressed the institutional context of the literary construction of a Canadian modernist avant-garde. For example, the essays collected in *Wider Boundaries of Daring*, edited by Di Brandt and Barbara Godard (2009), attempt to shift the critical attention not only to questions of canonicity and inclusion but the masculinist biases inherent in the fashioning of the notion of a Canadian modernist avant-garde.
  14. Clint Burnham is a self-identified "fellow traveler" of the KSW (conversation with the author).
  15. The interviews, available online, were conducted by Donato Mancini, also associated with the KSW, and rob mcLennan. A third interview is included in *Prismatic Publics: Innovative Canadian Women's Poetry and Poetics* (2009). For the reviews, see Jeff Derksen's "But i am ideological historical & alive ..." (*Open Letter* 1995) and Bruce Andrews's "Reading Notes" (*A Pestschrift for Dorothy Trujillo Lusk* 2003).
  16. In her theory of gender performativity and citationality, Judith Butler discusses citationality as "reiteration of a norm or a set of norms" which "conceals and dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (1993: 12), thus producing an effect of naturalization understood and re-enacted by the embodied subject as natural sex. The notion of sedimentation of language as effect of the citation of the gendered codes of culture is particularly useful to feminist work in that it recognizes the interrelationship of discourse and the materiality of the body, rather than notions of a *prior* symbolic law forcing itself on the subject or the sexed body as a *site of truth* taken up by different groups of 1970s feminism.
  17. Key writings are Nicole Brossard's "l'e muet mutant" (*NBJ* 50, 1975), as well as "Poetic Politics" (1990), "Writing as a Trajectory of Desire and Consciousness" (1992), and "Only a Body to Measure Reality By" (1996), later republished in *Fluid Arguments* (2005); Daphne Marlatt's "Musing with Mother tongue" (*Tessera* 1 1984) and "Writing our Way Through the Labyrinth" (*Tessera* 2 1985); Gail

Scott's *Spaces Like Stairs* (1989); and Louise Dupré's "The Doubly Complicit Memory" (*Tessera 1 / Room of One's Own* 8.4, 1984). These writers-critics also inaugurate the practice of *la théorie-fiction*.

18. Following autonomist Marxist theorists and Deborah Cameron's critical work on language, Farr correctly argues for a reinterpretation of class as relation, rather than stratum, and a poetics that works against stratification toward class recomposition – a poetics that "proceeds from an initial disclosure of the ruptures, divisions, and 'fault-lines' in the language/capital/society colossus, toward a self-reflexive writing practice which seeks to intensify and, in the last instance, *overcome* the imposed categories and identities that are thought to condition it" (Farr 2).

19. A case in point is Barrett Watten's *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (2003). Despite a refreshing cultural studies exploration of avant-garde poetics, Watten's engagement with feminist rearticulations of the historical and postmodern avant-gardes shows the disjuncture in avant-garde discourse in relation to feminist politics and aesthetics.

20. See Jeff Derksen's comment cited in Lusk's interview with Donato Mancini: "Derksen years ago said he liked how you could see different ideologies bumping against each other in my writing, with the kind of grating that would occur. I thought that was very perceptive" (*Jacket* 18, August 2002). The "grating" of competing ideologies further exposes the political structures and discursive apparatus underlying forms of knowledge and language.

21. In her influential essay, Rubin openly addresses the "double standard of interpretation" of Freud's psychoanalytical discourse but her critique also underlies her engagement with different critical discourses, from Marxism to anthropological structuralism. For the purpose of this paper, I am interested in taking up Rubin's critique in relation to different discursive formations in critical and cultural theory. For example, the failed inclusion of gender within Marxist-oriented theory (and current critiques of neoliberal discourse), the disavowal of gender, economics and class as historical determinants in criticism based on psychoanalytical discourse, or, for that matter, the reification of the links between gender and sex within feminist theory (a retrenchment move enabling the exclusion of transwomen from activist movements and the institution of feminist theory alike).

22. I am indebted to Clint Burnham for this insight.

23. The interrelationship of bodies, reproduction, and transnational capitalist structures is also central to Lai's work in general, from her novel *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) to the sequence of long poems in *Automaton* (2009).

24. Maxine Gadd and Dorothy Lusk, for instance, had been writing before the emergence of the KSW collective. Similarly, Lisa Robertson was involved in a writing collaborative practice with the Giantess group – work which streamed into the *Barscheit* magazine.

25. This comment resonates with the obvious marginalization of women writers by the Montreal avant-garde in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the difficult negotiations of writers like Marlatt with the *Tish* group.

26. Robertson has often acknowledged the significance of former generations of feminist writers, both Canadian and American, to her work, as well as writers at large who are language-oriented in their work (e.g., Roy Miki). Marlatt's and

Brossard's exploration of the nexus of writing, body, and desire has been central to the interrogation of imaginary and symbolic constructs of gender and sex, and it has formed the ground of an important relationship between Anglophone and Francophone Canadian feminist writings (see my article "Acts of Passage: Women Writing Translation in Canada" in *TTR* XX.1 2008 for a discussion of this relationship). While Brossard's and Marlatt's practices work at the level of the letter and the sentence (e.g., "elle" and "I" in "Character/Jeu de lettre," *Salvage* 1991) Mouré's texts engage with the gendering and sexing of literary genre, textuality, and language in ways that is profoundly resonant with Robertson's poetic concerns. Although an in-depth reading of the cross-pollination of these practices is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting the productive intersection of these connections and the legacy they offer for a contemporary scene of writing (for example, the relation of the feminine to literary genre, specifically lyric, is central to Salah's poetics, where notions of utterance and address are further developed to unravel the complex dynamics of gender and sex in relation to subjectivity, desire, and identification).

27. The intersection of these bordered territories is perhaps most apparent in the work of an established American critic of modernist and postmodern avant-garde writing. Marjorie Perloff is among the few American academics to have gestured toward the Canadian scene of avant-garde writing – she has written about Steve McCaffery, Christian Bök, and Derek Beaulieu and, apparently, includes Lusk's poetry as part of her teaching practice (see Lusk's interview with Mancini). Given her sustained interest throughout her career for language-oriented writing and questions of gender in relation to the avant-garde canon, her lack of critical attention for Canadian feminist experimental writers is quite surprising.

28. Although not formally part of the KSW collective, Rita Wong and Larissa Lai are closely related to the KSW writers. Wong, Lai, and Zolf have been publishing since the 1990s. Given a time-old framing of avant-garde poetics within the notion of difficulty, the categorization of Salah's poetic sequence as avant-garde in relation to KSW feminist vanguardistic practices may sound surprising. Yet, the "simplicity" of sections of her book of poetic sequences (*Wanting in Arabic* 2002), especially the rewriting of the love lyric and the surgical diary mapping sexual transition, hide a complex entanglement of subjectivity, gendered and sexed positionality, and desire. In tackling the long rhetorical tradition of 'love' songs and desirous bodies through a transsexual/diasporic poetics, Salah gives visibility to the devices that produce gendered and sexed subjects, yet rearticulates the exigencies of love and desire (as central tenets of subjectivity) through the ambiguities and the losses of the morphing and diasporic body, the excess of nostalgia, and misrecognition in language as a site of irony and productive agency.

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mouthpiece / Kathryn MacLeod



*Mouthpiece*, 1996

## Empty and Full Speech: A Lacanian Reading of the Kootenay School.

Clint Burnham

### *I. What I am doing and what I am not doing*

In this essay I will be looking at the poetry of Susan Clark,<sup>1</sup> Kathryn MacLeod, Dan Farrell, and Melissa Wolsak, Vancouver-based writers who have, since the 1980s, been associated with the Kootenay School of Writing.<sup>2</sup> As part of a book-length study of the KSW, I am focusing on work by these writers from the mid 1980s to the early 1990s – the period in which the school saw a rapid and intense period of social, political, and poetic formation.<sup>3</sup> My approach – what I have also come to call *l'approche*<sup>4</sup> – will be primarily Lacanian: especially, I am interested in using these writers' work to elucidate Lacan's theories of language from two key essays in the 1950s, working from first his distinction between empty and full speech and then his more properly structuralist conception of language. Or, to turn this formulation around, I wish to use these and other Lacanian concepts (desire and its relation to the Big Other and *l'objet petit a*) to understand what is going on formally in this body of work: not so much why did such intensely innovative and formally adventurous poetry come to be written at this time and in this place, but what interpretive and readerly problems does such poetry pose for the critic, the reader, for other poets.

Before turning to reading the poetry, then, what I am not going to do here is either to provide a richer or more robust introduction to the socio-political historicization of this work. Nor am I going to work through a reading of Lacanian theory to provide a corpus of keywords and paradigms that can then be called upon for the work of interpretation. Instead, what I would like to do is to situate briefly the material conditions of the various texts I will be reading here – that is, their status as books, chapbooks, magazines, and anthologies – and then to outline the interpretive strategies (*l'approche*) I will draw on. My turn from a historical account to one interested in the status of texts *qua* texts will demonstrate, I hope, that KSW works need to be encountered in the milieu in which they were first published, a milieu that itself contains that very history all too often reduced to matters of large-scale political events. Similarly, my quick introduction of theoretical matters will leave their elaboration to the practice of interpretation, allowing for an encounter between the theory and the text, and not merely the application of a reified theory to an idealized text.

As an example of the rich material terrain of KSW literary production, consider the following sites of production for Kathryn MacLeod's work: the poem "Without Loss at Opposite" first appeared in the magazine *JAG* (Apr. 1986), the poem "Circus Darkness" in *Writing* 16 (Oct. 1986), the poems "Scrim," "Overqualified," and "Vile, Moral" in *Raddle Moon* 5 (1987); a text "from *Houseworks*" also in *Writing* 23/24 (1989); the 1989 anthology *East of Main* reprinted "Scrim" and "Overqualified"; another text "from *Houseworks*" appeared in *Motel* 3 (1990); the poem "The Infatuation" in *The Capilano Review* (1991); "Oh, theory" and "Asylum" in *Raddle Moon* 11 (1992?); her book-length collection *mouthpiece* (Tsunami, 1996) included work from *Writing*, *Raddle Moon* 11, *Motel* and elsewhere; and the 1999 anthology *Writing Class* included "The Infatuation" and "One Hour out of Twenty-four" (both from *mouthpiece*) and "Asylum."

This list spans 13 years and includes magazines that were essentially photocopied typescript, saddle-stitched or stapled at the corner (*JAG*, early *Writing*, *Motel*); those with more polished offset printing in book form (*Raddle Moon*, *The Capilano Review*, later *Writing*), two key Vancouver anthologies (*East of Main*, *Writing Class*) and a stand-alone book (*mouthpiece*). All of these sites were local. Or, more accurately, they were regional. *JAG* billed itself as a magazine for DTUC émigrés (David Thompson University Centre was the Nelson, B.C. liberal arts college shut down by the provincial government in 1984, as part of the cost-cutting measures that led, on the one hand, to the Solidarity movement of social protest and, on the other hand, to DTUC students and faculty relocating to Vancouver and starting the KSW). *Raddle Moon* itself had moved over from Vancouver Island to Vancouver (*Raddle Moon* had its origins as the UVic student writing magazine *From an Island* [1978-1981]; the mailing address for *Raddle Moon* shifted from Sydney, B.C. to Vancouver).<sup>5</sup> *Writing*, long the house magazine for the KSW, was at first published out of Nelson at DTUC (*Writing* was saddlestitched for its first 22 issues; it was then perfect bound until the end of its run in 1991<sup>6</sup>). *The Capilano Review* has been, and continues to be, based at Capilano College (now University) in North Vancouver. *East of Main* situated itself resolutely, and perhaps controversially, in the eastern half of Vancouver.<sup>7</sup> MacLeod's work also appeared in American magazines that were, as it were, fellow-travellers of KSW or post-Language poetry: *Big Allis* (New York), *How(ever)* (San Francisco), *Avec* (California), and *chain* (Buffalo).

Institutional and cultural capital issues are also apparent in this survey of MacLeod's work: Canadian sites were either in the institutions (*Capilano Review*) or had moved from inside to outside (*Raddle Moon* and *Writing*); similarly, in the U.S., *chain* was associated with the writing program



at SUNY Buffalo. This situating and moving into and out of academic institutions is utterly key to understanding the KSW poetics, I would argue: both determinedly intellectual and traditionally bohemian. To use a Lacanian trope, the KSW may be said to be *ex-timate* (inside and outside at the same time) to the academy. And while MacLeod's work was published in two key book anthologies of avant-garde Vancouver poetry (*East of Main* and *Writing Class*), it was not included in two other key anthologies, these appearing as special issues of *West Coast Line* (the first issue, "The New Vancouver Writing Issue," no less, in 1990) and *Raddle Moon* (17, ca. 1999).

When I was working on this essay, my office at Simon Fraser University faced the university library; indeed, I could see the outside edge of the building's top floor where the Contemporary Literature Collection was housed, a collection that included many of the small magazines in which MacLeod's work first appeared. Wanting to examine some of these, I went over to Special Collections on a weekday afternoon, at around 4 p.m., forgetting that that collection closed at 4:30. I was, however, able to see copies of *Motel*, which came from the collection of retired SFU professor, poet, and critic Roy Miki. Charming, or perhaps as a trace of racialized misrecognition, Miki's name was spelled "Mikki" on *Motel*'s address labels – both when handwritten for the first issue, and then computer-generated. *JAG* was what I really wanted to see, but it was not in the CLC – rather, the library's computerized, online, catalogue told me it was in Lam Collection, in the sub-sub-basement (shades of Bartleby! or, rather, the sub-sub librarian in *Moby-Dick*). So I then went down from the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the library to this sub-sub-basement, where the Lam Collection turned out to be a series of those moveable shelves. At the far left the shelf went up to the end of "J" – but it did not, in fact move. Luckily, *JAG* was near the end of the shelf and just visible, between a German *Jahrbuch* and something with *Italian* in its title. I had to lean in, over dusty disassembled shelves on the floor, to pull out the bound issues of this holy grail, this *objet a*. That is, as Lacan might argue, the magazine, this iteration of mid 1980s Vancouver poetry, had that afternoon been function as the object of my desire – which is not to say that I really wanted the magazine (although I did), but rather that it took the place of the *objet a*, this structural place that not only taught me to desire, but protected me from the abyss of my desire. Now that I know where the magazine is (actually, on Jason Wiens' recommendation – via Facebook – I requested the issue be moved to the

*petit a*, has nothing to do with the importance of the poetry in the magazine, with its relevance to 1980s Vancouver poetry, with its material condition as photocopied sheets of paper, and so on. Rather, in a fundamental Lacanian sense, I want to desire, and this magazine fulfilled that desire (that desire to desire), however momentarily. Then, in a more materialist sense, in a critical sense having to do with the various magazines and anthologies in which Kathryn MacLeod's work has appeared, we can see a certain trajectory here: from the social situation of 1980s literary production in Vancouver (in and out of the academic institutions, having to do with the social geography of Vancouver and also British Columbia, the little magazine as a literary means of production, the coteries of DTUC and KSW and other poetic formations), to the cataloguing and collecting of those material traces at SFU's special collections (in part because such activist academics as Roy Miki and Peter Quartermain had first of all subscribed to these guerilla publications and then donated their collections to the KSW, that collection then ending up at SFU), and finally to my critical production as an academic at the same institution.

## II. Empty and full (1): Dan Farrell, Susan Yarrow, and empty speech

In a funny, perceptive, but also passive-aggressive article on the work of Susan Clark, Edward Byrne argues that Clark's (and Christine Stewart's) writing "is post-romantic. It's delirious not realist, excessive not minimal, dialectical not analytical, philosophical not sociological" (10). My argument in this essay will be that, on the contrary, Clark's (and MacLeod's and Farrell's and Wolsak's) is both excessive and minimal. I would like to sketch out what I mean by "both excessive and minimal" in terms of Lacan's theories of language from the 1950s, and then provide readings of texts by these poets that deal first with this notion of absence/excessiveness and then the question of procedural poetics.

Clark's and MacLeod's and Farrell's and Wolsak's writing is both excessive and minimal in the following ways. First of all, this is writing that refuses reference, refusing either the readability of a Jeff Derksen poem (which, as in "International Muscle Cars," asks "How is this 'my world' / any more than the typeface/of the Boston Pizza logo (mimetic)/or the egg-man (realism) of Humpty's Family/Restaurant" [98]) or the erotic affect of Lisa Robertson's *XEclogue* ("This is how Lady M enters: Sinuously flanked by Roaring Boys who pan her stance with flicks of birch" [n.p.]). The poems I look at in this essay are minimal in the rejection of reference,

Two key essays of Lacan's from the 1950s are "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" (*Écrits* 237-322/198-268)<sup>1</sup> and "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud" (493-528/412-441). In the first essay, given as a talk at a psychoanalytic conference in Rome in 1953 (and thus often referred to as the "Rome Discourse"), Lacan introduced the distinction between "full" and "empty" speech, a largely Heideggerian dualism he used to talk about the clinical situation, contrasting the *empty speech* of a patient babbling on about nothing as a way to avoid getting at the real neurosis or trauma, with the *full speech* of a moment when a patient actually begins to talk about what is happening in his or her difficulty. In the second essay, a talk delivered at the Sorbonne in 1957, Lacan had much more comprehensively moved into a Saussurean or structuralist problematic, and here discussed signifiers and signifieds, the signifying chain, and the sliding of the signified under the signifier.

It's important to see that in the "Rome Discourse" Lacan is doing two things (or at least two things that are germane to our purposes here in talking about poetry). He is stressing the importance of psychoanalysts paying attention to speech in the clinical situation, in analysis. And, he is saying that there are two different kinds of speech that take place in that situation. For Lacan, then, empty speech is that "in which the subject seems to speak in vain about someone who – even if he were such a dead ringer for him that you might confuse them – will never join him in the assumption of his desire" (*É* 254/211).

In this vein, consider the following from Dan Farrell's "1988" chapbook *ape*:<sup>9</sup>

a tiring  
the exhausting

We set up the demons and let the turtles roam. There the  
day in the day's tingled. [n.p.]

There is, of course, an emptiness, an absence at work in these lines (which comprise, with more space than this quotation shows between the first two and the second two, an entire page of the chapbook). "A tiring" what? "The exhausting" what? The "day in the day's tingled" what? Is there a chronological shift from the present participles ("tiring" and "exhausting") to the past participle ("day's tingled")? Which is not to argue, of course, that poetry must make rational sense, but rather the poem's departure from sense takes place in terms of this emptiness, an emptiness that is also

ian<sup>10</sup> negation?):

– I was in the middle and couldn't see –  
"a" instead of "I"

Is there nothing unimportant on which I can wipe my hands? (77)

Is my argument, then, that the work of Farrell or Yarrow is empty of meaning, and therefore morally or ethically or politically empty? If "a" is substituted for "I" in the line "I was in the middle and couldn't see" – so that we have "a was in the middle and couldn't see" – does this simply fetishize lack of meaning, emptiness, under the guise of showing the poetic procedure or process?

To return to Lacan, the distinction between empty and full speech does indeed appear to be all too much that clichéd 1950s existentialism, rife with an appeal to authenticity and second-hand Sartre. And, indeed, this is how Dylan Evans frames the difference in his handbook to Lacan: "Lacan draws on Heidegger's distinction between *Rede* (discourse) and *Gerede* (chatter) to elaborate his own distinction between 'full speech' (*parole pleine*) and 'empty speech' (*parole vide*)" (191). But I don't think that that is quite how Lacan makes the distinction. He remarks, in the "Rome Discourse," the following:

Indeed, however empty his discourse may seem, it is only so if taken at face value – the value that justifies Mallarmé's remark, in which he compares the common use of language to the exchange of a coin whose obverse and reverse no longer bear but eroded faces, and which people pass from hand to hand 'in silence.' The metaphor suffices to remind us that speech, even when almost completely worn out, retains its value as *tessera*.

Even if it communicates nothing, discourse represents the existence of communication; even if it denies the obvious, it affirms that speech constitutes truth; even if it is destined to deceive, it relies on faith in testimony. (*É* 251-2/209)

Which is to argue, then, that in Farrell's text, "a tiring" and "the exhausting" are here shown in their emptiness, not because they do not refer to anything immediately present – such is the condition of poetry, or perhaps language – but because they "represent the existence of communication," because their lack of meaning is itself a form of meaning. Here we have texts that are, *pace* Byrne, minimal. And this minimalism is related to the worn out nature of language, of speech, to its status as fragment or *tessera* – the fragments in Farrell, but also the splintering of the sentence

Lacan's other theories of language (full speech, and then the full-dress structuralism of "The Instance of the Letter") and what they can do to help us read this work. By "this work" I mean that of Farrell, MacLeod, Wolsak and Clark/Yarrow, but I would like to stay with Susan Yarrow's "From 'Not not'." The piece itself appeared in the inaugural (1990) issue of *West Coast Line*, a journal emanating out of Simon Fraser University that combined, under the editorial work of Roy Miki, his former poetics journal *Line* and Fred Candelaria's *West Coast Review*. This first issue of *West Coast Line* was subtitled "The New Vancouver Writing Issue" and had work by many writers associated with the KSW: from Deanna Ferguson and Colin Browne to Dennis Dennisoff and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk; it also included work by such Vancouver artists as Mina Totino (the cover), Kathy Slade, Jin-Me Yoon, and Stan Douglas, and a review essay on Tsunami chapbooks by Fred Wah.

This editorial context then suggested various reading strategies with which one might approach Yarrow's text, and Byrne's Vancouver-centric one (which is to say, situating Yarrow's work in terms of its exclusion from the *Writing Class* anthology) is exemplary in this regard. So if my turn to a Lacanian infrastructure is sensible in some ways (Lacan being in the canon of European theory), it is perverse in others. Unlike Byrne, I am not so much interested here in Clark's editorial work at *Raddle Moon*,<sup>11</sup> or her position in or out of KSW proper; rather, I am proposing a way of reading her work in synchronicity with others in that poetic orbit.

So what does this notion of empty speech have to say about "From 'Not not' "? The poem itself is structured as 12 pages, from "PAGE 7 [following '...our delicate gluttony, without harm']" (76) to "PAGE 18," which ends "(see also: 'plute')" (81). The variety of typographical and punctuation devices in Yarrow's text make it deliriously difficult to quote: not only are the "PAGE" references in SMALL CAPS, but the note after "PAGE 7" is, in Yarrow's poem, in square brackets, which, when quoted, makes it look like my own intervention. This postmodern play with the page, with type and signifiers, is thus about the very possibility of quotation – both the poem as quoting from another text (whether or not it is called "Not not"), and the poem then in turn being quoted. In a certain way, a poetic line like

PAGE 7 [following '...our delicate gluttony, without harm']

is a wonderful example of empty speech. For this is a poem that, whether

augural lines.

The poem is thus in some way about citation, about engaging with the speech of the Other, the speech of another text. But the poem also refuses clear indicators of citation: lines may be flush left or indented, enclosed in parentheses or set off by em-dashes, short and on their own or almost prose-paragraphs.

Here are a few other lines from the poem:

As the weather in the province's far north or some words overheard enlarge us. (77)

A month gapes. Her tangled face. Friendly, allowable violence. (All this *time* I've refused, but also sequence.) (78)

Writing with some urgency atop a great pile of different papers, somehow 18-centuryish. Those famous men were cramped for space. (79)

– The longer sentences are often voiced but unaddressed – (81)<sup>12</sup>

In these passages, emptiness may be thematic ("A month gapes," the sense of the size of British Columbia and its far north), structural (overheard words), a matter of absence (the presumably unread "great pile of different papers") or psychoanalytic (sentences that are "voiced but unaddressed": the question of to whom the poem or speaker is talking).

But if such emptiness is constitutive to this poem, what happens when I take it seriously? What happens when a critic or reader listens to empty words, reads them, and, perhaps, echoes it back? Or is that what criticism does, is criticism simply a matter of filling in the emptiness, providing referential footnotes (as in my sense that "the weather in the ... far north" refers to British Columbia)? Lacan talks about precisely this issue, the analyst reflecting back the analysand's empty speech, and what he has to say about it contributes to my feeling that even as he is sketching out its distinction from full speech he does not want to totally abandon the value of empty speech. Make no mistake: as will become evident, Lacan lays his money on full speech; but I get the feeling that his clinical experience does not let him dismiss empty speech *in toto*:

Responding to the subject's empty speech – even and especially in an approving manner – often proves, by its effects, to be far more frustrating than silence. Isn't it, rather, a frustration that is inherent in the subject's very discourse? Doesn't the subject become involved here in an ever greater disavowal of himself as a being.

puff of air in animating it – he ends up recognizing that this being has never been anything more than his own construction [*oeuvre*] in the imaginary and that his construction undercuts all certainty in him? For in the work he does to reconstruct it *for another*, he encounters anew the fundamental alienation that makes him construct it *like another*, and that has always destined it to be taken away from him *by another*.” (É 249/207-208)<sup>13</sup>

Finally: if we read these writers of absence in terms of empty speech, the rejoinder may well be that we are paying too much attention in trying to interpret writing that insists on its nonreferentiality (see Byrne) – our answer of course, which is the answer of the stereotypical English lit professor or critic or scholar, is that that is our job, to “read too much into it,” to see meaning where none may lie. Parsing Lacan: our job, first, is to look at these “sincere portraits which leave the idea of his being no less incoherent”; then, to uncorrect (in the jargon of MS Word, “undo”) these “rectifications that do not succeed in isolating its essence”; again, to undo the “stays and defenses that do not prevent his statue from tottering” (thinking of stays as akin to the corset?); and thus to fully engage in the “narcissistic embraces that become like a puff of air.” Which is to say, for the poet, “in the work he does to reconstruct it *for another*” or for the reader, “he encounters anew the fundamental alienation that makes him construct it *like another*” in terms of the tradition, “and that has always destined it to be taken away from him *by another*” or the anxiety of influence. Lacan’s poetic repetition here, *for another/like another/by another*, moves us into a different direction, finally: into the realm of the community and the tradition, the nation and the local, other poets and poetic contexts.

### III. Empty and full (2): Kathryn MacLeod, Dan Farrell and full speech

That is, Lacan’s full speech, the speech that the patient makes of her history (Lacan refers to the hysteric “Anna O.,” a patient of Freud’s colleague Josef Breuer, who invented the term “talking cure”: [É 254/211]). For Lacan goes on immediately, in the Rome Discourse, to make two arguments around full speech. The first argument is that full speech can be heard in that part of a discourse that is most significant, or that is read against itself, or in which a mistake reveals all, or where silence stands in for the whole. The second argument is that it is the breaking off of discourse (silence, breaking off – we still seem to be in the land of empty

... messy liquids ... uninvited failure  
a collection of substantial size ...  
your nipples visible through t-shirt ...  
... exchange an old one for a new one ...  
brief morality ... angry about “the masterpiece”  
unmaking the bed. evasive.  
... completion or celebration, erected  
out of boredom ... my right point of view ...  
relax/antagonize ... complete the sentence  
... his hard line ...

(MacLeod, “The Infatuation,” *WC* 77)<sup>15</sup>

This excerpt from Kathryn MacLeod’s poem “The Infatuation” foregrounds the separation of words graphically: in this case, through the use of ellipses. Like Emily Dickinson’s dashes, the ellipses separate and join: they are a form of Lacanian interruption.<sup>16</sup> The poem may be said to loosely be about a love affair: “keep it hard the whole time” appears in the first verse-stanza, “gentle male companion ... inspired tongue and finger” in the second, “don’t push his buttons ... damp shirt” in the third, “... a complete withdrawal ... making you touch me ... isolated study of the male organ” in the third, (our excerpt is the fourth) “you don’t need courage with a mother” in the fifth, “I deliver you” in the sixth, “virile girls for men” in the seventh, and “... sexual arsenal ... delicate subversive ... punitive silence, sentenced to naked women ... dreams of a long cock betrayed him” in the eighth and final verse-stanza (*WC* 76-79).

But this putative content or narrative is then subverted (gently?) by the formal constraint of the ellipses. In the excerpt’s first line, we have the ellipsis, then “messy liquids”, then another ellipsis, and then “uninvited failure.” By opening the verse-stanza or section of the poem with the ellipsis (which happens three other times in “The Infatuation”) the suggestion of something missing, something absent, is made. Like full speech, the punctuation here speaks. “Messy liquids” and “uninvited failure” may suggest the material conditions of sexual intercourse – *coitus interruptus*, perhaps, or premature ejaculation, or even the messy liquids of sperm, lubricant, spermicide, and so on. But the text itself is messy, in a way, with all of these dots, visible like the nipples.

The ellipses also suggest the rhythm that Thomas detects in Céline, here a languorous pace, one that is laid-back in a way that conflicts neatly

ent they are in themselves (a pen and a coffee cup have intrinsically different use-values: you can't pour coffee into a pen and you can't write a letter with a coffee cup), they can all be compared to each other economically (in terms of their exchange value: a coffee cup may cost \$8 and a pen \$1.99, so the cup is worth roughly four pens). Our labour itself is commodified under capitalism: thus, while my work as a university professor may seem to be quite different from that of a hospital nurse, our salaries can be compared (and, indeed, we both do forms of what is now called affective labour: thus my teaching must include "student-friendly" gestures so students don't feel bad if they don't understand something too, the nurse has to teach the patient how to regulate his or her body).

By foregoing the syntactical crutch of conventional poetry – the lyrical, the grammatically regular sentence – this poetry then makes evident how language itself is commodified: not simply, in a Naomi Klein sense, as a brand-name or logo, but, more profoundly, as a discourse. This is the most important meaning of the "equal signs" in the title of the journal  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ . Thus in MacLeod's text, *all phrases are equivalent*. "Messy liquids" are the same as "uninvited failure," which is the same as "a collection of substantial size" and "your nipples visible through t-shirt" and "exchange an old one for a new one" and "brief morality" and "angry about 'the masterpiece'" and "unmaking the bed. evasive." and "completion or celebration, erected out of boredom" and so on. The rhythm of the poem, then, ensuing from its parade of equivalence, acquires a meaning.

But this rhythm can be misleading in two different ways: first, if we ignore the gaps, and, secondly, if we overlook the variations in the punctuation. Ellipses signify, in the genre of an academic quotation, that words are missing; in other conventions, they simply mean a segue of some kind, a transition. The disjunctive nature of MacLeod's poem in general suggests the first meaning, but the great disparity between one phrase and another (say, between "a collection of substantial size" and "your nipples visible through t-shirt," the first carrying the connotation of a general, abstract description, and the second a more concrete, intimate statement) also means that we cannot hope to fill in the missing text. "The Infatuation" can be read as an intervention into a pre-existing discourse, a forcing out of the significant. The ellipses are the simulation of absence, then: its signifier.

A second problem with just thinking about the ellipses is we ignore

of double sets of ellipses. The quotation marks around "the masterpiece" do a number of different things: they make it difficult to quote the words or the punctuation itself (similar problems lie in Susan Yarrow's work, as I argue above), they suggest that the masterpiece is not really a masterpiece, and they suggest that the phrase the masterpiece is a direct quote (which last suggestion may support the second one). The periods in "unmaking the bed. evasive." *undo* the role/rule of ellipses in the poem, and also is a kind of evasiveness. Too, the virgule between relax and antagonize suggests the on/off binary nature of the slash (i.e. either relax or antagonize – although at first I was thinking of simply the substitution function of the slash) that is also rather passive-aggressive (do you mean relax or antagonize? – although given the right context, someone being relaxed could antagonize someone else).

A penultimate reading of the ellipsis: in his essay "Discourse in Poetry: Bakhtin and Extensions of the Dialogical," Michael Davidson argued for a social-semiotic reading of how "contextual frames" worked in contemporary poetry. Specifically, he said that in such writing:

[T]he discontinuity between one line or sentence and the next is both a qualification of causal, narrative logic and an assertion of the paradigmatic nature of reference. The gap between elements is asserted as a sign itself, not simply as a caesura between two elements in a theorem. The gap calls attention to contextual frames within each unit, frames which overlap and interpenetrate like sedimentations in geological strata. (146)

In addition to the argument I've already made on how this signal form of punctuation, which joins and separates, which signifies absence as well as transition, is so meaningful after all, something new that Davidson brings to the table here is the idea that the "gap" – for our purposes, the ellipses – brings attention to "contextual frames." By this I think he means the notion of ideology as a discursive construction, or the signifiatory processes by which ideology functions.

My use of this argument from Davidson is both overdetermined and serendipitous. Davidson's essay appears in *Codes of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, a 1983 collection edited by Michael Palmer, and a copy of which I purchased in 1985 at the New Poetics Colloquium organized by the KSW in Vancouver. So I turned to Davidson's essay as a way to bring some Bakhtinian theory into this essay. In 2008, when I was writing this section of the essay, I mentioned the Davidson text to Jeff Derksen in a

function as my own private fetishistic disavowal – *I know very well that theory forbids the use of biographical minutiae, and yet here I can use it to bolster my argument.*

Now, if MacLeod's poem shows us in a deliberate way what happens when things are left out or cut off by displaying the marks of that castration, a Dan Farrell poem works from the other end. Look at the opening lines of Farrell's poem "Intent," from his 1994 collection *Thinking of You*:

Late in the dream my sides shorten they had  
d course. I came to accuse him of my cold  
act but my testimony goes off. It came to  
that? It came to catch that. Every opposit  
e towards him hid in the privily spur. A c

(n.p.)

The first and most evident form of 'meaning' here has to do with form: with the sudden ending of lines in the middle of words and then new lines beginning with letters that 'finish' the previous words but arbitrarily.<sup>17</sup> The "d" at the start of the second line and the "e" at the start of the fifth could as easily have been chosen – cut off from another word – for how they complete "ha" at the end of the first line and "opposite" at the end of the third. The disjunction, then, between and within words, opens meaning up: a surplus meaning is performed here, rather than a fixed or restricted meaning. What this means is two different things.

First of all, we have a sense of Lacan's claim that the punctuation of a therapeutic session (Lacan's famous "10 minute sessions"<sup>18</sup>) could generate meaning:

It is, therefore, a propitious punctuation that gives meaning to the subject's discourse. This is why the ending of the session – which current technique makes into an interruption that is determined purely by the clock and, as such, takes no account of the thread of the subject's discourse – plays the part of a scansion which as the full value of an intervention by the analyst that is designed to precipitate concluding moments. Thus we must free the ending from its routine framework and employ it for all the useful aims of analytic technique. (*É* 252/209)

As I noted above, Lacan's use of the word "scansion" suggests this passage's usefulness to a critique of poetry. But perhaps I have it wrong. Is Lacan not arguing here specifically *against* the arbitrary intervention (the "routine framework") that Farrell employs in "Intent"? I think not, for

moments into full speech: they transform the arbitrary sundering of words into meaningful and poetic signifiers.

Also, according to standard structuralist or semiotic theory, signs acquire their meaning conventionally: language works by assigning signifiers to signifieds. Thus "late in the dream" has a fairly fixed meaning: a temporal designation. But Lacanian theory argues that there is always something leftover, something sticking out, something that doesn't quite fit into the symbolic order of language. And poetry is the place where that extra is brought into play. This is especially true in language poetry. A Lacanian reading of the poem would first of all point out that meaning is always being deferred in language, and all that poetry does is to make this deferral more evident. In the conventional use of language (and this is, admittedly, something of a straw man: any use of language comes to seem arbitrary or tricky if we consider it with enough vigour), meaning is arrived at sooner or later: thus we can imagine someone saying "late in the afternoon I had a beer", where "I had a beer" comes to give meaning to, as an activity that takes place in, "late in the afternoon." Or we can even imagine a patient (an 'analysand'), lying on the couch in the analyst's office, muttering away "late in the dream my sides shorten they ha-" and then suddenly sneezing just as he or she is about to explain why, in the dream, it seemed as if the sides of his or her body had suddenly shortened. But what is surely striking here is that it is in this very rude interruption of language (an interruption that, as in the famous optical illusion

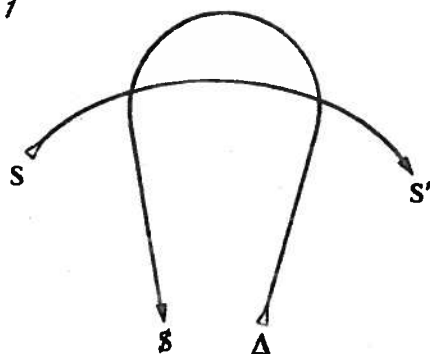
## MARY HAD A A LITTLE LAMB

we hardly ever notice in everyday life), in this cutting off of the speech, that we suddenly arrive at surplus meaning, surplus language.

Again, the creation of meaning by what comes later in the sentence illustrates or is a connection between two different aspects of Lacan's theory. His discourse on full speech, and on the role of the interruption, is connected to his theory of logical time, and, more specifically, the Freudian notion of *nachträglich*, or retroactivity.<sup>19</sup> That is, for Lacan, meaning



Graph 1



(É 805/681)

As Lacan explains, we assume that language proceeds from S to S', from one subject to another, or, following syntax, from the beginning to the end of a sentence. But the arc from the triangle (representing our status in the Real, as beings before language, but also some mythic pre-intention)<sup>20</sup> to the \$ (representing the barred or split subject, the idea that we only exist in language and are therefore always castrated beings of lack) cuts through language, changing the meaning of the first word in a sentence (the second place of the arc) to be determined by the second word. This process is then Lacan's button-tie or *point de caption*.

"Late in the dream my sides shorten they ha" does not necessarily have to mean that the last word of the line is only *part* of a word, after all: it may be an exclamation of delight, the patient or poet's joy at such a *fun* line (a fine or a fun line). Even if the pattern in the poem seems to be to leave off words and then add their probable endings to the next line, since the lines are only approximately the same length (and not the same character length, as if this were a typeset version of a typewriter poem), there are still other possibilities: this could be a line in a Scots dialect, *à la* the poetry of Robbie Burns or Tom Leonard or the novels of Irvine Welsh. But, again, am I knocking on an open door, fighting the last war, in making such a stark declaration of a difference between what is going on in Farrell's "Intent" and what goes on in everyday language? Doesn't the kind of language we find in text messaging or advertizing or graffiti also include such abrupt endings? (I am being anachronistic in some ways here – but perhaps avant-garde techniques are the laboratory for the fully commercialized use of language.) Or, if this is so, if such formal aspects of language are not restricted to poetry, then is the privileging of poetry misguided: should we not perhaps have a larger category of how language works?

Maybe. Let's hold these thoughts in abeyance for a while, and explore

instead how Farrell's poem allows us to think about both constraint and the lack of reference in terms of surplus meaning and the *objet a*. This second term in Lacan refers to the small *a* other (or *autre*): not the Big Other of language, the symbolic order, or God, but rather the *objet a* that is a remainder or trace of the Real, of some intense satisfaction that is either from "before" we enter into the Symbolic ("before" not in a strict chronological or developmental sense, but in a conceptual sense) and/or from somehow in or beyond the Real (as in Lacan's famous topographical model of the torus, or the doughnut: if the Symbolic order is the doughnut of language, then the hole in the doughnut, which is both in the doughnut and outside it, is what shapes the Real. Canada's famous Timbits, of course, are the perfect example: they are the remainder, what is left over, and then, ingeniously, transformed into a commodity, into the symbolic). The *objet a* is the object-cause of desire, it is not so much *what* we want as that *we want to want*, or what keeps us wanting. Meaning is the paradigmatic *objet a* of literature, and especially of poetry. And since we want to keep desiring, that way in which meaning itself always eludes the reader in Language writing, in KSW texts, that itself becomes pleasurable (perhaps even a matter of *jouissance*). After a while, reading Farrell's text (mischievously titled "Intent" – the only discernable intent here is to frustrate meaning) becomes enjoyable not only in spite of the lack of meaning but because of it: freed up of the tyranny of reference, language can simply be. "ha" doesn't mean had or ha or hand or anything else: the letter is the letter in its materiality. The letter is not in the symbolic, but in the real.

#### IV. The structuralist turn: Melissa Wolsak

Susan Yarrow's poem begins with a citation from Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets*:

*'It is possible,' says Hooker, 'that by long circumduction from any one truth, all truth may be inferred. (76)*

This citation does not have a closing quotation mark: placing the entire poem into the category of what Richard Hooker said. But the form of rhetorical logic being presented here by Johnson/Hooker, that of circumduction, has a little resemblance to Lacan's structuralist theory of language propounded four years after the Rome Discourse, in his 1957 essay "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud". I am referring to Lacan's notion of the signifying chain, and to the key distinction he makes between metaphor and metonymy (borrowing from, and perhaps mangling, Jakobson). As a theoretical frame for a final discussion in this essay, that of a Melissa Wolsak text, I would like now to turn to Lacan's essay.

Lacan's semiotic or structuralist theory of language can be summed up in the following manner: first, in an extreme version of Saussure, the signifier is absolutely distinct from ("barred" from) the signified; then meaning is dependent upon both the syntagmatic axis (or the realm of grammar) and the paradigmatic chain (or the realm of semantics) but not in a linear fashion (meaning is retrospective: see my discussion of Freud's *nachträglich* or Lacan's *point de caption* above); this is thus the signifying chain: "links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links" (*É* 502/418);<sup>21</sup> finally, Lacan's metaphor and metonymy refer to Freud's notions of the dreamwork, and the processes of condensation and displacement in particular. So, first of all, the signifier (the word) is not only to be distinguished from the signified (or concept it gives rise to), and not only, *à la* Saussure, is there an arbitrary relation between the two, but, bringing in Lacan's penchant for topographies and diagrams, the line in the S/s is as absolute as that, say, between the conscious and the unconscious (see Bowie, chapt. 3). For Lacan, the bar between the signifier and signified is as real as the rails of a train, as terrible as the phallus. Therefore, meaning is in Derrida's sense a matter of both difference and deferral.<sup>22</sup> the meaning of cat is that the sign is different from hat or mat, and it is continually deferred because we never get at a signified we only get at another signifier, another word. But also the following meaning is never contained in a sign once it is used in language, in any kind of grammatical or poetical or textual context:

For the signifier, by its very nature, always anticipates meaning by deploying its dimension in some sense before it. As is seen at the level of the sentence when the latter is interrupted before the significant term: 'I'll never...', 'The fact remains ...', 'Still perhaps ...' Such sentences nevertheless make sense, and that sense is all the more oppressive in that it is content to make us wait for it.

But the phenomenon is no different, which – making her appear, with the sole postponement of a 'but,' as comely as the Shulamite, as honest as a virtuous maiden – adorns and readies the Negress for the wedding and the poor woman for the auction block.

Whence we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that meaning *insists*, but that none of the chain's elements *consists* in the signification it can provide at that very moment. (*É* 502/419)

Let us put some of this to work, then, and look at a few lines from Melissa Wolsak's 1994 book *The Garcia Family Co-mercy*:

Minnie

and her lips

(n.p.)

Now, the first two lines instantiate Lacan's notion of the signifying chain: we do not know who this "he" is or what he is doing; and we want to know how he's doing it. But the full stop period after "he" draws our attention to the gap between that phrasal cluster and the next line, a line that is itself subdivided by a comma. The meaning, then, is something like: "how does he"? "How does he" what? "How does he get his fur?" "How does he get his fur" as in does he buy it or shoot an animal for it? No, as in how does he get it "to go like that," to be draped or fuzzy or stinky. And of course, the meaning is not so much this variety of meanings, of arriving at these meanings, or even that there is a plethora of meanings. (In *Lacan to the Letter*, Bruce Fink has argued that Lacan does not so much say that there is no meaning as there is all too much meaning: 88). Rather, the meaning of this passage is how meaning itself is dependent on language. The meaning of "fur" is not an animal's outer covering but a signifier occupying a place in the structure of words on the page. The meaning of fur is to be contiguous (in more than one way), for example, to "upsurge" – "fur" is both spatially close to "upsurge" and phonetically similar (the look and sound of the phoneme "ur"). In a similar vein, "pimpernel" and "upsurge" and "lupins" and "Minnie" and "lips" are connected metonymically by the "p" and "in" and "up" and "pi"/"ip" and "im"/"Mi" and so on (for these last two, see Jakobson's essay "Linguistics and Poetics," where he discusses Poe's turn of "Raven" into "never" [157-8]).

This much seems like uncontroversial formalism (hence my slippage of "firmly" into "formly" above), but Lacan goes further in a way that is useful to how we think about Wolsak's poem. For he argues that the sliding of the signifier that we have seen here, the metonymic slippage (here, in the decomposition of the signifiers into their constituent letters and sounds), is also how desire works. Desire, he argues, is "caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the *desire for something else*" (*É* 518/431). Which is to say that desire and language are always tied up in each other. As if in confirmation of this, when I discussed my interpretation-in-process with Melissa Wolsak in July 2009, she provided me with wonderfully relevant information on the process of writing the poem. That was a busy, but also casual conversation and evening – we were at the launch of a book of mine – and when we chatted via Facebook a few days later, I told her I wouldn't use the background information with

passed on to me has, to the chagrin of literary history, disappeared into the ether.

## Notes

1. Susan Clark published under two last names: Clark and Yarrow. She edits *Riddle Moon* under the name Clark and is better known in the community by this name. In this essay, the text I discuss was published under Yarrow, so I will refer to Susan by that author-function.
2. This essay is from a larger work on the poetics and poetry of the Kootenay School of Writing, the body of work primarily being that of the 1980s (but also published in the 1999 Writing Class anthology), the approach being a Lacanian one. I divide the poetry into three camps or tendencies: the social collage/disjunction form to be found in the work of Jeff Derksen/Deanna Ferguson/Colin Smith/Dorothy Lusk; the Red Tory neopastoralism of Lisa Robertson/Christine Stewart, Peter Culley, and Catriona Strang, and, here, the concerns of absence and non-referentiality in Susan Clark, Kathryn MacLeod, Dan Farrell, and Melissa Wolsak.
3. Please see the introduction to Barnholden and Klobucar, eds., *Writing Class* for historical information on the formation of the school in reaction to provincial politics (the right-wing Socred government's 1984 closing of a university college in the Kootenay district of southeast B.C. leading to the internal migration of writers and academics to Vancouver) as well as the KSW's relation to both the Canadian and American literary avant-gardes (primarily the Vancouver 60s legacy of TISH and the American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement).
4. By *lapproach* I mean a theoretical or interpretive strategy of reading, of engaging with language, that is not separate from the language itself, an approach that sits in the lap of language, as it were, one that laps from the bowl of language as a lap dancer, but that also is full of reproach. See Lacan's *lalangue*, often translated as "lalanguage," in *Seminar XX*.
5. *Riddle Moon* carried mailing addresses for both Sydney, B.C. (on Vancouver Island) and Vancouver for issues 8 through 14; from 15 on, it carried only a Vancouver street address (although not the west side one of 8-14; too, for issues 15-21 it also carried various website URLs). See Byrne's "Riddle Moon: a Talk" for more detail on the career of the magazine.
6. *Writing* was published out of DTUC for issues 1-9 (Summer 1980 – Spring 1984). The editors were David McFadden for the first five issues, John Newlow for #6, Colin Browne for 7-22, Jeff Derksen for 23-27. Issue #9 included the following note: "Although the provincial government has closed David Thompson University Centre and its School of Writing, *Writing Magazine* will continue to publish regularly. Your subscriptions are even more important than ever. Please

1984-January 1987) and then 152 West Hastings (20-22).

7. I remember Adeena Karasick, then an up-and-coming poet, arguing with me in 1989 or 1990 about the geographical determinism – or was it essentialism? – that excluded her from the anthology since she lived on the west side of Vancouver. Brian Fawcett's productive attack on the KSW was titled "East Van Uber Alles."
8. In all further citations from *Écrits* I will give the French pagination (included in Fink's translation) first, followed by the English. *Écrits* is also abbreviated to *É*.
9. I put quotation marks around 1988 because while the Tsunami chapbook is not dated, its CCIP (Canadian Cataloguing in Publication) data indicates the years 1988 and 88 in the library codes: PS8561.A77A75 1988 and C88-091178-6.
10. In a colloquium edited by Clark in *Riddle Moon*, Abigail Child wrote that "For Freud, Lacan and Hegel desire is always marked by an ontological lack which can only be filled with the other. In this tradition desire is negative, unfillable, an absence. In contrast, the tradition of Spinoza, Nietzsche, Foucault and Deleuze describe desire not as lack but as a positive force" (17). Whether or not the latter four thinkers really thought of desire as such a vitalist "positive force," and even though for Lacan, at least, lack can never (or should never) be "filled with the other," Child's statement and its proximity to or perhaps sponsorship by Clark indicates that my Lacanian reading of Clark's work is hardly one that can be assumed to be supported by or agreed to by the author.
11. See my first footnote for the Clark vs Yarrow distinction/confusion.
12. In these quotations I have tried to preserve Yarrow's floating left margins.
13. The importance of this passage to Lacan's continuing sense of his work – i.e. from 1953, when the Rome Discourse was first delivered, to 1966, when it was published in *Écrits*, is that Lacan notes "The preceding paragraph has been rewritten."
14. "[T]he psychoanalyst ... takes the description of an everyday event as a fable addressed as a word to the wise, a long prosopopeia as a direct interjection, and, contrariwise, a simple slip of the tongue as a highly complex statement, and even the rest of a silence as the whole lyrical development it stands in for" (*É* 209/252).
15. Here I refer to best-available edition of this poem, in the *Writing Class* anthology (Klobucar and Barnholden, eds.).
16. The ellipses' best-known appearance in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature is no doubt in the novels of Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Writing about style and language in Céline, Merlin Thomas commented on his use of what he calls the "three dots": "[T]hey divide his text into rhythmical rather than syntactical units, permit extreme variations of pace and make possible to a great extent the powerful hallucinatory lyricism of his style" (89). This is in some ways what is going on in MacLeod's "The Infatuation." For a discussion of Emily Dickinson's syntax, see Howe, esp. p. 21.
17. Listing the textual sites for Kathryn MacLeod's written production above, I noted the 1986-1987 Vancouver magazine *JAG*. What is interesting about that magazine – along with its promiscuous mixing of work writing language poetry feminism etc. –

175/197-213). With respect to *nachträglich*, a commonplace of Freud's theorizing is that a child's witnessing of the primal scene, for example, is not traumatic at the time, but later: see the Wolfman case ("From a History of an Infantile Neurosis") and, also Lacan's commentary at various places including *É* 213/256-7).

20. See Fink, 114ff, and also Žižek, 111ff.

21. Mis-typing Lacan's quote, I wrote "necklace *formly* hooks", a mistake worth preserving.

22. See Hurst's discussion of *différance*.

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## Ambling in the Streets of Affect: Jeff Derksen's "Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically"

Jennifer Blair

When you're smilin',  
Keep on smilin'  
The whole world smiles with you.

— Shay, Fisher, and Goodwin, as  
sung by Louis Armstrong

Stephen Harper got a little happier looking this year. Or, at least the stencil made of his face by *Globe and Mail* cartoonist Anthony Jenkins for the Halloween children to use when carving their Halloween pumpkins made him look a little more "fun" than usual. Perhaps not surprisingly, it took him a couple of tries before he had the PM pumpkin design looking happy enough: when he showed his first draft to Harper's wife Laureen, she felt that it was "a bit too snarling and negative," and so she requested a touch up. "I got excited that he had made a template I could make of my husband," Mrs. Harper explained to *Globe* reporter Jane Taber, but "his wataalism" is located within the realm of feeling while at the same time cannot much fun at all." Despite this particular holiday's foundation in the ghoulish, Harper's children apparently did not need to be carving a mean mad, or too-scary-looking Dad-o-lantern. Fortunately, Taber's article "Harper's Halloween Grin," includes both of Jenkins's stencils, so that readers can choose which of the Harper faces to incorporate into their Halloween decor.

The PM has generated plenty of ridicule over the many unsuccessful attempts to shift his public image into something that expresses more emotion – particularly more *positive* emotion. And perhaps 'Steve's' most remarkable accomplishment thus far has been his unequivocal resistance to making his public persona more affectively pleasing, despite the many years and, no doubt, tens of thousands of tax-dollars spent in the cause of putting a little more happy human feeling in the persistently un-human

dream. "Political feeling," for him, would seem to be an oxymoron.

Our political feelings, on the other hand, are somewhat different. First of all – and it's not too obvious to say it – *we have political feelings*. We are not empty pumpkin shells at the mercy of *Globe* cartoonists and children's safety carving knives. In fact, as some thinkers on the subject have recently argued, our feelings, at this moment of extreme political disillusionment and residual Obama-envy, *are* our politics. This intersection between the emotional and the political is an area that several contemporary critical theorists, writers and artists – including the work of some Kootenay School members and affiliates – have identified as the focus of their creative-critical endeavours. For example, Jeff Derksen's "Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically," published in his 2003 *Transnational Muscle Cars*, engages in a kind of exploratory poetic flâneurism through this realm of affect-as-politics. This long poem reads "as if," in the poem's words, it is generated from the activity of "ambling in the streets/ of a fin-de-siècle city," but at the same time, the title informs readers right away that this

emphasis on the local is coupled with a possibly reluctant, and definitely "sad," acknowledgement of the geopolitical (18). In other words, the poem's complex spatial locatedness (attending to both the local and the geopolitical) is further complicated by its emphasis on affect, which finds the poetic persona always at once situated within an affective environment while inevitably aware of the circumstances that define and perpetuate it. As Derksen's speaker explains: "I have dwelt in the/ felt of feelings and felt/ the weight of dwelling" (22). In other words, this "lyricist/ of late capitalism" is located within the realm of feeling while at the same time cannot much fun at all." Despite this particular holiday's foundation in the ghoulish, Harper's children apparently did not need to be carving a mean mad, or too-scary-looking Dad-o-lantern. Fortunately, Taber's article "Harper's Halloween Grin," includes both of Jenkins's stencils, so that readers can choose which of the Harper faces to incorporate into their Halloween decor.

Our attempts to understand emotion or make sense of space are, thus, somewhat circular in nature. We can, perhaps, usefully speak of an emotio-spatial hermeneutic: emotions are understandable – 'sensible' – only in the context of particular places. Likewise, place must be *felt* to make sense. This leads to our feeling that meaningful senses of space emerge only via movements *between* people and places. (524, original emphasis)

Affect is at once part of and the result of the event of movement between people and places – in other words it requires this plurality of both bodies

sensory receptors are located at the surface of the body, and yet at the same time it is through our capacity to feel, to perceive, that we can glean the overall impact of this situation of our being in the world, the "weight of dwelling." Affect enables individual human subjects and collectives to express this engulfment, which is also to say our participation and even complicity within our socio-political moment, and at the same time, it is the mode through which we can attend critically to it.

In addition to providing new forms of political engagement for the left affect has been identified as a tool for right-wing political manoeuvring. Several thinkers such as Nigel Thrift have pointed out that "the discovery of new means of practicing affect is also the discovery of a whole new means of manipulation by the powerful" (Thrift 58). The speaker of "Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically" attends to the connections between affect and right-wing/corporate powers in such comments as, "the patriotic right has taken over even the 'radicality' of shopping/ which held so much hope (united/ sweaters)," which gestures to the manipulation by the right of affects, like hope, that have tended to be associated with revolutionary politics (15). However, Derksen does not leave aside the right's more readily recognizable capacity to make bad feelings worse, as can be seen in the poem's imperative: "Reach out and/ salt the wound – that's what good corporate neighbours are for!" (14)

To take up and explore the question of affect, then, is a decidedly political endeavour insofar as affect offers a unique mode of political engagement for the left and at the same time serves as the right's new horizon of political domination. Derksen lights upon affect's political potential by exploring its relationship with the politics of space and language in the context of contemporary neoliberalism. If, on the whole, Derksen's poetic project, as exhibited in *Transnational Muscle Cars* and elsewhere, takes on the spatial, ideological, and rhetorical structuring of the neoliberal state, especially in Canadian contexts, then "Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically" attends specifically to the affective flows that participate within and also inhibit these structures. Or, to use a phrase by Raymond Williams of which Derksen is particularly fond, it attends to neoliberalism's "structures of feeling." This poem utilizes affect's unique spatial relationship with respect to the human subject-sensorium and the political sphere as a way of exposing and countering neoliberalism's "'bifurcation of space'" (12) into "the local" and "the global," particularly through highlighting the contradictions, failures, and inconsistencies that become

ceeds first with an analysis of Derksen's treatment of affect in this poem, including both its references to bad feelings as well as its demonstration of those occasions when feeling itself becomes somehow inhibited or obstructed. Then it will turn to address the ways in which Derksen's linguistic strategies – what he terms "cultural poetics" – operate in conjunction with his focus on affect.

### *The Happy and the Sad*

What the poem stresses in particular through its "ambling" is a culture engulfed in negative emotion – misery, despair, and, as the title indicates, sadness – which generates not from individual experience but rather from social and economic conditions. In this sense the poem aligns itself with the current critical focus on affect that celebrates what Sianne Ngai has termed "ugly feelings." Also in keeping with the work of Ngai and others, these feelings are not limited to the private individual – they are not situated within a particular cathartic narrative procession of individual development (confession, healing, psychic revelation, etc.). Rather, they are samples of idiosyncratic emotions that inform the contemporary neoliberal moment as it is experienced in the urban West, channelled through the poem's speaker who defines the affective nature of this moment as an "aching slow burn" (14). But if the effect of right-wing politics has been to produce such negative feelings in the public (and specifically the left), then this poem also identifies the potential of these feelings to "cut free." At one point the speaker declares:

....Don't  
spit from the viewing platform  
for heroes. I take that as  
an insult to my own brand  
of hostile stupidity that I have bred  
in the petri dish of anxieties  
cut free of economic determinism – you  
vulgar glaring rung nudger! (13-14)

The possibility of anxiety existing outside of economic determinism is as much a pipe dream as a touchy-feely Mr. Harper. What's more, if this were possible, "hostile stupidity" would likely not be the affect that one would pick as being the most desirable or as having the most political potential (how, one might ask, can "stupidity" be political?),<sup>1</sup> but here we have an instance in which the poem lights upon negative emotion to ac-



tanks”), which light upon the potential to render *negative* feelings politically powerful. As Lauren Berlant writes, the Public Feelings project “organized around the thought that public spheres are affect worlds at least as much as they are effects of rationality and rationalization” (“Criticalism and its increasingly desperate attempts to ‘both justify its intense governmentality and to hide the contradictions of its actually existing project and conditions’” (Derksen, “Poetry” 7). Already, one can identify the “Internationally Depressed” and making T-shirts with the slogan “Depressed? ... Might Be Political.” This focus on bad feelings highlights the fact that the realm of affect, negativity does not mean the opposite or absence of emotion, but rather those feelings that, while ‘bad,’ have their own particular nature and therefore positive valence, and as a result their own potential for mobilizing political resistance. Here is a passage from Feel Tank Chicago’s manifesto:

We *could* adopt the pose of outraged common sense, or of rational thought in an irrational world. Instead, we aim for an emotional epistemology.... Feel Tank Chicago seeks to understand the economic and the nervous system of contemporary life; to feel the risk of unlearning the taken for granted and the risk of reclaiming optimism. We are interested in the potential for ‘bad feelings’ like hopelessness, apathy, anxiety, fear, numbness, despair and ambivalence to constitute and be constituted as forms of resistance.

The Public Feelings project is a product of the Bush era in American politics and all of the political disillusionment that went with it. Identifying and harnessing negative emotion as a political force functioned as a way to locate a mode of resistance still alive in an otherwise politically weary left-leaning body politic. In other words, this negativity became a site of optimism. Ann Cvetkovich offers a clarification of Feel Tank’s position on negative emotion: “The goal is to depathologize negative affect so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action rather than as its antithesis. This is not, however, to suggest that depression is thereby converted into a positive experience; it retains its associations with inertia and despair, if not apathy and indifference, but these affects become sites of publicity and community formation” (460). Feel Tank’s goal was not to achieve happiness, but to acknowledge and even cultivate the generative effects of these various modes of depression. Even such apparently antipolitical affects as “apathy” and the apparently antipolitical acts they lead to (such as neglecting to go to political demonstrations, for example

It’s harder to be happy geopolitically” (11). Misery may stand as the great equalizer. But these lines should be read as functioning ironically rather than as direct expression insofar as they mimic the language of neoliberalism and its increasingly desperate attempts to “both justify its intense governmentality and to hide the contradictions of its actually existing project and conditions” (Derksen, “Poetry” 7). Already, one can identify the desperation behind the logic of reassurance in these claims that do certainly circulate in contemporary culture – claims which imply that if the rich are miserable too, it does not make sense to lobby for greater share of the world’s wealth, because the poor will still be miserable even if they become rich. This line also highlights a weak attempt by the powerful to tune in on affect. The poem soon undercuts this notion of a “classless society” in subsequent lines which suggest that the political gloominess of primary concern is not that of the “millionaires” per se, but of those who feel themselves being “fixed in the fingers of inevitability/ and the gloomy vision/ of the centre right/ (air tight)” (11). To explore one’s misery may be to identify with one’s implicatedness within contemporary right-wing political climates, or at least to admit that it is impossible not to be affected by them even as we aim to resist them. However, to the extent that the rule of the right affects us at the level of our emotions and the expression of these emotions, this poem ultimately seeks to find within affect a new mode of countering (although not precisely ‘resisting’) this play for control over the domain of public feeling.

“Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically” incorporates, as we’ve seen, sadness, misery, and salted wounds, and elsewhere “bitterness,” “hate,” “anxiety,” “hostile stupidity,” “panic” and “alarm” (13, 14, 16, 19), but its political mobilization of affect is less in its expression of feeling (happy or sad feelings) than in its demonstration of the inhibition of feeling, an inhibition most notable in the poem’s first mention of feelings, which is that “it’s harder to be happy” when it comes to geopolitics. The full sentence reads: “It’s harder to be happy/ geopolitically/ so new restaurants are reviewed/ quickly before they close” (11). Linking happiness with the closure of new businesses identifies the difficulty with feeling happy in the current economic climate when the promise of freer and freer markets has lost its lustre – its legitimacy – and is being replaced by the realization that our current economic prosperity cannot be sustained without its negative effects. Here, then, the poem enacts what Derksen considers to be the political potential of contemporary poetry: it “points to the gap between the

Harper's grin needs a touch up.) While the reviews that the poem speak about try to champion fleeting successes, the flâneur's stroll through the city is ultimately affected by the fact that the local population is either too willing to change its gastronomic allegiances or too poor to go out to eat often enough.

This focus on happiness and its disappearance, rather than on sadness, may distance Derksen somewhat from the Public Feelings project. In Derksen's poetic rendering "happy" becomes, like those "ugly feelings" that Ngai explores in her now well-known book of the same title, an "explicitly amoral and *noncathartic*" emotion, "offering no satisfactions or virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release" (6). Accordingly, the poem rarely offers straightforward expressions of 'happiness' and 'sadness' and instead devotes much of itself to expressing those occasions when feeling happy seems impossible and even undesirable—when happiness encounters difficulty moving through its requisite circuit of travel. Indeed, Derksen's poem "produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release...and does so as a kind of politics" (Ngai 9). This is not to say, however, that Derksen's poem somehow laments the absence or difficulty of feeling happiness *per se*. Instead the expression of an inhibited happiness is its political expression, its political action. Given that Derksen references Slavoj Žižek's chapter "Happiness after September 11" elsewhere in *Transnational Muscle Cars*, we might infer that what interests Derksen about happiness in the contemporary historical moment is that it is in fact not a simple, self-evident or self-identical emotion, but that it "relies on the subject's inability or unreadiness fully to confront the consequences of its desire" (59). For Žižek:

the price of happiness is that the subject remains stuck in the inconsistency of its desire.... When today's Left bombards the capitalist system with demands that it obviously cannot fulfil (Full employment! Retain the welfare state! Full rights for immigrants!), it is basically playing a game of hysterical provocation, of addressing the Master with a demand which will be impossible for him to meet, and will thus expose his impotence. The problem with this strategy, however, is not only that the system cannot meet these demands, but that, in addition, those who voice them do not really want them to be realized. (59-60)

Žižek goes on to pose the following question: "when 'radical' academics demand full rights for immigrants and opening of the borders, are they

this way, they can hypocritically retain their clear radical conscience while continuing to enjoy their privileged position" (60). Ultimately, for Žižek "happiness is inherently hypocritical" in the sense that it relies on the disparities between the West and the rest, thereby protecting the position of the local in which this so-called "happy" leftist dwells (60). Moreover, this somewhat self-satisfying, self-congratulatory feeling of happiness functions to delineate and to affirm the very collective category of "leftists" (and perhaps also of "academics"), and that such an identification is also contingent upon an 'other,' located definitively elsewhere, on whose behalf these claims are made.

Overall, Derksen's poem can be said to "question the consequences of desire" just as it also seeks to give voice to the obstruction of the flows of happiness. More specific to the analysis in "Happiness After September 11," however: by adopting a spatial logic of happiness quite similar to Žižek's, it is little wonder that Derksen's poem positions happiness at a specifically "local" level. In fact, Derksen elsewhere is explicitly critical of the very category of the local when he argues that "the local was not the last line of defence against globalization, but the very structure which enhanced globalization, bypassing national regulations and policies to attach itself to globalism's scapes" ("Where," 59). The fact that the poem soon identifies the difficulty of feeling happy at the level of the geopolitical serves to reverse neoliberalism's attempts to cover over "the inconsistency of [the subject's] desire" (Žižek 59) and also to indicate some malfunctioning in the local vs. global structure. As well, just by virtue of its linking of happiness (or at least its ensuing failure) to the geopolitical, the poem upsets the conventional associations of affect and space by drawing together a specific affect with a political realm to which it does not conventionally belong. Ultimately, if "it's harder to be happy," then the poem announces neoliberalism's own failure to successfully manage and diffuse these affective inconsistencies.

The poem further disrupts the conventional relationship between affect and space by critiquing the individual's tendency to assume only a local perspective.<sup>3</sup> For example, at one point the poem chastises the individual's tendency to be afraid of the world beyond the local by rendering this fear as simply paranoia—that is, fear of one's own inner, psychic state: "When the world/ intrudes on you/ is it 'the world' or the sharp shapes of early determinants/ mom's refusal, dad's approval/ or vice versa with the kindly/ or harsh grandmother. summers/ in nature and urban winters" (20). This

tial identification and one's affective program. Just as affect need not be individual or cathartic, it also need not be situated as an interior phenomenon and as such restrict human feeling to the local and the individual. Moreover, as we have seen with the Public Feelings project and also through Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*, affect is a process that materializes bodies in such a way that does not always or entirely work in the service of capital. Thus the poem's primary goal may be summed up in the speaker's declaration that "I'm/ trying to work against (within)/ how this city (boom humbles/ humans as ornaments" (15).

As we've already seen, however, the poem's goal is not (or not only) to rescue the individual from inwardness and other processes of its delineation that ultimately work to commodify him or her. Rather, the poem functions to situate affect as an experience that, while being 'felt' at the level of the individual body, is in fact the effect of interactions between bodies and forces moving outside and also, at times, through them. In short, affect is contingent upon place and also movement between spaces. In her most recent work, Lauren Berlant has explored in further detail the nature of what we might term 'positive' or 'hopeful' affects like "happiness" – she uses the word "optimism" – as they constitute and are continually reconstituted by both the individual and publics. While in the early works of the Public Feelings project, Berlant and others cited negative feelings as being "optimistic" in the sense that they signalled a retained attachment to the political (albeit an attachment that was shifting if not in the process of being broken), Berlant's work now explores in greater detail this "desire for the political," a desire that was generated, at least in part, from right-wing politicians such as Bush, who "wanted the public to feel the funk, the live intensities and desires that make messages affectively immediate, seductive, and binding" (Berlant, "Affect"). Berlant continues: "[i]n his [Bush's] head, a public's binding to the political is best achieved neither by policy nor ideology but *the affect of feeling political together*" (Berlant "Affect," emphasis original). Berlant's writings on this phenomenon of the willingness, the desire, to form attachments to such publics even at the expense of finding any actual political content in the object, amount to what she has termed "cruel optimism." Cruel optimism comes as a result of this desire to attach, to be a part of affect worlds, but its descriptor "cruel" serves to identify the fact that the positivity realized by forming an attachment is constantly accompanied by the negative forces of the threat

inconvenient and tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of this attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world....[T]he very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place. ("Cruel" 21, emphasis original)

The object of attachment is as ephemeral and changeable as ever, but this does not dissuade people from forming these attachments. Instead, it makes people more anxious about their potential to attach, and less concerned about what it is they are attached to. Those who desire to "feel political together" no longer seek political ideals as their object, but rather affect itself and the potential it offers to belong to a public. To recall one of the poem's claims, this situation can be explained in "the notebooks/ of the past, where firm beliefs (firm's/ belief) are up for loan (loam)" and where crying is made impossible by "tear ducts taped up/ with duct tape" (12). Derksen also distinguishes between this desire for forming publics, for this sense of belonging to the political, and the individualist logic that continues to inform such concrete political acts as voting: "To vote" the speaker bitterly suggests, "think/ only of yourself/ in relation to yourself/ others are fucked/ so fuck them" (21-22). Read alongside Berlant, these lines critique the public's willingness to relate for the sake of pleasure, satisfaction, self-confirmation – and happiness – but not for the sake of acknowledging and acting on behalf of our social and political relations to one another, and the material conditions that inform these relations.

This "optimism" is not identical with Derksen's articulation of the difficulty of feeling "happiness," but Berlant's parsing of the complex and self-contradictory nature of the positive and negative constellations parallels Derksen's attention to the nature of happiness and the (waning) investment in the local in "Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically." In the following lines, Derksen's speaker addresses this tendency to prioritize an ambiguous affect world over political despair: "now/ the blight of bleakness/ is less than the atonal noodlings/ of a bubbly Eno/ which spring into melody/ often" (22). In one interpretation, this passage can be read to emphasize a willingness to be content, if not happy, with music that only at times serves up something as concrete as a melody. But the shift from "bleak-

belonging. As Berlant explains, “[i]n ambient sound we dissolve into an ongoing present whose ongoingness is neither necessarily comfortable nor uncomfortable, avant-garde nor Muzak, but, most formally, a space of abeyance” (Berlant, “Affect”). Ambient citizenship, as a form of resistance to the right’s deployment of affect, “characterizes a mode of being that moves around recursively in an environment gathering things up, changing the relation between what the senses collect and the constitution of political imaginaries and practices” (Berlant, “Affect”).

In Derksen’s poem, it is the right-wing de-materialized affect that might best be described as “ambient,” but this shift from “bleakness” to “ambience” might also be taken as the poem’s shorthand for the primary work that it does to disrupt neoliberal affect worlds. As well, the poem’s self-proclaimed “ambling” movement forms a kind of particularization of route and agency within the otherwise directionless affective ambience. In a section devoted mainly to media representation, the poem asks, “Is there now/ a place for outrage, a glaze for lags, a/ flag for flack”? (18) The question is initially intent upon locatedness, but then embarks upon a kind of meandering through the linguistic sounds of the letter ‘a’ as if to create a poetic ambience.

In these several passages from Derksen’s poem that de-individualize and also re-spatialize affect, the embodied ambient space of affective experience can be read as an alternative to the all-too-simplified (and ultimately dematerialized and disembodied) space of “the local.” All in all, what Derksen and Berlant have in common is the analysis of the significance of affect worlds to contemporary political life, and an interest in describing the potential of mobilizing affect (or simply making use of affect’s already inherent mobility) to inhibit and reroute neoliberal structures of feeling.

#### *Affect and Derksen’s “Cultural Poetics”*

As with the example of the affect-laden individual attempting to breed anxieties in the science lab, the poem often expresses itself as being unsure about when it is itself feeling, and when it stands in a more objective relation to affect. On occasion, it transfers its feelings into articulate commentary about affect (as when it asks: “Is it because/ I hate you that I/ think of you” and “did I mention that global pleasures are few and hard to talk to?” [16, 12]). The upshot of this uncertainty is a persistent recourse to an ironic tone, such that one might determine the poem’s most often

and building from his previous two books, Derksen continues in a rhetorical mode that Donato Mancini characterizes as “smart-ass wordplay” (64).<sup>4</sup> Consider, for example, the poem’s following comic (and also self-abnegating) lines: “I’m harping, I’m/ thematic, hit me with/ a study guide! Go/ gothic!” (18) Such instances, along with the overall “dissonance and eclectic” nature of Derksen’s oeuvre, “avoid creating reason-based rhetorical systems that might force him to exclude ideas or information that disturb their delicate operations” (Mancini 63). Indeed, it is a remarkable feat that this work can sustain its exploration of happy and sad feelings, and the more nuanced trajectories of affect circulating through and between these emotions, in the midst of its persistent and reason-defying rhetorical flippancy. But it is this very feat that is the core of this poem and its workings insofar as it combines Derksen’s interest in the possibilities of using language outside “reason-based rhetorical systems” and also his interest in disrupting the dominant flows of affect – flows which produce and confirm, to return to Thrift, “manipulation by the powerful.”

What is most interesting about Derksen’s poetic rendering of political feelings is that his “cultural poetics,” that is, his linguistic project “to heighten the contradictions of global capital within poetry” informs his treatment of affect as well (“A Conversation” 132). Derksen’s “cultural poetics” is not to be confused with a poetics of resistance. In fact, Derksen advocates “moving away from an idea of opposition and resistance to an idea of rearticulation” because “opposition and resistance has imagined itself as being outside of the debilitating structures of power, and has been critical from the exterior, whereas rearticulation is about disarticulating and rearticulating linkages within systems, somehow rearrang[ing] structures from within” (“A Conversation” 130–131). The way in which affect allows one to be both within and yet also able to perceive and even critique the conditions of this “within” at the same time offers an ideal mode through which to exercise this poetics. As well, affect – as a mode of action and feeling that has a complex relationship with reason, signification, and space – comes to be something that Derksen accesses to obstruct those embedded structures of neoliberalism. Derksen argues that “the linguistic turn in cultural theory can provide a structure for grasping such structural conditions of neoliberalism.” As he goes on to explain:

These gaps between ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ and its ideology and between the language of neoliberalism and both the type of affect it generates and actual material conditions it creates are more than the indetermi-

If poststructuralism, as Derksen argues, “continually tries to bring the outside into the chain of signification, neoliberalism (the ideology) tries to keep the outside (‘actually existing neoliberalism’) separate from the chain of signification. If there is no outside to the text in poststructuralism, in neoliberalism an outside is not only denied entry, so to speak, but the possibility of it is denied” (“Poetry” 7). What Derksen is talking about here are the ways in which neoliberalism makes claims to certain successes – better availability of products, greater freedom of choice for consumers, and economic growth, when in actual fact this system has limited the economic and political freedoms of most people in the world, not to mention endangered future production with its poor treatment of the environment. These are the conditions that neoliberalism denies, advertising in their place the potential for its constituents to participate in its affect worlds, to feel attached to the political. Derksen’s project, then, is to return the possibility of acknowledging, rather than denying, these material contents – the “outside” – in terms of both text and politics. His project of “rearticulation” which seeks to express various aspects of neoliberalism as contradictory (rather than as a unified, smoothly flowing apparatus that keeps all of the world’s populations on a consistent path of social and economic improvement) must reinvent the possibilities for discussion and debate, and for experiences and enactments of affect connected with these possibilities. In general, his aim is to give voice to that which is denied by neoliberal ideology. Affect aids him in this process because it does not follow the binary model of Saussurean linguistics, and it confounds the spatial logics of neoliberalism (especially concepts of “inside” and “outside”). Moreover, this poem reasserts affect as an experience that has its foundations in real material conditions and substantive political work – that is, a politics comprised of dialogue, concrete policies, and action.

In positioning his rearticulation, Derksen must contend with neoliberalism’s hijacking of language and its basic referential functioning, and with the fact that language is inevitably susceptible to mobilization by the corporate-domination of affect. Significantly, his fellow proponents of negative affect would consider him fortunate to be working in the medium of poetry, given their comments on the potential that literature specifically affords in articulating a political critique of neoliberalism. Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings*, building from Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, is largely based in the contention that “literature may in fact be the ideal space to investigate ugly

ture” (15) and it asks “How is this ‘my world’/ any more than the typeface/ of the Boston Pizza logo (mimetic)/ or the eggman (realism) of Humpty’s Family/ Restaurant?” (16). In its attempt to offer a poetry less ensconced in commodity culture, the poem devises a linguistic practice that does not aspire to recapture mimesis or realism. “Writing,” states the poem, “can no longer be daily mind mapping/ as it was once so easy/ to please with point by point/ hits” (14). And it goes on to shout “Let’s go Toronto/ Jumbotron!” Clearly, the poem’s use of language goes far beyond that of conventional representational expression, but given neoliberalism’s dislocation of the signifier and signified this is cause for concern at least as much as it is cause for a celebration of its ‘radicality.’ Derksen is explicitly self-conscious about his uptake of language, as when he explains: “‘Speedskaters/ of former Yugoslavia/ unite under the flag/ of fetishwear for return of the/ repossessed post-NATO realignment/ lines combined with panic-attack/ currency kebabs’ is the kind/ of sentence I am thinking/ about” (19). The poem’s take on language is to decry the ease with which it can be circulated, with its particular pleasure- or fear-inspiring affectivity, but long having lost its referents – from advertising logos to the generative effects of the big screen to a mash-up of media reportage that commodifies states into sports, food, clothing and a “panic-attack.”

If this is the language that neoliberalism serves up, then the poem’s strategy is to ‘quote’ from it. In this respect Derksen follows from a technique he used in his previous book, *Dwell*. Writing on Derksen’s use of the “decontextualized quotation” in *Dwell*, Jason Wiens explains that this device operates as “a sort of ‘found poetry’ whose assumptions are laid bare when placed under the sign of irony” (104) – an irony that comes precisely from considering these quotations out of context, and also from Derksen’s critical-comedic tone. “Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically” is, like many of the poems in *Transnational Muscle Cars*, chock-full of several quotations, as if borrowed from the ether of culture in which they circulate as freely available. Some read like bumper-sticker slogans “Stakeboarders are people too!” (17) while some read like sound-bites from the news media – “jittery Asian markets,” “Russia unravels” (17). By isolating these quotations Derksen distinguishes the way affect is sensationalized by the media from his own more sophisticated attention to the complex spatial relations of happiness.<sup>5</sup> Other quotations seem out of the mouths of politicians, “new world/ international economic order” (15), “deficits are unethical” (14), and others still are more fragmentary, including “strange

mately instruments, like the singular individual and also the space of the local, of a neoliberal model, in which their function is to close off people from one another as well as to serve up pre-packed quotations for use – but not for retooling or rearticulating. These quotations also signal in linguistic form the other various closures hailed by neoliberalism. As Derksen has explained: “neoliberalism also seeks to lock in its particular narratives through closure – so we hear calls of the end of utopias and of a utopian horizon, the end of the nation-state, the end of history, and the end of geography.... This radical temporal project of the closure of different futures, and the projection of the social as imagined through neoclassical economics, reflects the narrowness of the neoliberal vision” (“Poetry and the Other Politics” 43). Derksen goes on to say that “[t]his entangled knot of determinates marks the conditions under which writing takes shape and confers a reality on the politics of the moment” (43). To finish with the words “close/ quotes” functions in part to express the function of the language of neoliberalism, but it also serves to throw back at it what it dishes out.

The connection between the quotation and affect becomes explicitly apparent in the following passage, one that appears early on in the poem, but that resonates with its concluding section:

...From the excesses of  
my youth to the excuses  
of both, to free-floating formal quotations  
little moments of appropriated  
pleasure are nowhere near  
enough to be filled with alarm  
of life lived to max capacity  
that others recognize  
where democracy dwells  
demos of singular stand-ins. (19)

Like the excessiveness ever-promoted by capitalism, the borrowed “free-floating formal quotations” available – to the poetic persona, to readers – might provide happiness, might deliver a pleasure albeit appropriated from elsewhere. But, neither of these can communicate the alarming facts of current socio-economic conditions that, in the West and elsewhere, pose as – “stand-in” for – democracy. This is what the “others recognize,” and, as with Žižek’s formulation of contemporary happiness, it is the knowledge of the other that identifies the inconsistencies of the “happiness” of the

enough” then it follows that bringing these quotations and/or pleasures closer together may in fact produce the affective insurgence that the poem seeks. This emphasis on proximity suggests a second reading of the word “close” of the poem’s penultimate line. Therefore, as we’ve seen, the singularity produced by “close[d]/ quotes” can be lamented, but the fact that these quotes are also “close” in terms of proximity indicate that the conditions for further affective interaction and flow are prime. At least, the distance that produces the geopolitical (and that also therefore determines the possibility of a “local” upon which the experience of “happiness” depends) seems somewhat reduced when the “quotes” are “close” together. Here Derksen lights upon this possibility that certain components of language, delimited as individual components rather than links on a semiotic chain by their form as “free-floating quotations,” can function to affect one another – and to intervene more broadly in political affect worlds with which the poem engages – when they are brought within a spatialized realm.

In Derksen’s rendering, happiness comes to be a complexly public, geopolitical affect that does its best work of contending with and criticizing contemporary politics when its status and longevity is called into question by claims that it is an affect that is “harder” to feel, and by the implications behind this statement – that happiness is not spontaneous or located purely in individual pleasure, that it is on the wane, and that its inherent inconsistencies are becoming increasingly difficult to deny or ignore. The right may have ruled the last decade through affect-as-distraction, by generating affect worlds in response to the desire for the political, all the while excluding acknowledgement of material conditions, but the “ambler” of this poem recharges neoliberalism’s nebulous affective environment with particularity and with expressions of the failure of this “cruel optimism.” The poem warns against feeling satisfied with the “happiness” we get from belonging to publics, insisting rather that we recognize its formal “cruelty.” In doing so it also dismantles the divide between the local and the global that once served to insulate our emotions from being affected by the sadness “outside.”

It’s harder to be happy geopolitically, but as the local fades, and also as we cannot doubt our position and complicity within neoliberalism, happiness does not constitute our affective experience or serve as the predominant result of our forming attachments, of our pursuit of affect worlds. The fact that Harper’s wife had to call someone up to help Steve get a better smile is another instance of this difficulty with being happy in a public



## Notes

1. For one answer to this question, see chapter 6 of Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*, called "Stuplimity."
2. This phrase has been employed by several critics over the past decade. An early instance of its usage can be found in the work of Ann Cvetkovich, whose 1988 dissertation is called "Mixed Feelings: The Victorian Novel and the Politics of Affect." A version of this project was later published as *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* 1992.
3. By issuing this criticism the poem corrects the "all too common error of both analytical understanding and political action" (Harvey 79). According that David Harvey, this error "arises because we all too often lock ourselves into one and only one scale of thinking, treating the differences at that scale as the fundamental line of political cleavage." Harvey goes on to criticize "all the globalization talk" for "hold[ing] that everything is fundamentally determined at the global scale (79).
4. Mancini suggests that the poems in *Transnational Muscle Cars* demonstrate a kind of "low comedy" that is "reminiscent of the second great shit-disturbing Marx, Groucho" (65, 64). Mancini's article, however, does not discuss "Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically."
5. Ann Cvetkovich's writes that "[a]t this level of daily experience and the cultural forms to which it gives rise, affective life is often central and also more complexly visible than in sensationalized media" (Cvetkovich 466). Derksen's poem explicitly identifies – and seems sceptical of – contemporary forms of media when it invites its readers to "join / me in front of the cold screen/ for hot media as 'the tip/ of the iceberg' from/ 'Teenage Tina'" (18-19). Since elsewhere Derksen refers to TINA (There is No Alternative), this is likely a reference to the Thatcherite/neoliberal mode of thinking more commonly indicated by the acronym (see Derksen "Poetry and the Other Politics" 43).
6. Žižek points out that "knowledge ultimately makes us unhappy" (61). He specifically talks about situations in which one knows that the other knows something about oneself. In order to expose the true feelings of those leftists who maintain their happiness by issuing demands they do not actually want to be met it is necessary to "[call] the other's bluff, counting on the fact that what the other really fears is that one will comply with his or her demand" (Žižek 60).

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# Writing 13

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## Collective Texts/Interviews

### Versus the Atomizations of Power: A Dialogue about The Kootenay School of Writing, Friendship, and Collectivity

Donato Mancini, Colin Smith

*Colin Smith, author of Multiple Poses (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1997) and 8 x 8 x 7 (San Francisco: KRUPSKAYA Books, 2008), was a fan of, a student in, and a collective member of the KSW from 1987–1998, and again 2005–2007. This text amalgamates interviews conducted at Donato Mancini's home in East Vancouver on January 24 and February 25 in 2006, and by e-mail between Winnipeg and Vancouver at the tail end of 2009. Substantially edited by both parties.*

**Donato Mancini:** *When did you move to Vancouver?*

**Colin Smith:** I took the overnight train from Banff and arrived in Vancouver on the last rainy Sunday in May 1987.

**DM:** *That early?*

**CS:** That early. You could look it up. There was a day-long general strike the next day. Dot<sup>1</sup> and Scott Watson,<sup>2</sup> and perhaps Kevin Davies<sup>3</sup> was there as well, took me on a long walk through Chinatown and elsewhere.

CS: It took time before I felt confident enough or had enough material, and everyone around knew that. Still, I read once in Vancouver early on, and still remember how shit-scared I was. Amazingly still have the promo paper, so I can tell you the particulars: Wednesday 28 October 1987, 8 p.m., at the Western Front.<sup>4</sup> \$4/\$3. Curated by Peter Culley,<sup>5</sup> and MCed by him too, natch. It was a 6-pack reading with hearty KSW affiliation. Myself, Deanna Ferguson,<sup>6</sup> Dan Farrell,<sup>7</sup> Susi Milne, Rhoda Rosenfeld, and Dennis Denisoff<sup>8</sup>.

DM: *You were inside the KSW for about 10 years.*

CS: Closer to 12, with a couple lost years in there. There was a spell, from some point in 1994 to when I was operated on in 1995, when my back exploded and I could not even get up the fuckin' stairs. Was effectively "on medical leave" then. I resigned from the collective during the summer of 1997. The last year I was in Vancouver the first time, in 1998, I didn't come around much.

DM: *You say you were brought in through Dorothy Trujillo Lusk and Dan Farrell in Toronto?*

CS: No, through Dorothy and Kevin Davies. They were living there in 1986, a couple in those days. They had buggered on out of Vancouver sometime in 1985, I think. They were apparently stressed out with Vancouver life just then and several people possibly including Jeff Derksen<sup>9</sup> said "For Christ's sake, leave town, go someplace else for a bit." They pooled their dough and lived in Italy for about 3 months. After that, Toronto. Their old friend Bob Johnston, a photographer, had relocated there, and they lived right next door to him in a house on Symington Avenue. I met them in March 1986 at a Stephen Rodefer reading Victor Coleman had organised at the Salon above the Music Gallery.<sup>10</sup>

DM: *How did you meet Dorothy and Kevin?*

CS: They caught my eye because most of the people there were the usual Toronto artholes. I got into a conversation with Dorothy after obliging her cigarette with a light. The three of us hung out the whole night talking, getting very drunk, playing a little pool. We exchanged phone numbers.

DM: *At that point you were still writing anecdotal subjectivist stuff.*

CS: Yep. The mighty Canadian Lyric. Bad workshop poetry, lots of it. I had eked out a creative writing degree at York (1977–1983). Although by 1986 I did have *some* awareness of and love for *some* avant-garde stuff. Andy Payne,<sup>11</sup> my introduction to Stephen Rodefer and my tip-off for that reading, had waved a few Language poets at me. Steve McCaffery, Charles Bernstein. Bernstein may have come to town at some point, and Andy played me a tape of the reading. (Or of a Bernstein reading *someplace*.) I remember hearing "The Klupzy Girl", for sure. Andy was hopping with excitement and slapping me upside the head with a copy of *Is-*

*lets/Irritations*.<sup>12</sup> A little later I became aware of Clark Coolidge. *Quartz Hearts*<sup>13</sup>.

DM: *The CanLit glacier started to thaw.*

CS: Yes. I was prepped for a long-overdue melt. I knew the work of a few of the nuttier American poets but had just not discovered the Language poets.

DM: *How did you open up your writing away from the CanLyric?*

CS: My own attempts at the Canadian lyric were by and large pathetic – bathetic would be more like it – and I always felt there was something else I was chasing. I was reading buckets of John Ashbery and thinking "This is Right Out There! Why can't I write like this? Why can't I reflect complicated forms of consciousness?" Plus, I had always been a political animal, and I was having zilch luck getting *that* stuff to work. I was perpetrating back-firing satires and facile monstrousness – really stupidly obvious junk. So I was looking for models of political poetry that were both more explicit and more sophisticated, that used the personal and the political in a fine weld that I could not find in the Canadian poetry I knew.

DM: *Who did you study with at York?*

CS: Pretty much everybody except bpNichol, unfortunately for me. I studied heavily with Don Coles. Eli Mandel briefly. In prose, Matt Cohen, Clark Blaise. Robert Clayton Casto<sup>14</sup> – a contrary and lovely poet who I wish had got more attention. bpNichol was teaching second-year courses and if you didn't get Nichol you got Somebody Else, and I got Somebody Else. And maybe this comes with becoming an old fart, but my studies have a silly complexion to them now, seem selective and myopic. Having not got Nichol as an instructor, I didn't get around to reading him until Kevin and Dot's recommendation, I think. But – duh – I had seen the Four Horsemen perform in 1978, and I knew of Steve McCaffery's work no later than 1984 – *Panopticon*<sup>15</sup> book launch at the Rivoli, yowza, that was a hot, antic night!

DM: *So your friendship with Kevin and Dorothy formed around writing from the start. Was Dorothy already producing interesting work?*

CS: Yes, but she was reticent about showing it to other people. I didn't realise until I read that interview you did with her<sup>16</sup> that I might have been among the first she shared her work with. She had shown it to Kevin and to no one else for the longest time. And for me it was *hearing* it rather than *seeing* it. After the Rodefer event I spent basically the Spring and Summer, and to a lesser degree the Fall, drunk in their living room, gabbing about writing. We recited our work to each other, and sometimes just read together (that shared quiet among friends). They were fond of pulling these outrageous, hardcore Language books off their shelves and throwing them at me: "Have a look at this," or "Why don't you read some of this

out loud to me?"

**DM:** *Right into the pool without water-wings.*

**CS:** Oh yes, but done out of affection rather than malice, I think. They thought I had a good reading voice that I had not quite learned how to use. That busted me up nicely: to open any unknown book and start reciting from it cold, finding the meaning as I went. The idea was: don't try to force a poetic voice onto the material, just go. Let the words and their meanings tint as they can't help but do, let the energy you find take over, and the voice will take care of itself.

But Kevin and Dot must have been shrieking internally with laughter, cos they were throwing me things like David Melnick's *PCOET* and *Men in Aida*. Bruce Andrews's *Wobbling*. Lyn Hejinian's *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*.<sup>17</sup> Really sonically adventurous work – I had no idea what I was getting into. Absolutely key for me, poetically and politically, was Bob Perelman's *The First World*.<sup>18</sup> I thought: "This is it This is how you do it This is how you get the personal the political and the social refracting off each other – this is ringing the cherries for me!" To say nothing of being graced with the very occasional text from my two new friends. Dorothy reciting "Stumps"<sup>19</sup> – *completely* baffling. But this is how I first encountered their writing, through the ear.

**DM:** *Kevin was slow to develop his writing as well?*

**CS:** Well, yes and no. In those days it was more a matter that he preferred to encourage Dorothy. But it is also true that he was inclined, even more so than she was, to hoarding his poems. He thought they were inadequate, and largely kept them to himself.

**DM:** *Was *Pause Button*<sup>20</sup> the first thing Kevin felt really confident to show others? I know there isn't another book before *Pause Button*, which is (in a sense) a single poem. How much writing preceded it?*

**CS:** Quite a lot. But he lived in a state of perpetual disavowal. Interesting thing, Kevin came out of a CanLit background. Kevin, if he had wanted to – and I take this mostly from Dorothy, who has seen this work – could have been a successful and conventional practitioner of CanLit. He grew up in Nanaimo and had a teacher in high school who tutored him, I think both formally and privately: Jack Hodgins, apparently an amazing, supportive teacher. Realising how bright Kevin was, he did extra laps for him as an exegete. I think there might be a short story somewhere out there that Kevin won an award for when he was around 17. Kevin had those prize-winning chess but scorned them (thereby annoying some of the older Van-

*the sea / which no one empties / is also an ashtray*" (opening lines of *Pause Button*)? Was that his first big project?

**CS:** Not really. Kevin was writing and destroying sequences of work all along. And he worked in sequences from early on, oh yes. Possibly through Jack Hodgins or maybe through his fellow Nanaimo asshole buddy in poetry Pete Culley, he got introduced to and grabbed by the work of Jack Spicer. But it took him forever and a fucking day before he got close to what he wanted. He was *always* writing, perpetually making these crabby notes, weaving them into chunks and sequences with frequent intrusion of outer blips. Infrequently he would release pages of this stuff for publication. There is an early chapbook-length poem called *despite* that Billy Little<sup>21</sup> put out in maybe the early Eighties. Excruciatingly rare, I never had a copy, I've only read it because Jeff Derksen loaned me his. (And the reason Jeff loaned it to me, slyly and quietly, was because he knew if Kevin found it on his shelf he would steal it and burn it.) Slivers of *despite* mutated into shards in *Pause Button*. I think bits of a funny slew of political heresy titled "Sunset Over B.C. Sugar" (read in public but never published) are in there, too. For sure bits of "Extraneous Detail" made the cut; some of *that* was published around 1986 in *BC Monthly*.<sup>22</sup>

Kevin was less retentive about readings, however, and gave some legendary ones. It may have been in a Local Writers Adjunct Salon to the New Poetics Colloquium<sup>23</sup> that he gave one that burned down not just the barn, but the whole farm. Calvin Wharton speaks eloquently about it, as a reading that changed his life. I imagine it was crazed and political, and I know it went at warpspeed because of what Peter Culley wrote about it<sup>24</sup>. In those days Calvin was a card-carrying Wobbly who was thinking about transiting the Work Poem<sup>25</sup> versus Language Poem cleave, and Kevin's incendiary performance encouraged him to go farther toward the Language camp. Sounds like it synergised chaos: mad laughter, shouting and hollering, heckling (which Kevin encouraged). Maybe all it lacked was gobbing stageward and an ashtray chucked into Kevin's face. Anyway, Calvin's gist was that here was where you could take poetry if you were political enough and had nerve enough.

So Kevin would read these "sequences in progress" and then immediately after someone would approach him and say, "Can I publish that?" Kevin would go, "O no no, it's good enough to read but not good enough to publish." Drove plenty of people to distraction for quite a while, particularly Larry Brammer, kindest and most patient of souls, who made the mis-

nami back pages: Forthcoming – *BlahBlahBlah* by Kevin Davies. The titles would change – one particularly good one was *Animal Drill* – but no book would follow. Finally, Lary's jest at Kevin and himself, in a sort of structural despair, I think, was registered under the subhead "Ever-forthcoming."

DM: *Sounds like Kevin was instrumental in motivating a lot of people.*

CS: Fuck Yes! You cannot itemize the ways. He is so brilliant, and so generous with his knowledge and inspirational in his yapping that you can find a long list of folks, myself included, who will love him to their last breath. Cornball, but true.

DM: *Was Kevin an organizer?*

CS: Formally, no. But he was a devout KSW attendee and could be press-ganged into working a gig or being MC. He liked doing things for the KSW but never wanted to sit as part of the collective.

Mostly what he did was come to most everything and ramp up its intelligence factor *incredibly*, before and after readings and in piss-ups afterwards that often went late into the night. Sometimes he would be more interesting than the reading itself, and he had an encyclopaedic way of linking disparate poetry strands.

He functioned also as a peripatetic volunteer editor for plenty of folks and their poetry. Dorothy. Me. Jeff Derksen. Nancy Shaw. Any time you see Kevin being given a thank-you in the acknowledgements slot of a book, you can figure he had something substantive to do with the editing, or that he provided an inspirational re-visioning.

So the whacking totality that is *Pause Button* is the accumulated and stitched-together pieces from these destroyed and renovated reading scripts. Massive amounts of revision and deep structural cutting and pasting, until he had the larger architecture of what he wanted and the sustain to achieve it. Notwithstanding that I was one of the many people driven bonkers by his savage reluctance and the long wait, I *am* glad he held out.

DM: *Do you remember who else was around in those days?*

CS: What follows will be very partial, particular to me, and possibly muddled in its timelines. I met so many people right away, and this was followed immediately by more waves and batches of more folks. So long after the fact, and now that my brain is turning into Cheez Food, it is not so easy to keep all of it distinct.

It might be structurally worthwhile to think of Spring 1987 as a second phase in KSW development (first being getting it birthed and making the

Here are some neighbourhood love matches: Gary Whitehead<sup>27</sup> and Athena George.<sup>28</sup> Jeff Derksen and Erin O'Brien. Gerry Creede and Jan Coyle. Calvin Wharton<sup>29</sup> and Claire Stannard. Stan Douglas and Mina Totino.<sup>30</sup> Reid Shier<sup>31</sup> and Kristin Fredrickson. Scott Watson and Brice Canyon (though Brice's surname was "MacNeil" then). Cate Rimmer<sup>32</sup> and Keith Higgins. Deanna Ferguson and Phil McCrum.<sup>33</sup> Nancy Shaw<sup>34</sup> and Bill Wood. Susan Lord and Paul Kelley. Other people who come to mind? Peter Cummings.<sup>35</sup> Kathy Slade.<sup>36</sup> Dennis Denisoff. Mike Zoll. Wayne Arsenault. Charles Watts.<sup>37</sup> Peter Culley, based in Nanaimo with his partner Daphne Samuel, had squatter's rights in several neighbourhood apartments, and was often around.

Consider this: I lived that summer with Kevin and Dot at 1727 William Street, right behind Joe's Café.<sup>38</sup> Lary Bremner also lived in this building, when not at sea half the year working on a commercial fishing boat. In an apartment upstairs was Terry Ludwar, the exquisite queen who worked as a typesetter back then (he gave it up for gardening). Three of Terry's gigs at that time were Tsunami chapbooks, *Writing*<sup>39</sup> magazine, and Lord and Kelley's Fissure chapbooks. I bring this up to illustrate how intense and condensed this increasing scene was in those days. You could bump into half of it just going for groceries at the Santa Barbara.<sup>40</sup>

Colin Browne:<sup>41</sup> always busy with several things, always around. In those days he was working and teaching at Praxis, trying to finish his film *White Lake*, putting together a music/text collaboration with Martin Gotfrit ("Ground Water"), while being the editor of *Writing*. I don't know if he was ever on the collective, but likely he was on the board.

Can't remember exactly when I was invited onto the KSW collective – it was maybe 1989, certainly by 1990 – but Derksen and Shaw were on it. Whitehead and Wharton? Not sure. Kathryn MacLeod<sup>42</sup> and Doug Stetar were there, and so was the wonderful and underrated Julia Steele.<sup>43</sup> Not long after that came a cascade that consisted of Lisa Robertson,<sup>44</sup> Catriona Strang,<sup>45</sup> Susan Clark,<sup>46</sup> and another dear old friend of mine from York days, Catherine Bennett,<sup>47</sup> who moved to B.C. in 1989. Sometime after that, a couple of young tech weirdos named Andrew Klobucar and Dave Ayre came by and got infused, infected.

Enough schematics; enough name-dropping. This was the blob of mutating community, as it struck me. Apologies to anyone who missed seeing their name here.

DM: *In an early review of his "Sitar Taken as Sitar" <sup>48</sup> Jeff Derksen says*

bar scene, as well as a diverse North American literary scene" (155). *Were these the highball, heady days of the "rigorous bar scene"?*

CS: Oh yeah that would be those times all right, along with scads of others. We drank heedlessly. Key hang-outs were the Waldorf in East Van, and, in the Downtown Eastside, Uncle Charlie's lounge. Sometimes the Princeton, down at the docks. For a spell, also, the Legion on Main Street (at 2nd Avenue). Loosely speaking, we were young and deranged, excited and excitable, politically miserable, with this New Art Thang that was as demanding and scary as it seemed delightful. At a few years' remove came Dan's arch jest to the effect that, "Once we were drunks, now we're a community."

Keep in mind that there were wonderfully permeable boundaries in our sodality. Any KSW reading or Artspeak<sup>49</sup> or Or Gallery<sup>50</sup> opening could turn into a dance party. A house party piss-up could swivel from dancing to a subgroup in a hallway getting into a serious yak about the difficulties in Barrett Watten's latest book, say. Soundtrack for those times held heavy reoccurrences of The Pogues, The Smiths, PiL, Queen Latifah, Neneh Cherry, Public Enemy, Madonna, Sonic Youth, Single Gun Theory. "Tack-Head!"

I loved that shift, On Call aspect to our lives. From serious non-denominational saturation grows a movement.

DM: *Everyone was on welfare and writing their heads off.*

CS: Well, *many* were. Not that welfare was any sort of financial windfall, but Vancouver had not yet become Vanhatten, to use Renee Rodin's<sup>51</sup> dire and sadly accurate characterization. Though the table setting that would cause World-Class Bullshit to rule had already been laid. That kind of civic business hubris that frets "We should be bigger and better." The Expo 86 (a Class B World's Fair; subject heading: Transportation) was a large factor. To say nothing of the reign of "The Kid", otherwise known as Gordon Campbell, who was mayor then, and is premier now. The boss what Marathon Realty brung ya.

For instance, Jeff lived in a roomy, diner-style 1-bedroom apartment at 1965 Commercial. Paid around \$280<sup>52</sup> a month for it. Which was common for the 'hood then. He now tortures his students' credulity with this factoid. They will not believe him!

DM: *Welfare was not so hard to get on back then, not so hard to be on.*

CS: Yes, exactly. Sometimes it even went out of its way to be helpful! I

How it felt to me was: Young, foolish, learning this great new poetry, and there is definitely a scene happening and it is definitely the most interesting thing in your life. Not much need for sleep or food. All you need is enough for cheap draft beer and smokes, maybe the occasional movie, and enough to buy and share books with a lot of people. You plough the rest into time bought for the writing.

DM: *Tell me more about your shared reading habits.*

CS: There was a lot of communal book-sharing. There was, for example, that Gertrude Stein reading group. By no means was it a class, just an experience. I think its members were Creede, McCrum, Catriona Strang, and Farrell. They would get together at Gerry and Jan's apartment on semi-regular Sunday afternoons for a couple of hours. Just reading a text aloud, sitting in a circle passing the book around in 20-minute increments the buggers made their way A to Z through *The Making of Americans*. Pretty sure they did *Finnegans Wake*, too. Phil hamming it up with a deliberately foul Irish brogue.

Jeff was more intense and methodical, which is his nature – generous and accessible, as well. Jeff was a pretty terrific exegete for me. Because of his work for the collective and then as an editor for *Writing*, he got to be on a sort of first line of access to new books, new work. And once I got involved with both the school and the magazine, there was no getting away from him! He and I are a similar sort of book nerd. Devout and hard-driving. And not giving two shits about any necessity for academe. I mean, I had already *been* there, and had become fairly aware of its limitations. Jeff came from a working-class New Westminster background. What he had for education at that point was high school and however far he got in DTUC before Premier Bill Bennett and his Socred government shut it down as part of their ideologically evil "Restraint" programme. I mean, *very* eventually he waltzed off to Calgary and points American to earn some letters, but he took his sweet time. KSW was proof that you did *not* have to go to some official school to learn and do interesting stuff.

DM: *Jeff talks about that time as if it was like being a grad student. He said that if he had not read and carefully thought about what was up that week he would feel too shy to show up at the bar. I wonder if it felt that way for you and for others.*

CS: Yeah, that was Jeff. One of the sharpest of us feeling inadequate! Can't guess to speak for others, but I certainly felt intimidated and challenged. All along. Still do. Good thing I don't mind the experience so



first year as the goofy, quacking guy from the Arrogant Centre of Away who wore a lot of white and stayed pretty quiet. Trying to be friendly and helpful. I was in a steep and scary learning curve. Made significantly more tense cos in Fall 1987 I won a \$6,000 Explorations grant to bring to fruition a poetry manuscript that I had just disavowed and destroyed. Had applied for the thing while still in Ontario, on the urging of a CanLit friend, as a despairing lark. *Never* thought I would get it. Whoops.

So I hunkered down unpleasantly. An unconfident motherfucker trying to regenerate yet another manuscript. Which I did, to the Canada Council's satisfaction, though not to my own. It was another dud wad. Had a few sheets in it that became poems in *Multiple Poses*; not much more to say. One of the pleasantest aspects of getting that grant was that it permitted me the privilege of buying a fair number of books at Proprioception<sup>54</sup> and having those totems of inspiration at my elbow through years of new writing and rewriting.

**DM:** *Were a lot of writers from the older generations coming to KSW readings?*

**CS:** There was always a reasonable quotient of those folks. Particularly game were Maxine Gadd,<sup>55</sup> Judy [Judith] Copithorne,<sup>56</sup> Renee Rodin. Billy Little. Jamie Reid.<sup>57</sup> As mentioned before, Gerry Gilbert.<sup>58</sup> Warren Tallman, though he seemed puzzled or angered about a fair number of things that he saw or heard. George Bowering and Brian Fawcett at times, often as not to heckle. Roy Miki – he eventually became a board member. Some of this had its conduit through baseball. The writers' baseball league. Called the Cosmic League, as I recall – deliriously hoping this was not spelled with a K! Six teams grouped out of discrete work zones or writing affinities.

There was one team whose members were largely print and television journalists. Another was mostly industrial or technical writers or something, and *they* were unpleasant – colloquially known as the Soreheads cos they took themselves and the baseball way too belligerently and seriously. There was a team comprised of workers at the Granville Book Company,<sup>59</sup> an independent and co-operatively run bookstore right downtown. (Gerry Creede worked there for a couple years. I think the baseball might have helped that happen.)

And the Bad Backs, fer chrissake. Our favourites. We would play each other for kicks during the off-season. Bowering was on that squad; so was Fawcett. Norm Sibum, that rancid classicist prone to putting into his poems

The KSW team picked up the ludicrous moniker The Friendly Club, as a tribute to our rebarbative poetics. A few of its members were actually visual artists with some KSW affiliation, particularly from Artspeak, which had, after all, actually grown from a Petri dish that had a KSW bone fragment embedded in it. Eventually enough people kept showing up that some unwieldiness occurred, and a second team was formed, largely comprised of the visual artists. This new team saddled itself with the disgusting epithet Blind Trout.<sup>61</sup> McCrum fashioned himself a punk team t-shirt in celebration; white fabric with a schematic fish drawn in black marker, the eye Xed out.

Stan Douglas was one of the earlier Friendlies (right field). He was definitely someone copacetic with what the KSW did. His *TV Spots* piece has many of us acting in it. He and Deanna collaborated on that *Link Fantasy* chapbook.<sup>62</sup> Some of us, including Ferguson and Davies, were his research and production grunts for the *Vancouver Anthology*.<sup>63</sup> Dan's *Last Instance* bears a Stan photo on the cover.<sup>64</sup>

Baseball – another vector for putting spokes into a communal wheel. I played a substantively poor second base. Kept score and rooted, mostly.

**DM:** *I want to ask you about Gerald Creede. In contrast with the excruciatingly long gap between writing and publishing that you talked about with Kevin, Creede's writing in *Ambit*<sup>65</sup> seems less laboured in that particular OCD neurotic perfectionist way.*

**CS:** Well, you would be wrong there. It was *immaculately* laboured over. Just *seems* casual, is all. Whenever I think of Gerry and his poetics, I think of Astaire and Rogers dancing – “Oh yeah, let me make it look like I just flicked this off my wrist.” Gerry's inner prankster liked to pose as a slacker. His joke was that he only wrote 1 line or sentence a day. After I got to know him a little better, I visited him a couple times in his writing studio. Which was a garret apartment in a house on 1600-block Victoria Drive; the house pictured on the cover of *Ambit*. (This building no longer exists; has been replaced with a generic glassine condo. Imagine our surprise.) Gerry went there most every day and spent some 6 hours a spell “getting down my line”. He showed me his notebooks once – they were dense and busy and beautiful and included miniature watercolours wrought by him – and they demonstrated deep thought and long labour and reforging. He was just very strict with himself. If he got one line a day it was pulled out of pages and pages of work.

His work is openly reflective of the perils and underdevelopments in

know, it is actually *okay* to be accused of sincerity.

**DM:** *What was his involvement in the KSW?*

**CS:** A shadowy character who was an inspirational shit-disturber, maybe? Came to a lot of the events; took the occasional workshop. (Was in Bernstein's.) Gerry could cut an alarming figure at times. There is a saturnine darkness in him that seems somewhat paranoid, and it has a wobbly balance. Often had a feeling he might punch me in the face. There was a nasty time when he and Kevin got into a fistfight on the sidelines of one of our baseball games. Gerry took a shine to me but it took some time before I felt comfortable around him. It took me realizing we were the same kind of working-class fuck-up. Even from the same kind of places in Ontario – Windsor for him, Oshawa for me. Auto-industry fiefdoms.

**DM:** *Is Gerry still writing?*

**CS:** Does anyone know? Now that he's an outcast and a recluse .... He destabilized pretty badly after his dad died. I mean, without Jan as his bed-rock, he might have graduated from being a "failed monster" – that phrase is Dorothy's, and is intended to imply that there is always enough good in him to trump monstrosity – to becoming a "lost monster." I mean, I hope he is whatever passes for well or better, and that he is still writing, though I never fault anyone for giving it up. There were all those amazing sonnets, what the fuck happened with them? Anything? Some were read in public; were any ever published? It would be a large spiney book of Creede. He probably wrote over 100 of the things.

**DM:** *What about Dan Farrell? How was his poetry received early on?*

**CS:** Dan's work always got some pretty intense reactions. Some people just *hated* it. But Kevin considered "Young Dan" – as he would call him – one of the best writers in our circle, if not *the*. With his later work, I came to feel he was Our Beckett.

**DM:** *His first chapbook was *ape*<sup>66</sup> in 1988.*

**CS:** *Frightening* book. Struck me as a psychogram of the underpinnings of a deeply failed civilization unaware of the fact and one that closely resembled ours. Deeply disjunctive and laconic and marbled with -ing words. Many of which were people's attempts to describe to their doctors the kind of pain they were in. Dan once gifted me a photocopy of this page from some medical text containing a comprehensive chart of these descriptors; a funny, awful, supersaturated kind of read. He managed I think to work every single one of these words into *ape*. So, lots of pain, plenty of failure, and all those freakin' turtles! "We set up the demons and let the turtles roam." "The turtle will just oscillate back and forth indefinitely." Oh, lordy. When people take that work as unemotional I think it is a defence mechanism, a way of shielding themselves from the implications of its darkness.

A large part of the intense scandal around Dan's work was his reading style. That immaculately aggressive monotone. Between Dan's univocality and the extreme editorial rifting happening in the poems, he would have people like Fawcett and Bowering and George Stanley on the ceiling. It was *so* anti-performance, anti-personhood. Dan and Deanna shared that reading style. With Dee this could become problematic, because you would question at times the aesthetic fit between text and recitation. Dee's work was not always so deadpan. It seemed cluttered and clamorous and polyvocal in a way reminiscent of Dorothy's, so you would wonder why she didn't peck and swoop with her voice. Still, though, she was remarkably consistent about remaining affectless, so *integrity* was on her side. Keep in mind that this is not an optimistic group of people. This is not an optimistic poetics, and there is not a lot of optimistic subject matter. Some of us chose an antic performance style to smash our points home; others of us chose the dry route.

A silly story for you: I had a nightmare inspired by *ape*. Not terrifically dependent on the manifest content of the poem itself – the turtles were off-screen, as it were – but came out of an underlying unease generated by the text. Was walking alongside some sets of railroad tracks that had fires burning and spreading on every side of them, trying to locate Dan because we were in danger and I thought I had some idea of how to get us out. Could not find him, could not see him. A prairie dream well in advance of me ever living here! I told Dan this dream and I think he was as pleased as embarrassed.

**DM:** *Did you generally have large crowds at the readings?*

**CS:** Not huge but sufficient, most times. I mean, the work was fringe, and our performance spaces were not exactly roomy. Thirty in attendance would fill the space. Fifty would engender that mob feeling. We would get shitloads of people at some of the special events, though. Often as not you would see 100 for either the reading or talk by some of the American writers-in-residence.<sup>67</sup>

**DM:** *Was that expected?*

**CS:** To some degree. I mean, we would have to book larger spaces for some of them, in accordance with our guesswork over how many souls might possibly show up. As ego-gratifying as it is to have an overflow room with folks pinned up against the wall with their beers in hand, it is *not* a rock concert; you can't discommode people *too* much.

To that end, the Susan Howe and Lyn Hejinian talks – on the Emily Dickinson industry and "strangeness", respectively – and the Bruce Andrews poetry reading happened in the Lux Theatre at the Western Front.

**DM:** *Who else did you have in residence?*

**CS:** I attended them *all*, so can give you a full rundown. Susan Howe, No-

vember 1987. Lyn Hejinian, September 1988. Charles Bernstein, June 1989. Bruce Andrews, May 1990. Abigail Child, August 1991. (I have rounded off a couple of these to the months in which the bulk of the residency occurred.) After that we applied for P. Inman, perhaps twice. Got a No the first time and maybe the programme got shut down while waiting to hear of the second decision? We kept Bob Perelman on a shortlist during that stretch. Perelman returned in October 1995 to do a 2-day something, which I imagine ratched our collective wallet.

**DM:** Was Bernstein's visit an important event in general?

**CS:** Yes, but no more or less so than any of the others. They *all* rocked. They were *all* critically important, poetically and socially.

This is how it shook out structurally. Writer flies in during the weekend and is collected at the airport. Taken to their billet and set up there nicely, largely let alone to rest – unless we were dragging them out to a community dinner meet-&-greet right away, hyped-up pricks that we could be! Commencing the Monday evening, the first session of a five-session workshop. Three hours a night, carrying on afterward often as not. This be code for drinking with the writer and one other and extending the energy and content of the workshop for a few more hours. So the workshop would go from Monday evening through Friday evening. Saturday and Sunday would be the Big Top public gigs for the writer, generally. Their poetry readings were on the Saturday night and their talks on the Sunday, say.

The second week would be the lighter one. Writer would keep short hours during the day for discrete conversations about anything with whichever community members were foolhardy or brave enough to sign up. Or, more concretely, if the workshop had been a standard poetry workshop (as it was with Howe, Hejinian, and Bernstein), here is where each youngster would get an hour with the visiting elder to receive a private critique of their work. During that second week, writer would get to rest, do some writing, or whatever the fuck they desired. A fair number wanted to wander around agog in some of that stunning landscape we have outside the GVRD. Sunshine Coast, anyone? Before pouring the visiting artist onto their homeward plane (and ourselves into detox), there was often a celebratory goodbye bash with the collective and select others for the tuckered-out writer.

Variants to this recipe: what Andrews and Child did for workshops, and what Child did for her talk. With Bruce, we did a fairly close reading of most of the contents of *The Politics of Poetic Form*,<sup>68</sup> which had just come out. Oy chihuahua, that was a lot of intense work and thought and yapping! Abigail conducted a workshop centred around melodrama and film. The study text was Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination*.<sup>69</sup> Using someone's borrowed TV monitor and VHS deck we watched a lot

of film clips. A lot of Douglas Sirk, needles [sic] to say. Child gave no talk but had a screening of her films instead. Perhaps the location was up the road at SFU Harbour Centre in one of those corporate-named small theatres? Think so. For sure the content was the recently completed *Is This What You Were Born For?* Seven short films comprising a loose cycle. That was 90 minutes of sheer gorgeous social and sexual transgression!

**DM:** It was two weeks of drinking and talking with the visiting poets.

**CS:** Oh god yeah. You just never slept. You let the experience "eat you raw through a flavour straw," to use an expression from my home town. Especially once you were on the collective, you felt more pressure afoot to make sure everything went off well and that everyone was having as good or as energetic a time as possible. The best part of the KSW 'reputation' rested on our kind and lively hospitality. Because none of our doings resided in the lap of financial splendour or a swank or sane neighbourhood. What Canada Council paid the visiting writers and to us to transport them was not exactly sheep shit, but it also would have been hard stretched to perpetrate a marginal war crime. We are talking cultural glory here!

**DM:** How did you house the visiting writers?

**CS:** Inventive billets, mostly. It was a lot of making-do. We got pretty good at it. What was often aimed for was for someone on the collective with a reasonably nice apartment to gift it toward the writer and go crash with amenable friends. Jeff's 1965 Commercial Drive place was one such, and worked out better than fairly. Before Jeff and Erin moved in together, into that Quebec Manor co-op around Main and 7th, they each had a place in East Van. Jeff would bunk with her and the writer would squat his place.

Bruce Andrews's situation was a tad off the cuff. He got Stan and Mina's apartment on Charles at McLean. But this also meant he got Marilyn the cat, their infernal fuckin' fax machine, and me trying not to intrude or hover overly while checking in on myriad matters and setting up their technology to tape episodes of *Twin Peaks*. Bruce's residency came while Stan and Mina were away for like 5 weeks. I took care of their place often; Marilyn, who had a satanic dislike for most folks, liked me. KSW must have been in a jam that time, to have gone for such a wonky scheme.

On occasion it was easy. My favourite of the gargantuan passel I think of as Our American Cousins – Kevin Killian<sup>70</sup> and Dodie Bellamy<sup>71</sup> – came north and did stuff early and often and consequently got better rooted. They would often stay with Stan Persky in his rambling Kitsilano house (New Star Books<sup>72</sup> lived in the basement, beside the laundry room). Sometimes they would have Stan's place to themselves. Or sometimes they would hunker down at Scott Watson's place.

**DM:** How were the relationships between the visiting writers and the rest

of you?

CS: They were good. To some small degree we might have intimidated them, hey? There was a single visiting writer and a ton of us. (Notwithstanding that we were in awe and scared shitless of our distinguished guests.) We had very nice Canadian manners and what must have seemed like extra adrenal glands. Without a doubt we had shocking habits. The boozing, the smoking, the emotional chaos – oh we grew a reputation. We were smart young wild animals. Plus, it *is* disconcerting to be off one's own turf, right? Plus, how well did any of them understand Canada? Plus, we knew way more about them than they knew about us.

Notwithstanding the tenor of that sketch, I think they were quite tickled to come here. A reciprocated feeling and then some, from our end.

DM: Any stories?

CS: Not so much, but there is one weird sidebar. Seemed often as not during the residencies that some great resonant political hoo-hah would happen or was going on. Around the time Susan was here, final nuts and bolts were being polished on the blood-drinking betrayal robot known as the Free Trade Agreement. While Lyn was in town, Mulroney dropped an election writ; in November we would troop uselessly off to the polls in what was a cynically manipulated "referendum" on said FTA. Bruce was in town about halfway through the most intense Meech Lake haggling.

While Abigail was in town, the Siege of Kanesatake. "Our" noble fuckin' troops go into a clampdown around some necessary barricades. Trying to evict the Mohawk people from their own land in order to help extend a golf course onto it. Infuriating and revolting! Sympathetic blockades across the country, though, which I was glad to see.

The crackdown on student pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square happened while Charles was here. We had gone to the Waldorf after class. Charles had a scotch in front of him and was pontificating – in one of his Five Thousand Word Bursts About Anything, as he referred to them – when on the silent TVs up in the rafters we become aware of what looked like a man attempting a waltz with a tank. Suddenly: "What the hell's going on?" and "Can you turn the sound up on that, please?"

DM: How was Bruce's visit received? What was it like to have him around?

CS: What struck me most about Bruce was that of all our residency visitors he asked the most questions about Canadian politics and Canadian social matters. Also he did a lot of inquiring into KSW history, structure, alliances. Bruce is one of the more political people you could ever hope to meet, an endless notetaker, and his laser-like outreach for info would sometimes have you wondering if he would stop short of actual interrogation! Always wondering how a community wheel is built and how well it

functions, voilà Bruce. Plus, asking after the Canadian slang. Not because we are the Goddess's gift to idiom – I imagine he does this everywhere he goes – but it was funny and fun to see. I remember "turfed out" as one expression that particularly delighted him. "Oh, what's that mean?", then he would write it down on one of those blank slips he kept packwise in his shirt pocket. He seemed to have an infinite supply of those things.

Bruce is both nice and thorny, and his writing is often disgusting or rebarbative, so of course he managed to cause polarities of delight and alarm. He took some heat for his poetry reading, a lot of which was some of the nastier parts of *Shut Up*,<sup>73</sup> along with stuff from the Mars and Saturn sections of *Lip Service*.<sup>74</sup> Got queried about trucking in misogyny the next night, in the Q & A after his talk. I remember Renee bringing it up: "I found some of this material misogynist, has anyone else felt the same way?" Bruce deflected it with a negative. Then, the next year from Abby Child, we found out that he *had* been queried the same way in New York. I could see the need to have these arguments, but I tended not to agree with the outcomes. My feeling was that Bruce was using misogynist material as a means to attacking misogyny itself. Which is nevertheless a risky proposition, yes? I always thought he was going after the debutante sectors, loosely speaking. The rich and the privileged and the taste-makers.

DM: What about Abigail Child?

CS: Abigail Child will never be forgiven for running away with one of our best poets. She took Kevin Davies from us.<sup>75</sup> (And yes, Virginia Mancini, and Abby and Kevin and anyone else who may read this, I am *totally* jesting.) I vaguely recall that some utter boor, most likely me, suggested aloud that we should get a New York poet back. A fair-trade exchange, as it were, to the tune of "We'll take Melanie Neilson for Kevin" or "We're not going to let Judith Goldman return home."

DM: The KSW has a much stronger reputation in the U.S. than it does in Canada. How do you think that came about?

CS: There are a few factors. One is, simply enough, poetic affinity, and the sheer bloody sustained hard graft we did over many years to bolster and enlarge these nodes of affinity until they became a web of correspondences. I think it was canny to hold something of the magnitude of the New Poetics Colloquium close to right away. Set up this temporary swimming pool and execute a horrid cultural belly-flop. Get people talking.

Banal as it may be, like *will* attract like artistically, and it does not take much to get an American Language poet excited over the prospect of going to a new place and proselytizing their cause. Maybe we played on their sense of Manifest Destiny. (Not sure how much I may be joking here....) A correctly valorized and deployed American Enthusiasm about what we were doing surely helped make the KSW known better south of the border.

A matter of connecting our sliver with their larger project. Also, you cannot underestimate what effect may come about courtesy of the size of the U.S. population. A lot of adventurous creators there.

Bringing a historical fatuity into it, there is that North-South Vancouver cultural axis thang. The geographically atomized condition of Canadian population settlement and the difficulties this brought to making links along the East-West axis. Canadian artmaking did not have a coast to coast railroad imposed on it, and Vancouver has always been *particularly* isolated from the rest of the country. So we have had to make a lot of our stuff happen in our own autonomous craft fair, and when we reached out it was often as not toward San Francisco, say, rather than Toronto. Our experience reflects this dynamic in no smaller degree than what happened for the TISH mob earlier.

Duration has a lot to do with it. Do anything well enough and enthusiastically enough long enough, you *will* get noticed. I think over time we accrued a sort of mythological cachet quite disproportionate to the size of our personnel and budget. Making weird culture pennies bleed in the Downtown Eastside, yup! A lot of our American visitors were surprised by our poverty and discreteness. They came from bigger communities and were better shod financially.

An irony here is that we tried to model our own intense communal interwebbing after how we imagined they did things in the Bay Area and New York, only to find out that their Time to Eat Salad, so to speak, had passed. I remember most vividly Lyn Hejinian's testament on this. We thought they were still subgrouping in a frenzy, and she said "Oh no, not any more, things have settled and split apart, some people have moved away." Surprising and sad to hear.

**DM:** *The kind of silence and hush of grumpy rumour in Canada about the KSW up until now must have partly to do with many KSW-related writers' reluctance to participate in the competitive aspects of writing as a career marketplace, their reluctance to do the used car hard sell. Artistically and politically I sympathize with this turning away, but it still bothers me, for example, that piles of Tsunami books lie unread even today.*

**CS:** Well then consider yourself lucky we were not more hardcore and Zerzan-like in our refusals! We might have elected not to exist if we had taken some of our ideological stubbornness to its ultimate extremity. Many people accused our poetry of being elitist in its opaqueness and in its refusal to participate in the system, but if anything it was far less elitist and

tionary in my mind. Which might posit me on the conservative side of the KSW scale. This topic is a big toughie, though, one of the biggest: to what degree do you collaborate with a system you oppose? As a bunch of folks of a Marxist, socialist, anarchosyndicalist, anarchist bent, how does the KSW comport itself in a supersaturated globalizing capitalism that has its great stupid dick parked and thrashing in every quadrant of everyone's business? There *is* no "outside" to it, as Jeff is fond of saying, so tactically, what do you do?

My preference would be to contest and corrupt it, prank it. Get involved and figure out which action is best in a given instance. If one is making something novel that is severely against Political Circumstances As We Are Lived By, go for a full pester. One can't be *counter* in isolation, really. We are still within a CanLit world, it is only efficacious to fuck that shit up from within a CanLit point of reference. Plus, I think on some level it is a stinking disservice to each writer to do a reluctant job of distributing their lovely insurrections. This ideally will have nothing to do with privileging any one soul's work over any other, or providing any kind of platform for starfucking or pampering any single writer's ego. That kind of Cult of Personality crap is despicable, and strikes me as deeply counter-productive within communal terms and structures.

Still, each to their own, hey Donato? You can't *dictate* terms to people. If an entity like Tsunami prefers to operate from a cave in the woods, or a grumpy refusenik like Deanna maintains a sharply specific set of terms for how her work will go out into the world (or whether it will at all), you cannot *argue* against that.

In alliance with this, I think it may be valuable to speak to the variety of practices that constitute publishing and distribution. Any poetry reading could be seen as publication. If said reading is recorded and posted on a website, say, or kept in the KSW office as part of the tape archive, this will constitute distribution. On a level of modest means, you could wheat-paste your poem to a telephone pole, citizen. Or, like Lary, you could publish out of your own shitjob pocket. This too is a long-standing Vancouver tradition. D.I.Y. A lot of the older Vancouver poets who had some association with Intermedia were fond of and prone to going that route, and still do. Am thinking here of people like Roy Kiyooka,<sup>76</sup> Maxine Gadd, Judy Copithorne, Rhoda Rosenfeld, Jam Ismail. Again yet again, Gerry Gilbert.

More obscurely, Athena George published Dee's first chapbook, *Will Tear Us* through her imprint which I vaguely recall might have been

had at the B.C. Sports Hall of Fame. I mean, if you can win some operating grant lottery of bourgeois money bundles to make a tony-looking magazine like *Writing* or *Raddle Moon*<sup>77</sup> happen, well, great, go to it. But that is only *one* means and method.

At the risk of being very cynical, how is it possible to give a loose shit or fucked rat about how much Canadian verse culture *means*? It is such a puny, debased coin within our society. Barely a currency at all, I worry sometimes. What are you going to do, make a *career* out of poetry? What does that even mean? Become a grant hog? Add a few slim volumes to the benighted madness of bloated and cautious official canons? Become 'famous' by attracting a GG nomination or actually winning one of their trophies? Now that Canada has one, win that poet laureate post, like Bowering did? Head toward lounge-singer territory like Leonard Cohen?

**DM:** *Was there hope that you could influence or change Canadian poetry?*

**CS:** Yes. We meant or hoped to have an impact. I mean, why else do it? Why tear your throat out to make this extremely ugly noise if no one is going to hear it? And I think we have had an influence. More people in Canada are making this kind of poetry now. The inspiration of our evil example has helped that happen. End of file. No film at 11.

**DM:** *How did you feel affinities and differences with U.S. writing?*

**CS:** We felt *both* pretty keenly. The advantage to having so many American souls come our way to do things is that it made an effective social platform upon which these matters could get thrashed out. Not to *resolve* anything as such, more just to keep the gears grinding. These are very different countries, after all.

I would say we shared a similar praxis and suspicious nature and tremendous anger over how language can always be overly channelled or manipulated to self-serve its political masters, and we cared to foreground our resistant, linguistically based materiality to that, as well as putting forward our own slapstick kinds of intervention and differently constructed alterities. It comes out of an ethics that will not kowtow to any particular form of power.

But while we were always self-conscious that American Language writing lived large in our orbit, I think we felt no assumption or much assurance that reciprocation was going to be granted, okay? That Trudeau-esque perception – the mouse that sleeps beside the elephant. Awareness of this burden I think has contributed to the sharp edges and scintillating rages in the work of some Vancouver Koot folk. Thinking here of Catriona and Nancy's *Busted*.

Consider the times and the scales. Americans had to put up with the regime of Ronnie RayGun and Poppy Bush; the prospect for worldwide

nuclear oblivion – at the hands of Reagan, particularly – always seemed a kiss and a stupid remark away. But Canadians lived under the reign of those world-domination lunatics as well. Plus, we had *more*. On a national level, we were under the thumb of that neocon businessman Lyin' Brian Mulroney. Who did so much to screw Canada over in favour of American and transnational money interests. Living in B.C. at that time, we also suffered the policies of that übercapitalist, Bible-eating bonehead Bill Vander Zalm. Truly ugly times. I mean, things are worse *now*, but a lot of that is because back *then* these creeps got their substantive way.

**DM:** *How did you view Language writing initially?*

**CS:** As reflective of all that political rage and despair. When I first got into this stuff I had no idea what was hitting me. Similarly to Kathryn MacLeod, my first reaction to a lot of this writing was repulsion. My thoughts were (a) I don't know what the fuck this is saying, and (b) I get the feeling I'm being attacked. You had to readjust. I hung in there and tried to figure it out.

I asked Colin Browne about it one fine day, when I was returning the galleys of an issue of *Writing* to him, which I had just proofread. Some issue that had a *lot* of difficult material in it, stuff plangently hostile to conventional syntax. Many textures, though. I was unlearned and confused, I could not figure out what it was that these writers had in common, though some commonality seemed implied. And he said, "It's rage." Then he explicated usefully about the ideological underpinnings that funded, if you like, the necessity for American Language writing. The lies, crimes, and horrors that one can associate with the Vietnam War and the Nixon Administration was a central factor. And I think he was right.

There are twin tendencies (at the least) in Language poetry that contest power. One is to clown with toxic aphorisms, and another to make 'opaque' with smashed and recombined syntax, as a means to contest normative meanings and the realpolitik that would have us believe in some canard called the 'transparent.' No, my sweetheart, the 'transparent' is not going to happen unless you have vested interest in its fabrication. Language is not so easily pinned down; too weird, too variorum, too manifold, too easily bears an abundance of contradiction and coloration. Especially so the mongrel critter that is English.

I think of Clark Coolidge's work as being lusciously sublime in its reluctance to make manifest meaning. Let me mention Melnick again, and bring P. Inman in here. At times Bruce Andrews will push these matters out onto the gonzo extreme of the branch (and then saw it off behind himself). I encapsulate this attitude with this: "We're not going to make adorable, explicable cucky for you. No language fuel will be provided for your mendacious propaganda. We're going to shit rainbows, total dissent, alter-



nate worlds.”

Gerry Creede told me this great story. He was on the bus one day, had brought along Coolidge’s *The Maintains*<sup>78</sup> and was reading it in transit. Some dude sat down next to him and craned over in curiosity to scope out what he was reading. Dude made some panicked squawk “Gaaaaw!” and moved far away as possible.

Having overly focused on matters of rage and despair, I would also like to say that there is tremendous pleasure and optimism that can come out of opacity and alternative syntax. There is always a virtue in trying to reimagine the world, and it makes critical sense to begin with language. I do not think we can get out of the globalized mess we are in without a sustained application of new thought. Non-standard language can catalyse this. Often when I think about these matters of power and language, I circulate back through Lary’s astute quip: “We swim or ape the empire.”<sup>79</sup>

**DM:** *What was KSW’s reception like in Canada among poets?*

**CS:** There was a smattering of other Canadian poets interested in what we were doing. Steve McCaffery and Karen Mac Cormack. Erin Mouré. It might have been Jeff who came across Rob Manery<sup>80</sup> and Louis Cabri<sup>81</sup>, a pair of buddies in Ottawa who were curating alternative readings at Gallery 101 and starting a magazine called *hole*. It was maybe Nancy who lubricated a connection between us and a young Toronto pup named Darren Wershler-Henry, who was snuffling about for material for a magazine called *SinOverTan*. Outside of pockets of Language-oriented, anarchist-minded folks, there were not a lot of like-minded people out there. We were fine with that; a large part of the point was to be oppositional. If there was no opposition we might have thought we had become lame or ineffectual, not doing our job.

Over time there were more. I think we set an attractive example of misrule and self-determination, and, the longer we lasted, the more people we would draw (as well as repulse). I think as more folks came to understand what motivated the engines that made this writing run, and as more folks gave this kind of writing a spin around the block themselves, we became more appreciated (or, worse, tolerated!). Which presents a dilemma of acceptance. You need to examine yourself, your history, your ‘movement,’ if you will, and the work coming out of it, for signs of complacency, lameness, dry rot, wet rot, co-optation, redundancy, and irrelevance, right? A poetics of opposition that is not oppositional any more? What do you do with that but change it up or shut it down?

and – odd as this might strike some folks – the writing coming out of KSW was always intended to address and interact with communalities beyond any one individual writer taking what passed for shelter under its hacked-up and mouldy umbrella.

I mean, a central part of Language writing is a belief in foregrounding the social materiality of the discursive rhetorical frames any ‘we’ live in. To intrude on their assumptions and contest or complicate political power, where it lives and what it does. So, think of what we do as both singularly manifest and ghostly – each single person does their writing, but in such a way that it addresses a much larger room of people, makes links, ventriloquizes, projects multiple personas, if you like, until the view of a KSW writer could be palimpsestic. You wind up looking at a person in their single body simultaneously with overlays of other people’s spirits, lives, words.

This is why dealing with any of us could be so optically and philosophically disturbing! In our society we are trained to respect, overvalue, and stick to a belief in the singular person and the banal atomizations of power we are deceived into imagining exist, rather than looking at the connecting rods between platforms of power, say.

On a practical, “put laces in the boots” level, we aided and abetted the Woodsquat<sup>82</sup> and its folks in 2002. As I was in Winnipeg and out of touch in those days, I can testify sweet fuck all to what we did, but Aaron Vidaver<sup>83</sup> would have been smack dab in the centre of it. I gather we stored some people’s stuff in our space, gave a benefit reading or two, beyond that I’m not sure.

To our collective meetings. These could be heinously long on occasion, like reinventing democratic process each time out. A tough slog; we never considered doing it any other way. There was no interest in and maximum wariness toward replicating the hierarchical bullying that ‘passes’ for social structure. There was a refusal to valorize any task set above any other. Everyone did their turn at mopping the floors. There were even occasions when grants would be worked on collaboratively, as if it were a mutant stitch-’n’-bitch. Terrific times!

The notion of passing the ‘office person’ baton around came out of the same democratic belief and suspicion of ossified power happening. Share the wealth, plus best not have anyone hold too much of it. Although the ‘office person’ post could be seen as a zonking batch of drudgework, it actually held quite a lot of unofficial power. By the simple virtue of having

your question. Now that there has actually been some writing on the KSW, the phrase 'caretaker regime' has popped up a couple of times. Although usually used ironically, it is *still* a balloon I care to pop. Its implication is that there was some Great Originary Mandate for the KSW and that some successive formations of the school have somehow let it down and just carried along in an apathetic or bureaucratic ennui. This is unhelpful bullshit, to me. Any collective has the right to do whatever they want with the organization. Contestations of or agreements with any new direction taken are *and should be* hashed-out from within, around the collective table.

**DM:** *Whenever a poetry movement like KSW conceptualizes its work in terms of the social (rather than, say, the aesthetic or epistemological), a basic, even conventional question returns: how much can poetry influence life or affect social conditions?*

**CS:** This is *indeed* a conventional question, and no answer should be trusted. A large part of the power and beauty of poetry, generally, and I think ours in particular, is that in its condensations and pulverizations and flexibilities and sublimities and prankings – and because of Language's marginal cultural status in Canada and I would say in the United States as well – it is really impossible to know. I feel this is actually one of poetry's best strengths and most demonic charms, this difficulty quantifying what it does or where it may go. How it might effect things. I am extraordinarily fond of considering Gerry and Nancy's quip in their collaboration "Close to Naked"<sup>84</sup> as a droll and perspicacious *ars poetica*: "It can get in anything air can get in."

But how much can you determine? Are we considering here the trickle-down effect of Canadian poetry? Doubt it. Is it a trickle-up effect? A trickle-through? On one level, you just try to keep an apparatus like KSW going. You are trying to find or make the kind of writing that will aid this project. And you try to make the best poem you can, and you hope it will have *some* kind of effect, but on another level you are completely fucked from the start. *As* a Canadian poet. Poetry does not *mean* here. If it did, this place would be called something like Chile, or USSR.

To get specific, though, here are a few things I would never have anticipated. That Jeff's *Down Time*<sup>85</sup> would win the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Award, that Lisa's *Debbie: An Epic*<sup>86</sup> would be shortlisted for a Governor General's. Kind of mind-crogling to me. That Jeff would wind up in a real world collaboration with geographer David Harvey.

Most astoundingly that the KSW would last 25 years. Barely conceiv-

kind of thing. Whose lightbulb was this anyway?

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## Notes

1. Dorothy Trujillo Lusk. Author of *Oral Tragedy* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1988) and *Ogress Oblige* (San Francisco: KRUPSKAYA Books, 2001).
2. Author of *Jack Shadbolt* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990), and many exhibition catalogues. Current curator of the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery in Vancouver.
3. Author of such books as *Comp.* (Washington: Edge Books, 2000) and *The Golden Age of Paraphernalia* (Washington: Edge Books, 2008).
4. The Western Front is an interdisciplinary artist-run centre founded in 1973.
5. Author of, among other books, *Fruit Dots* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1986) and *The Age of Briggs & Stratton* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2008).
6. Author of *The Relative Minor* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1993) and *Rough Bush* (New York: /ubu editions, 2004).
7. Author of such books as *Thinking of You* [sic] (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1994) and *The Inkblot Record* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2000).
8. Author of such books as *Dog Years* (Vancouver: Pulp Press, 1991) and *Tender Agencies* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1994).
9. Author of such books as *Until* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1987), *Transnational Muscle Cars* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2003), and *Annihilated Time: Poetry and Other Politics* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2009).
10. A non-profit "Centre for Creative Music" in Toronto, founded in 1976.
11. Andrew Payne. Now an assistant professor in history and theory in the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design at the University of Toronto. Had a long-standing editorial involvement with *Public* magazine. CS's first friend at York.
12. Bernstein, Charles. *Islets/Irritations*. New York: Jordan Davies, 1983. Reprinted by Roof Books in 1992.
13. Coolidge, Clark. *Quartz Hearts*. San Francisco: This Press, 1978.
14. Author of 3 books of poetry, including *Human Gardens* (Toronto: Wolsak and Wynn, 1998). He died in April 1998.
15. McCaffery, Steve. *Panopticon*. Toronto: Blewointment Press, 1984.
16. Mancini, Donato. *Causal Talk: Interviews with Four Poets*. Ottawa: above/

- Barrington, MA: The Figures, 1978. Reissued in 1996 by Sun & Moon Press.
18. Perelman, Bob. *The First World*. Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 1986.
19. Eventually collected in *Redactive* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1990). Pulped 1995. Reissued by Tsunami Editions in 2000.
20. Davies, Kevin. *Pause Button*. Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1992.
21. Also known as Zonko: author of such books as *Corrected Pomes of Billy the Yid, or LET THEM EAT CAKE* (Vancouver: Running Dog Press, 1983) and *St. Ink: Selected Poems* (North Vancouver: Capilano University Editions, 2008). He died in January 2009.
22. *BC Monthly* was the poetry magazine Vancouver's Gerry Gilbert published, sometimes monthly, sometimes irregularly, from the late 1960s until 2006. Over the decades *BC Monthly* went through many material phases, in periods mimeographed, photocopied, and even glossy-covered and perfect-bound. Gilbert was a regular attendee at KSW readings for nearly 20 years, and recorded many readings for the KSW archives and for broadcast on his Co-op Radio show "radiofreerainforest." He died in June 2009.
23. The New Poetics Colloquium was a cross-border poetry gathering staged by the Kootenay School of Writing, August 21–25, 1985. The event was conceived by Colin Browne and substantially organised by Browne and Tom Wayman, with the help of the rest of the KSW collective. It brought together Canadian poets (George Bowering, Nicole Brossard, Jeff Derksen, Michel Gay, Gerry Gilbert, Daphne Marlatt, Steve McCaffery, and Sharon Thesen) and poets associated with the Language movement in the United States (Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Barbara Einzig, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Michael Palmer, Bob Perelman, Ron Silliman, Diane Ward, and Barrett Watten). Most of the proceedings were recorded and are freely available for listening on the KSW website.
24. The reading was actually in Fall 1983 at the Western Front. It was a benefit for MacLeod's bookstore, which had been destroyed by arson.
25. Referring to the vernacular, realist labour poetry so energetically advocated by Tom Wayman. In 1986, the Kootenay School staged Split Shift, a conference about the New Work Writing. This writing aimed mainly to represent the day-to-day conditions of labour and life-on-the-job in a realist but idiosyncratic way (differentiating itself from the idealisation of labour in, for example, Soviet social realism), as a literal corrective to the invisibility of work in most literature.
26. Tsunami Editions published many of the early books that came out of the KSW. Funding came from editor/publisher Lary Bremner's own pocket. He eventually passed on editorship to Deanna Ferguson and Catriona Strang, who began producing full-length perfect-bound trade books with the support of private donors. Kevin Davies's *Pause Button* (1992) was the first Tsunami Editions book with a spine. Later books and chapbooks were edited and produced by Ferguson and Michael Barnholden. Barnholden currently owns the press; Ferguson is no longer involved.
27. Author of *My Finite Chevy and Other Stories* (Nelson, BC: David Thompson University Centre, 1982) and *I Can Fix Anything* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1994).
28. Co-editor [with Whitehead] of *Between You Me and the Stars* (Nelson, BC: A.

- George and G. Whitehead, 1984).
29. Author of *Visualized Chemistry* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1987) and *Three Songs by Hank Williams* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2002).
30. Both now internationally renowned Vancouver artists.
31. Current curator of Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver.
32. Currently curator of the Charles H. Scott Gallery, at the Emily Carr University in Vancouver.
33. Now a well-known Vancouver artist.
34. Author of such books as *Affordable Tedium* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1987) and *Scoptocratic* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1992). She died in April 2007.
35. Editor and publisher of *Music for the Speaking People* (Nelson, BC: Peter Cummings, 1984).
36. Now a well-known Vancouver artist.
37. Author of *Bread and Wine* (Vancouver: Tantrum Press, 1987). As Tantrum, publisher of Peggy Kelley's *Evagination* (1989). With Edward Byrne, co-editor of *The Recovery of the Public World: Essays on Poetics in Honour of Robin Blaser* (Burnaby: Talonbooks, 1999). Former curator of the poetry-centred Special Collections Library at Simon Fraser University. Watts, who died in 1998, was a regular attendee at KSW events for well over a decade and a friend to many of the writers there. The Kootenay School's library is named after him.
38. Joe's Café is a Portuguese-run coffee, sandwich, and pool joint at 1150 Commercial Drive, still in operation today.
39. *Writing* was an informal house organ of the DTUC/Kootenay School from 1980 until 1992. Its editors included David W. McFadden (1–5), John Newlove (6), Colin Browne (7–22), and Jeff Derksen & Nancy Shaw (23/24–28). *Writing* was discontinued after issue 28.
40. Santa Barbara Market is an extremely popular, inexpensive, Italian-run grocery store at 1322 Commercial Drive, still in operation today.
41. One of the teachers at the David Thompson University Centre (DTUC) writing programme who transplanted the school to Vancouver ca 1984 and renamed it the Kootenay School of Writing, along with Jeff Derksen, Athena George, Calvin Wharton, Tom Wayman, and Gary Whitehead, with substantial help from Kathy Alexander, Peter Cummings, and Angela Hryniuk.
42. Author of *mouthpiece* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1996).
43. MacLeod, Stetar, and Steele were also the construction crew, cooks, and sheet changers for the literary periodical *Motel*, which put out about 5 issues as the Eighties turned into the Nineties.
44. Author of such books as *The Apothecary* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1991), *XEclogue* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1993), and *Lisa Robertson's Magenta Soul Whip* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2009).
45. Author of *Low Fancy* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1993). Co-author, with Nancy Shaw, of *Busted* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2001) and *Light Sweet Crude* (Burnaby: LINEbooks, 2007).
46. Author of *as lit x : the syntax of adoration* [sic] (Vancouver: Friends of Runcible Mountain, 2001), and former editor of *Raddle Moon*.

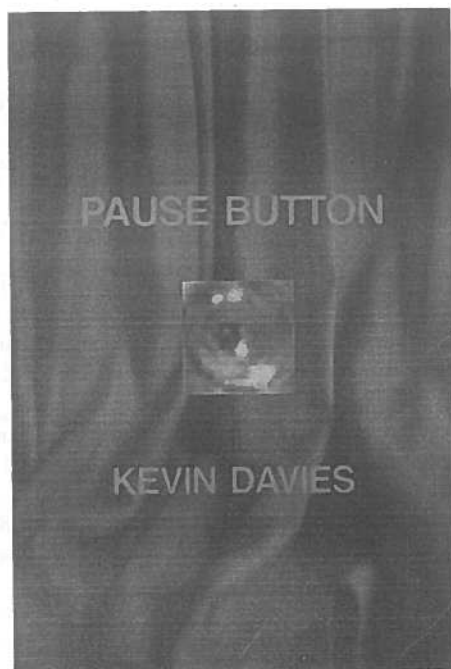
47. Author of *Sub-Rosa & Other Fiction* (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 1997).
48. Derksen, Jeff. "Sites Taken as Signs: Place, the Open Text, and Enigma in New Vancouver Writing." *Vancouver: Representing the Postmodern City*. Ed. Paul Delany. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1994.
49. Artspeak is a Vancouver artist-run centre established in 1986, still operating today. The Kootenay School shared an office with Artspeak at 112 West Hastings from 1993–1995.
50. A Vancouver artist-run centre founded in 1983, still in operation today. KSW and the Or also shared space at 112 West Hastings, from 1995–1999.
51. Author of such books as *Bread and Salt* (Burnaby: Talonbooks, 1996) and *Ready for Freddy* (Vancouver: Nomados Literary Publishers, 2005).
52. A 1-bedroom apartment in the same area in January 2010 averages a *minimum* \$800.
53. The KSW has always operated largely on volunteer labour, but through most of this history there has been one part-time paid position (5 hours per week) that rotated through the collective. This "office person" would take care of the most menial office work necessary to keep the KSW running.
54. Proprioception Books was a poetry, poetics, and theory bookstore established, owned, and operated by the Charles Olson scholar Ralph Maud. He sold it to Lisa Robertson in 1988. She ran it until 1994, when she could no longer keep it viable. Robertson's Proprioception was a focal point for Vancouver and visiting poets. It was housed at three locations: in a nondescript office building in 1900-block West Broadway (until 1988); then in the Dominion Building at Cambie and West Hastings (1988–1992); finally in the 400 block of Homer Street (1992–1994).
55. Author of such books as *Westerns* (Vancouver: Air, 1975), *Lost Language: Selected Poems* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1982), and *Subway Under Byzantium* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2008).
56. Author of such books as *Heart's Tide* (Vancouver: Vancouver Community Press, 1972), *Arrangements* (Vancouver: Intermedia Press, 1973), and *A Light Character* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1985).
57. Author of such books as *The Man Whose Path Was on Fire* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1969), *Prez: Homage to Lester Young* (Lantzville, BC: Oolichan Books, 1993), and *I. Another. The Space Between: Selected Poems* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2004).
58. Author of *Moby Jane* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1987), *Azure Blues* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991), and many independent publications.
59. One of many Vancouver bookstores – once keystones of the writing culture here – that have been put out of business by a convergence of factors, including unfair and predatory competition from Chapters/Indigo and exorbitant real estate costs. Others include R2B2 Books, Octopus Books, Vancouver Women's Bookstore, Women in Print, and Duthie Books.
60. Author of such books as *On the Ropes* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 1997), *Reading the Riot Act: A Brief History of Riots in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2005), and *Circumstances Alter Photographs: Captain James Peters' Reports from the War of 1885* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2009).

61. A "blind trout" is a turd floating in a toilet bowl.
62. Douglas, Stan, and Deanna Ferguson. *Link Fantasy*. Vancouver: Artspeak, 1988. Produced for a show called *Behind the Sign*, which featured 6 artworks produced from collaboration between 6 pairs of writers and visual artists.
63. *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*. Ed. Stan Douglas. Vancouver: Or Gallery Society and Talonbooks, 1991. Essays by Nancy Shaw, Scott Watson, Marcia Crosby, Robert Linsley, Keith Wallace, Robin Peck, Sara Diamond, Maria Insell, Carole Williams, and William Wood.
64. Farrell, Dan. *Last Instance*. San Francisco: KRUPSKAYA Books, 1999.
65. Creede, Gerald. *Ambit*. Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1993.
66. Farrell, Dan. *ape*. Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1988.
67. From 1987–1991 the Kootenay School had an annual writer-in-residence programme, funded through a Visiting Foreign Artists grant provided by the Canada Council.
68. *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof Books, 1990.
69. Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1976.
70. Currently on the editorial collective of KRUPSKAYA Books. Author of such books as *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* [with Lewis Ellingham] (Hanover: UP of New England for Wesleyan UP, 1998), *Argento Series* (San Francisco: KRUPSKAYA Books, 2001), and *Action Kylie* (New York: In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igne, 2008).
71. Author of such books as *The Letters of Mina Harker* (West Stockbridge, MA: Hard Press, 1998), *Cunt-Ups* (New York: Tender Buttons Books, 2001), and *Academonia* (San Francisco: KRUPSKAYA Books, 2006).
72. Eventual publisher of Lisa Robertson and of *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology*.
73. Andrews, Bruce. *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1992.
74. *Lip Service*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2001. Available free online.
75. Kevin Davies and Abigail Child became a couple during her residency. Davies emigrated from Vancouver to New York in Fall 1992, and lives there still.
76. Author of *Pacific Windows: Collected Poems of Roy K. Kiyooka* (Burnaby: Talonbooks, 1997).
77. *Raddle Moon* was the feminist-oriented poetry and poetics journal edited by Susan Clark et al. Twenty substantial issues were produced between 1984 and 2003.
78. Coolidge, Clark. *The Maintains*. Oakland: This Press, 1974.
79. Timewell, Lary. *Jump/Cut*. Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1987.
80. Author of *It's Not As If It Hasn't Been Said Before* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 2001).
81. Author of *The Mood Embosser* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2001).
82. Also known as the Woodwards Squat, the Woodsquat represents one of a number of high-water marks in Vancouver housing activism (along with the Frances Street Squats of 1990). An enormous, almost block-square department store in the

Downtown Eastside, Woodward's went out of business in 1993. The remaining fallow edifice became a mouse batted about by numerous development cats. Plans to turn the building into 100% subsidized, affordable housing kept falling through or apart, all while the neighbourhood kept swelling with homeless people. Finally, in September 2002, frustrated folks popped the building and moved in. Roused by the cops a week later, they returned immediately to the site and set up a tent city under the Woodward's canopy around 3 sides of sidewalk. Before this manifestation dissolved, it lasted 3 months and contributed to an electoral defeat of the ruling municipal right-wing NPA party. The building was 'shot' down with explosives in September 2006. Unfortunately any chance for large-scale social housing was betrayed. The site will provide another chapter for Simon Fraser University downtown, 2 condo skyscrapers, toney street-level shoppes, a token smattering of subsidised apartments, and a token rump for the locales of some local arts organisations (possibly including the KSW).

83. Current editor of *The Rain Review of Books*. Publisher of chapbook press Thuja Books. With Roger Farr and Reg Johanson, a member of PILLS (Pacific Institute for Language and Literacy Studies). Guest editor of *West Coast Line* no. 41, the "Woodsquat" issue. Archivist. Anarchist.

84. This poem is in both Creede's *Ambit* and Shaw's *Scoptocratic*.



*Pause Button*, 1992.

## By the Collective, For the Collective, On the Collective

### Current and Recent Members

*The following transcript is from a series of email discussions held between current and recent KSW collective members Steve Collis, Pauline Butling, Michael Barnholden, Donato Mancini, and Nikki Reimer, between June and November 2009. Edward Byrne was also invited to participate but was unable to respond. The context for the discussion is, in part, the restructuring of the collective as a group of interrelated though semi-autonomous "pods" of sub-collectives, which has brought many new and younger participants into the KSW, and the School's collaboration in W2: Community Media Arts. A revitalization of the School does indeed seem to be underway, with new reading and discussion series (such as *Respondency West* and *Negotiating the Social Bond of Poetics*) and a new edition of *W Magazine* about to appear.*

**STEVE COLLIS:** So I'd like to kick this discussion about KSW off. In some ways I'm thinking of this co-interview as something like a transcribed KSW collective meeting. I have a few questions on my agenda; I'm sure everyone else does too; so let's get started. Reply to all, and reply at will.

Narratives of KSW seem to have been falling into a pattern of an initial 'Golden Age' (origins, youthful enthusiasm, rising stars) followed by a long and less-lively 'caretaker regime.' Ted and Mike, you were involved from, what, mid '90s to mid zeros? Pauline, you were there at the outset, but haven't been on the collective until the past four or so years. Donato and I have been on the collective since around '04 or so, and Nikki your involvement spans the past few years. So we're 'caretakers' all, according to this narrative. I can't remember where the term 'caretaker regime' came from – was it Jason Wiens' dissertation? – but what do you think about this narrative, and how would you characterize your involvement with the KSW?

**PAULINE BUTLING:** I don't like the 'golden era' narrative: it seems too simplistic and greatly underestimates the activities of the 1990s. Is it really from Jason's thesis? But yes, the start-up years were very high energy, very productive, visionary, innovative etc., in part because of the politics of the moment. There were massive public protests, the threat of a general strike, etc., in response to the Socred "Restraint" budget, not to mention the student/faculty/community protests against the Socred government's decision

to shut down David Thompson University Centre (DTUC). KSW originated in a highly politicized moment, and one that called for collective action on several fronts. But I see several equally energetic moments after that. A narrative of several 'waves' that formed in response to different historical moments seems to me more accurate. Here's my thumbnail sketch of the KSW in Vancouver (KSW in Nelson is another story).

1) 1984-87 or so: a group of former DTUC faculty and students who moved to Vancouver after DTUC closed – Colin Browne, Tom Wayman, Calvin Wharton, Jeff Derksen, Gary Whitehead, Angela Hymniuk, Kathy Alexander – were propelled by the desire/need to support a writing community outside the institution: notable for ambitious programming – New Poetics Colloquium (1985) and Work Writing (1986) plus lots of workshops and readings. Residencies, mostly with U.S. Language writers, from 1987 – 1991.

2) 1987-1994: The first group began to thin out sometime in the late eighties and some Vancouver-based writers and/or SFU students got involved: Nancy Shaw, Colin Smith, Lary Bremner (Tsunami chapbooks) were in the collective by 1987. Others from this period include Susan Clark, Kevin Davies, Catriona Strang, Maxine Gadd, Lisa Robertson, Judy Radul, Christine Stewart, Dan Farrell, Peter Culley. Some, but by no means all of this 2nd collective had studied with Bowering, or Miki, or Blaser at SFU. I see a shift here to an even greater inter-disciplinary emphasis (in part through Nancy Shaw and her curatorial work), definitely more woman involved, and more attempts to address gender issues.

3) Next came the Victor Coleman restructuring proposal – to shift to an artists-run centre model with a full-time administrator – which produced a major furor (or so it seemed from afar). In retrospect this strikes me as a particularly significant 'crisis' because the response was to reaffirm KSW's commitment to a collective model.

4) 1995-2000: When the collective regrouped, it took a decidedly more Marxist/anarchist turn (or so I've heard tell: I was in Calgary then and mainly got a sense of the activity from the program announcements and occasional AGM that I managed to attend). I recall Reg Johanson, Aaron Vidaver, Dorothy Lusk, Roger Farr, Andrew Klobucar, Michael Barnholden (not sure when Ted came on board) as key figures. Jacqueline Turner and Meredith Quartermain were involved for awhile but found it too ideologically driven. There was a flurry of activity sometime in the mid to late nineties with this group. Also, they made some 'policy' shifts: e.g. decided not have workshops. But they did lots of readings and talks. They also started the Charles Watts memorial library (1999). There was a 'save KSW' fundraiser toward the end of this period – a sure sign of money and energy lows.

5) Around 2002 there was another resurgence when Margot Leigh Butler (visual artist) and Donato Mancini joined Barnholden, Byrne, Klobucar etc. Not sure how to characterize this period as I became part of it so can't see the whole (I joined in '03). I've heard some people say they liked the greater programming range (those who thought the previous phase was too narrow). Others say they found the programming too diluted. This 'wave' had significantly expanded funding, thanks to Donato's hard work on grant applications – Gaming Commission funding being the big addition – which made for lots of readings, workshops, and international features, such as the British Writers Series (2005), the mini-symposium on Robert Duncan (2006), and the "Positions Colloquium" (August '08).

7) 2009: KSW is dissolving and reforming again, in part because of inevitable burnout in a volunteer-run organization, in part because of current conditions that Mike describes. I don't want to say 'crisis' because crisis rhetoric engulfs us these days. Call it 'renewal.' But another wave seems to be forming as KSW struggles yet again to respond to and/or resist current conditions.

**MICHAEL BARNHOLDEN:** The problem I have with the golden era narrative is that it intentionally ignores and repudiates the collective nature of KSW. When you organize collectively you are rejecting mainstream western liberal democratic hegemony or as I like to call it: capitalism. There is an alternate history that both refuses and opposes capital and its individualistic tendencies. So the question I would like answered in terms of foundational narratives is whether the collective model was originary or is it evolutionary? I think the collective and collectivity is the single most important thing about KSW bringing up as it does collective or community texts.

**DONATO MANCINI:** The term 'caretaker' doesn't appear in Wiens' dissertation although he does (somewhat jokingly) periodize the KSW in terms of different "regimes" or "juntas" (terms he says he got from people in Vancouver) dependent on who was on the collective at the time in question. (Reg thinks 'caretaker' might have been something Andrew Klobucar added in response to a talk Wiens gave.) And though Wiens never directly states that there was a 'heroic' period, he does focus his research on two periods spanning 1984-1992, because he claims (writing in late 1999) that the KSW hasn't done anything since 1985 "to rival the New Poetics Colloquium." So his work constructs this narrative, irrespective of his qualifications to the contrary and irrespective of his genuine respect for the recent and current KSW.

But I think I'll answer your first question through my answer to your second question. Not to characterize my own involvement exactly, but to characterize what the KSW collective has been like since I've been in-



volved – in crisis. It's felt to me that the KSW has never been sure of itself either as a venerable institution, or as (through its cultural, poetic work) an agent of social change, and has even questioned the need of its own existence at every step. Rather than a weakness, however, that has been its own positive kind of praxis, in the senses that certainty can make critical thought rote, and make institutions odiously, securely anniversary-celebrating. But if its poetics has claimed a more supple epistemology, KSW as an entity must at least avoid treating its position as guaranteed.

From a few angles (at least): the 'regime' part of the term works in characterizing KSW's internal uncertainties, its contestedness, its lack of self-congratulatory affect, and shiftiness about poetry's political valences. The other part of the term, 'caretaker,' is what bites. That's the part that can be read as an uncritical mapping of a facile, authenticist historicism (one that privileges moments or periods of emergence) onto the KSW's complex, ongoing history. 'Caretaker' also makes everyone after 1992 secondary, of a lower cultural class, and suggests a pot-bellied self-satisfaction about KSW's past, as collectives after 1992 happily took passive custodial roles. In fact the KSW I've known has been achingly reluctant and inconstant about even keeping modestly thorough archives – the exact opposite of caretakers, in fact. (I remember on September 14, 2004 we were in a collective meeting and realized that it was the 20-year anniversary of the KSW. We raised our glasses and continued with the meeting. A bit humourless of us, maybe!)

The poltergeist that disrupted so many collective meetings in my experience is the question: "Are we a mere service organization?" It can be seen as another facet of the question: "Are we only caretakers?" As far as I can tell, this question has been around in one form or another ever since the KSW's identity as a college, future college, or potential college fell apart and began to morph into something else. If KSW is merely a theatre of readings where writers can get gigs, what are the class and cultural implications of being that kind of "service organisation"? If that's all the KSW is, is it even necessary to have a KSW? Is picking up an Eminent Professor Poet's empty beer cans a meaningful form of cultural labour? Who are we working for? The questions haven't been resolved, and I'm not sure that they will be resolved.

However, if this isn't odious, I would like to propose an alternate periodization of the first decade KSW, up to the indisputable break in 1995 when the collective almost totally dissolved and reformed.

Anyhow, here's the model I work with mentally:

1984 - 1987 'Blue Pencil.' This is the period when founders like Colin Browne and Tom Wayman were still actively involved in the collective. Remember that it was Browne and Wayman who directed the New Poetics

Colloquium, wrote the grants, did the corresponding, secured the venues, etc., and the Colloquium was Browne's idea. I call it Blue Pencil because of the "Blue Pencil Café." In the KSW's first year in Vancouver, before it even had its own space, students would meet mentor writers in cafés to have their manuscripts marked up. The eventually strong Marxist orientation of the KSW was still emergent, although the fact that the school was born of direct protest to neoliberal policy biased it in that direction. Most important in characterizing the KSW at this time however is that – if all the lovely brochures with Fred Wah's digital polar bear (which he says is the first thing he ever made with a computer) are true documents – during this time the KSW was literally trying to create itself as a viable independent, alternative writing college with an aesthetic scope inclusive of but beyond the range of given CanLit. It is also during this period that the Language Writing versus New Work Writing controversy was worked out. The crucial conferences happened during this time: New Poetics was in 1985, and Split/Shift in 1986. It is revealing in retrospect that Jeff Derksen, for example, did a lot more work for Split/Shift, and Wayman worked a lot more to realize New Poetics. That is: KSW's identity, in formation, was already in formation and in flux, as it is today.

1987 - 1991 "Rigorous Bar Scene." This is the period when the younger generation of the collective – Dorothy Lusk, Jeff Derksen, Deanna Ferguson, Colin Smith, Nancy Shaw, Calvin Wharton, etc. – took over the actual gruntwork work of keeping KSW going, and with the support and competition of their not-directly-involved friends – Peter Culley, Kevin Davies, Kathryn MacLeod, Dan Farrell, Gerald Creede, etc. – really got their freak on as brash young politicized poets. Wayman departs, Colin Browne continues to edit *Writing* but moves off the collective onto the nominal Board of Directors. A clear bias in favour of Language Writing and Marxist social discourse takes over, which is the source of Wayman's ongoing grudge. The really defining feature of this period were the two-week writer-in-residencies funded through the Canada Council "Visiting Foreign Artists" program. Susan Howe, 1987. Lyn Hejinian, 1988. Charles Bernstein, 1989. Bruce Andrews, 1990. Abigail Child, 1991. A very intense period of thinking and activity. As far as I can tell, it is during this period that the hard-core collectivism that is the focus of our conversation takes root.

1991 - 1995 "Barscheit." The CC residency program is cancelled in 1992, I think, and the final issue of *Writing* is published in 1992. It's during this time that a strong, corrective feminism enters the KSW discourse; Susan Clark's *Raddle Moon* briefly replaces *Writing* as the 'official' organ of the school and, if the 'Rigorous Bar Scene' period was something of a boys' club, that is no longer in any way true. This period is more opaque to

me, I have to do more research. But we know this is when Lisa Robertson makes her real mark on the KSW and the community around it, with no small controversy.

1995 'Coleman Meltdown.' The collective almost completely empties out and reforms this year, in the wake of the Victor Coleman incident. (Isn't Andrew Klobucar the only person who was involved before and after 1995? Note that in his view the period that followed, '95 – '98, were some of the KSW's best years, and he was involved from '94 - 2008.) As far as I understand, seeing the KSW as 'moribund,' Coleman proposed (quite forcefully, and with some conspiracy) reforming the KSW into a *professional* artist run centre, with himself as the director. By this time, though, both feminist and collectivist paradigms were dominant. To me the fact that there was a meltdown at all testifies to how deep-rooted the collectivist and feminist ideology had become, otherwise the crisis caused would not have been so dramatic, and indeed the KSW might have become a more hardened entity. But everyone involved was literally ready to quit and/or to let it die rather than see it go in the crypto-corporate direction of the expertly managed arts centre. The 'Coleman Meltdown' ensued. (That said, I wish to contribute that I think it is extremely cruel in retrospect to demonize Coleman over this, and that's emphatically *not* what I'm doing.)

**STEVE COLLIS:** To pick up on a few things: Pauline and Donato, thanks for the chronology – and for pointing out the many directions at various stages. I think what you outline here goes nicely with Mike's comment about collectivity being the "single most important thing about KSW": one narrative of KSW has all these names going in and out of the collective, but the collective itself continues to exist – even when 'we' have tried to kill it (shut up shop), others step in and lift the (collective) body up off the floor. It's interesting that, as I reflect back on KSW, it's sometimes hard to tell which 'individuals' have or haven't been on the collective, and which have simply been 'associated' (I'd say, more accurately, 'affiliated') with it – or which have simply been constant attendees, or fellow travelers. Inside/outside is very fluid in the school (I was a regular attendee for a good number of years before 'assuming' a more 'formal' role on the collective). Such fluidity is, I think, a hallmark of collectivity (boundaries are hard to suss, 'ownership' an impossible concept).

Donato, I remember that talk by Wiens (maybe 1999 or 2000), so I may be getting the 'caretaker' tag from there, or from talking to Roger, who, I think, found the characterization of the years he was directly involved (the 'marxist' label) amusing (considering his openly declared anarchism). Wherever the tag came from, I don't blame Jason.

I have also experienced the KSW as 'crisis' – and agree that that has mostly been a 'positive praxis' – part of keeping the 'institution' 'anti-insti-

tutional' (thus KSW, with all its accrued cultural capital and history, has always been 'under erasure' for those of us cherishing it as an 'outsider' space). However (to individualize for a moment), when Mike pulled back a few years ago (notice how one doesn't really 'leave' the collective – one just 'pulls back' – even Derksen and Colin Browne are still on the Board), he made it clear that it was neoliberalism, and the annihilation of space through sped-up time, that was causing much of the 'crisis' KSW is always in: the 'space' for collective activity is liquified by an economy demanding all of our time – time which it has sped up immensely – to service our individual careers and day jobs. Collectivity is not easy (and it isn't pretty), when almost everything about our lives is pressed squarely on the shoulders of the individual (suck it up, cupcake).

I haven't even got to 'service' yet. But I'm sure others have something to say too.

**MICHAEL BARNHOLDEN:** The crisis that is KSW seems to me to revolve around 'collective': is it or is it not? a question that if answered in the negative elicits the service organization characterization. Once that question is resolved for the collective, then you have the ongoing crisis of capitalism that filters down to the collective in terms of, for example, the neo-liberal organization of leisure. There ain't none in Vancouver: you have to work two jobs seven days a week and go to school full time just to get by let alone imagine a future. There is no time to organize. This is a deliberate strategy of the end of history variety. So the collective must organize in and through local conditions. Tough stuff and not everybody can or wants to do it. But as far as I'm concerned if there is no collective there is no KSW.

**NIKKI REIMER:** I would agree that the notion of collectivity is central to KSW's existence. And this collectivity is demarcated by the need to continually redefine what KSW is, what we do and whom we serve. In fact this conversation is necessary for the collective, as there is no KSW without the collective, so there is no KSW without the interrogation of the collective.

I also repudiate the caretaker mythology, not least because it was a mythology I internally chafed against in my first tenure with the collective, and the fact that this mythology does not only abstractly but also in practice seem to necessitate a two-tiered collective, whereby the 'younger/newer' members pay their dues by performing the labour, while the 'older' members perform the heavy intellectual lifting. (For the record, I was a collective member through 2005 and 2006, and then since January 2009, when I returned after the "future of the KSW" meeting.) I recall an almost constant sense of frustration with KSW at the time. But for me this frustration was as much due to my personal situation, working for a stifling, patriarchal corporation by day, trying to enter the social/intel-

lectual/literary/Marxist-hangover space of KSW by night and weekend, and experiencing much (internal) strife as a result. "Time to service our individual careers and day jobs ..." what Steve said.

Our discussion has recently resurfaced in my mind in response to recent community events and the spectre of the BC Arts cuts. Our membership in the W2 Community Media Arts collective has also raised questions of autonomy and history. (The legacy of the Woodsquat, the looming Olympics.)

I'm wondering if and how we see the collective as changing in response to this latest round of arts cuts? I'm trying to find a better word to use than 'renaissance' – perhaps 'renewal' is better – but might our new 'pod' structure of operations, our membership in W2, our individual and collectives responses to the current local and national political situations and the need to become even leaner and meaner in our operations lead to a re-energized, new, different KSW?

**STEVE COLLIS:** I like your first point – about needing to constantly re-define the collective, and thus collectivity itself. I'd link this back to Donato's sense of the collective always being in a state of 'crisis,' and this being (despite how difficult it can be to deal with on a day-to-day basis) its strength, or value. It's a state of 'permanent revolution.' And to work collectively necessitates such instability – the stable foundation, under capitalism, is always private and individual, and the collective is in part disparaged because of its perceived instability and unwieldiness.

We face this problem constantly when it comes to granting institutions. They always want to deal with a 'director,' but KSW has never had such an 'individual.' They want to know about our 'administrative hierarchy,' and fear that because we don't have such an apparatus we won't be a 'safe investment.' And yet here the KSW is, after 25 years, still unstable, decentered, off-balance, in crisis – and continuing.

One more comment on the 'caretaker' question: the (self?) mythologizing of KSW's past, and the sense of a later 'less vital' stage, is in part about the 'age' and 'aging' of the collective. When the 'institution' was young, so were many of its participants. There was no 'old KSW' for them to measure things against. Anything was possible. Those folks (as folks are wont to do) got older, and most moved on to other things. Since that point ('84-'92?) I'd guess that the average age of the collective has steadily risen. And yet younger members keep coming in (and experiencing the sorts of things Nikki has). All this seems to me inevitable, and partially countered by the structural fact that KSW keeps its 'permanent revolution' going: the rigidities of any decades-old institution struggling with a constantly re-configuring collective structure and composition.

Recently KSW got a whole lot younger, and a whole lot larger and more disbursed than it's been for a very very long time. I think this is a good thing. Maybe something of KSW's historical 'identity' will be lost. But it always has had to change, and as long as it continues it will have to continue changing. The collaborations it has entered into, and the diversification of its structure via the 'pods' (each with its own area of influence – readings, pedagogy, publishing, etc.) – all this seems to me necessitated by the aggressively privatizing and neoliberal moment we are living through. The arts cuts you mention Nikki are a sign of the amping-up of Campbell's already stellar neoliberal credentials. How can something like KSW survive? We – every group working in the arts, and/or identifying with the left – has I think to reach out and form whatever alliances are possible, forge new affinities, and work towards something of a cultural front in the face of the storm. As it gets harder to collectivize, we need to cast an even wider collective net.

**MICHAEL BARNHOLDEN:** A couple of things: I've never been clear on what the difference is between labour and the heavy intellectual lifting. But I think there is an issue around 'history' as in 'why do we even have to refer to the way we did things in the past?' The answer it seems to me is that one of the things about collectivity is that we all have to keep reminding ourselves and others that the collective or collectivization is the point. And that takes us into aesthetics or poetics if you prefer and the collective or community text. And that's where programming proceeds from and why we disdain the 'professional' reader looking to pad their resume.

A lot of shorthand in there but too busy for more right now. I said this early on in the reorganization but I actually think we should not be applying for grants of any kind. Current local conditions make contingent coalitions very attractive but they do have pitfalls – i.e. it won't be collective.

**PAULINE BUTLING:** I agree with Mike that remembering history is important, not as an exact template, but as a bulwark that provides some protection against the neo-liberal forces that constantly conspire to destroy us. I agree with Nikki that we need to re-think KSW in light of current conditions. But I think the crucial issue is not so much money (KSW has survived some pretty lean years). More important is our housing crunch. Remember we were evicted from our last home because the landlord could get more money renting it to a furniture display company. Mike and Ted searched everywhere and could find nothing affordable. So we started using Spartacus Books as our public venue, which worked well enough (with a fair amount of shlepping supplies to and fro). Then they got booted out as well and have had to settle for a much smaller space (which was too small for us). So KSW has been homeless for more than a year, roaming from venue to venue while hoping that the Community Media Arts Centre

(W2) in the old Woodward's building will become a reality (despite the endless bureaucratic hassles that come with dealing with the City as landlord). Yes, as Mike says, "current conditions make contingent coalitions very attractive but they do have pitfalls i.e. it won't be collective." The greater pitfall in my mind is that without "contingent coalitions," we will be permanently homeless (like so many others in the DTES [Downtown East Side]). The challenge to collectivity now includes the challenge of co-habiting physical space.

**STEVE COLLIS:** Ironical, perhaps, that even collectivities and 'institutions' go homeless in the DTES. 'Home' is a strange concept in relation to the KSW – the DTES (maybe getting close to a dozen specific locations over 25 years, but always in and around the DTES) has been our 'home' – right at the centre of homelessness. When I was first on the collective, 2003/04, we were on Hamilton Street, and I loved that 'home.' Then Spartacus books worked great too. Now, through our involvement in W2, we're back at 112 Hastings, which is where I first attended KSW events, starting in 1997. So there's a kind of 'homecoming' there too. Part of the resistance many of us have had to joining W2 and potentially moving into the new Woodward's space has been – will we simply be the cultural wedge of rampant gentrification – the chasing of 'homelessness' (note: not its resolution) out of the area? So, picking up on Pauline's point, the 'challenge' (as everywhere under capitalism) for us now is how to go about "co-habiting" with what is happening to the "physical space" of the DTES? Expanding our sense of collectivity is the response we seem to have chosen: KSW is now comprised of numerous semi-autonomous yet intersecting 'mini collectives,' while as a whole it is collaborating in another, larger collective of committed DTES groups in W2. The results aren't certain yet.

One thing that encourages though is that somehow KSW always manages to stay KSW. *Joining* KSW – even simply collaborating with KSW from the outside (W2) – has always been a process of *learning* KSW. It takes time – no one sits you down and says "KSW is this and not that: like it or lump it." But its outlines come into view as you work within it and I'd say this really boils down to its being about collectivity ("Ohhhh...you really mean it isn't about *ME*?""). As we've all been saying, collectivity is always a struggle – especially under current conditions – but we continue to struggle with it (otherwise we would do something other than KSW).

## Aroused by Unreadable Questions: Interviews with Lisa Robertson and Catriona Strang

Christine Stewart

Though the medieval way is still thought good enough, what is to prevent some modern Girl from rising from the Couch of a Girl as modern, with something new in her Mind? – Djuna Barnes

My doctoral thesis, *Aroused by unreadable questions: Vico, Spinoza and the Poetry of Lisa Robertson and Catriona Strang*, is a specific study of Catriona Strang's *Low Fancy* (1993) and Lisa Robertson's *Debbie: an epic* (1997). The thesis includes two interviews that I conducted with Strang and Robertson.

I interviewed Robertson in 2004. I was interested in the extent to which *Debbie: an epic* engaged in the production of textual and readerly subjectivities. In those days and in that academic environment, Robertson's and Strang's work posed difficulties. It was considered obscure and unformed. The language was too precise, too profuse, too impossibly entangled within systems resistant to exegesis and summary. Meaning was either overly abundant or overly ripe with baffling decay. In some ways, reading Strang and Robertson's work within an academic context was antithetical to their poetic purposes (and so excruciating). However, their blatant absence from the scholarly discussion in my context at the University of British Columbia was something I needed to address. I also wanted to identify their own unique and radical trajectory beyond the purview of Kootenay School of Writing at the time.

That is, although Robertson and Strang were writing within the local writing community, and the KSW, they were also working beyond them. They configured new and important feminisms where the subject was reinvented, extended, parodied but not proscribed, where the subject was played (and pummelled) into radically and previously unexpressed dimensions. I wanted to consider these dimensions.

In my reading of *Debbie*, I noted how Robertson marks the crisis and tragedy in the history of the human by disrupting established subject configurations at the intersection of reader and text. These disruptions linguistically manifest and suggest other modes of reading and being. They re-

quire new readers (readers who are writers and writers who are readers): necessary, relational, local, and temporary. By redefining and configuring readerly and narrated subjects in the poetic process of reviewing and re-writing human subjectivity, the subject becomes a readerly site of processing, a point of possibility, what Robertson describes as a possible "physics of change." In *Debbie*, Robertson lets the lyric 'I' go awry in wild linguistic affect and wry pastoral camp. The reader becomes the means by which normative systems of power are folded over, fed through, sucked in, fucked up and then sent back slant. The ear cocks – listening – and the writing/reading eye squints askance into the fray.

In the thesis I investigated the possibilities of Giambattista Vico in Robertson's poem. I argue that in *Debbie: an epic*, the readerly and written subject is Vichian and so metaphoric; that is, metonymically metaphoric, that loss is essential as identification rests on the metaphoric extension of the subject in particular and immediate patterns of ecstasy, recognition and decay, that language constitutes and dissolves, that meaning is an agonized metonymic abundance based in a constitutive and constitutional relation and failure.

This reading of *Debbie* is contextualized within Robertson's writing environment of that time. Robertson was enormously influenced by the Language Writers. The Kootenay School of Writing was at the centre of her writing life, and her work on the collective was an important time in KSW history.<sup>1</sup> This is true of Catriona Strang, Nancy Shaw, Deanna Ferguson, Dorothy Trujillo-Lusk and Susan Clark. At the time, these women resisted what they felt were the male-centric poetics of the school and established various feminist perspectives. For a time, Robertson and Strang's work shared a particular focus. Although they were familiar with writers like Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky, they also consciously forged their own path of study. They both read Djuna Barnes, Jane Bowles, Kay Boyle, Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, Mary Oppen, Mary Butts, and Lorine Niedecker. Robertson was also taken with Vita Sackville-West, Edith Sitwell, and Vivian Westwood. In addition, Strang and Robertson were avid readers of books and magazines on food, cooking, fashion, fabric, and gardening. They consciously decided to collectively resist current trends in order to create their own. Writers like Bruce Andrews, Barrett Watten, and Clark Coolidge, for example, were put aside in an attempt to locate something else. Robertson's reading and writing practice proposed that there might be very different texts to be read, to be reread, and different readers and different readerly communities to be configured. *Debbie* is a manifestation of that something else, a particular idea of a reconstituted 'female' subject, aligned with ruin, ambiguity, the library, dogs and history's decay.

What follows is the interview that I conducted with Robertson over the phone in 2004 (with my Strang interview after). This short interview is a slight archive of her thinking at this time. Robertson has been interviewed before and since but I think her responses here reveal an interest in a particular kind of reader – one that the text warmly constitutes, one that configures and implicates the writer as reader, as compiler: [w]hen something becomes different from itself ... (Robertson).

air fucking gorgeousness garments of  
perspex rubbings in this version

*Debbie: an epic*

*Interview with Lisa Robertson (Vancouver-Paris) November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2004.*

**Christine Stewart:** Why do you write?

**Lisa Robertson:** Not one answer. A thrill on the side – I think it's the sensation that comes from playing with structure when you get an intuitive feeling that language could go on in a different shape, direction than you had ever believed possible.

A method for following and developing intuition. Intuition of structures that haven't been imaginable to me before.

**Stewart:** What do you mean by intuition?

**Robertson:** An almost, a little tweaking feeling of possibility – not an explicit thing. Like uh, it's partially emotional. It has something to do with how a kind of, kind of almost emotional judgement of how things might change.

How to make or follow change in relationships to language or to people. But not sort of obviously based on explicit conceptual structures.

It is emotional judgements of potentials that for me have something to do with how structures can change.

When I'm writing I often find I can be labouring away at something and it's not working and not working and then I realize I have to wait and finally it arrives. I might have to wait a year. To hold on to the difficulty and let it rest there. Eventually it will solve itself. I get a feeling of what might work.

**Stewart:** Are you aware of how the solution works?

**Robertson:** Often it is a simple thing. So simple it wouldn't have occurred to me.

Easier to explain in retrospect.

I know it is working because it feels right. I know that isn't a very intellectually cohesive way of talking about it. When I'm teaching ... I'm thinking about how to recognize and honour your own intuition. Why I

write, the feeling of recognition and the movement that follows.

Feels very libratory in a way that accepts complication – not through simplification. In a way it makes a setting for complexity so that a shape can be enjoyed, pondered over.

Noting a wave, any reaction, any refusal in the gut.

**Stewart:** Can it [poetry] be radical, revolutionary?

**Robertson:** I have no expectation that it will result in a change in the structure of the government.

I feel less and less sure about the discourse about syntax as political. I don't resist that, but I don't feel that I have a relationship with that. But, I am very interested in the relationship of writing to change and describing change, describing or representing what change might be, the physics of change. When something becomes different from itself that pertains to social life and various relationships, public, institutional. More and more I'm interested in representing, as much as I represent anything, I want to represent change to myself. That remains the most interesting thing about living.

\*

A year before this interview with Robertson, in 2003, I had interviewed Catriona Strang also for my doctoral thesis. In my study, I had wanted to understand the unflagging energy and motion of the Strang's text, *Low Fancy* (1993). There is no overriding sense of loss in *Low Fancy*. What exists are the shifting movements and relations of abundant word bodies. I read the language of the text as existing on a plane of immanence – not one of infinite regress, or perpetual deferral. This is very different from what I understood to be the textual dynamics in Robertson's *Debbie*. I wanted to understand this difference. I also needed to find a way to articulate the particular quality of energy that existed in Strang's text. Because *Low Fancy* is (to a certain extent) a homophonic translation of the original medieval collection *Carmina Burana*, I was led to Louis Zukofsky's homophonic translation of Catullus. Through Zukofsky I came to Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*. There, I found a way to articulate the activity and buoyant productivity of Strang's text.

Similar to Spinoza's philosophy of being, *Low Fancy* opens a history of metaphysics to a radical, political and democratic alternative where language defines being within the collective, where thought exists in a positive form, in a persistent and constitutive tension. Strang's strange translations of the *Carmina Burana* songs pushes this tension to extremes as words move from conduits of meaning to metre and sound. As a result, the text becomes the play of the intelligible and the unintelligible. Meaning is

not arrived at through mediation, nor through the transcendence signification of the word but through the word itself, the thing – its activities and relations, its readable and unreadable materiality.

By looking at Spinoza's *Ethics*, Gilles Deleuze's notion of the Spinozist text and Negri's idea of Spinozist radical equality, I investigated the potential of *Low Fancy* to manifest a democracy of meaning, to facilitate the reasoned, imaginative gathering of common notions. I ask how this text might afford its material and its readers agency in the construction and deconstruction of meaning; how this poem might work to help us understand what we know, what we cannot know and "our power of knowing" (Deleuze, 83).

I do not claim that *Low Fancy* follows Spinoza's philosophy. Nor am I convinced that Spinoza would approve of my linguistic version of his notion of being. I only suggest that *Low Fancy* linguistically embodies Spinozist principles about the nature of being and power and that the poem is a Spinozist text in a Deleuzian sense. Deleuze suggests that many writers, poets, musicians and "even chance readers" are Spinozists because they work in terms of "speeds and slowness, frozen catatonias and accelerated movements, unformed elements and non-subjectified affects" (Deleuze, 129). *Low Fancy* configures readers of this sort.

In this study I also looked briefly at Strang's writing context. In addition to the writers that Robertson and Strang read in common (see the Robertson interview above), Strang was an avid reader of Samuel Beckett and had a strong love of things medieval (musical and textual). For both Strang and Robertson at that time, the practice of writing was committed to a sense of irreverence for all forms of reverence. This practice was also committed to delight – to an exuberant and even goofy play in the pleasure and absurdity of language. The feminist politics that Strang brought forth and shared (particularly with Robertson and Nancy Shaw in the late 80s and early 90s) had a profound effect on the school's development. For Strang, this politic lead to an collaborative poetics and practice (particularly with Shaw and musician Françoise Houle). The scores, for example, in *Low Fancy*, were composed by Houle (see Ex. 2 below). What follows is the interview that I conducted with Strang in 2003. I think her Spinozist affinities are present and that her commitment and irreverence luminous.

"it hums"

*Low Fancy*





Ex.2 LF 25

*Interview with Catriona Strang Vancouver January 13, 2003. We are in Catriona's living room at the Trout Lake Co-op.*

**Christine Stewart:** Why do you write?

**Catriona Strang:** because it's so much fun  
an imaginary audience.  
work a conversation through with thinking.  
reading is existing  
can't imagine a solitude  
irrelevant whether it [the writing] gets read  
sly, frivolous

Writing: a way of understanding, of intervening. a way of looking at stuff.

Taking apart shared cultural experiences, the perceptions of a nation: look at them, remember that they are assumptions.

Look at how they are built, build new ones? – no [not new ones], suggesting other ones.

[Writing as] pointing to the arbitrariness of what is.

[It is] not a critique of the arbitrariness.

[but rather] what if it had been this way?

[But] not modernist angst – the centre does not fall.

Who needs a centre [anyway].

Maybe we all need small ones [centres] – not big ones.

The big hegemonic "they" [are] indescribable – "they" don't exist.

Hegemonic, I hate that word.

Is hegemony necessary?

Is it possible in small ways?

[Writing is the] suggestion of the variable.

**Stewart:** Can writing be a revolutionary practice?

**Strang:** Maybe a beginning of a sketch, a model.

**Stewart:** Can writing be an originary space?

**Strang:** A revolutionary space? Maybe.

[But, it] has to be pretty extraordinary.

I mean people have been writing this way for a while now ... just because you use a noun as a verb ... [Maybe writing is more] a moment of consciousness.

Originary experience is VERY problematic.

[I see] originary experience as a way to hegemony, toward "proper" response, "improper" response.

Originary experience maybe as bursts of consciousness.

Taking down the stuff that stupefies.

Language as playground.

Defecting the nation

A lark, posturing.

The origin of so much is personal.

Dicking around. I always end up writing about sex.

My method: muck around.

Literary excursions.

Zukofsky, rewriting, translation.

*Carmina Burana* [Low Fancy]

fucking with authority, fucking with fucking.

Writing backwards, writing on top of, adding to the pile.

Excess, musicality.

EVERYTHING is material [for the poem].

The complicit nature of writing?

A way out

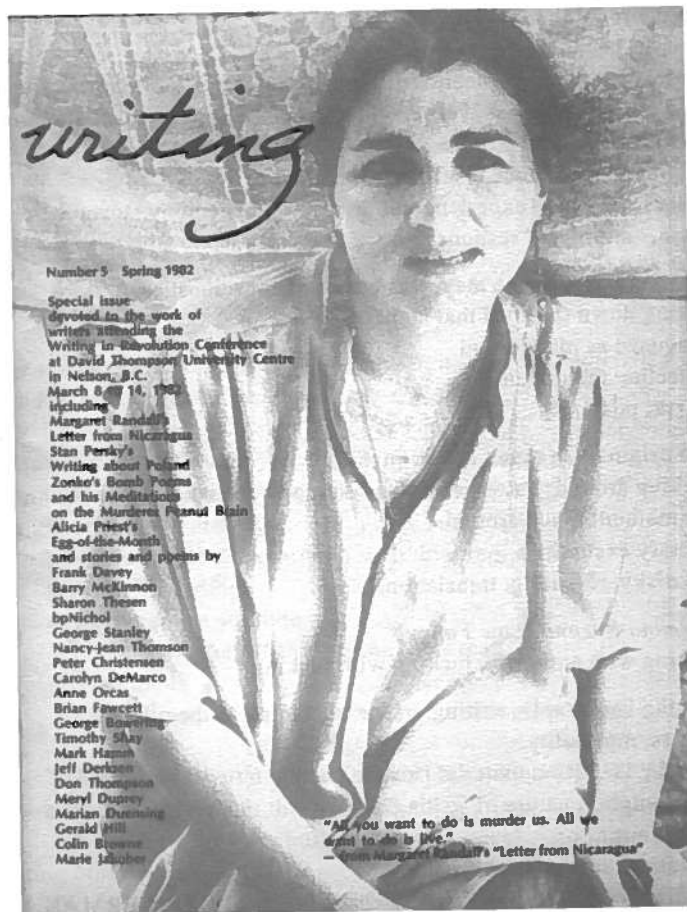
Salvation, accessing salvation?

Leading to clarity. JUST MAKE THE POPE SPEAK GERMAN.

EVERYTHING IS MATERIAL

## Notes

1. Several histories of the KSW have been published. The lack of consensus in these stories has been the subject of debate: see Michael Barnholden and Andrew Klobucar's anthology, *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing* (1999), Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy's *Writing in Our Time* (2005) and Edward Byrne's essay "The Women (first reel)" (2005).



## Historical Contexts

### KSW: Origins, including Nelson

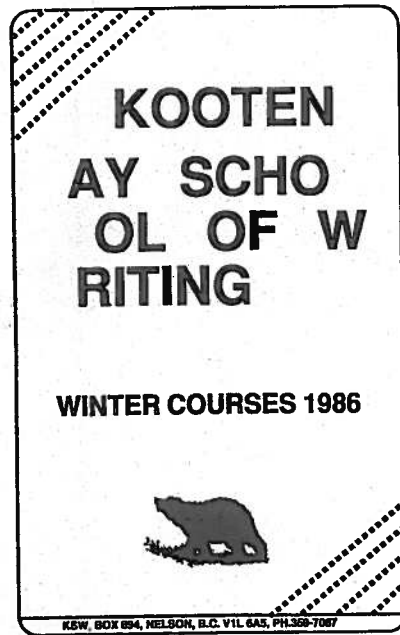
Fred Wah

The Kootenay School of Writing has its roots in the writing program at David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, B.C., about 400 miles east of Vancouver in the Selkirk mountains. DTUC began as a government-funded post-secondary collaboration between Selkirk College and the University of Victoria and was established in 1979 on the campus of the former Catholic-run Notre Dame University that had been closed by the government the year before. DTUC was conceived as a fine arts university shaped out of the beleaguered Kootenay School of Art (then located at the Vocational School and begun in Nelson in the 50s). The primary programs at DTUC, besides the sculpture, ceramics, fibre, print making, photography, and painting courses of the Art School, were music, theatre, and writing. I coordinated the writing program to run parallel to courses in publishing, editing, journalism and creative writing at the University of Victoria. After the first two years of Selkirk College courses, students would be able to take senior courses in writing offered by UVic faculty. David McFadden, Tom Wayman, and myself were there to start the program and over the next few years a range of writers was involved (Margaret Hollingsworth, Paulette Jiles, Clark Blaise, Audrey Thomas, Colin Browne, Dave Godfrey, Seán Virgo, and John Newlove, to name a few). The students came from all over western Canada. The institution was a small (about 500 students), intense and cohesive arts community when the Social Credit government shut it down in the spring of 1984. After a series of protests

and sit-ins the students and faculty dispersed, with one group in Vancouver and another in the Kootenays looking for some way to hold onto the possibilities of a writing community.

One of the early brochures from KSW (Nelson) has this welcome note:

Welcome to the Kootenay School of Writing. This independent artist-run post-secondary school was established in defiance of the order to shut down David Thompson University Centre [Nelson] in May 1984. Ex-students and faculty from the DTUC program have organized centres in Nelson and Vancouver to serve a constituency interested in courses and workshops on the writing craft taught by working writers. At the heart of both centres dwells a dedicated group of volunteers who are convinced that schools such as KSW are necessary in the face of an education system labouring under seemingly vindictive industrial policies. KSW welcomes your involvement.



During the summer and fall of 1984 a group in Nelson (myself, Pauline Butling, Paulette Jiles, Rita Moir, Irene Mock, Blake Parker, and others) and a group in Vancouver (Colin Browne, Tom Wayman, Jeff Derksen, Gary Whitehead, and others) set up The Kootenay School of Writing Society. The list of the first directors for the incorporation of the Society on September 14, 1984 names Haida Paul, Stephen Osborne, Penny Connell,

Ann Cowan Buitenhuis, Katie Campell, Donna Zapf (all of Vancouver) and Pauline Butling (of South Slokan).

The two centres proceeded to sustain and extend the intense energy that had evolved over five years in the Writing Program at DTUC by setting up workshops, courses, readings, and events around writing that have continued in Vancouver and Nelson until the present. The two centres worked in tandem until the end of the 80s but have since operated separately.

While the Vancouver group set up space in an office building on West Broadway, the Nelson crowd held on to its roots in the old DTUC Student Union building on 10<sup>th</sup> Street in Nelson. We had an office, several small rooms (shared with other arts groups) that could be used for classes and workshops, and the lounge with bar that had, during the DTUC years, become *the* centre for literary events in the Kootenays.

There had always been a significant community involvement at DTUC and this continued with the Nelson 'collective.' Still around in the Nelson area were a few faculty (myself, Pauline Butling, Irene Mock, and Paulette Jiles), some local writers from the Slokan Valley (like Rita Moir and Blake Parker), and former students (Verna Pelant, Caroline Woodward, Jeff George, and others). We applied for Canada Council readings, offered workshops for small fees, and generally kept marching on, as they say.



Fred Wah, Paulette Jiles, Irene Mock, Rita Moir, Blake Parker (Photo by Pauline Butling)

Some of the Nelson brochures from the 80s advertise workshops in Journalism, manuscript production and editing, creative journal, short story, scriptwriting, and other things. A one-day "colloquium" on poetry featured Diana Hartog, Paulette Jiles, John Newlove, Timothy Shay, and myself. We teamed up with other local groups like Polestar Books and the Nelson Municipal library to bring in working writers for residencies, readings, and workshops. Some of the writers named in the early brochures include bpNichol, Carol Bolt, Marie-Claire Blais, Carol Shields, Aritha Van Herk, and Michael Ondaatje. In the summers we joined with the Kootenay Lake Summer School of the Arts and hosted writers like George Bowering, Margaret Hollingsworth, and Lillian Allen.

Part of the DTUC art scene was resuscitated by the establishment of the Kootenay School of the Arts in Nelson in 1991. It included a writing program taught by a few former KSW people like Tom Wayman and Verna Pelant. Nelson KSW itself has continued on as a venue for readings and workshops by a large range of Canadian writers, mostly through support of the Nelson and District Arts Council and the Canada Council. Like Vancouver, the work is all volunteer: Deb Thomas, Verna Pelant, Irene Mock, Sandra Hartline, Eileen Pearkes, Linda Lee Crosfield, Jenny Craig, and others, have all put in KSW time. When I asked Tom Wayman about his recollection of those years he said: "Irene Mock was the ongoing sparkplug for KSW... More recently, some people wanted to merge KSW with Oxygen Art Centre, but my understanding was that this was resisted by people in KSW. Probably wise: a monoculture, as we're constantly told, is a vulnerable situation." Besides Oxygen, KSW has partnered recently with Selkirk College, ironically the place where it all started in the late 70s.

I'm offering this brief sketch of the Nelson KSW partly as a way to explain the origin of "Kootenay" in the name as well as a reminder that big cities aren't the only places where the imagination flourishes.

(With thanks to input from Tom Wayman, Irene Mock, Verna Pelant, Sandra Hartline, Pauline Butling, and Eileen Pearkes).

## Kootenay School of Writing in the Expanded Field: Retrofitting and Insider Knowledge

Jeff Derksen

*Community is at least the clinamen of the "individual."*

— J.L. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*

*Forget it forget it write about US.*

— Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, *Redactive*

The origins of political-aesthetic movements often emerge from a mythic backdrops, claiming an internal solidity or a correlation with a historical moment or social relationships: Russian Constructivism was a result of a revolutionary movement of art into life as Soviet society evolved; Dada was a reaction to the loss of public meaning following the First World War; Magic Realism is an expression of the neocolonial condition of Latin America; the Beat poets emerged in reaction against stifling fifties America; the *Tish* poets broke away from the perpetuation of a colonial model in Canadian Literature; the Language poets write out of a public sphere broken by the domestic crisis in meaning caused by the US assault on Vietnam, etc. This manner of reading artistic formations does situate culture within a larger historical framework, but often it does so through either a slack materialist impulse or an impulse to commoditize text and context — they become a thematic package deal, curriculum friendly and great for anthologies. Human actors and their often messy relationships drop away in this structural homology.

However, and this *however* is my own form of rhetorical totalization, there obviously is a dialogic relationship in the circulation of social conditions and political aesthetic decisions that results in "structures of feeling" (Williams) and a "structure of necessity" (Grossberg) embedded in an aesthetic. An aesthetic movement can be a result of a group of artists asking "What is to be done" in the face of rigid social structures or in the sweep of a social transformation. For the Kootenay School of Writing, an artist-run centre operated by writers with sites in Vancouver and Nelson formulated in early 1984 and established in June 1984, there is no moment of origin caused by a reaction to an aesthetic, but rather the school sprung from the political catalyst of a provincial bill governing postsecondary ed-

ucation in BC. On July 7, 1983, the Social Credit Government introduced Bill 20, the "College and Institutional Amendment Act which gave the Ministry of Education control over courses and budgets" (Palmer 22). I choose this moment out of a web of interlocked social vectors because it foregrounds the political nature of the decision for a collective of writers who were either students or faculty at the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson – which was shut down as part of the "downsizing" project of the "Restraint" budget – to form KSW.

In pinpointing a catalytic moment, I am emphasizing the political origins of KSW over other aspects of its formation and identity. Three dominant ways that artistic movements or communities identify themselves, or come to be identified by, emerge. One emanates from the pressure within a community to imagine itself as a cohesive or coherent site, an ideological cohesion based on aesthetics or some other point such as class, gender, sexuality, race or ethnicity. This internal definition often implodes under the pressure to cohere around a point which is plural, multiple and unstable. Within communities there is also a drive to differentiate.

But communities are defined by structures or systems outside of themselves – a constitutive outside that sketches in the negative space of a community or perceives a group where even group members may not. A community will come to be known by a dominant character, trait or tendency – that is, a character or aspect of the community is isolated by a constitutive outside. Usually these characteristics are abruptly representational: a community is racialized, aestheticized, etc. They are defined in opposition to a norm set by a dominant culture, following anthropological models. Once designated, it is possible for the constitutive outside to prescribe how this community should function, what its effects, if any, on the public sphere should be. For writers of colour, certain narrative forms have been seen as the cultural imperative for recognition. For writers of official verse, it is self-expression based on a 'crafted' imagism that can lead to awards. For an avant-garde community or communities that define themselves as oppositional, the constitutive outside demands they give up their 'elitist' status and seek a larger audience, charging that their discourse is secretive and elusive. The structure or discourse that can make sense of a community enacts expectations, which are often internalized, that dictate how this community can become (to use the dominant metaphors) 'visible' or to 'make their voices heard.' This, of course, may not be what this community set out to do. Not all communities measure their effectiveness by being visible to the cultural gaze of a dominant culture.

The KSW falls into a third paradigm of formation (although it is not outside of these previous two), at least in its earlier years. Rather than a group brought together through internal similarities, it was a group that

cohered around Bill 20 – an external political event was the unifying factor. So as a community, it was, at first, based on a shared ideology and not a shared aesthetic. Later KSW cohered around internal aesthetic and ideological factors and a new set of pressures were set in motion. Many of these pressures were the result of a lack of funding and the request from funding agencies that KSW broaden its audience. Yet, in some sense, KSW was designed as a contingent coalition. This formulation of contingency, of dispersal and rearticulation is becoming a dominant model for community formation in leftist poststructuralism as totalizing narratives of community are rewritten. Nonetheless, for many of the ten years that I was directly involved with the day to day operations of KSW it did show aspects of this formulation – from the inside, however, it was at times difficult to imagine the articulations, bonds, and fragile unities that imploded or exploded before finding inscription into new "discursively constructed political positionalities" (Bennett 254) as a positive method of doing cultural 'work' – rather, like so many other artist-run centres in Canada, it was, at the moment, a set of tactics for simply continuing without losing a view of the commitment to the ideological function of an art practice. Fluidity is not always a structured principle, it can be applied from the outside.

To begin with, KSW set out to continue the support that the university and colleges had given to writers which was now shattered as postsecondary educational institutions had liberal and fine arts programs axed by one-third (as was the case with SFU's Centre for the Arts) or, in the case of DTUC, totally. This official support was, in retrospect, fairly open; many writers who taught in this system were innovative or progressive writers who brought their values to the classroom. Writers such as Barry McKinnon, Leona Gom, Fred Wah, Sharon Thesen, Tom Wayman, and Gladys Hindmarch, to isolate only a few, represented a varied approach to writing; but they shared a sense of the ideological nature of texts. In contrast to how the university writing scene in America is portrayed, in Canada the scene was occupied by some of the more innovative writers. This continuation was also a direct protest against the government's rationalization of a liberal arts education as it retooled its economy with a narrow corporate agenda that saw all education as industrial or corporate training. In one of the few accounts of a history of KSW, Nancy Shaw writes, "KSW's utopianism consisted not of an attempt to collapse the boundaries between art and life, but to carry on a type of education banished from post-secondary education" (97).

With a small office above a restaurant in the low-rent area (\$225 per month) of Broadway near Oak in Vancouver, KSW began to develop a curriculum and to offer courses, present readings and talks, and hold "Blue Pencil Cafés," brief individual manuscript editing sessions. The work-

shops, taught by writers, framed as introductory courses in creative writing, journalism, drama, etc., supplied the main source of income for the school. Governmental cultural funding was not applicable and the provincial government was not about to fund an organization that acted as a working protest to its economic, educational, and cultural policies. As a centre run by writers, KSW did not qualify for any Canada Council funding as the Council largely conceived of writers as solitary producers of texts and did not want to extend funding to a writer's group beyond the League of Canadian Poets or the Writers Union. An application to the interdisciplinary section was discouraged by a Council official who told us that writing was not "sexy" enough and suggested performance art with a dance component. In 1986, with the addition of a \$150 a month classroom beside the office – KSW's corporate expansion – Artspeak Gallery was formed with curator Cate Rimmer. Later this led to an unsuccessful attempt to secure funding from the Council's Visual and Media Arts sections.

A history of an artist-run centre can unfortunately become a history of its governmental funding. Although KSW always generated a large portion of its income from its courses (60% of which went to the instructor), this is unfortunately true in this case. Rather than document this, which is outlined by Shaw, I'll only add that for the first three years of KSW, a delicate juggling of grants, Unemployment Insurance stints, and Welfare allowed the place to run. In this way, a commitment to the collective was, for some members, also a commitment to using social services as their main source of income, with supplementation coming from teaching a course or doing a reading, or engaging in other grey economy activity. KSW had one office person who was hired with the money from a Canada Council Explorations grant (KSW managed to obtain several; one for a literary resource centre and two partial ones for the organizing of the international colloquia "New Poetics," 1985 and "Split Shift" 1986). This office person would work the minimum amount of weeks necessary to qualify for Unemployment Insurance (now known as Employment Insurance) and then would be "laid off due to lack of work," then another member of the collective would be hired and would do the same. Eventually the UI would run out and these members would be on welfare until the next grant and the cycle would start up again. The income of the three members who shared the office job would fluctuate from \$800 a month to \$375 over the course of a year.

My interest is not to validate my insider experiences of KSW's structuration, effects, defeats, crankiness, attacks, defenses, and retrospective shortcomings or victories. The authenticating position of an insider given by ethnographic discourse also brings with it the internalized temptation of authenticating a position of oneself or one's community. I don't want to be my own ethnographer and so seek to resist this granted author-

ity and to likewise resist inserting KSW into a history of opposition and resistance that would retrofit a discourse and aspirations onto a collective that was at times merely buffeted by changes in the public sphere rather than countering them and initiating others. On one hand it is possible to say that KSW followed a teleology of literary groups that contested a perceived national hegemony by reacting to specific social conditions in Vancouver from 1984 to present, and on the other hand, it is possible to say that it was a much less cohesive group. [A third option, I would add belatedly here, is to see the KSW as part of nonconformist educational sites: this would link it to the tradition of the 'free university.']

To emphasize either of these, to make community a spectacle (Chang 219) is, of course, to ignore the real effects, positive and negative, that KSW as a cultural site has created. There's a lure, as well, of the discourse of 'radicality,' to claim new semantic formulations as the result of KSW's organizing. Too often radicality is a synonym for an aesthetic rupture and is not applicable to cultural formations that operate on tactics not strategies, formations, in de Certeau's terms, that can only disrupt or deflect some abhorrent social processes and not act to 'radically' transform the public sphere. Instead I approach KSW as an articulation of the interface, the rubbing up of, literary and social processes. I borrow *articulation* from Grossberg who defines it in these terms:

Articulation is a continuous struggle to reposition practices within a shifting field of forces, to redefine the possibilities of life by redefining the field of relations – the context – within which a practice is located. For the effects of any practice are always the product of its position within a context.... Articulation is both the practice of history and its critical reconstruction, displacement and renewal (54).

With the embarrassment of an insider, these terms project a historical position that would not have been claimed by the collective: sometimes the "practice of history" is the repetition of established hierarchies and formations and the "critical reconstruction, displacement and renewal" of history is coincidence – a coincidence that is possible only by an alignment of social forces, but still a product of coincidence. That is, I'm hesitant to attach an agency to the past when one was not articulated at that time. With optimistic hindsight, I would say that KSW was not a step toward the organization of a political action, but that it was a political action, no matter how limited by a constitutive outside. Critically I would say that KSW formed as an anti- or supplementary-institutional site but took the outward form of an institution, a formation which blocked its ability to form some coalitions and enabled it to be absorbed into a more aestheticized field of cultural practice.



To follow through on the speculation of the articulation of KSW, I'll trace relationship of an avant garde writing practice with class and move to the homology of language and social order that lingers in the twentieth-century writing avant-garde. Within this relationship there are others that I am not focusing on but ones that need to be addressed at some future point, particularly the relationship of class, race, gender, and sexuality as sites of contestation and the role of representation within cultural tactics (in differentiation to strategies). To do this, I will detail some of the socio-political changes that were circulating at the time. These changes or contexts are not a background to the cultural production and formation of KSW, but are intrinsically bound with the everyday life of the middle and lower classes. I isolate these classes, and emphasize class, because the economic changes of the Social Credit government during the mid-eighties were an ideological disciplining put forward as fiscal responsibility that made class relations apparent as the city split into the moneyed Westside and the impoverished Eastside. In the end, the "Restraint" program actually was the reverse: governmental spending went up by over 12% despite the government centralizing control over the school boards, postsecondary education, dismantling the Rentalsman's Office, the Human Rights Commission and cutting any cultural frills (Palmer 21-24). This restraint and its spectacle of discipline created a structure of feeling that was confrontational, to use a phrase heard often in the media in terms of labour relations, and antagonistic as well as disheartening. But this structure also linked economic and ideological policies with cultural production.

### Wonder Where the Intellectuals Are

*We need, on one the one hand, to acknowledge (and welcome) the specificity of these elements – specific feelings, specific rhythms – and yet to find ways of recognizing their specific kinds of sociality, thus preventing the extraction from social experience which is conceivable only when social experience itself has been categorically (and at root historically) reduced.*

– Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

Gramsci's formulation of the "organic intellectual" allows for an intellectual to be from any class, identifying them with a class as opposed to the 'independent' or autonomous character that intellectuals designate for themselves in a 'social utopia.' Gramsci goes so far as to declare "non-intellectuals do not exist," that "each man [*sic*] carries on some form of intellectual activity" (9). Gramsci defines this democratized intellectual in terms of function; an intellectual who is a functionary of a "fundamental social group" is an "organic intellectual" who maintains links with their class. In a footnote, Gramsci's editors qualify the nature of this organic intellectual: "Gramsci's general argument ... is that the person of peasant origin who becomes an

'intellectual' (priest, lawyer, etc.) generally thereby ceases to be organically linked to his class of origin" (6). However, Gramsci's formulation is specific to his Italian context where there was an "ideological and political field" where the working class could be represented.

From 1983 through to Expo 86 in British Columbia it was precisely this field which was intensely eroded with an ideological program characterized as a fit economic policy. The "Restraint" program of the Social Credit government ultimately lead to a weakening of the unions and set up a politics of cynicism and discipline where the public was told that restraint (and its disciplinary actions against the poor and working class) was necessary in order to control government spending and the provincial debt. Cynically, pork-barreled gifts, meant to wipe years of restraint (with its religious-moral overtones) from public memory, would appear at election time. Restraint was countered with timely excess in the form of rural highways, unnecessary bridges or a World's Fair.

Initially the Restraint program lead to uneasy coalitions of labour and social groups that comprised the short-lived Operation Solidarity and the less-official Solidarity Coalition (July 1983-November 1984). In the words of the IWA labour leader and old-time pork-chopper, Jack Munro: "The Bennett government created the climate to put together a whole raft of people who never, ever really had the ability to get together before.... Like, where the hell would you ever get enough people to attend the Rural Lesbian's Association fuckin' meeting ... sitting next to the Gay Alliance, sitting next to the Urban fuckin' Lesbians, and all this horseshit that goes on in this fuckin' world these days, making a decision to shut the province down" (Palmer 83-4). The optimism of these coalitions was dramatically sunk when Munro, as the leader of a "labour bureaucracy that functions as little more than an agency of capitalist stability" (102-103) fumbled a potential settlement and a partial victory mediated by the Labour Relations Board and acquiesced to Premier Bill Bennett in a defeated deal – a deal sealed with a handshake on a private living room in Kelowna – that allowed for the lay-off of public-sector workers. The organic link a class-defined intellectual may have had to their community was damaged by this act of betrayal that the B.C. Federation of Labour and a coalition-based left politics has never recovered from. Further, coalition building suffered a great setback as it was betrayed from the top. As labour historian Bryan Palmer writes: "A gentleman's agreement on the premier's porch, in which nothing was recorded or committed to paper, thus scuttled one of the most drama labour and social confrontations in British Columbia's history" (76). Tom Wayman, a KSW collective member, in his long poem "The Face of Jack Munro," documents the sense of betrayal at this time:

So it was concluded

that Jack Munro was to order the hierarchy below him  
to close down our lines,  
that in return for nothing  
Jack Munro was to announce our defeat,  
to inform us we had obtained through our efforts  
nothing

And in return for our compliance  
the government would be free  
to implement whatever it desired.  
But we should be grateful  
because at least  
the usual authority would be preserved (119-20).

Tellingly, to articulate a bitterness that permeated the left communities, Wayman chooses poetry as the form for this very public address. "I believe contemporary poetry provides the best medium for articulating what is happening to us" (*House* 122), he writes, indicating a tactical position for poetry.

For the younger members of KSW who defined themselves in terms of class, writers who did not have a connection to the labour movement or other instruments of working-class culture, but who had the vocabulary and the sense of class antagonism that comes with a class-defined perspective, this breach – and one that may prove to be a historical breach in B.C. cultural politics – broke what was a historical link with class and culture, if we think of the unions as a formulation or site of working-class culture. With an organic and historically defined link to working-class culture dismantled, the cultural branch of the government set up its simulacrum and spectacle: an officially sponsored Festival of Working Class Culture which was mainly organized by arts bureaucrats who designated themselves "cultural workers." This "celebration" of working-class culture functioned similarly to other official instruments of "recognizing differences." The celebration became a festival of auto-interpellation to solidify the virtues of working-class culture while dampening or absorbing its oppositional potential, much in the same way official multiculturalism celebrates otherness while maintaining social inequities.

But even with a conduit to working-class culture, poetry is a hard sell. Smeared with the sign of high culture, poetry for the most part remains outside of a class-defined project. But what I find worthy of speculation is how class became a determining factor in many young writers' work in the community around KSW. Kevin Davies, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Dan Farrell, Deanna Ferguson, myself and others all, to varying degrees and varying means, take up class as a site and discourse of opposition and definition. That this textual project is not clearly representational makes it hard-

er for this work to be read as working class at the same time as the rejection of representation resists absorption and paraphrase. This work does not celebrate its authenticity as a cultural artifact from the working class, but accelerates class antagonisms as a tactic to foreground class. The Russian Formalist device of foregrounding in order to make visible is applied to class relations. Lines such as "Let us not cross the line" and "Ladies in Dayton's" from Deanna Ferguson's *The Relative Minor* or lines from Kevin Davies *Pause Button* such as "Will the transformation need me?," or his paraphrase of Charles Olson's paraphrase of Milton, "my dustpan my cleaning fluid my vacuum," are saturated with a class consciousness that doesn't need explication. Nor does Dorothy Trujillo Lusk's line "But I am ideological historical & alive despite an horizontal and verbal agency and all screams that ensue," or Dan Farrell's "man's salute to labour power backs off / from its own bestowed head," or my own "nobody / tells me / to enjoy culture." But the work is also a formalist engagement the politics of language and of reading, and, crucially, a challenge to the poem's status as high culture. The division of high and low culture is a nearly exhausted debate in postmodern discourse, but is a functioning paradigm in working-class approaches to culture.

To address the question I pose above, class affiliation may no longer be so readily apparent or seem to be 'organic' when the cultural field itself has few organic links with class. Class becomes an invisible aspect of culture as a transparent bourgeois culture is asserted. So an 'intellectual' (which I imagine is a pejorative term to the writers whom I am specifically writing about) would not be seen to be a functionary of their class when culture loses its use value for a class, but rather as an independent intellectual – just as Gramsci imagines. Within an economic policy that disciplines and punishes the financial and physical body of the working class, culture itself becomes a useless excess. When union leaders are negotiating not to stop layoffs but simply to limit the number or the schedule of firings, culture (and the organic link to the intellectuals who act as a conduit for it) is not a priority. As we see so keenly at this moment, culture is foregrounded during times of surplus, not of deficit – and the measure of surplus, as the Canadian banks have demonstrated this year, serves to cloak accumulation. When this economic policy buries culture in the public sphere, access to culture by the working class (who are not undifferentiated within this category) – if they wanted, had the time and money for it – is diminished.

Perhaps then this link to class, once made increasingly difficult in the public sphere, occurs in the text. Praxis is replaced with lexis. This is not a retreat, but a tactical reconfiguration. Class affiliations are not acted out in the manner Gramsci imagines, with the intellectual functioning as a carrier of options and ideas for their class, for the public sphere has been so al-

tered that this relationship is no longer possible or imaginable. And, at that point in B.C., the official labour organizations had been so discredited that there was no possibility of linking with them in order to 'reach' the working class. Even the Vancouver Industrial Writers Union never really established or maintained any functioning ties with organized labour. Alternative models, such as the International Workers of the World seemed to be a better, if only symbolic, link to the working class. Indeed, at one point KSW pursued unionizing its 'shop' through the Wobblies.

The conception of the working class as a homogenous group with a shared identity is totalizing and no longer operative. Tensions exist within the working class between unionized and nonunionized workers and class lines are further blurred by solid union contracts which (thankfully) allow workers to make a wage similar to a low-level manager. As well, and particularly in the west coast, the racist and sexist tendencies at the inception of unionization are still apparent. The massive changes within the nature of capitalism and the mobility of capital have created changes in the make up of the working class that have dispersed it as an identifiable group in North America. This is undergoing revisions as NAFTA and other corporate-centred policies make the gulf between the working class and upper and middle classes more apparent. These shifts in the global world system have repercussions on the lived experience of the working class and on how they are viewed from a constitutive outside. Tony Bennett speculates on the model of working-class subjectivity in an opening manner:

Freed from the constraint which required the working class be regarded as ontologically privileged, by virtue of its class position, as the co-ordinating subject in the transition from capitalism to socialism, socialist discourse is now able to multiply its outlets and channels of circulation, proliferating in grasping on to new objects and reaching out to new constituencies in a movement to which, in principle, no definite limits can be assigned. (254)

Bennett's proposal imagines a working class that is no longer limited by conceptions that assign its function; this creates new modes of connections and links between culture and the working class, at the same time, as I've pointed out in the case of B.C., as it shuts down others. The opportunity then arises for new networks of connection and nodes of contact. Self-consciously, KSW was an attempt to create a noninstitutional centre, free from the constraints of governmental policy on education, where a culture which did not obfuscate or romanticize its production, was available. Availability and accessibility were enhanced by the very affordable fees for workshops and courses, by using community centres instead of postsecondary institutions as the site of events, by organizing events through existing cultural organizations (such as ESL program for seasonal

farmworkers), and by organizing ourselves as nonhierarchically as possible in a collective.

Charges of elitism based on the poetics of KSW struck me at the time as being based on a pejorative view of the reader and of a so-called working class, as well as a view of culture modeled on communication; that is, the problem in an imagined reception was not based in the poetry but in the political economy of poetry, how it circulates as an obfuscated cultural capital. And since the identification and study of culture is, as Grossberg notes, tied with an identification of culture as communication" (43), poetry that fails to 'communicate' is beyond study as a cultural event or practice. Paradigms of reception and of representation that were modeled on writing that did not focus on signification and the production of meaning were applied to the 'language-centred' poetics of some of the writers associated with KSW. These paradigms constructed audience as the consumers of commoditized messages or as a group *needing* to be represented. Loosely, the writers associated with KSW thought of the audience as participants in a community. Therefore when Brian Fawcett, wary of KSW's ties to a poetics 'imported' from America, wrote in *The Vancouver Review*: "LCW [Language-Centred Writing] is a device based on a rhetorical joining of the communicator and the target of communication so as to give both the appearance of community and intellectual coherence without any of the responsibilities of either community or coherence" (5), a model of communication and of the poem distorts the actual public work that KSW was doing. From the point of view of the people who were putting in the actual (and considerable) labour that it took to collectively run KSW, the idea of the "appearance of community" in the place of an actually existing community was a negation of both labour and community.

After Fawcett's disavowal of "Language-Centred Writing" and its simulacrum of community, he lists what "decent poetry" should do: "It's one thing to communicate intimately from one person to another, and another to communicate from one end of the Village to the other. In a global economy, poetry should do both" (5). In an interview, Michel Foucault comments that, "it seems to me that what must now be taken into account in the intellectual is not the 'bearer of universal values.' Rather, it's the person occupying a specific position – but whose specificity is linked ... to the general functioning of an apparatus of truth" (1144). The three-tiered function of Foucault's intellectual focuses on class position, the conditions of life and work, and the "specificity of the politics of truth in our societies." The first two propositions fit in with a definition of the poet as functioning intellectual that could be attached to KSW, but the emphasis on truth is too grand a proposition to argue for in this case. For a poetics based on multivalencies that are arrested and made concrete only in the

specific conditions of the reader's context, such universalisms are difficult to maintain: truth value is questioned but universal truths are not proposed. This could be the historical failure that Fawcett sees.

I'll leave open the need for an analysis able to take the complexities of interpellation and internalized interpellation into account in the relationship of class to some of the writing produced around KSW; for instance, was such writing a rejection of class ties, or an extension of them? Or did such writing simply imagine the working class subject (in the manner Bennett suggests) and its relationship to it, in a different way? Yet, I may be writing out of a class politics that I carry a tinged nostalgia for, or mistaking a personal "structure of feeling" for the tone of a community. The question that arises from my speculation is, how do you remain an intellectual of your class when your class is not easily locatable or defined and when definitions of that class are generally pejorative? Perhaps the question is not how an intellectual would function organically but what would such a link look like and how would it function?

#### Poetic Measure: Poetry, Affect, and Negative Homologies

*After falsifying all production, [the State] can now manipulate collective perception and take control of social memory and social communication, transforming them into a single spectacular commodity, which everything can be called into question but the spectacle itself, which, says nothing but, "What appears is good, what is good appears"... It is clear that the spectacle is language, the very communicativity or linguistic being of humans.*

Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*

Poetry is often presumed to not have any social meaning, any social consequence, to not have any effect. Poetry is generally approached as a 'difficult' mode of representation which nonetheless makes identities or positions 'visible' or 'heard.' Trapped in the lexical web of representation, poetry articulates what is already constituted but has not yet surfaced. In a psychoanalytic model, poetry allows what is repressed to come into view. Any praxis initiated by poetry is generally defined as interior or singular. As a result, poetry is not read as the articulation of a group despite the existence of historical models where poetry did articulate the complexities of a group; I'm thinking of such 'national' poets as Pablo Neruda, Jose Marti, and more recently, Ernesto Cardinal, and Black nationalist Amiri Baraka.

Without an effect on a group, poetry cannot create an *affect*. Affect as well, is often measured in terms of groups or mass. Perhaps this is why, through such methods as Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling," the study of affect is pursued in cultural studies with its focus on scale and on "mass." Yet, Lawrence Grossberg suggests that, even at this large scale, "Affect is perhaps the most difficult plane of human life to define, not

merely because it is a-signifying (and contemporary theory is heavily directed toward signifying practices [and I'll add representational here]), but also because there is no critical vocabulary to describe its different forms and structures" (80). His observation hints at the field that the study of poetry, and poetry as a social discourse, is within. A double bind of scale or mass and a-signification arises with the gauging, or even theorizing, of the affect of poetry.

Poetry will never be a mass genre in North America: it has limited returns as a commodity form and those poets who are concerned with scale usually turn to prose. For poetry that takes the challenge of how meaning is produced socially as a central part of its project, that is, poetry which does not take meaning as a stable pre-given construct unaffected by ideology, the potential to measure affect is even more diminished. As texts that fall outside of what a critical theory based on a model of communication with a shared message passing from sender to receiver regards as signification, this type of oppositional text is categorized as 'experimental' (i.e. most often leading to failure), 'avant-gardist' (i.e. elitist and asocial) or 'nonrepresentational' (i.e. meaningless) despite practitioners's insistence that their work be read as specific yet contingent, against an unanalyzed representation yet hyper-representational. Poetry that rejects the claims of signification as a naturalized process circulates on the outer conceptual horizon of what is intelligible, of what is readable.

Yet when Grossberg turns to the tricky job of defining affect, of situating affect with a social field, his attempt seems to me to describe fairly clearly the relation of poetry to its community. Affect, because it is an *affect*, is not able to supply its own justification. Affect then is defined by ideology as an excess: "Because it matters, it must have an excess which explains the investments in it, an excess which ex post facto not only legitimates it but demands the investment" (86). It is unclear how ideology will define affect as excess, for in making ideology the actor in this process, human agents seem to be left out. Yet, despite this and despite the metaphor of capital which commoditizes excess, Grossberg seems to be trying to define what makes a practice, or a site, *compelling*. Excess itself, as the uncontainable or as leakage, has become an attractive concept because it moves away from models of repression and of discipline and into a form of oppositionality. "The more powerful the affective investment," Grossberg continues, "the more powerfully it must be ideologically legitimated, and the greater the excess which differentiates it from other sites" (86). A small shift in Grossberg's language has a cultural site now being defined ideologically rather than being defined by ideology: I read this as affect being defined as ideological and therefore conscious of interpellation. His next sentences imply that it is the human agent who does this

differentiation: "For example, the rock fan 'knows' that there is something more in rock music which distinguishes it from other forms of music. This excess, while ideologically constructed, is always beyond ideology because it is called into existence affectively." Here *affect* is placed outside of ideology rather than being its reaction to it.

Would not affect lose its oppositionality if it were imagined as somehow outside of ideology? Grossberg seems rather to be stressing the uncontainable and excessive aspect of affect, an aspect which makes affect elusive to define. Crucially, he has shifted the definition of affect so to emanate from a cultural consumer (or producer in Tony Bennett's sense that a text's meaning is produced ultimately in the act of consumption), or a member of a community. To frame Grossberg's discussion in terms of poetry, a reader or 'fan' of poetry likewise knows that there is something more (or at least compelling) in poetry that distinguishes it from other literary genres or cultural productions. Fortunately poetics have defined what these distinguishing traits are so it is not easy to situate it outside of ideology. Like affect, it is a principle of excessiveness, in the form of multivalency or plurality, that has been one of the central features of a twentieth-century poetic avant garde. In the Language poet's network of North American writers that the scene involving KSW became most identified with (and the network that some writers tried to distance themselves from), Steve McCaffery has insisted on a politicized idea of excess, making it central to a theory of a general economy of writing.

McCaffery characterizes excess as a force that can not be thematized and that engages the reader as a "co-participant within a discharge" (103). This discharge, and the texts that enact it "have no concern with the dominant theory of communication (or at least with the dominant theory of communication that sees it as a transmission from producer to receiver along a semiotic axis of production-consumption, giver-recipient) but rather with establishing a politicized effervescence within the code" (150). Crucially, McCaffery moves excess from structure into economy. Within structure, excess becomes the well-worn structuralist and poststructuralist polyvalency. At this point (after poststructuralism, after postmodernity) it should be very clear that language carries multiple meanings with it – to argue against critical thought which values representational rather than relational meaning is merely to argue for how meaning is produced everyday, yet the polyvalency of our everyday lives seems difficult to accept in texts.

However – and here I don't want to align solely with critiques of poststructuralism which claim it is merely asocial (a claim too often slapped on poetry) – it is necessary to locate the circulation of this polyvalent sign within a larger, extra-linguistic economy. McCaffery poses economy "as an alternative to structure, economy is concerned with the distri-

bution and circulation of the numerous forces and intensities that saturate a text" (201). A general economy, with its emphasis on expenditure and excess and not on accumulation is nonutilitarian and nonproductive. In a homology of language and social order, a general economy of writing counters a restrictive economy of the accumulation of meaning. A further homology sees the referential fetish of language as a commodity fetish in that meaning is consumed with no attention to its "dialectical engagements" (McCaffery) as mass-produced goods are similarly consumed with no trace or aura of the labour that produced them.

These tactical homologies are compelling in that they move the polyvalent sign and writing that deploys it into a social field. They are not structures themselves, but speculative models. The speculation that arises for me is if it is possible to make a negative homologous link of a poetics of excess during a time of governmental restraint. I'm wary of making this connection too strongly – despite the productive aspects of homologies – as it seems too clean of a theoretical proposition based on a direct signification, that the reaction to a social context and its forces set off an aesthetic reaction in the other direction. Tony Bennett warns against this sort of materialism: "As literature's ultimate source, history thus, in the last instance, determines all properties of the literary forms in which itself is signified" (43). In direct reaction to KSW, Fawcett arrives at the materialist speculation that "[i]t may be an understandable reaction, this nihilism, given that the economic and cultural mainstream of our culture is based on the manipulation of information and commodities – on lying, exclusion and trickery" (5). But as I emphasized above, the poetics of KSW were not a retreat, but a retooling of poetry in reaction to shifts in the public sphere and a rupture of the speech-based and individual-centred poetics that progressed with *Tish* and solidified into a dominant through the fat years of cultural nationalism and its amplified funding from the Centennial through the seventies.

In theorizing his own method, which is against aesthetics as a continuation of a bourgeois literary criticism, yet wary of materialism, Bennett proposes "a sociology which, unlike classical Marxist or classical sociology, will not construe literary or other texts as the epiphenomenal manifestations of underlying social 'realities' but will rather insist on their status as directly active components in the organization of social relations" (35). Texts become components of social relations, not merely the result of them. The articulation of these structures of feeling then is not only representational but involves what Williams locates in the Welsh industrial novel; a specific structure of feeling emerges, but this structure is "still facing quite radical problems of form" (*Problems* 221). The negative homology between restraint and excess get worked out at the level of poetic form as well as the semantic level.

For me, this is most strikingly grounded in Deanna Ferguson's class-designated languages where disjunctiveness highlights the tensions between classes and between high and low culture in her *The Relative Minor*, in Gerald Creede's disjunctive insertion of job-search narratives and its futilities in his "Resume," and his articulation of Vancouver as a city involved in a low-level class war throughout *Ambit*, in Kevin Davies's information overload of contested social facts in *Pause Button*, in Dorothy Trujillo Lusk's intervention into class and gender narratives in *Redactive*, in Nancy Shaw's scopocratic gaze at the middle class in *Affordable Tedium*, in the anxiety and jumpiness of the sentence in Lary Timewell's *Jump/ Cut*, and in the reworked historical discourses in Dan Farrell's *Thinking of You* which draws the seventeenth-century plaque in London into a pressurized topography of Vancouver.

To complicate the negative homologous relationship between the debilitating and disciplining "Restraint" economic policy and a poetry of excess involves seeing the cultural production of poetry within an anti-institutional space – KSW and Tsunami chapbooks in specific – as a reaction, a result, an articulation of, and a resistance to, a paradigm shift in the public sphere initiated by an ideological "act of coercion" (Palmer). The poetry produced by younger "language centred writers" during this social paradigm shift felt and lived so dramatically in Vancouver was tangled within an intersection of social forces or vectors that were given a locus through KSW, Artspeak Gallery, Or Gallery, partially through the Western Front, and through the few available print media – magazines like *JAG*, *Writing*, *rattle moon*, *Motel*, *barscheit*, *hole*, and Tsunami chapbooks. In Grossberg's framework, this was an instant of when "[t]he investment in popular practices opens up strategies which enable one to invest in forms of meaning, pleasure and identity, and to cope with new forms of pain pessimism, frustration, alienation, terror and boredom" (86), and I'll add unemployment and underemployment to this list. The result was that this particular poetry emerged as compelling form of articulation for the structures of feeling during a brief but charged period: yet a period that stands as an intense initiation of today's neoliberalism in British Columbia.

Calgary 1997

*This essay springs from a directed reading course in cultural studies that I took with Charles Acland at the University of Calgary in 1997. In some ways I see it as an attempt to critically frame my experience of working on the KSW collective within the "structure of feeling" in Vancouver and the North American poetry scene at that time. It's an attempt, too, to reflect on the lived and deeply affective aspect of the intensities of that time, place,*

*and constellation of people. The essay was first published in Annihilated Time: poetry and other politics (Talonbooks 2009).*

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## Canonicity and Teachable Texts: A Response to Christian Bök's "TISH and KOOT"

Jason Wiens

In his 2006 *Open Letter* article "TISH and KOOT," Christian Bök discusses what he calls

a pair of historical narratives, both reiterated so frequently that they verge upon mythic status – the first story, of course, beginning in the summer of 1963, when a cadre of Canadian poets at the University of British Columbia (UBC) organizes a conference in Vancouver, inviting, among others, such Black-Mountain poets as Olson, Creeley, and Duncan, all of whom have inspired the Canadians to consolidate a variant coterie around the magazine *Tish*; the second story, of course, beginning in the summer of 1985, when a cadre of poets at the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW) organizes a conference in Vancouver, inviting, among others, such Language-Based poets as Andrews, Bernstein, and Silliman, all of whom have inspired the Canadians to consolidate a variant coterie around the magazine *Writing*. (97)

Bök proceeds to examine this parallel further, arriving at the conclusion that while many of the earlier poets have "gone on to enjoy canonical celebrity, achieving literary prestige and academic sinecure" (97), most of the later poets "have yet to enjoy an equal degree of canonical celebrity, so far achieving, by comparison, very little prestige and almost no sinecure" (97). Bök's essay is itself another iteration of this narrative, although he cites in his essay not a single one of these earlier narratives that he claims have been rehearsed with great frequency. One such narrative might be George Bowering's "Vancouver as Postmodern Poetry," which draws a number of parallels between the scenes of the early 1960s and middle 1980s. Bowering suggests that the latter group "in the 1980s began to create a Vancouver as dynamic as the city bricollaged by their forebears of the 1960s" (1994, 136). He then elaborates on this comparison: "As the sixties group found sympathy with the poets who appeared in Donald M. Allen anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960), so the later group is often associated with the poets who were collected in the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E anthologies" (136). Bowering even goes so far as to identify a correspondence between Frank Davey and Jeff Derksen: "Frank Davey's counterpart among the KSW poets is Jeff Derksen, an in-

tense and serious poet well grounded in theory, aware of the political inevitabilities of his craft, and given to essay-writing as part of his job description" (136-137). Perhaps we can read Bök's omission of references to essays like Bowering's as evidence of a general acceptance of these narratives. Yet these narratives simply do not stand up to historical scrutiny, in particular the parallels Bök draws between the two conferences, as well as the particularities of the two moments.

The 1963 'conference' at UBC was not organized by the poets associated with *Tish*. It was organized, as I and others have written elsewhere, primarily by Warren and Ellen Tallman, with Creeley corresponding with Warren Tallman as to which writers to invite. The conference was actually an extension of a three-week summer poetry course at UBC which Robert Creeley, Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg were brought in to teach. It is true, as Aaron Vidaver has pointed out, that some of the *Tish* poets were involved in organizing "the fourth element of the conference: the off-campus parties, readings, and discussions at the Tallman, Reid and Wah homes" (n.pag), and certainly Fred Wah's tapes of the events have worked to cement the gathering's importance, especially from a U.S. perspective. It is also true, as has been well-established, that "[t]he impulse to create *TISH* had been sparked by Robert Duncan during three nights of lectures, July 23, 24, and 25, 1961, at the Vancouver home of Warren Tallman" (Davey 7). But Bök's parallel seems to suggest that the 1963 event sparked a flurry of poetic creativity in Vancouver, especially among the *Tish* poets, and consolidated a community. In fact, *Tish* 19 (the last issue edited by the original group) was published March 14, 1963, months before the conference, and, as George Bowering would write in *Tish* 20, the 1963 event marked the last gathering before a general dispersal of the group: "Frank Davey is moving to Victoria. Fred Wah is moving to New Mexico. James Reid promises to leave the continent. Lionel Kearns is going to lock himself in his writing room for a year. I moving to Calgary" (1975, 423). Of course, the poetry scene in Vancouver continued to thrive after 1963, but this event marked the end of the particular chapter Bök refers to, not its beginning.

The 1985 New Poetics Colloquium was organized by members of KSW, chiefly Colin Browne, who wrote the Canada Council grant proposal and was the primary correspondent with the participants. But *Writing* was not started at the encouragement of the Language Writers invited to the colloquium; *Writing* was founded in 1980, by instructors and students at the School of Writing at David Thompson University Centre (DTUC) in Nelson, KSW precursor, with David McFadden as its first editor. *Writing* only began publishing writers associated with the Language school around issue 8 (Winter 1984), by which time Colin Browne had taken over as editor. This was also the period when DTUC was closed, prompting some instructors

and students to establish KSW. In other words, KSW came into being as a result of political and economic circumstances, not through the encouragement of the Language Writers. *Writing* was publishing Charles Bernstein, Diane Ward, Bruce Andrews and Bob Perelman, and these writers were invited to the New Poetics Colloquium because of what some of the writers associated with KSW perceived as shared poetic and political concerns, not through some model of mentorship. The younger writers that Bök seems to have in mind, including Jeff Derksen (whom he names a "ringleader" of the group) and Nancy Shaw, did not take over editorship of *Writing* until 1989, four years after the colloquium.

This is not to say that the event did not invigorate a community, establish relationships between writers, or push some writers, especially younger ones, in a particular direction. Correspondence between a number of the writers after the colloquium demonstrates that the colloquium was indeed a watershed moment. Derksen, for example, writes in a February 1986 letter to Lyn Hejinian that "[t]he shock waves from the colloquium are still moving through the (younger) writers here – people use our library and borrow the tapes from the colloquium – there is curiosity now, instead of suspicion." Shortly after the colloquium ended, in September 1985, Colin Browne sent a letter to Richard Holden, director of the Canada Council Exploration Program in which he reported on the success of the event:

We had an average of 150 people out to each evening reading, and somewhere between 75-100 people during the day sessions. There was never enough time for all the questions, and conversation rattled on long into the night. The whole thing was actually thrilling, and we feel as if we've been transformed by what happened.

In a 1985 letter to Hejinian, Steve McCaffery writes, "I had a generally good feeling about the conference. I just wrote a letter to Bob Perleman [sic] stressing the unrepresentational nature of that conference. It was vital and it happened and I know the repercussions will be tremendous."

This sense of the colloquium's exceptional impact is evident in letters of the U.S. writers as well. Hejinian writes to Browne in September 1985 that "Post-colloquial contemplation and conversations have continued here, and I don't know if you have any way of knowing how wonderfully you brought us all together or how significant an event you put in motion" (Hejinian 1985 n.pag). Later in the letter she comments on the colloquium's impact on the Bay Area scene as a whole:

I got a letter yesterday from Susan Howe, who said that she knew that we in the Bay Area, home of the Talks, would take the Colloquium as a matter-of-course, but that for her it was an experience of a lifetime. It was an experience of a lifetime for me, too – and for Carla, Bob, Barrett, and Michael (I haven't had a chance to talk to Ron since I got home). Despite

the long history of public and private discussions, that one might think would have built up to such an event, in fact it wasn't 'conclusive' – in the bad sense. In many ways, despite that history, it felt like a beginning.

While the American writers were generally older and had been publishing their work for a longer time than the Canadian writers, I don't think the 'branch plant' notion of centre-periphery influence applies in this case (or, for that matter, in the case of the early 1960s). Rather, the Vancouver writers who attended the colloquium recognized the U.S. language poets as contemporaries, people working on similar projects in other places and with whom they could exchange ideas, texts, magazines, and correspondence.

Attempts to read the KSW moment of the 1980s as an iteration of the *Tish* moment of the 1960s also ignore the continuities between the communities and scenes. Fred Wah, after all, was an early teacher of some of the prime movers of the Kootenay School as an instructor at DTUC, and when the Nelson college was closed he helped to found KSW. Bowering's essay which I reference above could be read as his attempt to canonize the KSW writers, and his support included writing a letter of appraisal endorsing their application for a Canada Council Explorations Grant which would help to fund the 1985 colloquium. Interestingly, Bowering's letter emphasizes the singularity of the 1985 event, rhetoric that runs counter to narratives that emphasize parallels between 1985 and 1963: "I can concur that such a colloq. has never before happened in Canada, and that it will be an event of the highest order of literary importance."

I have tried to demonstrate that the direct parallels Bök attempts to establish between the writers associated with the early years of *Tish* and the writers associated with the early years of KSW are not entirely historically accurate. But Bök's rhetoric in "Tish and Koot" is consistent with much of his critical practice, which he treats as a constraint-based project much like his work in *Eunoia*. Bök often stresses the materiality of his critical texts, attempting to write paragraphs of comparable length, beginning each paragraph with an identical word or similar phrase, or, as is the case here, contorting his rhetoric so as to emphasize parallelism. This rhetorical parallelism stresses the similarities between the groups KSW and *Tish* in order to underscore Bök's primary argument: that the earlier group came to enjoy success in the form of canonicity and "academic sinecure" while the later group so far has not, and to extend this observation, implicitly and explicitly, to a generational antagonism. Bök suggests that the generation born in the 1940s and launching their careers in the 1960s – of which the *Tish* group might be representative – benefitted from a period of cultural nationalism and a concomitant investment in cultural infrastructure as well as an expansion of the university system. Bök suggests that the rewards of literary activity in Canada, such as they are (awards, recognition, cultural capital that can

be invested in academic sinecure) have disproportionately advantaged the earlier generation. I am sympathetic to this position, and applaud Bök for making this case. And yet I don't think we should make this point by reinforcing problematic historical narratives. Moreover, we might point out that Jeff Derksen has achieved academic sinecure as a professor at Simon Fraser University, and Lisa Robertson has achieved a degree of canonicity and international recognition, with prestigious residencies at places such as Cambridge and the University of California, Berkeley, which would suggest that Bowering might have extended his false parallel even further (if Jeff Derksen is Frank Davey, then I suppose Lisa Robertson is George Bowering. Would that make Kevin Davies Fred Wah, given that Davies, like Wah in the 1960s, left Vancouver for the States)?

Bök extends his comparison of the relative degrees of success of both coteries to questions not just of differing generations, but of poetics. He suggests "[i]f we read the UBC poets more than the KSW poets in the classroom, we may do so because *Tish*, despite its subversiveness, still provides a legible variety of lyricism – one predicated upon a proprioceptive, rather than a metalinguistic, experience of the self" (99). The qualifiers in this sentence – "if we read"; "we may do so" – speak to the difficulties of conjecturing with any certainty about what is read or taught in the classroom, beyond one's own experience as student or teacher, and anecdotal information. Bök concludes that the work of the KSW writers, in its questioning of the "sovereign discourse of identity itself" at the grammatical level, renders the work 'unteachable' in a conventional academic setting. He concludes the essay by reinforcing this point: "If KSW poets are considered 'unteachable' by the academy, they are so not because their work is too obdurate to be assigned to the students, but because it demands that teachers who address it must unlearn the very lessons that certify their own ability to discuss it" (103). Thus the work's 'difficulty' and 'opacity,' in addition to its questioning of the humanist lyric, poses too great a challenge not just to undergraduates but to their professors who prefer to teach more accessible contemporary poetry, or to teach contemporary writers through the pedagogical frame of identity politics. This latter possibility might also explain why the work of KSW poets would be largely ignored in CanLit classrooms (if we accept this conjecture, which seems reasonable). The membership of the school in its late 1980s / early 1990s incarnation – which included Derksen, Robertson, Kevin Davies, Dan Farrell, Nancy Shaw, Kathryn MacLeod and others – speaks to the 'whiteness' of the school at that stage. Given contemporary concerns with identity politics and canon revision, a professor teaching a CanLit survey might very well seek to balance the 'whiteness' of Canadian Literature in earlier periods by teaching more writers of colour to 'represent' the contemporary period.

Bök's suggestion that the accessible lyricism of the "UBC poets" renders them, in contrast, more teachable seems to suggest, in its syntax, that when the work of Bowering, Wah and Davey is taught it is the work of their novitiate period, published in *Tish* when they were undergraduates at UBC. Perhaps this is the case. When I have taught Canadian literature at a campus which has copies of *Tish* in its special collections, such as the University of Calgary, I have had students read through some issues of the magazine, but my intent with such an assignment is more to expose students to the materiality of the mimeographed little magazine than to the early work of David Cull or Lionel Kearns. I would imagine that when the work of the *Tish* poets is taught (in an undergraduate context) it is later work, simply because it is later work that is sampled in the available anthologies. Moreover, when we say *Tish* poets we generally mean Bowering and Wah, since they are the *Tish* poets whose work makes it into every major anthology of Canadian literature or poetry. Donna Bennett and Russell Brown's *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature* includes selections from Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1984) and Wah's *Diamond Grill* (1996). Robert Lecker's *Open Country: Canadian Literature in English* samples work over a more extended period for both Bowering and Wah, beginning with "The Acts" from *Autobiology* (1972) and ending with "Fall 1962. Vancouver" (2000) in the case of Bowering, and beginning with "Waiting for Saskatchewan" (1981) and ending with selections from *Diamond Grill* in the case of Wah. Gary Geddes' *15 Canadian Poets x 3* is the most historically representative, bracketing its Bowering selections with "Grandfather" (1964) and "Fall 1983, Oliver" (2000), and its Wah selections with "My Horse" (1965) and selections from *Music at the Heart of Thinking* (1987). We might question, moreover, just how often the work of these ostensibly canonical poets is taught. From a strictly speculative position, I would expect Wah's work is taught the most of the writers associated with *Tish*, and not because of his importance to that moment, but because of his position as a racialized writer as articulated in texts such as *Diamond Grill*.

Of all the writers associated with KSW, only the work of Lisa Robertson is anthologized in any of the collections listed above, and only in Lecker's (which, to its credit, is better than most in representing writers born after 1960). Poems by Robertson and Derksen are included in Sharon Thesen's *New Long Poem Anthology*, but an instructor wanting to teach the work of KSW writers in the classroom has few options if s/he is using a mainstream anthology (New Star's *Writing Class* anthology is an obvious option, but this anthology might be too specific in its focus for an undergraduate poetry class or Canadian Literature survey). This material fact might have as much to do with pedagogical neglect of the KSW writers as the aesthetic reasons Bök posits. The neglect of class as a category of dis-

cussion in the classroom and in the academy at large, especially when compared with other categories of identity such as gender, race, or sexuality, might also be a factor. Gary Boire has convincingly argued that "[b]ecause of institutional conditions, political compromises, and the interpellated ideologies that constitute and sustain a still predominantly White, male, heterosexist, middle-class academic elite, we have a professoriate that whatever its claims to the contrary replicates and perpetuates the class values of a capitalist nation-state" (230-31). This professoriate, Boire states, "cannot help but reproduce a hierarchical class structure which, in turn, guarantees their jobs, incomes, and social niches" (231). A white male professor can interrogate and unlearn his privilege with respect to categories of gender and race, but to extend this interrogation and unlearning to questions of class would be somehow too difficult or threatening. For their part, most students remain, in my experience, generally resistant to feminist or race-based approaches to literature, even though they can recognize gender and racialized difference. Class is an even harder category to discuss, not only because it is a harder category to recognize as a determinant in their lives, but because their position as postsecondary students implies either an entrenchment of their class privilege, or a determination to achieve upward class mobility.

Derksen has pointed out that the relationship between poetry and class remains a fraught one: even with a conduit to working-class culture, poetry remains a hard sell. Smeared with the sign of high culture, poetry for the most part remains outside of a class-defined project (2009, 293). To return to Bök's argument, if the work of writers associated with KSW questions the sovereign discourse of identity itself, and if the work shared with the Language Writers an interrogation of the assumptions of transparent representation, then it becomes difficult to read the work as an articulation of class in the representation or testimonial sense. We need instead to read the work as reflexively pointing towards the class contradictions particular to poetry itself: to read and write poetry itself seems to presume class privilege, a privilege reinforced by an institutional framing that tends to defuse dissent by fetishizing it. It is this contradiction Deanna Ferguson points towards in a poem like "Taking Theory Home"

Target an audience or refuse to participate  
laughing a word is a word black or white.  
Check Is the mike on Yes  
we've had a board meeting  
Yes, we like your illegal art. (42)

The organization of KSW itself, modeled after the artist-run centre, was an attempt to reimagine a different social context for the production and reception of poetry, and the work needs to be read as an attempt to extend

this social practice to the formal practice on the page. We have to remember that the 'school' in the Kootenay School references not only a particular poetics, but an attempt to construct an alternative pedagogical site for the production and reception of poetry. If Bök is correct in speculating that the work of the KSW poets is neglected in the academy, this might speak to the enduring success of that project.

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## Contributors

**Michael Barnholden** is a member of the board of the Kootenay School of Writing, managing editor of the literary magazine *West Coast LINE*, and is the author of several books of poetry and non-fiction – most recently, *Circumstances Alter Photographs* (Talonbooks, 2009).

**Gregory Betts** is a scholar, poet, and editor. He is the author of *If Language* (2005), *Haikube* (2006), *The Others Raised in Me* (2009), and most recently *Psychic Geographies* (2010). He lives in St. Catharines where he co-edits PRECIPICe literary magazine, curates the Grey Borders Reading Series, and teaches at Brock University. He is currently completing a history of early Canadian avant-gardism.

**Jennifer Blair** is an assistant professor in the Department of English at the University of Ottawa, specializing in Canadian Literature. Her recent publications appear in *Feminist Media Studies* and *Deleuze and the Postcolonial* (Columbia UP, 2010).

**Clint Burnham** is the author of critical studies of Steve McCaffery and Fredric Jameson. His book on the Kootenay School of Writing will be published in 2011 by Arsenal Pulp. His most recent book of poetry is *The Benjamin Sonnets* (Book Thug, 2009) and he teaches in the Department of English at Simon Fraser University.

**Pauline Butling** divides her time between a Kootenay Lake and a Vancouver home. Writing a family history is her current preoccupation.

**Alessandra Capperdoni** holds a Ph.D. in English from Simon Fraser University, B.C. Her research focuses on Canadian and Anglophone literatures, feminist poetics and translation, women's writings, modernism and psychoanalysis. She has published on Canadian feminist poetics, experimental writings, feminist translation, transgenderism and transsexuality, and Black diaspora. She is preparing a monograph entitled *Shifting Geographies: Poetics of Citizenship in the Age of Global Modernity*.

**Stephen Collis** is a poet and the author of *Mine* (New Star 2001), two parts of the on-going "Barricades Project" – *Anarchive* (New Star 2005) and *The Commons* (Talonbooks 2008) – and *On the Material* (Talonbooks 2010). He is also the author of two books of criticism: *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism* (ELS 2006) and *Phyllis Webb and the Common Good* (Talonbooks 2007). A member of the Kootenay School of Writing, he teaches poetry, poetics and American literature at Simon Fraser University.

**Jeff Derksen** is a critic and a poet who works at Simon Fraser University. His books include *Until, After Euphoria, Annihilated Time, Down Time, Dwell, But*

*Could I Make a Living from It, and Transnational Muscle Cars*. He was a member of the KSW collective for more than 10 years.

**Paul Stephens** is a postdoctoral fellow at the Fox Center at Emory University. From 2005-2009 he taught in the literature department at Bard College. His recent articles have appeared in *Social Text*, *Rethinking Marxism*, and *Postmodern Culture*. He is currently completing a book called *The Poetics of Information Overload: From Gertrude Stein to Conceptual Writing*. He grew up in Vancouver.

**Donato Mancini** is author of several books of visual and procedural poetry: *Ligatures* (New Star 2005) and *Æthel* (New Star 2007), and the forthcoming *Buffet World* (New Star) and *Fact 'N Value* (Projectile Publishing). In September 2010, Mancini will start work towards a PhD in English at the University of B.C.

**Nikki Reimer** is the author of *[sic]* (Frontenac House, 2010) and *fist things first* (Wrinkle Press Chapbook, 2009). She lives in Vancouver where she is a member of the Kootenay School of Writing.

**Lisa Robertson's** most recent book is *R's Boat*, from University of California Press. A selection of essays is forthcoming from BookThug. In fall 2010, she is writer in residence at Simon Fraser University.

**Colin Smith** is a KSW spore that wound up getting blown east into Winnipeg. He is the author of *Multiple Poses* (Tsunami, 1997) and *8 x 8 x 7* (KRUPSKAYA, 2008).

**Robert David Stacey** is an assistant professor of Canadian literature at the University of Ottawa. He is editor of *RE: Reading the Postmodern: Canadian Literature and Criticism after Modernism*, forthcoming from the University of Ottawa Press.

**Christine Stewart** is from Vancouver and currently writes, teaches and researches poetry and poetics in the English and Film Department at the University of Alberta. Recent publications include *Blench* (The Gig, forthcoming), "Domestic Research," (*Capilano Review*, Spring 2010), "From the Journals of Reading Early Barbour, Summer, 2009" (*Jacket* 39), and "This Then Would Be the Conversation" in *Antiphonies: Essays on Women's Experimental Poetics in Canada* (The Gig, 2008).

**Catriona Strang's** latest book is *Light Sweet Crude*, co-authored with the late Nancy Shaw (Linebooks, 2007). A founding member of the Institute for Domestic Research, she lives in Vancouver, where she and her two kids are active in the local homelearning community.

**Fred Wah** has been editorially involved with a number of literary magazines over the years, such as *Tish*, *Open Letter* and *West Coast Line*. He helped coordinate the Writing Program at DTUC in the early 80's, from which KSW emerged. Recent books are *Sentenced to Light* (2008) and *is a door* (2009), both poetry. He splits his time between the Kootenays in southeastern B.C. and Vancouver.

**Jason Wiens** wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Kootenay School of Writing. He has taught at the University of Calgary, Mount Royal College (now University), and most recently at the University of Northern British Columbia.

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# OPEN LETTER

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