

**A FLOCK OF WHAT RESONATES**  
**A review of Peter Culley's *The Climax Forest***  
**by Lisa Robertson**

The Vancouver poets grouped around the collectively run writer's centre, the Kootenay School of Writing, began publishing in the eighties in journals such as *Writing and Raddle Moon* and in early chapbooks with Tsunami editions. These writers (Peter Culley, Kevin Davies, Deanna Ferguson, Dan Farrel, Catriona Strang, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Jeff Derksen, Nancy Shaw, Melissa Wolsack, and Gerald Creede, too name those whose work is available in book-form) choose as their precedents the poetics associated with Black Mountain, New York School, and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E in the USW, and, in Canada, the experimental work of Steve McCaffery and bpNichol in the east, and, in the west, Robin Blaser and the TISH poets: Fred Wah, Daphne Marlatt, and George Bowering.

There are, however, important differences from comparable generational grouping in the States. For 40 years the Canada Council for the Arts, our federal cultural funding body, has fostered a firmly institutionalized national aesthetic, partly in response to the perceived need for discernibly Canadian cultural products that could counter the omnivorous mass marketing of the American cultural industry. The result has been the foregrounding, and funding, of an aesthetic and cultural identity based on Canadian regional specificities and supported by an expressive fusion of subjective voice with lyric "natural" image. Such middle-of-the-road poetics differ from their American relations in Canada, packaged as "CanLit", the pathos-packed nature lyric is explicitly aligned with nationalist identity paradigms, and plays an overt role in the dissemination of political values as high culture forms.

Think here of the victimized drone of Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, where the American threat alongside a bracingly snowy geography goads heroic Canadians to self-definition. It's no accident that her weather's eastern - the self-perception of eastern Canada as cultural arbiter, coupled with its historical and economic centrism, has tended to consign provincial cultures to supporting margins. Vancouver has received from this imperious tendency an inadvertent blessing - we've largely been left alone in our mild, coniferous rim, to form identifications and movements which have not respected the official aesthetic identity package, nor the cultural opacity of the 40<sup>th</sup> parallel.

Nevertheless, nationalist frames have exerted both positive and negative influences on the KSW writers. In the eighties the CanLit lyric formed an official front against which the forming community could define itself aesthetically and ideologically. In this respect, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, ironically during Vancouver residencies funded by the Canada Council, provided important critical tools for the political analysis of written forms and genres. Through the casual mentorship of McCaffery and his southern colleagues Bernstein, Hejiniian, Howe, Andrews and Child, KSW writers took up discourses such as Julia Kristeva's, Roman Jakobson's and Mikhail Bakhtin's structural critiques of social and literary genres and grammars, and applied them to readings of Canadian lyric voice, gendered subjectivity, and class formations. Paradoxically, the tendency to retain a regional political and geographic referentiality was encouraged not only by the Canada Council's federalist cultural paradigm, and by an often economically imposed geographical isolation, but by close readings of Black Mountain poetics and their specific alignments of a process-based materiality with local historiographics, natural histories, and vocabularies. On the west coast, where Warren Tallman brought Olson, Creeley, and Bunting to teach in the Sixties, and where Robin Blaser has lived and worked for 30 years, Black Mountain has remained an important influence, and is directly legible in the work of TISH writers.

Peter Culley's book *The Climax Forest* emerges from this hybrid context with a sure handed iconoclasm. The work shares many technical points of reference with an experimental avant-garde tradition among them a staccato montaging of borrowed lexicons, intentional disunities in voice, and a measured attention to the effect of syntax on the line unit. However, the result is not the disjunctive surface, the ironic distancing, the cool of merely playful dismantling of subject and sequence that we have come to associate with poets from the surrealist, oulipo, or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movements of writing. Culley carefully engraves his acutely compiled descriptive surfaces with both grandiose and tender affective rhetorics which are:

All the provisions  
    I can bring to bear -  
The distant groaning metal  
  
    of non-being, the self  
Afloat in a saucepan  
    of burning sugar, myriads  
of little salts shaped like  
    double wedges  
Diffused through water

earth and ether.  
A flock of what  
resonates through the low thatch.  
("The Provision")

Here is the lush attentions of someone who has made it his work to notice both things and the volute grammar of their noticing. Line breaks parse description's dense surface: "to break the surface / only to re-establish the surface - / a cradle of boxwood / afloat-." The pronoun's afloat also in its syntax, seemingly discovering itself within the discipline of describing. Culley has tended to work within structures and traditions that many of his colleagues have rejected, extending his rhetorical reach far into the genres and vocabularies of the gentleman naturalist - novelistic description and Romantic philosophies of subjectivity for example. (The book's epigramme is from Søren Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* and presents nostalgic recollection as a perceptual frame.) Nor have the Byzantine syntaxes of the great decadent stylists Swinburne and Pater escaped his wandering erudition. These precedents lend Culley's work a sometimes campily arch diction, thick with grammatical inversion, long clausal constructions, and deferred referents. But the poems, although remarkably resolved stylistically, are not only presenting themselves as rhetorics of perception, but as conceptual practices that think through the dialects of pastoral systems.

It might help to know that the poems originate in a tiny bookpacked rural house on Vancouver Island, from which might be seen "A caravan / of bright yellow trucks. / Jostling like bland mugged thugs / along a granulate roadway / of broken bottles" ("Greetings from Hammertown"). The frame walls more often than not ring with the various musics mentioned in the poems' titles: "A Portrait of Coleman Hawkins by Gerhard Richter"; "A Blue Fog You Can Almost See Through," after Duke Ellington; "Winterreise"; "Paris 1919: for Kurt Cobain"; "Twilight of the Idols"; "*Der Hirt Auf Dem Felsen*." This is the combinatory landscape of contemporary pastoral where the heights of European high culture jostle with the banal vernaculars of the everyday, all "drab impulse / and bitter consumption - / soundtrack, head cleaner, / kerosene, protein." The final sequence of the book, "Hammertown," names a quasi-fictive outpost embellished around a sentence from Perec's *Life, A User's Manual*: "It was a fishing port on Vancouver Island, a place called Hammertown." Culley doesn't waste the luscious irony of a rural, Canadian identification with distant summits of an experimental avant garde. "Hammertown," an ongoing longpoem that extends beyond the parameters of this book, is a bit of a love pat to Olson's Gloucester. From the shabby light-industrial environs of Nanaimo BC, the poems scan walker and landscape, rhythmic fluctuations between archaism and pop, the German Romantic light of a Vancouver Island evening stroll, drunken tire ruts across the lawns, the stroller's mind wandering among the rhyme of Darwin's prose and flickering edit of silenced television, the rich greys of the afternoon movie shifting to ad hoc soundtrack of Elvis, Wagner, Slits. The pastoral juxtapositions of urban and rural, primary resource economics and enforced leisures of unemployment, high and low cultures, perception and history, charge the poems with a specific density that's relevant in several registers.

The cozy identity tropes of federalist nationalism, the skewed economy of the North American "Free Trade" myth, the conflicting aesthetics of tiny avant garde cultural practices within the mass market of entertainment: What is relation of the periphery to centre? A Canadian writes at the uncertain margin of huge American machinations, at the far end of Britain's long project, at the blurring of Asian and western, at the crumbling of the lesser dollar - and the position is both defensive and complicit, in the sense that the persona is implicated, enfolded, in a political context that rankles even as it enables. Each margin needs, so produces, its own image of the centre, of power. The most acutely disruptive poetics yearn for, as they demote, the comfort and tenure of a broad audience. Sullen mavericks cherish their trophies. With minimal phonemes, Culley's poems show importantly that this cultural decadence, this precarious balancing, this tender hybridity "of near bile lodged in what humour" is in fact the middle, and is description.