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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

The Kootenay School of Writing:

History, Community, Poetics

by

Jason Wiens

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Abstract

Through a method which combines close readings of literary texts with archival research, I provide in this dissertation a critical history of the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW): an independent, writer-run centre established in Vancouver and Nelson, British Columbia in 1984. Emerging at a time in which the B.C. provincial government's program of "restraint" entailed drastic cuts to funding for education and the arts, KSW became a site for oppositional and innovative writing practices. KSW was an open-ended community insofar as the parameters of the community were never firmly established, or its principles explicitly codified. This model of community corresponded with an open form poetics practiced by writers associated with the school, as well by writers across North America - in particular writers associated with Language Writing. For the writers working in and around KSW, I argue, community and poetics co-existed in a mutually informing and productive relationship: the politics of the writers entered their work, and their work enabled the imagination of an alternative politics.

My study approaches KSW through the overlapping frames of "History," "Community," and "Poetics." My introductory chapter considers KSW's institutional and historical position within the wider frame of Canadian literature, and the degree to which the school reflects and negotiates the shifting political, cultural and economic context of contemporary North America. I then situate the formation of the school, and the writing that emerged from its context, within B.C.'s tradition of poetic communities and innovative poetics. KSW also extends a dialogue with important poets in the United States which began in Vancouver in the late 1950s, and my project situates their work in relation to American writers such as Jack Spicer and Lyn Hejinian. The following

chapter on "Community" considers KSW's collective role through an examination of its relations with several differing communities: the language writers in the U.S., "work writing," Vancouver's visual arts scene and a transnational network of feminist writers. My chapter on "Poetics" looks closely at the work of four writers associated with KSW: Kevin Davies, Deanna Ferguson, Lisa Robertson and Jeff Derksen. My "Coda" briefly addresses more recent developments at the school up to the present moment.

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INTRODUCTION

I want to begin with the assertion of several "facts" which I hold as self-evident throughout this study. In 1983, the recently re-elected provincial government of British Columbia – Bill Bennett's Social Credit Party – embarked upon a series of deficit-cutting measures which they termed a policy of "restraint." At this time, the small city of Nelson in the Kootenay region of the southeastern corner of the province was home to one of the most dynamic and innovative writing programs in Canada if not the continent: the "School of Writing" at David Thompson University Centre (DTUC), a regional liberal arts college. The instructors at the college included Fred Wah, Tom Wayman, and David McFadden; McFadden was the founding editor of *Writing*, a little magazine which showcased work emerging from the context of the school. In 1984 DTUC was closed entirely, the victim of sweeping cutbacks to education spending as part of the government's restraint policies. In defiance, several instructors at the school, along with some of their more enthusiastic students – including Jeff Derksen, Calvin Wharton, and Gary Whitehead – established the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW), both in Nelson and in Vancouver. KSW was to be an independent, collectively-run school of writing which would not only continue, in its emphasis on innovative, socially oppositional writing, the spirit of the DTUC writing program, but would operate to fill a perceived void in public education by offering affordable instruction in writing to members of the public on the economic margins.

If I hold these details leading up to the establishment of KSW to be "factual," just about everything else I could say about the school since is open to debate – not the least of which would be the shape of its collectivity, and the parameters of the ostensible community which formed around it. While KSW has always been in

theory collectively run, there have periodically arisen several "prime movers" who have been especially energetic and influential in determining programming, courses, and the general direction of the school. I would break the history of KSW down roughly into several different periods or phases characterized by differing regimes or *juntas*, as they have been termed colloquially in Vancouver. I see the first period as extending from 1984-1988 for the Nelson campus, and over about the same period of time for the Vancouver campus. Fred Wah, who remained in the Kootenays after the closure of DTUC, was the driving force behind the Nelson branch during this time, and while the school continued and apparently continues today, Wah's departure in 1988 for Alberta has effectively removed Nelson from the literary radar screen. The little work that has been done on KSW has tended to focus on the school's impact on the Vancouver scene – a consequence of an urban bias in Canadian literary criticism which seems only further entrenched by occasional interests in "regional" writing: work emerging from rural communities which is of interest primarily for its quaintness, marginality and supposed authenticity. My study for the most part rehearses this focus on the Vancouver campus, the brief exceptions occurring in my section on Wah in Chapter One and on "work writing" in Chapter Two. But Nelson holds importance for KSW not only as its historical roots but in the model it presented for the relations of an artistic community to the surrounding community. As Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden have established, Nelson is a city characterized by a working-class character, "left-wing" political affiliations, and a population made up largely of counter-cultural groups, such as hippies (both holdouts from the 1960s and the latter day variety, including a good number from Quebec), American draft-dodgers from the Vietnam War, Doukhobors, and marijuana farmers. Consequently, throughout the 1970s and 1980s Nelson attracted "more than its fair share of artists,

musicians, actors and writers" (Klobucar and Barnholden 18), and as such would have permitted a more integrated relationship between KSW and the surrounding community than that experienced by other alternative educational institutions such as, say, Black Mountain College in North Carolina.[1] It is this sense of immediate involvement with the surrounding community which the Vancouver campus of KSW inherited from Nelson, and brought to the decidedly less quaint (but no less "left-wing" and counter-cultural) surroundings of Vancouver's lower east side.

As I mention above, the period of the first "regime" in Vancouver lasted from the establishment of the school in 1984, through the New Poetics and Split Shift Colloquia of 1985-86, and the establishment of Artspeak Gallery in 1986. This was probably the period in which the collective – consisting at first of Wayman, Derksen, Whitehead, Wharton and Colin Browne – was least hierarchized, although if I had to point to any one dominating figure during this time, it would be Browne. As editor of *Writing* from issue 7 (Fall 1983) to issue 22 (Spring 1989) and as the writer of the Canada Council grant proposal for the 1985 New Poetics Colloquium, Browne was instrumental in determining the initial direction and inertia of KSW. When Nancy Shaw joined the collective around 1986, and began serving on the editorial board of *Writing* at issue 17 (January 1987), the proverbial torch began to be passed, and by 1989 Derksen and Shaw were more or less in control: editing *Writing*, arranging programming, and shifting the focus of the school away from education and more towards events. The period of this second *junta* would extend from 1989 to 1992, when *Writing* ceased publication (Shaw and Derksen edited the final issue) and

[1] Martin Duberman, for instance, notes problems which arose when the unorthodox behaviour of certain students and faculty at Black Mountain College would clash with local mores in rural North Carolina. He also writes of attempts made at different times to forge relations between Black Mountain and the "outside" community - attempts which were usually unsuccessful (Duberman 247, 267-268).

Derksen and Shaw would leave to pursue postsecondary education in the academy: a move which was perceived by some involved with KSW as a betrayal of the school's "anti-institutional" stance.

With their departure, the leadership vacuum was filled at least in part by a group of emerging feminist writers which included Lisa Robertson, Christine Stewart and Catriona Strang. And yet the exodus from Vancouver continued: 1992 also saw the departure of Lary Bremner for Japan. Bremner, the publisher of Tsunami editions, a small press which published most of the KSW writers' earliest chapbooks and perfect-bound books, left the operations of the press in the hands of Kevin Davies, Catriona Strang and Deanna Ferguson. Davies would soon leave for New York, as would the local poet Dan Farrell, establishing something of a KSW "diaspora" in that city, and extending the school's notoriety in the United States. By 1995, as I address at some length in my "Coda," the school was at a crisis point, and had reached the point of nearly folding. However, the energies of some individuals – in particular Michael Barnholden – helped maintain consistent and important programming at KSW over the following years. This programming continues to our contemporary moment, a moment in which the collective seems to me substantial and its programming goals remain innovative and ambitious.

One of the biggest assumptions I make throughout this study is that KSW as a site – both physical and conceptual – was the locus for and impetus to the production of a good deal of innovative and socially oppositional writing by Vancouver writers associated with the school. More specifically, I have in mind the younger generation of writers who emerged from the context of the writer-run collective from its establishment in 1984 to the publication, by presses such as Tsunami Editions,

Talonbooks, and ECW, of a *mélange* of perfect bound books from 1990-1994[2]: in other words, my focus will be on the period of the first two "regimes" which I outline above. These writers include Davies, Derksen, Farrell, Shaw, Gerald Creede, Peter Culley, Deanna Ferguson, Kathryn MacLeod, Lisa Robertson, Catriona Strang, Lary Timewell (Bremner), and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk. I by no means suggest that each of these writers participated equally in the collective; for example, Derksen and Shaw might be situated as more active and central, with self-styled "leisure poets" Creede and Culley observing from the periphery. And while I do like the double-entendre of "school" as both educational institution and as suggesting a similarity of concerns across the work of a group of artists, I do not attempt here to delineate or describe a consistent "Kootenay School" aesthetic, as has been attempted (or implied) with, say, Black Mountain, the New York School, or most recently Language Writing. While these writers have each developed his or her own idiosyncratic practice, I would identify among them several shared characteristics informing their practice as artists. These would include a belief in the potential of writing to function as social critique, a focus on the form and structures of language as the ground for that critique, a preference for opaque as opposed to supposedly "transparent" language, a concern with immediate, local context, and a dissident stance which assumes a position of social marginality.

Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden's "Introduction" to *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology*, remains the most extensive history of KSW to this point. I refer to their "Introduction" a number of times throughout my

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[2] These would include Derksen's *Down Time* (1990) and *Dwell* (1993) and Lusk's *Reactive* (1990) with Talonbooks; Shaw's *Scoptocratic* (199 2)and Strang's *Low Fancy* (1993) with ECW; and Davies' *Pause Button* (1992), Ferguson's *The Relative Minor* (1993), Farrell's *Thimking of You* (1994), Creede's *Ambit* (1993), and Robertson's *Xeclogue* (1993) with Tsunami.

study, usually to contest a point that they have made, though this should not be interpreted as a rejection of the historical fundamentals which they establish. I agree with them, for instance, that what motivated the school's formation "was not a specific aesthetic vision, but rather a politicised understanding of how art and literary production often contributed to the ruling class's hegemonic influence over society" (2). My work here also shares with them a belief that class relations were the fundamental ground for KSW's oppositional stance, both in terms of the school's social organization as well as in the writing which emerged from its context – although I hesitate to draw as direct a connection to organizations such as the International Workers of the World (IWW) as do Klobucar and Barnholden. Klobucar and Barnholden, for instance, draw parallels between the non-hierarchical structures of both organizations, and while they do point out that KSW's collective structure "might not have been in conscious imitation of the IWW," the implication of their argument is that KSW and IWW shared a similar class consciousness and an equivalent form of social organization and as a result held shared interests. More persuasive are the equivalences Pauline Butling points out which arose between artists and workers, among the main targets of Social Credit's deficit-cutting measures:

> The restraint program provoked an articulate class politics; many KSW writers began to explore the links between social/economic marginalization of the artist and class oppression. Gone is the romantic notion that outsider status is a necessary prerequisite for creative activity. In its place came a barrage of questions about who wields the power to exclude, who is excluded, who benefits, and how such inequities can be addressed. (Butling 2001, 3)

The few histories of KSW which have been produced have tended to regard the language-centred poetics and the more conventional forms of 'work writing' as co-existing in and around the site of the school; Clint Burnham, for instance, asserts that "[m]ore than most Canadian avant-garde poetic formations, KSW has foregrounded a radical politics as part of its aesthetic, a politics that included spaces for more realist-seeming work and community writing" (Burnham 2001). As I suggest in my second chapter, however, KSW – or more specifically the writers who were working in more 'experimental forms' – and writers associated with various workers' movements and organizations in and around Vancouver would eventually develop (or rather reveal) antagonisms that were not easily resolvable.

Klobucar and Barnholden's "Introduction" appears to contradict itself somewhat with regards to the question of KSW's position within Canada and "Canadian Literature." They begin with an assertion that "KSW continues to find itself 'misplaced' as far as mainstream Canadian literature is concerned" (1), and that the school's founding writers were of a mind that "[t]o yield in one's writing to the master themes, tropes and voices of mainstream (Canadian) aesthetics was tantamount to relinquishing all control over the process of one's work" (3). They follow with an argument regarding Vancouver's relation to "the CanLit network":

> In Vancouver...in 1983, few established literary scenes of national attention actually existed. In fact, this is largely still the case. Most authority figures in the CanLit network developed their careers in either Toronto or Montreal. (3)

I thus see an implicit conflict between Klobucar and Barnholden's assertions of KSW's opposition to "mainstream (Canadian) aesthetics" and the familiar refrain of Vancouver's marginality vis-à-vis Canadian literary power. Claims of Vancouver's

"outsider" status have been heard periodically since at least the days of *TISH*, claims that seem to me increasingly difficult to support.[3] When we think about the "big names" in anglophone Canadian literature over the past forty years, certainly a number of those would be associated with Toronto or Montreal, including writers such as Atwood, Brand, Nichol, Mouré, or McCaffery, and institutions such as Coach House Press, ECW, or Anansi. But when we consider names like Bowering, Webb, Marlatt, Wah, Thomas, Newlove, Thesen, bissett, or Davey, the idea that British Columbia is somehow marginalized vis-à-vis a network of Canadian literature becomes untenable, and almost disingenuous. Yet contemporary writers in Vancouver, including those associated with KSW, still tend to believe that they remain peripheral to the "CanLit network." As I point out below, however, their claims to marginality are not without support, given that their work remains largely ignored within popular reception, as well as critical appraisals, of contemporary writing in Canada. If the writers associated with KSW are marginalized, it is because of their uncompromising, oppositional stance, their anti-institutional bias, and the innovative or experimental forms of their poetics, and not because they live in Vancouver. This marginal position seems to be one which they regard with ambivalence: both resenting the putative "authority figures" to the east who would ignore the dynamic literary culture in Vancouver, and embracing this marginal

[3] Of the writers of the previous generation, George Bowering has asserted Vancouver's peripheral position most extensively, usually by a process of geographic determinism. In his essay "Vancouver as Postmodern Poetry" he writes "the young Vancouver poets of 1960 were conscious more than anything of living by the sea, at the edge, on a margin" (121). This notion tends not only to essentialize geography, but to ignore history: that political and economic power in North America has been concentrated, unlike in Europe, more in coastal areas rather than the interior would problematize attempts to equate a geographic periphery with a cultural periphery. Bowering has also, of course, repeatedly argued that western Canada is defined primarily by geography, not history.

position as necessary and even enabling. In this respect KSW, and the writers within its orbit, might be described by Pierre Bourdieu as occupying an autonomous, rather than heteronomous, position within the field of cultural production because of their tendency "to make of temporal failure a sign of election and of success a sign of compromise with the times" (217). Following Bourdieu's model, KSW has operated more from a principle of "internal hierarchization" rather than "external hierarchization," in that the former "favours artists (etc.) who are known and recognized by their peers and only by them (at least in the initial phase of their enterprise) and who owe their prestige, at least negatively, to the fact that they make no concessions to the demand of the 'general public'" (217). Granted, KSW's attempts to fuse avant-garde practice and socially oppositional praxis, not to mention the ever-decreasing space for a writing which refuses the dictates of the market, problematizes models such as Bourdieu's: a point I wish to expand upon in the following section.

KSW's troubled or ambivalent position within a Canadian cultural field is related to the wider political situation in contemporary North America, a political situation to which Klobucar and Barnholden provide a background but do not name directly. I am referring to the current condition of global economic liberalism, and of its manifestations in a continental context as the 1988 Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Canada and the United States and the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between those countries and Mexico. Klobucar and Barnholden situate KSW within the context of 1980s North America, when Reagan-style conservativism and its attendant sense of a "moral crisis" (7-8) held sway. Certainly trade liberalization, and the consequent integration of national economies and cultures, should be seen as growing out of the economic "rationalizing" of the

1980s and the end of the cold war with the collapse of communist regimes in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Couple this with the imposition of neo-liberal economic policies and a constitutional decentralization in Canada during the past decade – a consequence both of this global condition and of domestic circumstances – and where and how to position KSW within a Canadian context becomes a difficult question indeed. This introductory chapter attempts to address this question with respect to four main topics: the role of cultural institutions, the varying shapes of community, the possibilities for an oppositional poetics, and the idea of a "North American" cultural field.

Institutions and the Administration of Culture

Deanna Ferguson is a poet whose relations to KSW illustrate the difficulties of delineating a specific group of poets associated with the school. On the one hand, her affiliation with the school appears quite clear: her name shows up periodically in minutes of collective meetings from the late 1980s, she was involved in editing several Tsunami books, she has performed readings and given talks at the KSW and at KSW related events, and she is perceived in a local, anecdotal context to be associated with the school. Hailing from Cranbrook, she even attended DTUC to study visual arts prior to its closure (Trujillo Lusk 1998, n.pag). On the other hand, Ferguson has often refused or argued against attempts to associate her with the KSW, a refusal related to her suspicion of institutions, and her desire to maintain as much control as possible over the production, dissemination, and reception of her work. The following lines comprise a stanza in Ferguson's "Taking Theory Home," a poem which, as Clint Burnham tells us, "deals with the relationship between acquired cultural capital and the marginal, rural working class home" (Burnham 1998, 29):

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. (Ferguson 42)

The stanza is one of a series in the middle of the poem which begin with imperatives, some of which seem addressed to another person ("Refer to women as women you've had") and others in which the imperative seems more descriptive, as though the speaker is referring to herself ("Turn to window for comfortable distance"). The lines cited above seem closer to the latter; moreover, the imperative tone, along with the almost exasperated repetition of "Yes," seems to dismiss these "board meetings" and "illegal art" as rote occurrences. I hear in this passage a nagging reminder of KSW's organization as a bureaucratic institution, and of its negotiations of a wider administrative apparatus, not only of specific government funding agencies such as the Canada Council, but of a broader administrative culture, or perhaps cultural administration, which emerges as a "middle ground" between the options available to an artist in a market-driven economy: "Target an audience or refuse to participate."

While critics such as Christopher Beach have distinguished between "community" and "institution," the fact remains that in Canada, poetic communities and various institutions – universities being the most obvious, but also publishing firms and government ministries – are thoroughly imbricated in one another. Beach defines a poetic "community" as "a group of poets with shared interests, goals, orientation, or background" (Beach 5) and an "institution" as "a form of social organization structured by some force outside the immediate control or jurisdiction of the poets themselves, and usually in the service of something other than their own

private needs" (6). Although Beach acknowledges that "[i]nstitutions are...in many cases a catalyst for a given community, or a means of perpetuating a community beyond the life cycle it would otherwise have had" (6), for the most part he seems to regard them as pernicious:

> Unlike communities, which evolve organically out of the needs of particular groups of poets, institutions usually involve some form of bureaucracy. Also unlike communities, which tend to be self-sufficient (and at times highly insular) entities, institutions require a larger context, whether that context is defined in terms of readership, marketability, or a more general cultural or ideological agenda. While cultural institutions are to some degree necessary to the dissemination of culture beyond a relatively small group, they are also more likely to lead not only to the increased bureaucratization of culture, but also to the increased commodification of cultural production. (6)

If we accept Beach's argument, then the institutional grounding of a community presents both problems and opportunities, and forces artists committed to an oppositional practice to negotiate institutional apparatuses with care.

It soon becomes apparent to a researcher spending any time in the KSW archives that the school organized itself as a quite conventional, if less hierarchical, bureaucratic structure. Hundreds of pages of the minutes from weekly meetings from 1986 to 1993; drafts of grant applications; correspondence with administrative figures in positions with funding agencies; office logs; phone records: these are the rather banal documents at the disposal of the cultural historian. Such documentation appears disjunctive when read alongside the poetic texts which emerged from this administrated context, but the collective members of KSW appeared to recognise a

fact which Theodor Adorno had pointed out decades earlier: that culture and administration, long considered oppositional, are necessarily (if ambivalently) intertwined, and that "[w]hoever makes critically and unflinchingly conscious use of the means of administration and its institutions is still in a position to realize something which would be different from merely administrated culture" (Adorno 113). If the relative autonomy of the cultural attenuates its social praxis, then that autonomy, in the eyes of the socially-activist artist, must be reduced. KSW's unashamed adoption of a bureaucratic structure could be seen retrospectively as an effort to achieve this reduction. Following this argument, there was more at stake in the need to procure funds from government granting agencies than paying rent and artists' fees – although these necessities were certainly recognized as more urgent at the time. KSW's hope for social praxis, it could be argued, was related to the extent to which it engaged with administrative cultural apparatuses.

Michael Dorland, following Harold Innis, has linked the Canadian state's administration of culture to a wider "bureaucratic rationality," one which, in the absence of a revolutionary tradition, "has its roots in an unbroken continuum reaching back to the early modern emergence of the European absolutist state" (Dorland 142). The example Innis provides and which Dorland cites is the fusion of state and church in "the France of Colbert and Louis XIV," in which the state and church share the common denominator of bureaucratic rationality. After the conquest at Quebec City, the narrative goes, this Gallic form of organization was adopted by the British, enabling British North Americans (or what we might term "Canadians") to embark upon the federally-sponsored megaprojects which have come to largely define the nation, such as its rail, energy, medical and communications infrastructures. Dorland thus arrives at the conclusion that far from suggesting a "false economy" of culture,

akin to a failed regional development project, the administration of culture in Canada truly reflects the historical development of the nation: "in its practices, in the logics that articulate them, in its fundamental ordinariness, the administration of culture in the Canadian context has been the creation of an historically deep-rooted bureaucratic rationality" (146). The result has been the development of cultural discourses and practices that are characterized by "discourses of the state" – the most obvious being those of the CBC/SRC and of the National Film Board. At the same time, these discourses and practices remain "significantly alegal...the cultural sphere as a whole remains a jumble of overlapping jurisdictions, in which – and perhaps as a result – primarily administrative norms and practices prevail – because there are no other norms" (147). This suggests an alternative reading of Ferguson's "illegal art": the work is "illegal" not because it is somehow criminal, but because it remains outside the parameters of legal, official discourses – while remaining within the grasp of administrative culture.

In her essay "Aesthetics and Foreign Policy," Laura Kipnis attempts to address the question of state-sponsored culture through a broad comparison of the market-driven culture of the U.S. with the statist culture of Cuba. Kipnis' main point in her essay is that aesthetic positions are also questions of foreign policy, and that western aesthetic theories from Kant to Hugh Thomas have served to marginalize and trivialize non-western cultures. However, she also makes an argument that has interesting implications for the Canadian context:

> If culture is seen as central to social reproduction, it seems to follow that in a society in which reproduction occurs, in the first instance, economically, as ours, artists are subjected to the terrors and rigors of the marketplace, whereas in a society that reproduces itself, in the first

> instance, politically, as in Cuba, artists are subjected to the terrors and rigors of current political policies. It would follow that in an economically reproducing society, the ultimate social meaning of a work of art is thoroughly mediated and contained through the economic institutions of art – the market - whereas in Cuba, where art institutions are by definition political and politicized, the political meanings of works emerge unmediated, with more genuine potential to be subversive to reproduction. (Kipnis 214)

I do not wish to make a ludicrous comparison of Canada to Cuba, nor even to suggest that Canada occupies a cultural "middle-ground" between Cuba and the U.S. (the traditional myth of the Canadian "mixed economy"). However, to the extent that social reproduction via culture in the Canadian context still occurs to a large extent politically (or at least to a greater extent than in the U.S., the National Endowment for the Arts notwithstanding), Kipnis' remarks suggest intriguing possibilities. What might be seen as a co-optation of subversive artistic practices within a bureaucratic rationality ("Yes, we like your illegal art") could become re-figured through her model as an "inhabitation" of that rationality, in which the opportunity of a politically rather than economically mediated culture presents itself, and with it the possibility of transforming social reproduction.

Dorland, however, reminds us that over the past couple of decades there has been a crisis at the heart of state rationality in Canada, linked to legalistic, globalizing forces such as the FTA, NAFTA, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) agreements:

> what has been happening in the Canadian context since the mid to late 1970s and increasingly as of the 1980s has been an *inversion*...of the

> logic of state rationality *away* from internal, prescriptive policy to the external, and more legalistic, forms of inter-state rationality. For a country with Canada's backward linkages (a statist culture, small domestic markets, under-capitalization of a cultural infrastructure dependent on subsidy – in short, a weak civil society in its indifferentiation of the political and the economic), this is extremely painful. (148, italics in original)

We might link this "inversion" of which Dorland speaks away from the internal and prescriptive to the external and legalistic with the "continentalization" of poetics in North America – and with Jeff Derksen's emphases on the "centrifugal" over more centralising forces (Derksen is of course drawing on Bakhtin in using such terms, but we could still regard his use of them as symptomatic)[4]. Barbara Godard has also noted that discourses on culture at both federal and provincial levels have been changing over the past decade, accompanied by continuous cutbacks to cultural apparatuses (Godard 223). These cutbacks, however, have not necessarily resulted in less political mediation of culture: Godard points out that the arm's-length principle of the Canada Council, for instance, "was compromised by reduced importance accorded to jury decisions and more direct bureaucratic intervention by council administrators and the government itself through programs administered by Heritage Canada" (224). Thus there has been a doubled movement of both centralization of decision making in the hands of a few administrators, with a decentralization of funding by forcing arts groups to look to the private sector for capital:

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[4] In his essay "Sights Taken as Signs: Place, the Open Text, and Enigma in New Vancouver Writing," Derksen argues for "a more eccentric or idiosyncratic poetry, one that deals with specifics *as* specifics rather than raw data towards a universal projection" which would be "a centrifugal force providing alternatives to centralisation" (Derksen 1994, 151).

> In a neoliberal regime ruled by numbers, the function of arts groups has shifted from creative processes to the collection of economic data quantifying outcomes so as to justify arts activities in the corporate sector. Canadian culture has become synonymous with the culture of capital. (Godard 225)

Given this economic context, the transformative potential of cultural practices which inhabit administrative structures becomes seriously mitigated. And yet, as I argue above, so long as the avant-garde remains contained within an autonomous sphere, its social effects are limited. As Adorno explains, "culture suffers damage when it is planned and administrated; when it is left to itself, however, everything cultural threatens not only to lose its possibility of effect, but its very existence as well" (Adorno 94). However, to the extent that KSW and institutions within its orbit such as *Writing* magazine or Tsunami Editions received some government support (Canada Council funding for the New Poetics Colloquium, Canada Council and provincial government support of *Writing*, and provincial support for some perfect-bound Tsunamis) but relied more heavily on volunteer labour and the generosity of employed benefactors, I might suggest that KSW emerged, in the wake of state culture's retreat, as an element of what is generally termed "civil society." This is not to say that because of this KSW occupied a more autonomous position, but rather that civil, as opposed to governmental, mediation of social reproduction through culture requires us to consider differing ways in which a poetics might subvert or offer alternative possibilities for social reproduction.

Coterie, Community, Network

> 2 guys watch from a porch while movers carry the

futon frame to the side entrance. Her hand was in
mine but she wasn't holding it. I am so exhausted.
A shadow fell back on part of her face like the
beginnings of or remnants of a veil. Her steely eyes
set off the metal detector of my heart. Getting ready
to have been scared. Dan hiss by my window. Gerry
pedals into a head wind. Kevin seize the means of
projection.

--Gerald Creede, from "Boy Soprano" (1993, 28)

The concluding sentences of this section from Gerald Creede's "Boy Soprano," published in his collection *Ambit* (1993), serve as a reminder of the localized community in Vancouver in which the writing of the Kootenay School was circulating, and marks this text as a coterie poem. Following an allusion to Bruce Andrews' book *Getting Ready to Have Been Frightened*, an allusion which invites us to read these discontinuous sentences under the rubric of "language writing," Creede writes three sentences involving proper names which we could identify as those of Creede (Gerry), Dan Farrell, and Kevin Davies. While the verbs in the sentences involving "Dan" and "Kevin" are in the imperative, and thus imply events which have not yet happened, the sentences still make enigmatic references to occasions – occasions which make up the absent context of the writing. And while the references to "Dan" and "Gerry" are rather quotidian, "Kevin seize the means of projection," with its conflation of "means of production" and "projective verse," could be read as literary admonition, critique, or description. In any case, it is a sentence which situates Creede's text within a larger community of readers, conflating the social texts of both his own and Davies' work.

Lytle Shaw has recently pointed out that "[i]n everyday speech, literary communities are good, coteries are bad: the latter term seems to mark a threshold at which some ethical breach can be registered" (Shaw 114). In the case of Creede's poem, this "ethical breach" of a writing which is unapologetically enigmatic and insular would correspond with its textual "opacity": in both form and content, the poem is directed at a small community or coterie of "in-the-know" readers. Shaw traces the etymology of "coterie" back to eighteenth-century Europe, in which "the wretched conditions of the 'cots' or 'cottages' prompts the peasants to collectivize against their landlord" (115). The term soon came, however, to designate "privileged circles dedicated to covert political or literary activity," and Shaw identifies in this etymology the "competing senses of an authentically marginal group engaged in a struggle to attain property rights and that of a private, privileged clique" (115). These "competing senses" also bedevil attempts to situate KSW as an oppositional community: in the case of experimental poetry, or even of poetry *per se*, margin and privilege are often curiously conflated.

Writing about the coterie poems of Frank O'Hara, Shaw asserts coterie's usefulness as an interpretive framework rather than recoverable context: while the deployment of proper names in a poem can tell us something about the social context of the poem, it is their formal function within the confines of the text that is more crucial. That is, coterie poems should be read for how the proper names function *relationally* to one another – how they map out what anthropologists call structures of "kinship" – rather than as historical "evidence" or as a record of events. Thus in Creede's passage above the fact that he writes "Gerry," "Dan" and "Kevin" into his poem rather than, say, "Nancy," "Lisa" and "Jeff," maps out a structure of kinship which might imply a subgrouping involving those three names, and further imply a

fragmentation within the larger group. We should be wary, however, of presuming the accuracy of coterie writing in its constructions of historical communities. "Coterie has less to do with an immediate reception context," Shaw writes, "than with an idea about how the engines of literary history might be confused into inclusions through the guerilla use of proper names" (120). In the case of "Boy Soprano," or other poems of writers associated with the Kootenay School which use the proper names of their contemporaries, the meanings of "Dan," "Gerry," and "Kevin" are contingent upon the reader already having some familiarity with the context – but they also work to both register a community and confuse literary history into perhaps inaccurate "inclusions."

Judy Radul's poem "Kisses So Wet," included in Klobucar and Barnholden's *Writing Class*, also functions as a sort of coterie poem, but at the same time questions the idea of a coterie or community organized around the KSW, as well as its own assumptions about the recording of history in a text. Radul writes of the exchange of texts among writers, and playfully invokes questions of direct influence through a discovery of 'the new':

> And Dan Farrell loaded me his l=a=n=g=u=a=g=e
>
> You still have it. I where that was. (Klobucar 191)

In this passage, and in the poem as a whole, the speaker addresses herself to a "you," a writer who also, like Radul, situates herself on the periphery of "the Kootenay School of Writing." "Kisses So Wet" is dated "July 1994" and is dedicated to Deanna Ferguson; Ferguson's nickname also enters into the poem:

> And Dee would say it's not up to any body, certainly not Kisses
>
> So Wet, being only the sum of its individual fictions to grant
>
> me credit

> But that's not what I thought I meant by surprised that they
> noticed me but unto another rather neither might not other-
> wise would I have found such an idea (192)

This passage, and Radul's poem as a whole, establishes the Kootenay School as a contested field, and invokes a number of questions and conflicts which this study addresses repeatedly: the extent to which a community or coterie is the sum of its "individual fictions"; the introduction of new ways of writing through educational workshops ("might not other-/ wise would I have found such an idea"); and the borders or limits of this community and its own authoritative power in the Vancouver scene ("surprised that they / noticed me"). As Radul's poem suggests, KSW should not be understood as a discrete, identifiable community of writers but rather as an open, internally differentiated and conflicted locus within a larger Vancouver scene and literary history. Within a more general Canadian literary field, KSW might be viewed as what Frank Davey terms a "special constituency," similar to those constituencies organized around gender, race or region, which further demonstrates a fragmentation of a "national" audience. But this constituency, admittedly ignored by a mainstream Canadian audience outside of Vancouver, remains itself as open and vulnerable to challenge as the "national" formation it ostensibly questions.

In an essay entitled "Mapping Mind, Mapping Frames: *The Martyrology* and Its Social Text," Jeff Derksen suggests bpNichol's long poem "may indeed represent the outer conceptual horizon of official literature within Canada" (51). The essay emerges from the context of a collaborative graduate seminar on *The Martyrology* involving students from Simon Fraser University and the University of Calgary in 1994 and 1995, and I cannot help but wonder not only where KSW fits into this "conceptual horizon," but the extent to which Derksen is himself pondering that same

question. In his essay Derksen identifies an "avant garde 'faction' within the Canadian academy" (51); a "community of readers" who have collectively raised the status of *The Martyrology* (and I would add of Nichol's work in general) "to the most important long poem in Canadian Literature because it seems to embody the potentials for the social and literary change that this reading community seeks" (50). It is this same "faction" or community, presumably, which would be most sympathetic to the work of writers such as Derksen, Ferguson, or Lisa Robertson, and which would also - by reading, teaching, discussing, or otherwise supporting the work - have the power to raise its "status" by determining a social function for it within an existing canon, or better by transforming the canon to accommodate the works' innovations. Broadly speaking, this faction would be constituted mostly by academics, some of whom are also poets, most of whom live or have lived in western Canada, and would consist of persons such as Davey, Smaro Kamboureli, Roy Miki, George Bowering, Susan Rudy, Fred Wah, Steve McCaffery, Pauline Butling, Peter Quartermain, Robert Kroetsch, Miriam Nichols, Clint Burnham, Louis Cabri, and Douglas Barbour.

When I begin to talk about a faction of intellectuals committed to avant-garde practice and to the "potentials for...social and literary change" that experimental texts provide, I seem once again to be discussing a coterie. Indeed, examples of coterie writing in Canadian poetry over the past few decades are numerous: consider Davey's poems which explicitly address a Canadian academic context, and Canadian academics, such as "Italian Multiculturalism" or "Agnes Bernaur"; Robert Kroetsch's admonitions to other writers in *Advice to My Friends* (1985); Bowering's use of personal names throughout his oeuvre but especially in works such as *A Short Sad Book*; or Phyllis Webb's lines from her *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti-Ghazals*: "So. So. So. Ah - to have a name like *Wah* / when the deep purple falls" (Webb 12).

Nichol's *Martyrology* is no exception; in Book 3 he mentions "victor" (Coleman)'s reading, "dave aylward," and "margaret," and writes:

> i call these poets friends
>
> tho i cannot attend to them daily
>
> there is a we
>
> different the same
>
> links us in the law language comprehends
>
> i have to trust to carry me thru into somewhere (Book 3, V)

Nichol's lines imply that his relationships with "these poets" should be understood within a different model of "friendship," or kinship: one which relies less on proximity and daily familiarity than on "the law language comprehends." Language and community are here situated in reciprocal, mutually enabling relation.

In his essay "The Political Economy of Poetry," Ron Silliman claims the social organization of contemporary poetry occurs "in two primary structures: the *network* and the *scene*" (Silliman 28). While the scene, according to Silliman, is specific to a place, the network is by definition "transgeographic." He is quick to point out, however, that "[n]either mode ever exists in pure form":

> Networks typically involve scene subgroupings, while many scenes (although not all) build toward network formations. Individuals may, and often do, belong to more than one of these informal organizations at a time. Both types are essentially fluid and fragile. As the Black Mountain poets and others have demonstrated, it is possible for literary tendencies to move through both models at different stages in their development. (29)

Scene, coterie, community: these various structures of social organization coalesce, accumulate and overlap to constitute a broad, continental network of readers of the work emerging from the context of KSW: an avant garde faction within the Canadian academic and writing communities; the poets associated with language writing in the U.S. (mostly in New York and California); the wider Vancouver literary community; and the KSW poets themselves. These communities of course overlap in significant ways: members of the "avant garde faction" such as Wah and Butling were instrumental in establishing KSW; Vancouver was and remains an important formative site for many American language writers; and KSW's ongoing involvement as a venue and site for literary activity in Vancouver has worked increasingly to conflate the final two groups which I identify. Since three of these four groups are at least nominally "Canadian," this might imply that situating KSW in relation to "Canadian Literature" is not as problematic as it seems, and that perhaps the work of the writers associated with KSW might have the potential to extend the "outer conceptual horizon of official literature within Canada" which Derksen describes above. However, even the most popular and widely read of the KSW writers, such as Derksen, remain largely unknown within the dominant formations of official CanLit - the juries for prizes such as the Giller or Governor General's Awards,[5] massive reading series such as that at Toronto's Harbourfront, reviewers for the major daily broadsheets, or the larger literary publishers such as McClelland and Stewart - and with a few exceptions their work remains mostly unread and untaught within the academy. Moreover, "Canadian Literature" as a discipline continues to show the strains from its various competing constituencies, and it may well be the case that it is

[5] This situation may be changing: Lisa Robertson was nominated for the Governor General's Award for English Poetry in 1998 for *Debbie: an epic*, although she did not win.

no longer able to accommodate within its rather porous boundaries the work, and the community, which I discuss in the following pages.

Oppositional Poetics and the Discourses of the State: Shifting Stances

Historically speaking, left politics and Canadian nationalism have co-existed in reciprocal relation, both politically and aesthetically. As a supposedly decolonial project, the assertion of Canadian identity vis-à-vis literature has often been understood as an anti-capitalist gesture, or at least opposed to a capitalism which supports and extends U.S. hegemony. For Margaret Atwood, a familiarity with Canadian literature was part of good citizenship; indeed, Atwood asserts that "for members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive" (Atwood 19). Writing in characteristically histrionic prose, Robin Matthews sees nationalist cultural production as part of a broader resistance or revolution: "Cultural takeover will bring Canada to its knees in final abject surrender to U.S. expansionism, or it will bring Canada to its feet in a reaction to takeover that will assure the continuation of this country" (Matthews 209). F.R. Scott (1899-1985) was a classic poet of this nationalist/ socialist hybrid. The following lines comprise the opening stanza to "Laurentian Shield," one of his so-called "Laurentian poems" – imagistic nature poems that could be contrasted with his later satiric, more overtly "political" texts such as "W.L.M.K." or "The Canadian Authors Meet":

> Hidden in wonder and snow, or sudden with summer,
> This land stares at the sun in a huge silence
> Endlessly repeating something we cannot hear.
> Inarticulate, arctic,

Not written on by history, empty as paper,

It leans away from the world with songs in its lakes

Older than love, and lost in the miles. (Scott 96)

"Laurentian Shield," however, is one of his more subtly political Laurentian poems; characterized by working-class diction ("A tongue to shape the vowels of its productivity"), the text seems both to critique capitalist imperialism in North America ("Then the bold commands of monopoly, big with machines, / Carving its kingdoms out of the public wealth") and to advocate a sort of "working-class imperialism":

But a deeper note is sounding, heard in the mines,

The scattered camps and the mills, a language of life,

And what will be written in the full culture of occupation

Will come, presently, tomorrow,

From millions whose hands can turn this rock into children.

Scott's poem insists on the importance of writing in developing this "culture of occupation," and aligns those who work with language with other workers. The poem also demonstrates a common theme in Scott's verse, one which would be picked up by critics such as Margaret Atwood and D.G. Jones during the ascendance of thematic criticism in Canada: the archaeological view, and the alignment of the ancient land with the poet's subjectivity.

I would like here to indulge in a rather arbitrary comparison of Frank Scott's poem with some of Deanna Ferguson's writing. While probably not written with Scott's poem in mind, the following lines excerpted from an untitled poem which opens her collection *The Relative Minor* demonstrate an ideological, as well as aesthetic, gulf between the two poets:

> Articulate. Slaughter was articulated.
>
> You can drill down through the layers but what's more important.
> Over the cliff, up-river, into the great basin, as far as the village
> back to the sea Canada give-way. So it befell the inspired category
> military slavers prefer to call innocent jokes. Origin whose nation
> differ from conceptual neighbour. (Ferguson 1993, 9)

The approach to the land evident in Scott's "Laurentian Shield," and the imperialist assumptions behind that approach, come under scrutiny in Ferguson's discontinuous lines. The first sentence questions the importance of drilling "down through the layers," but she follows with a mapping of the landscape, and concludes the sentence with the ambivalent "Canada give-way": lines which could be read as either descriptive or imperative. The appearance of the country's name in this untitled text, which serves as a sort of preamble to *The Relative Minor*, seems to insist that we read the following sentence which mentions "military slavers" as a critique of the heroic, nation-building sentiment of Scott's "Laurentian Shield." The concluding sentence of this excerpt, "Origin whose nation differ from conceptual neighbour," invokes one of the fundamentals of Canadian identity: difference from the U.S. "Conceptual neighbour," though, reminds us that differences and borders are arbitrary and discursive, and the grammatical contortions of "Origin whose nation differ" nicely inverts the assumed relations of nations to origins: origins are not "discovered" by drilling "down through the layers," but are constructed after the fact by a nation – a nation which, through the grammatical imperatives of the sentence, is figured as plural and differentiated as opposed to singular and monolithic (i.e. "differ" takes first and second person and plural subjects, but not third person singular).

Louis Dudek saw Scott's willingness to express political opinions as a possible weakness in his verse. Thinking primarily of Scott's satiric poems, Dudek declares "in the poems of F.R. Scott politics assumes the central declarative position for the poet: he becomes too obviously a socialist writing socialistic verse, a man with a political purpose, not primarily a poet distracted by the times into shouting out a political message" (Dudek 63). It would be harder to make the same argument about Ferguson's texts: while she and some of her contemporaries might appear as no less "obviously...socialist[s] writing socialist verse," the opacity of her writing, and that of others associated with KSW, would seem to foreclose the possibility of didacticism, and would also suggest that they remain "primarily poets." Yet this separation of poetry and the social, of poetics and lived conditions, is precisely what many of the writers associated with KSW wish to resist. Furthermore, although the positions of all of the writers I discuss in this project within the category of KSW are without exception leftist, I could not argue that their writing is somehow "socialist" in the sense of advancing an international political movement. As I point out above, Klobucar and Barnholden do stress the importance of KSW's relations with the International Workers of the World, but it becomes difficult to articulate those relations with respect to the poetry (especially when considering the writers as a collective). This is a consequence of the forms of the texts, to be sure, but it is also a reflection of the political positions available to the emergent generation of poets in Canada today. These available positions should be recognized as a function at least in part of the gradual erosion of the power of elected parliaments in the face of "globalization"; in other words, a shift from decisions made at the national parliamentary level to decisions made at the extra-national judiciary level (what the right calls "judicial activism" on a global scale). But perhaps the most important

reason for what might be perceived as electoral apathy is that the fundamental underpinnings and assumptions of the state, something which Scott would never have questioned, are the target of critique by Ferguson and many of her contemporaries.

The aesthetic differences between the two passages above mirror the distance and differences between the two poets, but also obscures their shared ideological sympathies. Both Frank Scott and Deanna Ferguson have produced poetry that functions at times as a critique of capitalism, and each regards this critique as something to be lived as well. Yet there is a gulf as wide as the temporal and aesthetic distance separating these poems in the manner in which they live, and lived, their critique. Scott was a central Canadian lawyer who would become dean of McGill law school, write studies of Canada's constitution, serve as a member of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, and win major civil rights lawsuits in Quebec such as the battles against the "padlock laws" of Premier Maurice Duplessis or against the censorship of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (Smith 82). He was also involved in the early formation of social democratic political parties in Canada: he was one of the founders of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) which was the forerunner to the New Democratic Party (NDP), helped draft the Regina Manifesto, and served as national chair of the CCF from 1942-1950. In the context of an argument about the common denominators among anglo-Canadian writers of family background and education, Robert McDougall points out that Scott was "the son of Archdeacon F.G. Scott and grandson of Professor Scott who for forty years taught anatomy at McGill University" and is "F.R. Scott, LL.D., B.A., B.LITT., B.C.L., F.R.S.C." (McDougall 228). Thus Scott lived his oppositional politics within the parameters of an anglo-Canadian cultural and political elite, something which could not be said about Ferguson and the poets associated with the Kootenay School.

Scott's involvement in politics came at a time when such a thing was not unheard of among Canadian poets: Phyllis Webb ran (unsuccessfully) as a CCF candidate in a B.C. provincial election in 1949, as did A.M. Klein (also unsuccessfully) in Montréal that same year. Perhaps because of this poor track record at electoral success, contemporary poets seem much more reluctant to participate in normative politics.

I would suggest, then, that while social and political activism on the part of previous generations of poets in Canada, when not actively nationalist, was usually conducted within national institutions, social and political activism on the part of poets in contemporary Canada is often targeted towards those institutions. The political stances which had cemented earlier generations of poets as "Canadian" today serve to loosen the ideological assumptions which would gather contemporary poets within the same category. This is not to say, however, that citizenship no longer remains an important political category, or a useful frame in which to situate their work. Rather the poets associated with KSW would likely be more sympathetic with a model of citizenship advanced by thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe: a concept of citizenship which rests upon the ethico-political principles of modern democracy which Mouffe identifies as "the assertion of liberty and equality for all" (Mouffe 378), and which is predicated upon differences and conflicts between and within subjects: "[t]he aim is to construct a 'we' as radical democratic citizens, a collective political identity articulated through the principle of democratic equivalence" (379). Such a model of citizenship exceeds national borders while recognizing their historical and cultural significance: rather than implying some vacuous notion of "global citizenship," this citizenship is situated within the overlapping and conflicting contexts of the local, national and global.

(North) American Poetics?

> There is no such thing as American poetry
>
> Foreign concepts
>
> Old School
>
> --Kevin Davies, from "Untitled Poem from the First Clinton Administration" (2000, 85)

When we encounter the word "America" in a poem by a writer associated with the Kootenay School, as we do not only in this excerpt but in Kevin Davies' earlier book *Pause Button* ("The lights are on in tough America" [1992, 55]) or in the title of Ferguson's poem "Crisis in My America," we should read it as potentially denoting both the U.S. as well as the "new world" – that is, French and English Canada, the U.S., the Caribbean, Brazil and Spanish America – as a whole. The national ambivalences of the younger generation of poets in Canada might tempt us to read them as "American writers," as in writers "of the Americas" – although as I argue below this approach presents its own problems. Further in Davies' "Untitled Poem" he mentions America again, in consecutive lines:

> Parasites of America are held down while a bipartisan congress takes shits in their mouths
>
> For immigrants America is full of mysteries (2000, 88)

In the first line "America," because of the mention of "a bipartisan congress," appears to refer solely to the U.S., although "Parasites of America" could suggest "parasites" of the "Americas." The second line, written as it is by a recent migrant to the U.S., might be read as a testimony to Davies' own experiences, although once again the broader understanding of "America" could apply.

Davies' assertion that "There is no such thing as American poetry" appears audacious if we read "American" as an adjective denoting the U.S., audacious because from an outsider perspective a canon and tradition of American poetry – from Emerson and Poe through Whitman and Dickinson and into the twentieth century – seems very firmly established in that country. There remain, however, competing canons and traditions of "American poetry,"[6] and, more importantly, challenges have emerged over recent decades to the hegemony of a white, anglo-centric, male perspective. In other words, the pressures from previously marginalized constituencies that have plunged "Canadian Literature" into crisis are also being brought to bear on the far more entrenched formation, both in practice and as a field of academic inquiry, of American Literature. There are similarities in both instances: the rise of diasporic, non-European communities and literatures have made it increasingly difficult to sustain prevailing myths such as the "two nations" in Canada, or the "puritan heritage" in the U.S. Critics such as Carolyn Porter or Paul Jay have recently written of the need to "remap" American literary studies, arguing that the porosity of contemporary political borders needs to be reflected in literary studies. What this has usually meant is an attempt to situate the literature of the U.S. within the context of "the Americas," and with a critical eye that is for the most part directed southward rather than to the north. In her essay "What We Know That We Don't Know: Remapping American Literary Studies," Porter cites a number of Latino literary scholars such as José David Saldívar, José Martí, and Ramon A. Gutiérez, as well as anglo-Americans including Lawrence Buell, Philip Fisher, and Gregory Jay, in arguing that American literature be situated in relation to other literatures of the

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[6] For a good overview of the competing traditions in postwar American poetry, see Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996).

Americas. "A Latin American vantage point," Porter writes, "might serve to fracture and destabilize the normative assumptions of an American Studies whose clear focus has traditionally been achieved at the considerable cost of its nearsightedness" (Porter 509). For his part, Jay writes that "our criticism can best be revitalized by paying more attention to locations that are *between* or which *transgress* conventional national borders – liminal margins or border zones in which individual and national identities migrate, merge, and hybridize" (Jay 167), and points out the need for "the work of Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. theorists" in achieving this goal. Although Jay does not discuss Vancouver, that city could certainly be seen as such a "border zone" – something I address in my discussion of Jack Spicer in my first chapter.

While I find this attempt to move beyond the anglo-centricity of the American canon laudable, and the focus on Latin America understandable in a country with a significant hispanic minority, the fact that Canada only occasionally fits into discussions of "literatures of the Americas" seems odd to me. On the other hand, this exclusion might make some sense: Canadian literature should, after all, be viewed more as a North American literature than as a literature of the Americas. There has been far less impact of Latin cultures[7] in Canada than in the United States: notwithstanding, say, George Bowering's involvement with the Mexico City journal *el corno emplumado* in the 1960s, or Chilean-Canadian poets such as Carmen Rodríguez, it has been more the work of Trinidadian-Canadian, Chinese-Canadian, Indo-Canadian, and aboriginal Canadian writers, to name a few constituencies, which

[7] With the exception, of course, of French culture. In a speech to Central and South American delegates at the "Summit of the Americas" in Quebec City, April 2001, Premier Bernard Landry of the sovereigntist Parti Québécois described the Quebec "nation," in Spanish, as "we Latins of the North" (Séguin A5). While the process of "globalization" has alarmed many cultural nationalists in Quebec because it continues to reinforce the hegemony of English, it has also been welcomed as a way for smaller countries and embattled cultures to find common ground to oppose this hegemony.

have challenged and transformed dominant canons and assumptions. Even the establishment of further economic ties with Brazil and the countries of Spanish America will not necessarily lead to more cultural exchange; Lake Sagaris, for instance, has noted that despite an estimated 40 000 Chileans living in Canada, a sizable expatriate Canadian community in Chile, and the fact that "Canadian investment in Chile has mushroomed," we remain as "ignorant of each other's moral and imaginative place on this planet as we ever were" (Sagaris 13).

This mutual ignorance should come as no surprise: as is the case with the trade agreements, Canada's bilateral relationship with the U.S. vis-à-vis literature and especially poetry overshadows all other relationships. As Larry Shouldice reminds us, the position of U.S. literature in the New World is atypical and asymmetrical for reasons "that go well beyond mere considerations of quantity and quality" (Shouldice 51). Writing in 1982, Shouldice points out that "[o]f all American literatures, that of the United States provides the only instance in which a colonial literature has in turn developed into a colonizing literature on a grand scale, as part of an immense imperialistic cultural machine" (51). Because of a shared language, anglophone Canadian culture is affected by this situation all the more acutely, suggesting that the situation of Canadian literature within the context of the Americas needs to reflect this asymmetry. And yet I remain uncomfortable simply collapsing Canadian literature into a broader North American literature, if only because of the differing national contexts and interests - such as a greater focus on Latin America - of American literature.

Extending the frame of reference beyond the continental context and into a broader global anglophone literary field also presents problems for attempts to situate KSW within a global grid. Of the writers associated with KSW, Dorothy Trujillo

Lusk's work is most concerned with investigating the privileges, limits, and political consequences of being "English," and of writing in that language. More specifically, Lusk, along with Jeff Derksen, has embraced the topic of anglo-Canadian identity – and anglo-Canadian colonial relations with Britain – in ways most of the other KSW writers have not. Yet Lusk does this less through direct assertion than through indirect questioning:

> nothing
>
> I am pleased. I like pruning and you keep away over water.
>
> I am a happier instance yet wet of.
>
> I am such a fucking Canadian about all of this but in a good way.
>
> (Lusk 85)

The very title of the poem from which the above excerpt is taken, "Why Do I Have a Phony English Accent?," provokes more questions than it answers: does "Phony English Accent" imply an affected British accent, or does it suggest a less "authentic" English accent (i.e. a North American accent)? If the answer is the latter, the title could raise more questions about authenticity, and the ways in which such authenticity is determined. The question in the title could also be read as a lament, or as a strategy of feigned naiveté meant to remind us of an ongoing colonialism. Finally, it might not have to do with speaking at all, let alone Lusk's speech, but refer instead to the conventions of poetry: Lusk could be arguing that most poetry written in English, in Canada, has a "Phony English Accent," i.e. reproduces belated conventions from across the Atlantic.

Similarly, the humour of "I am such a fucking Canadian about all of this but in a good way" relies upon our sense that the adjective "Canadian," as it so often

does, raises more questions than it answers. "In a good way" implies its opposite: what exactly would it mean to be Canadian in a "bad way"? Again, there are a number of possibilities: smugly non-American, for one; anglophone imperialists for another; selfish, overconsuming, ecologically reckless North Americans for yet another. In implying that there are ways of being Canadian in a "bad way," indeed that this might be the default "way" of being "Canadian," Lusk's text questions certain clichés about the word "Canadian" (egalitarian, peaceful, progressive and so on) which would presumably be the "good way" of which Lusk writes. Still, despite the seeming ambivalence of this statement, it marks an assertion of national identity which has been increasingly rare in recent decades.

The question of globalization is a pressing one for most contemporary artists and writers across the planet, but I would argue it presents certain problems specific first to poets working in English, and more specifically to anglophone Canadian poets. Fredric Jameson has recently argued that while "American mass culture, associated as it is with money and commodities, enjoys a prestige that is perilous for most forms of domestic cultural production" (Jameson 1998, 59), such prestige does not extend to the products of anglophone "high culture":

> ...it is important for us [in the United States] to realize that for most people in the world English itself is not exactly a culture language: it is the lingua franca of money and power, which you have to learn and use for practical but scarcely for aesthetic purposes. But the very connotation of power then tends in the eyes of foreign speakers to reduce the value of all forms of English-language high culture. (59)

I am not in a position to speculate as to the accuracy of Jameson's conclusions about the attitude of "foreign speakers" to English-language high culture. However, with

respect to countries with large anglophone populations, the question as to whether the prestige of American mass culture is mirrored by the reception of American high culture is difficult to answer. Certainly federal attempts to encourage or protect the autonomy of Canadian cultural production have experienced similar degrees of success (and failure) with respect to both mass culture (e.g. Canadian content quotas on popular music radio stations) and high culture (e.g. the Canada Council). I would observe that Canadian poetry, however internally differentiated and difficult to taxonomize domestically, remains for the most part an autonomous and nationally circumscribed sphere: the anglophone Canadian writers who have achieved the most notoriety abroad are either novelists, or poets recognized for their fiction. This may perhaps be changing: certainly some poets associated with KSW (such as Derksen, Davies, Robertson, or Ferguson) continue to see their reputations grow in the U.S. and to some extent Britain. But does this suggest a newfound interest in Canadian cultural production south of the border, or is it a reflection of a "levelling" – and concomitant homogenizing – of the anglophone poetic field in North America and indeed the North Atlantic?

In many ways these questions of the relationship of Canadian writing to a broader global context have haunted domestic critical and historical approaches since at least 1943, when A.J.M. Smith in his "Introduction" to *The Book of Canadian Poetry* divided poets in Canada into two broad groups:

> Some of the poets have concentrated on what is individual and unique in Canadian life: others, upon what it has in common with life everywhere. The one group has attempted to describe and interpret whatever is essentially and distinctively Canadian and thus come to terms with an environment that is only now ceasing to be colonial.

> The other, from the very beginning, has made a heroic attempt to transcend colonialism by entering into the universal, civilizing culture of ideals. (Smith 2-3)

Although Smith does not explicitly use the terms in this passage, critics since would come to divide these groups into the "native" and "cosmopolitan." While Smith perceived the latter group as more heroic in their attempts to "transcend colonialism" through a universalist approach, others (such as Robin Matthews or Keith Richardson) saw "outside" influences – and especially American influences – as a sure sign of the "colonized mind," to use Richardson's phrase. What is interesting is that Smith's binary is equivalent to the two perspectives of nationalism and humanist universalism which Frank Davey identifies as diverting "readers, critics, and often writers" from an "awareness of the political dimensions of literature" (1993, 15). In "A Note on Canadian Poetry," Robert Creeley would observe that "Canadian poetry might always be this attempt, not so much to fit, say, into an environment but to act in the given place. If there is no 'major' poet in Canada, if there never was one, etc., I think it is part of this same problem. A theoretical embarrassment of 'culture,' all the tenuosities of trying to be local and international at the same time, etc., takes an energy otherwise of use in the making of an idiom peculiar to the given circumstances" (Creeley 227-228). True to form, Creeley's writing here is gnomic and presumptuous – it is unclear to me just exactly what the difference is between fitting "into an environment" and acting "in the given place," and his "etceteras" might have been fleshed out. But his emphasis on "the making of an idiom particular to the given circumstances" is clear enough and a familiar refrain throughout his writing. Working under quite different historical circumstances from the late 1950s context of Creeley's essay, the KSW writers have devoted their energies to developing

this particular idiom, though in a localism that moves beyond the particularities of place which characterized Vancouver writing in the 1960s, towards a more "contextual localism" – one which situates the social and economic particulars of Vancouver within a doubled movement that is at once enigmatically "provincial" and globally "cosmopolitan."

This dissertation is divided into three main chapters, each of which is intended to investigate one of the three categories named in my title. The first chapter, "History," does not delineate the historical development of KSW but rather looks at the broader development of a tradition of innovative writing in Vancouver since the 1960s. The second chapter, "Community," looks at KSW as a collectivity by situating them in relation to differing communities in Vancouver and abroad. The final chapter, "Poetics," focuses on the work of four poets associated with the school – Kevin Davies, Deanna Ferguson, Lisa Robertson, and Jeff Derksen. I conclude with a brief "Coda" which looks at more recent developments at the Kootenay School, and reflects upon the school's long-term impact and short term prospects. While I thus implicitly differentiate between "history," "community" and "poetics" through my title of this project as well as its individual chapters, in practice I see each category as thoroughly bound up in each other. Regardless of what innovations contemporary writers develop through their work, poetics emerge intertextually, through a re-writing, appropriation, or rejection of prior poetics, and in this way history and poetics are linked. Furthermore, and this becomes all the more apparent when one visits Vancouver, history, or rather shared and contested historical knowledge, is one of the binding agents of any community. Finally, a truly innovative, oppositional poetics cannot develop in isolation, within a vacuum: community is necessary for the production, distribution, reception, and canonization of poetry and poetics. While I

would argue that these overlapping categories characterize any scene, the fundamental claim of this entire project is that the Kootenay School of Writing, as an oppositional educational and cultural site, was an open-ended *community* insofar as the parameters of the community were never firmly established, or its principles explicitly codified. This model of community corresponded with an open form *poetics* practiced by writers associated with the school. In what follows I explore the consequences of this correspondence by reading the poetry as particular articulations of, and contributions to, a specific historical and social context.

CHAPTER ONE: HISTORY

The few critical discourses on KSW that have been written to this point share an emphasis on the genealogy of literary postmodernism in Vancouver, an emphasis focused specifically on the 1960s. These competing narratives are notable not only for what they each choose to include and exclude, but perhaps more importantly by the fact that they apparently need to be told: that to understand the writing which emerged out of the context of KSW one need be familiar with a host of characters from the forty-plus-year story of innovative writing in Vancouver, from *TISH* and the "Downtown Poets" (the familiar triumvirate of Gerry Gilbert, Maxine Gadd and bill bissett), to promising poets who died early such as Red Lane and Sam Perry, to visiting or expatriate American writers such as Robert Duncan or Ed Dorn, to 1970s writers such as Brian Fawcett or Pat Lowther. This chapter will be my contribution to the debate, although my procedure here will be less to trace a straight genealogy than to isolate a series of synchronic moments and texts, usually ones which I feel have been overshadowed or otherwise elided, and try to establish certain correspondences or comparisons or linkages with work of the 1980s poets.

The group of poets associated with *TISH: A Poetry Newsletter, Vancouver*, including George Bowering, Frank Davey, and Fred Wah, have come to occupy a privileged position within these narratives, tending, in Peter Culley's words, "to take something close to full credit for the introduction of literary postmodernism to the frontier" (Culley 1992, n. pag). While *TISH* was undoubtedly an important and formative moment in Vancouver's cultural history, at least part of the reason for its prominence is the fact that Bowering, Davey and Wah would come to occupy academic positions from which they could write and teach their way into that history – and I want to stress that I am not accusing or implying that they did so in bad faith.

There have been in recent decades several attempts to revise this history, including interventions from writers associated with KSW such as Peter Culley and Jeff Derksen. In a catalogue essay on Gerry Gilbert, Culley argues that poets such as Gilbert, Gadd and bissett, "whose response [to the formal possibilities of the New American Poetry] might have been thornier, more idiosyncratic, or...might have *predated* TISH, were difficult to fit into the new equation" (Culley 1992, n.pag). Culley sees the hegemony of the *TISH* poets as obscuring the contributions of other poets not associated with the academy, and he ascribes this condition to class dynamics:

> The difference of social milieu and context that separated Gilbert from the editors of TISH were, at the time, of little moment. Both were, after all, united against the common enemies of provincialism and cant, both drew liberally from the same stream of influence. Neither could these differences have been said to alter the trajectory of Gilbert's career, fixed as it was on its particular course. But as the TISH poets and their students took their places within the Academy and began to compile the histories of their era and milieu, the problem of assessing Gilbert's place within it was exacerbated by subtle problems of class. What had been university students interacting with a poet who happened to live off campus was [sic] now tenured professors writing, for the public record, about someone who lived precariously and strangely, someone for whom the rebellion of youth had carried over into adulthood and middle age. (n. pag)

Contrary to Culley's description of the *TISH* poets as privileged subjects whose class positions enabled them to determine the histories of Vancouver poetry, Pauline

Butling points out that they "shared a class consciousness or at least an outsider experience in that most of them came from working class, and/or non-urban families" (Butling 2001, 113). Butling takes a more nuanced approach to the *TISH* writers' academic affiliations, noting that class hierarchies prevailed *within* the academic milieu as much as they did *between* that milieu and "downtown":

> Notwithstanding the influx of working class, non-urban students at the University of British Columbia, the old class hierarchies still prevailed in the cultural and social formations. The "dominant pole" (i.e. the student government, the sororities and fraternities, or the editors of the campus publications) came mainly from the Vancouver upper-middle class, had a city-bred sophistication, and moved easily into (and felt entitled to) the available positions of power and privilege at UBC. While the *Tish* poets were investigating "the problem of [poetic] margins" in order to develop an open-form poetics (*Tish* 3 & 4), they were also directly experiencing the problems of negotiating life on the social margins at the University. Their resulting class-based anger helped propel them towards an oppositional poetry and poetics. (114)

While Culley sees the *TISH* poets as abandoning or attenuating the more "radical" elements of their poetics and social stances as they entered the academy, Butling notes that as young, white, able-bodied males "they were in fact quite close to the 'dominant pole'....[as] the inheritors of the patrimony [they] will 'naturally' move quickly into positions of power and influence" (119). For Butling, this privilege did not mean an end to their social and poetic radicality but was in fact what *enabled* them to assume a radical position: "the designation of 'radical' indicates a position of

power *within* a patrilineal genealogy, as well as an outsider position...the 'radical' is a site of power and as such is both a contested *and* a protected site" (121).

TISH's prominence in Vancouver's literary history, their association with American poets, and their ostensibly "radical" or otherwise innovative poetics have made the temptation to compare them with KSW almost irresistible. For Culley, KSW was "[s]imilar to TISH in that the formal energies which drove it were largely imported from south of the border" (1992, n. pag). George Bowering notes that "the KSW poets, like those of the sixties, share interest and venues with the poets of the U.S. avant-garde" (Bowering 1994, 136) and he hears in KSW an echo of *TISH* to such an extent that he claims "Frank Davey's counterpart among the KSW poets is Jeff Derksen" (136-37). The repetition and duplication of *TISH* by KSW is apparently so complete that even as singular a poet as Davey finds his correlative in a specific emerging writer (and vice versa). For his part, Derksen reads KSW's relation to *TISH* as something more akin to an oedipal struggle, or at least as a reaction to *TISH*'s supposedly "proprioceptive" and "projectivist" poetics. While Derksen hesitates "to draw direct lines of influence because the KSW scene has not defined itself in terms of literary genealogy, but in terms of shared strategies – and these strategies come from visual art, time-based arts, cultural theory, a rather rigorous bar scene, as well as a diverse North American literary scene," he "conflate[s] the late eighties and early sixties scenes with their similar positions within, and reaction to, a stalled literary climate" (1994, 155). For Derksen, the "point of divergence" between the KSW writers and those of the 1960s "may well be in the valorisation of Olson's sense of 'proprioception' in which the body is seen as the sum of sensations rather than something that is negotiated socially" (156).

While Derksen has further claimed that "[a]s a movement, *Tish* is defined as an avant garde that rebelled against other aesthetics, against other Canadian poetics, namely the more national poetics centred in Toronto and Montreal," and as a result "[t]he socially conscious and community based aspects of the *Tish* project were obscured" (1995-96, 65), I would argue that their historical impact has been less a consequence of the actual poetry and poetics which they produced in the newsletter, than in their social organization and collective stance. In this respect I would agree with Clint Burnham's notion that *TISH* has become "an archetype or stereotype, or at least trope" (Burnham 1996, 21). The poetry in *TISH* was in fact very uneven, and we could hardly note a consistency in style among Davey, Bowering and Wah, as well as within their individual bodies of writing during that period. Davey himself has dismissed much of their poetic statements as "documents of their novitiates," and recognizes similar failings in their poetic juvenilia, although he asserts "their failings were outside our power at the time, being mostly failings in knowledge and skill rather than judgement" (9). To put it another way, I doubt that many younger Vancouver writers carry with them copies of *TISH 1-19*, or hold animated discussions about the merits of Bowering's "Circus Maximus" or Davey's bridge poems. What *TISH* did provide was a model: in Butling's words their innovations include "articulating 'place' as a complex cultural and historical formation and democratizing the Canadian literary field by legitimating alternative discursive/ geopolitical positions" (119). *TISH* also provided, perhaps more importantly, a history: although by now the tellings and retellings of that history have transformed it into something approaching mythological status. This might be an unavoidable situation: as Michael Davidson has suggested, "[t]he writing of literary history invariably takes mythic forms" (Davidson 1). Davidson further argues that what we come to call "schools" or

"movements" emerge from a series of "enabling fictions," fictions which on the one hand provide a useful context for the readings of a given text, but which also carry the unfortunate consequence of obscuring the "creative dissension and opposition that are a part of any literary movement" (1).

By introducing this chapter with a brief discussion of *TISH*, I too might seem to be running the risk of reproducing a familiar narrative of Vancouver literary history which places that newsletter at the origin of its "postmodern" period. Within the context of this study, I might also be implicitly establishing a similarly familiar parallel between *TISH* and the KSW – or situating them both as bookends or brackets. But I would be remiss to neglect that moment entirely, and I do, after all, discuss Fred Wah's work in this chapter – though work from a period much later in his career – and cite Bowering and Davey's criticism throughout this study. As I mention above, my goal here is less to trace genealogies than to observe synchronic moments, and I am more interested in what Jack Spicer would call "correspondences" than in direct connections. How do Spicer's own imaginings of Vancouver anticipate differing models of community which would emerge over the following decades? What significance can we attach to the correspondences and non-correspondences between a Roy Kiyooka poem published in the mid 1960s and a version revised several decades later? Did the experimental magazine *periodics* establish the site of a vital cross-border dialogue which KSW would nuture? What vestiges of the "Kootenays" can we detect in the Kootenay School of Writing? This chapter may appear somewhat digressive in a project ostensibly focusing on the KSW scene, but one of my main theses in this project is that the Kootenay School developed out of a specific historical trajectory of innovative poetics and writing communities in Vancouver, and that the poets' knowledge of that history was crucial in informing their poetics.

understandings of community, and public stances. Thus I feel the need to establish what I consider formative moments in this historical trajectory.

"Love / Of this our land, turning": Jack Spicer's Vancouver Poems

In the third issue of the *Georgia Straight Writing Supplement* (April 1-8, 1970), Stan Persky and Dennis Wheeler publish a statement of "Intent" as to the purpose of the supplement which merits quoting at length:

> To put into print, with some immediacy, writing for this place. To insistently understand this activity as not separate from the political. That is, to have such an intention as to serve the place's imagination, is to criticize the systematically destructive thing men have set into motion (and we mean particulars, from such a fact as each year 30 or 40 houses are ripped out of Kitsilano, say, and replaced by faceless boxes which as living space make life less possible all the way to the general condition of being in a city that is in a country which has a colony-relationship to a country whose form [sic] is capitalist imperialism). That is what we mean by political; it does not require sitting down with that as your subject: it will enter the work. (16)

Persky and Wheeler's "Intent" corresponds with some of the concerns, and approach to practice, of the later KSW writers: the recognition of the political as manifest in the immediate social context, the emphasis on writing as intimate engagement with this context, and the interest in both the local and global dynamics informing their contemporary moment. Yet the previous issue of the *Writing Supplement* (December 1969) was devoted exclusively to the work of Jack Spicer (who had died four years earlier), re-printing his *Admonitions* and *A Book of Music*, along with an essay by

Robin Blaser (the kernel of his later "The Practice of Outside," published in Spicer's *Collected Books*), and a short piece by Jim Herndon. What were the circumstances which would result in the publication of relatively early work[8] by a deceased San Francisco poet in a magazine ostensibly devoted, immediately, to "writing for this place"? Moreover, how do we read what seems to be Spicer's inclusion in the Vancouver scene in light of the editors' (one of whom is himself an American) politicized statement about Canada's "colony-relationship" to the U.S.? In the Spicer issue, Persky and Wheeler also include an editorial statement, this one entitled "What We're Up To," which also claims the object of the supplement is to serve the "mind of the community, or the imagination of the place, Vancouver." However, in that statement they further articulate an ambition to create an inter-city network of like-minded projects:

> The general possibility of this idea is that underground newspapers in other cities will do likewise—and there could be the same kind of national exchange as now exists for news. So each paper would have the double advantage of being able to encourage local writing in their place and yet to print stuff from other places. (39

I will contend that Spicer's work occupies a uniquely 'doubled' position with respect to the Vancouver scene of the 60s and early 70s—at once unmistakably 'foreign' while at the same time part of "the imagination of the place."

The publication of Spicer's work in *The Georgia Straight Writing Supplement* appears less contradictory if we investigate Spicer's relationship with the Vancouver community from his first visit in early 1965 to his last visit later that year just prior to

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[8] That is, relatively early in the period from the publication of *After Lorca* (1957) to his death in 1965, during which time he wrote the poetry that would comprise his *Collected Books*.

his death, when he delivered the first three of what were to be collected as his "Vancouver Lectures" (the final lecture would be delivered later that summer at Berkeley). At this time Spicer's work was already influencing several Vancouver writers, George Bowering in particular, and this helped produce a departure from the dominance of Black Mountain tenets both in Bowering's work and the practice and ideals of the writing community as a whole, given the challenges to Olson's projectivist notions of composition implicit and explicit in Spicer's poetry.[9] But Spicer was not only an outside influence on the Vancouver scene but increasingly a participant in it, and much of his late work emerges from his intimate involvement with that community as much as with the North Beach scene in San Francisco. In a 1972 interview with Brad Robinson, Persky reflects that "[w]hen [Spicer] came back from Vancouver, he looked incredibly healthy. There was an image of radiant Jack. & while he was in Vancouver, he had clearly something that corresponds to poetic vision...." (Persky 8). Moreover, even though he only visited the city twice, Spicer's visits had and continue to have a profound effect on the organization and relations of the literary communities in Vancouver. As Lew Ellingham and Kevin Killian point out,

> Spicer's visit united, if only temporarily, a number of disparate schools of poets, each with its own history, traditions, and agenda. The "downtown" poets, more Beat-influenced, were also more conversant with the visual arts than their campus counterparts. (319)

To that point, the visits to Vancouver (usually at the invitation of Tallman) by Olson, Duncan and Creeley had served – notwithstanding their own particularities and

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[9] Ron Silliman cites "For Harvey," published in *Admonitions*, as "Spicer's sharpest assault on the indulgences of projectivism" (Silliman 1985, 170): "When you break a

idiosyncrasies – to introduce a specific story of American modernism to the city: call it Black Mountain if you will, but this story basically built upon the teachings of Pound and Williams. Spicer's visit, with his astonishing idiosyncrasies, irreverencies, and contradictions, permitted a further opening of the field, and an increased questioning of the authorities of the older and outside influences.

With a few exceptions, most critical approaches to Spicer's work have neglected to adequately address his involvement with the Vancouver scene in the 1960s. In his chapter on Spicer in *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetry and Community at Mid-Century*, Michael Davidson notes the importance of Vancouver on Spicer's writing in the last year of his life, as do Lew Ellingham and Kevin Killian in their biography. While Davidson at first asserts that "[t]hough Spicer's effect on poets within his own circle was substantial, he was relatively unknown outside the Bay Area" (152), he later acknowledges that Spicer arrived at his model of the city as baseball diamond while visiting Vancouver, "where a new and vital poetry community was evolving - a scene in which he was a central figure" (168). Davidson cites the opening lines to the first poem of Spicer's "Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival":

> Start with a baseball diamond high
> In the Runcible Mountain Wilderness. Blocked everywhere by
> stubborn lumber. Where even the ocean cannot reach its
> coastline for the lumber of islands or the river its mouth.

The baseball diamond, like the game of baseball itself, with its balance between closure and openness, the finite and the infinite, embodies Spicer's poetics and politics of community. Acknowledging that these lines "attest[] to the feeling that the [sic]

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line nothing / Becomes better. / There is no new (unless you are humming / Old Uncle

Vancouver was offering a new hope for community that his own lacked," Davidson does not really pursue the implications of this statement, dwelling instead (understandably, given the focus of his study) on Spicer's increasing skepticism "about the literary situation in San Francisco during his last years" (168). But Spicer's intense commitment to the Bay Area locale (demonstrated by his demand for a geographical limit to the distribution of his work, "not to extend beyond the San Francisco Bay Area" [Davidson 153]) was motivated for the most part by an antagonism to the East Coast U.S. literary establishment, an antagonism which did not extend up the coast to Vancouver. Indeed, Spicer's texts were to become increasingly available in Vancouver, particularly after the migration of Persky, Robin Blaser and George Stanley to the city in 1965. Granted, Ellingham and Killian point out that in the early 1960s Spicer "attacked Duncan for championing the new poetry coming out of Vancouver" (234), and cite a letter from Duncan to Robin Blaser which mentions Spicer's "knowing sneers at...Vancouver poets" (235). But these exchanges had more to do with Duncan, and of Spicer's envy of and rivalry with him, than with Vancouver. Once Spicer had visited the city he became, as Duncan had earlier, a champion of its writers. For instance, after the success of his final visit in 1965 Spicer organized a special reading of "New Vancouver Poets" at the Berkeley Poetry Conference, which included Dennis Wheeler, Gladys Hindmarch and Neep Hoover, demonstrating, according to Ellingham and Killian, "how far Spicer's predilections had swung away from 'organizing' San Francisco poets and towards the north" (346).

It is important as well to remember that it was Spicer who coined the idea of the 'Pacific Nation,' which would later become the title of Blaser's short-lived magazine. In an interview with Tové Neville which appeared in the *San Francisco*

Tom's cabin) there is no new / Measure."

Chronicle (August 29, 1955, p.33) shortly after his death, Spicer discusses his idea of a nation which would stretch from California to Northern B.C. and even into Alaska.[10] Two issue of *Pacific Nation* were published: the first in 1967, the second in 1969. In his preface to the first issue (dated 'June 3, 1967'), Blaser writes:

> I wish to put together an imaginary nation. It is my belief that no other nation is possible, or rather, I believe that authors who count take responsibility for a map which is addressed to travellers of the earth, the world, and the spirit. Each issue is composed as a map of this land and this glory. Images of our cities and of our politics must join our poetry. I want a nation in which discourse is active and scholarship is understood as it should be, the mode of our understanding, and the ground of our derivatives. (Blaser 3)

Established around the time he would - not without controversy - assume the teaching position at Simon Fraser, *Pacific Nation* seems to me Blaser's attempt to account for his position as diasporic writer: neither rejecting the idea of nation *tout court*, nor abandoning one nation in favour of the other. Blaser imagines a sort of virtual nation whose borders are wavering and contingent, continually re-mapped in the compositions of its poets. *Pacific Nation*, for the most part, stayed true to the spirit of its title by publishing mostly west coast writers, including Blaser, Spicer, Gerry Gilbert, George Stanley, Richard Brautigan, Karen Tallman, Gladys Hindmarch, and Stan Persky (who actually completed the editorial work on the second and final issue).

In *The Book of Magazine Verse* Spicer constructs a similar notion of nation and community. Written as it was during the period in which Spicer was periodically visiting Vancouver, the book makes reference to British Columbia and Canada a

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[10] See Ellingham 1997, 48-49 for further discussion of Spicer's "Pacific Nation."

number of times: most obviously in the poems for the Vancouver Festival, but also in the poems for *Tish* and in these lines from the fourth poem for *Down Beat,* the final sequence of the book and, as it turned out, Spicer's career:

> British Columbia
> Will not become a victim to Western Imperialism
> if you don't let it. All those western
> roads. Few of them
> Northern. (Spicer 264)

By the time of this writing, of course, B.C. had already become a "victim to Western Imperialism," though perhaps Spicer thought if it more as embodying the potential of the frontier for an alternative society. But I also read "west" in these lines as suggesting the "west coast" that Spicer writes about elsewhere in the poems for *Down Beat* ("West Coast is something nobody with / sense would understand"), a stance which might conflict with or problematize notions of a "Pacific Nation" in its recognition that few of "those western / roads" were "Northern." A closer examination of "Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival" would be productive in several respects: the poems offer an intimate commentary on the mid-60s Vancouver scene, present an interesting twist on Spicer's ideas of the integrity of the nation and its relation to culture, problematize the accepted critical understanding of Spicer as exclusively a San Francisco poet, and provide an almost parodic intervention and contribution by Spicer to a 'Canadian' poetry.

"Seven Poems from the Vancouver Festival" should be distinguished from the other poems collected in *Book of Magazine Verse* in that the 'dedicatee' here is in fact not a magazine such as *TISH, Downbeat,* or *The St. Louis Sporting News,* but is rather

an event.[11] Again, this exception has been elided in critical treatments of the poems. In an otherwise excellent essay on "Spicer's Language," for instance, Ron Silliman does note that "[t]he level of reference in *Magazine Verse* to periodicals as dissimilar as *The Nation*, *Downbeat* and *Tish* is unlike the experience of the book *Language*" (Silliman 149), but he might have gone a step further and noted that not all of the poems in the book are for magazines – a structural inconsistency which only heightens the "dissimilarities" of which Silliman speaks. Even Spicer apparently did not feel this exception was of particular importance. Responding to a question by Bowering as to how "the Vancouver Festival poems fit into a magazine series" during his third and final Vancouver lecture in 1965, Spicer replies "I figure it's about as much of a magazine as the *St. Louis Sporting News*. I mean, you have to be expansive. You look at it and write for the CBC and they'd probably accept it" (Gizzi 109). While Spicer does not seem especially interested in the "Vancouver Festival" poems' exception to the *Book of Magazine Verse*'s rule, he does imply a rupture in the boundary between magazine and world, between the textual and the material ("you have to be expansive"). Nevertheless, most of the poems collected in *Magazine Verse* develop some sort of intertextual dialogue with the periodical they are ostensibly written for (albeit proceeding by a process of negation, in that Spicer wrote poems intentionally antithetical to the aesthetics of the magazines and which he expected or hoped they would not publish), and thus engage with various differing communities of readers and writers. "Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival," on the other hand, are unique in that they address a transitory *moment* rather than an existing textuality. This is not insignificant given that the poems are all in some way concerned with

[11] The other possible exception to this might be the "Three Poems for *Tish*," given the critical conflation of the title of the newsletter with a specific community of poets, a conflation I also manage to produce above.

theories of community, addressing the fleeting, ephemeral, 'extra-textual' moments and personal relationships that are crucial to the development of literary communities and histories but which are too often lost to conventional historicization:

> The Beatles, devoid of form and color, but full of images play
>
> outside in the living room.
>
> Vancouver parties. Too late
>
> Too late
>
> For a nice exit. (261)

"The Beatles" here remind us further of the global dynamic informing and problematizing the localized understanding of community to which Spicer was firmly committed. It is not only that the Beatles represent a debased, free-floating textuality of surfaces, "devoid of form and color, but full of images," but that they "play outside in the living room," invading localized space through the flattening and culturally homogenizing effects of modern technology and market-oriented modes of distribution. As Robin Blaser writes of Spicer:

> He was always sitting in the midst of poetry. An ungrammatical disturbance. At his table in the bar—night after night—predictable only in that. Most of us noticed the way he wove poetry in and out of what we were. In The Place on Grant Street, 1957, he set up a "blabbermouth night." It was, when I heard it, a kind of wonderful, funny jabberwocky that was spoken, full of a language alive to the tongue of anyone ready to stand up there. Later, at Gino & Carlo's on Green Street, things changed. George Stanley once commented that it was the Beatles that did him in. There is some truth in this. Another

> sound entered. You could not be heard at the table. The language game that was played was partly destroyed. (Blaser 197?, 315)

The idea of the city as diamond which Spicer develops in "Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival" offers an attempt to deal with the saturation of local space by a certain transnational dynamic. The poems manage to construct and sustain Vancouver as a site of ambivalence, at once particularly local and fleetingly transnational.

As I note in my introductory chapter, Vancouver could be described as what Paul Jay terms a "border zone": "locations that are *between* or which *transgress* conventional national borders – liminal margins or border zones in which individual and national identities migrate, merge, and hybridize" (Jay 167). A "border zone," Jay points out, has much in common with Mary Louise Pratt's notion of a "contact zone." Pratt's term, however, seems more geared towards what we more conventionally think of as postcolonial situations: "contact zone" in her formulation would include "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt 4) as well as "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into conflict with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6). Given the emphasis by Pratt on cultural disparities, agonistic struggles, and asymmetrical relations of power, it would seem irresponsible to use the term with respect to U.S. and Canadian cultural contacts: the countries' shared language, geography and relatively similar positions within a global hegemony require a more nuanced approach, or at least the more restrained rhetoric

accompanying Jay's term of "border zone," when discussing transnational cultural relations.

That Vancouver might be termed a "border zone" could account for a degree of critical blindness to the city's importance to Spicer's later career, but Spicer's own writing strategies also lead to a construction of the city as "between" borders: the poems themselves seem to blur the boundaries between Vancouver and San Francisco. My argument can perhaps best be made by reference to an earlier text of Spicer's, *After Lorca* (1958). In one of his 'letters' to Garcia Lorca, Spicer develops his theory of 'correspondences' so crucial to an understanding of what seems to be the intensely metaphorical ground of his poems:

> Things do not connect; they correspond. That is what makes it possible for a poet to translate real objects, to bring them across language as easily as he can bring them across time. That tree you saw in Spain is a tree I could never have seen in California, that lemon has a different smell and a different taste. BUT the answer is this—every place and every time has a real object to *correspond* with your real object—that lemon may become this lemon, or it may even become this piece of seaweed, or this particular color of gray in this ocean. (34)

In "Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival" several words—or rather *objects*—which consistently recur in his oeuvre, such as diamonds, seagulls, or oceans, appear repeatedly, inviting (or rather creating) correspondences between San Francisco and Vancouver. I am thinking here of lines from a poem in *After Lorca* such as "A Diamond"("The universe falls apart and discloses a diamond / Two words called seagull are peacefully floating out where the waves are" (23)) compared with lines from "Seven Poems from the Vancouver Festival" ("The seagull with only one leg,

remote / From identification" (262)). The development of such correspondences is perhaps aided by the consistency of the Pacific Coastal landscape which permeates Spicer's work, although the specificities of Vancouver do enter the poem:

> And our city shall stand as the lumber rots and Runcible
> mountain crumbles, and the ocean, eating all of islands,
> comes to meet us. (259)

> And Victoria fights New Westminster. And
> They're all in the same game. Trapped
> By mountains and ocean. Only
> Awash on themselves. (262)

Although Spicer's work has not really been considered within a postcolonial frame, Homi K. Bhabha's notion of "ambivalence" is pertinent here: "the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (Bhabha 150). Again, I would not deign to compare Canada's colonial relationship to the U.S. with that of India to England, nor would I accuse Spicer, à la Keith Richardson, of cultural imperialism (although these poems certainly imagine British Columbia as frontier). But there is in Spicer's notion of "correspondences," as well as in his poetry, a similar understanding of displacement and difference in the act of writing – a *différance* which the unique circumstances of the composition of the "Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival" makes evident.

Spicer further introduces to this ambivalent site, wavering between transnational correspondences and local specificities, a fantastic, nonsense image of "Runcible Mountain," a reference to Edward Lear. Locating his city "high / In the

Runcible Mountain wilderness," Spicer establishes another ambivalent correspondence, this time between the real and the fantastic, the historical and the utopian. Spicer's faith in poetry's ability to transform social space – both by its potential to 'translate' real objects 'across' and its own ontological status as a real object with significance in the world – along with the almost journalesque quality to some of the poems, creates the impression of an intimate dialogue between the poet and the city, writing it even as it writes him:

> Giving the message like a seagull scwaking about a dead piece of bait.
> Out there on the pier—it's been there for hours—the cats and the
> seagull
> fight over it.
> The seagull with only one leg, remote
> From identification. Anyway
> They're only catching shiners.
> The Chinamen out there on the pier, the kids in blue jeans, the
> occasional
> old-age pensioner.
> The gull alone there on the pier, the one leg
> The individual
> Moment of truth that it cost him.
> Dead bait. (262)

As Spicer remarks in his third Vancouver lecture, "I think that the poem, if I guess right, is going to move toward building the city instead of a celebration of the city as the 'Textbook of Poetry' did" (Gizzi 110). By this I think Spicer means that although

in "A Textbook of Poetry" poetry does have the potential to build alternate cities, it remains posterior to the material city:

> Poetry comes long after the city is collected. It recognizes *them* as a metaphor. An unavoidable metaphor. Almost the opposite. (175)

> But the city that we create in our bartalk or in our fuss and fury about each other is in an utterly mixed and mirrored way an image of the city. A return from exile. (176)

What Vancouver offered him, as Ellingham and Killian relate, was "a community of writers who appreciated his work, and the promise of a new career" (Ellingham 317). For Spicer the future possibilities of poetry, grounded as it is in community, were bound up in the determinations of that community's past: "You have left the boys club where the past matters. The future of your words matters. That future is continually in the past" ("A Textbook" 179). As opposed to San Francisco with its "burden" of literary history, Vancouver's literary history was being written at the time, and though Spicer and ourselves were and would be mistaken to assume the city had no past, it was for him at least a productive illusion.

The ambivalent space Spicer opens up between San Francisco and Vancouver in "Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival" extends to their corresponding national contexts: moreover, this national difference is complicated by his development of a sort of agonistic 'garrison mentality' through the use of us/them and we/they constructions:

> We shall clear the trees back, the lumber of our pasts and futures back, because we are on a diamond, because it is our diamond

Pushed forward from. (259)

Wit is the only barrier between ourselves and them.
"Fifty four forty or fight," we say holding a gun-barrell in our
teeth. (261)

Throughout the seven poems, the referents to these collective pronouns remain unclear: we are never sure whether Spicer is speaking of or to Canadians, or Americans. The overall effect of this in the seven poems is to at once critique U.S. ignorance of (critical blindness to?) national differences and histories as well as critique a paranoid Canadian nationalism, or rather point out the arbitrariness of national boundaries and the violent colonial histories implicit in the act of naming:

The Frazier River was discovered by mistake it being thought
to have been, like all British Columbia,
Further south than it was.
You are going south looking for a drinking fountain
I am going north looking for the source of the chill in my bones.
The three main residential streets of Los Angeles were once
called Faith, Hope, and Charity. They changed Faith to
Flower and Charity to Grand but left Hope. You can
sometimes see it still in the shimmering smog of
unwillingness Figueroa
Was named after a grasshopper.
You are going south looking for a drinking fountain
I am going north looking for the source of the chill in my bones (260)

About this poem, the second in the series, Spicer remarks:

> I'm also right about the Fraser River being a kind of spook, on account of Fraser couldn't even find salt water. He was all the way to Westminster and just gave up on the goddamn thing and said there weren't no ocean, it was about a hundred miles to the south. Unfortunately I spelled Fraser when I wrote the poem F-r-a-z-i-e-r, which is the name of a park, one of the big wilderness areas in southern California. (Gizzi 124)

Spicer's misprision in the composition of the poem, then, operates as a trope for a wider cultural ignorance of British Columbia, both on the part of English explorers as well as contemporary American subjects. Yet a hint of ambivalence still remains in the passage: "Further south" could be read here as a recognition of Vancouver and British Columbia's growing importance in a continental experimental poetics network, though not from a Whitmanian, manifest-destiny oriented perspective, but from a stance which recognizes that this network, this 'city' will be built on local specificities and differences. For Spicer, borders, like the rules of a baseball game, must be recognized as ultimately arbitrary but at the same time respected as crucial to the composition of the game.

In the final poem of the series, the devices which I have noted in the rest of the poems – the ambiguities of collective pronouns, the play between site-specific particulars and their correspondences with other locales, the sense of poetry as at once a process emerging from collectivity and a tragically lonely procedure – combine to develop a position of identity and a stance on nation which is profoundly ambivalent and contradictory:

> It then becomes a matter of not
> Only not knowing but not feeling. Can

A place in the wilderness become utterly buggered up with logs?

A question

Of love.

They

Came out of the mountains and they come in by ship

And Victoria fights New Westminster. And

They're all at the same game. Trapped

By mountains and ocean. Only

Awash on themselves. The seabirds

Do not do their bidding or the mountain birds. There is

No end to the islands. Diefenbacker

Addresses us with a parched face. He

Is, if anything, what

Earthquakes will bring us. Love

Of this our land, turning. (262)

Inaccuracies in spelling aside, 'Diefenbacker' here operates on a number of different registers and invokes a host of contradictory contexts. We could read the name of the palsied former Prime Minister[12] as a synecdoche for 'Canada' as a whole, or for federal power to the east (notwithstanding Diefenbaker, as a western Canadian, was the exception to the rule as far as Canadian Prime Ministers go). But the poem's potential significations become all the more complicated by the lack of a definite

[12] Spicer's time in Vancouver overlapped with a Canadian federal election, and he managed to watch the televised debates. According to Warren Tallman, "Jack was fascinated by John Diefenbaker, who was the Prairies' lawyer. He loved Diefenbaker, the old-style populist politician, who had this tremendous rhetoric, and who also had a variety of palsy of some kind, so he was always slightly shaking when he talked....Jack felt immediate affinity with this guy, and he thought Diefenbaker was really great" (Ellingham an Killian 333-334).

referent for 'us.' The inertia of the poem would seem to imply that 'us' comprises the Vancouver community with whom Spicer is building his diamond city; on the other hand, knowledge of Spicer's citizenship and previous commitments to the locale of San Francisco, as well as the mention of 'earthquakes,' may imply an American audience as the 'us' of these closing lines. Given the ambiguities of these pronouns, "this our land" could refer at once to the specific locale of southwestern BC, Canada as a national construct, or Spicer and Blaser's 'Pacific Nation' – 'turning' in this reading reinforcing and further complicating the already fraught sense of place and nation in the poems.

As I mention above, previous critical readings of "Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival" have themselves mirrored this contradictory and ambivalent stance to place which the poems establish, the readings usually reflecting the imperatives of the critical project at hand. My readings of the poems here are no different. To me, the "Seven Poems" are remarkably prescient in both addressing and further extending the complications introduced by Vancouver's increasing importance in the North American poetic field, and the challenges presented to attempts to accurately discuss the poetry which has emerged from that context within a transnational, continentalist frame, given the stubborn persistence – demonstrated both by the rise of CanLit *and* American Literature – to discuss literature within a national frame. We should remember that cultural nationalism, and the obfuscations it produces, is by no means limited to Canada, and that a re-articulation of poetics since the 1960s within more accurate and possibly enabling critical frames will require as much a reconsideration of American literary histories as it will of Canadian.

Revisionings: Roy Kiyooka's "the 4th avenue poems"

In issue 11 of Bowering's long poem magazine *Imago* (1969), Roy Kiyooka published "the 4th avenue poems," a series of sixteen poems dedicated to "john & jos: more than friends." These names refer respectively to John Newlove and the artist Marken Joslin, with whom Kiyooka had been living in the Kitsilano area of Vancouver. This intimate second person address continues throughout the series as a whole, both through explicit dedications of specific poems (i.e. the dedication to '10': "for Jos, somewhere, in the world") and by the epistolary or journal form of some of the poems:

> Dear John: I threw out all your dirty socks
> foul tin cans and lousy pulp. You left a month ago...
> your women even the fat one doesn't come knocking.
> the mice have gone after other crumbs. (from '2')
> Jos has left.
> John too. Others
> before them
> left by the back door
> I am still here
> tied, to what they
> left behind. what I have made
> I will also leave
> when that time comes (from '8')

Addressed as they are to departed friends, the poems also offer Kiyooka's "farewell to Vancouver," as Roy Miki tells us, "before moving to Montreal where he would teach (1965-69) in the Fine Arts Department at Sir George Williams University" (Miki

308). Kiyooka's note to the poems informs us that the sequence was written "winter 64 / spring 65" and "revised in Montreal winter 68." The poems would be further revised by Kiyooka in the 1990s as he was preparing, in collaboration with Miki, to publish his collected poems under the title *Pacific Windows*. Kiyooka would unfortunately pass away before the editorial and revisionary process was completed, leaving Miki, as was the case with many of the other texts collected in *Pacific Windows*, with a 'computer version' from which to work. Coming from a poet working out of a "desire to be more attentive to the mundane particulars of daily life," for whom the "practice of revision inevitably became a re/vision in which a new text was produced" (Miki 302), these re/visions have a good deal to say about shifts in avant-garde poetic practices from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. In the context of my re/visions of histories of the Vancouver scene in the 1960s, not to mention the recent drive to re/vision the earlier work of poets such as Kiyooka in light of challenges posed by the poetics of race or gender since the 1970s and 1980s, a close examination of transformations of "the 4th avenue poems" provokes questions about reading poetry as a formal textualization or documentation of history, and the problems posed to scholarly interventions and re-readings of this textualization.

For my purposes here, I will focus on one poem in particular, the fifth in the series, in part because it demonstrates some of the most significant formal transformations from the 1968 version to the 1994, but also because it engages with the broader historical and social context of 1960s North America. Here is the version published by Bowering in *Imago*:

> the color of
>
> Death, is black and white,
> puked-in to a million homes. His death
> no more colorful than
> harvey lee oswald's or jack ruby's

when the quake struck Alaska
the eskimos didn't know what hit them.
without t.v. they didn't know
how he got it. it was not their way.

The storm was static on t.v. with
the power gone, the lights all-over-town
snuffed out, one after another.
Judy's father got it, his way, that night.

His way was not theirs. Death, like a set
with burnt-out tubes emits weak signals.
Death, John is no avenger. Vengeance is 3D-
technicolor. Are you alive? Why dont you write? (Kiyooka 1969, 7)

What immediately strikes me about this poem is the degree to which the repetitions, linebreaks, ambiguous pronouns, and discontinuous sentences produce a disjunctive, rather than projective or associational, poetics. Meaning, or reference, in this poem is emphatically contextual: while it appears immediately clear that the occasion of the poem is the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the referent to "His death" is not so much determined by our awareness of the historical context as it is overdetermined by the references to "harvey lee oswald," "jack ruby" but especially by "puked-in to a million homes." A poem ostensibly about the death of JFK quickly transforms into a critique of the flattening effects of mass communications: "His death / no more colorful than."

In the second quatrain, the focus shifts to another major historical event: the devastating Alaska earthquake of 1964. The stanza demonstrates a growing consciousness of the replacement of immediate, material experience of the real with a mediated, technological, virtual re-construction of that experience. 'the eskimos' here introduces a plural pronoun, 'they,' which will as the poem proceeds undergo a similar referential slippage to what we already see happening in the second quatrain with 'he.' "it was not their way" further introduces an element of cultural difference.

an element which appears threatened by the "Vengeance" of "3D- / technicolor." "it" in "it was not their way" lacks a definite referent, thus invoking the multiple contexts of the collision of traditional aboriginal practices with mid-twentieth century technologies, as well as a supposedly pacifist culture, alien to the political violence which would result in the assassination of a U.S. president. The last line of the third stanza, juxtaposed with the first of the fourth ("Judy's father got it, his way, that night. // His way was not theirs"), reveals a common thematic of death threading across all four stanzas: when Judy's father "got it, his way," it was not a mass-media event dealing with death, as was the case with Kennedy and the Alaskan earthquake. "His way was not theirs," however, also re-directs attention back to the ostensible occasion of the poem – the assassination of JFK – and invokes the suspected political conspiracy behind the assassination. Within the immediate context of "the 4th avenue poems" as a whole, the "John" who is addressed in the final quatrain and asked "Are you alive? Why dont you write?" would appear to be the same "John" to whom the series is dedicated; however, given the ostensible occasion of the poem, "John" here could also refer to the dead U.S. president. The effect of the production of multiple and overlapping potential contexts is to demonstrate at the formal level what might be termed the poem's paraphrasable content: a comparison of differing experiences of death, and a critique of the homogenizing, misleading and flattening effects of mass communications. "Vengeance," as an act of violence which occurs posterior to a previous act, is closer to 3D-technicolor than to death (3D-technicolor being posterior to "black and white," but also to the events which it records and re-constructs).

Kiyooka's procedure in the fifth poem of "the 4th avenue poems," as well as the serial form of the poems taken together, is remarkably similar in its disjunctions, not to mention in its ambivalent attitude to mass-communications technology, to that

of Spicer in his *Book of Magazine Verse* or *Language*[13] (see my comments on "Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival" above). Ron Silliman, in a discussion of those books in his piece "Spicer's Language," describes Spicer's strategy as that of 'overdetermination': "the failure (or refusal) of an idea or image to add up (or reduce down) to a single entity...No logos, this implies, can be said to exist which does not, within itself, contain contradiction, negation or some effacing otherness" (Silliman 169). Silliman further describes Spicer's writing as proceeding "by negation, that is, by the registration of a difference" (177), and hails him as "the first truly sentence-oriented poet in the American language":

> The sentence is now the unit of composition and the line, which is nothing more than a line break and the possibility of caesura, locates stress within the sentence. More accurately, it serves to posit stress at places within the syntactic chain that most often twist, or even contradict, the apparent denotative meaning. (190)

While Silliman stops short of naming Spicer as the first 'language poet,' he does claim that his work "anticipates many of the developments in poetry over the past eighteen years" (190) (Silliman is writing in the mid-80s). Much the same could be said of Kiyooka's poem. In fact, in comparing the 1968 version to the 'computer version' of the early 1990s, we might begin to map out broader transformations in North American avant-garde techniques given the contributions made by the so-called 'language poets' over the 70s and 80s and, given the language poets' affinities to the KSW writers, locate another important late 60s precursor.

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[13] This is not to say that Spicer's work was a direct influence on this poem, but rather that the method 'corresponds' to that of Spicer's late work. Kiyooka was, however, certainly familiar with Spicer's poetry by the time of the revisions of the poem, if not at the time of their initial composition.

Here is the 're/visioned' version of the fifth poem of "the 4th avenue poems" as published in *Pacific Windows*:

> the color of death is black & white puked
> into a million livingrooms. his death no more colorful
> than Harvey Lee Oswald's. or a Jack Ruby's.
> when the big quake struck Alaska the Inuits didn't know
> what hit them. without t.v. they didn't know
> how JFK got it. it wasn't their way. the big storm was
> static on t.v. with the power down the lights
> all over town snuffed out one by one. Judy's father got it
> his way that night. his way wasn't their way.
> Death like a burnt-out t.v.set emits weak signals. Death
> John is no avenger: vengeance is 3D-technicolor.
> are you alive? why don't you write? (Kiyooka 1997, 26)

The most striking difference between this and the earlier version of the poem is of course the collapse of the more lineated, stanzaic verse into the prose poem form. There are important changes in diction: "eskimos" becomes "Inuits," for instance; even allowing for the 'mistake' of putting into plural an already plural noun (Inuit) this reflects the historical shift in the naming of aboriginal peoples. A perhaps more significant change would be the replacement of the indefinite pronoun "he" in 1968's "he got it" with a specific reference to "JFK," the effect of which is to reduce the ambiguities which I note in the previous version.

The shift from lineated verse to prose also shifts the correspondences of the poem: whereas in 1968 the text's disjunctions correspond for the most part with the devices and strategies of Spicer's work, in the newer version the text seems more

closely to approximate 'new sentence' practice. If we accept these correlations as valid, this would seem to suggest that Silliman is accurate in locating Spicer as a precursor to the new sentence, and would place Kiyooka's work in a similar aesthetic continuum: only here the situation is such that rather than later poets re-working inherited strategies from their precursors, we have a poet re/visioning his earlier work to correspond with new poetic strategies, reading practices, and communities.

This prompts the question: if the form of the poem changes in the twenty-five years that pass between the re/visions, does its paraphrasable 'content' change as well? Kiyooka has written that the series, along with his "Zodiac Series" of collages which accompanied the publication of Bowering's *The Man in Yellow Boots / El Hombre de las Botas Amarillas* as a special issue of *El Corno Emplumado* (1965), "embodies my own cantankerous sixties politics" (Miki 311). How, then, is a politics differently 'embodied' in the later poem? Moreover, given the increased historical distance from the occasion of the poem's composition, how do we understand the re(con)textualization of history which the poem produces?

One immediate effect of the removal of stanzaic divisions is to collapse the multiple contexts invoked by the poem even further into one another. Whereas in the 'original' version, the stanzaic divisions at least separate several different contexts (the assassination of JFK, the Alaska earthquake, a more localized 'big storm' and an emigmatic reference to 'Judy's father'), in the new version the focus shifts from the quatrains 'down' to the more discrete level of the sentence. To be sure, the sentence is very much an important unit of composition in the earlier version: however, here it appears to be the *primary* unit of composition, with the paragraph acting, in proper new sentence fashion, as a unit of quantity. If we accept Fredric Jameson's analysis of new sentence practice as symptomatic of a "schizophrenic" experience of

temporality, in which, "[w]ith the breakdown of the signifying chain...the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time" (Jameson 27), then Kiyooka's re/visioned work might be read as demonstrating the increased fragmentation of experience and inability to re-construct that experience into a meaningful narrative that we have supposedly been experiencing with increasing intensity over the past decades. If the text's paraphrasable content is a critique of the levelling and de-humanizing effects of mass communications, changes in the poem's form have seemed to mirror precisely those effects. The earlier poem thus offers an anticipatory glance at a 'black and white' death which loomed, in 1964, 65 and 68, across the North American landscape; in 1993 this death returns with a vengeance, not only in "3D-technicolor" but (to step 'outside' the poem for a moment) in a real-time, interactive communications network, the profound ambivalence of which is most clearly articulated by the term "World Wide Web."

As I mention above, Kiyooka regarded "the 4th avenue poems" as a companion piece to his "Zodiac Series" of collages. The collages (see figures 1-2) consist of twelve black and white oval frames in which are juxtaposed various heterogeneous images, including anonymous figures, crowds, various images of violence (a nuclear explosion, a bleeding man being attended to), what appear to be expressive "amorphous scrawls and blotches" (Kröller 37) and language which ranges from the referential ("Do you have to be asked") to discontinuous and handwritten text to arbitrary letters resembling sound or concrete poetry (RRSSSSTTTTTUU). In her illuminating discussion of Kiyooka's collages in relation to Bowering's poetry in *The Man in Yellow Boots*, Eva-Marie Kröller sees the "focus and perspective" of the collages changing "with the dizzying frequency of a television image" and that the

Figure 1

Figure 2

piece as a whole "suggest[s] both an eye mournfully reflecting impending catastrophe and an angry rent in the dense verbal and visual fabric of propoganda" (37). Thus the politics of the "Zodiac Series," as Kröller describes them, would seem to correspond with those of "the 4th avenue poems," at least as I have read those politics in my arguments above.

This identification of the politics of the poetry with that of the collage series may be problematic, however, given the arguments I have made thus far, as well as those made by both Jameson and Silliman. In his discussion in *Postmodernism* of the "paradoxical slogan" that "difference relates," for instance, Jameson describes a process whereby a viewer of certain contemporary art practices is asked "to rise somehow to a level at which the vivid perception of radical difference is in and of itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship: something for which the word *collage* is still only a very feeble name" (Jameson 31). In his discussion of Spicer's "For Harvey," Silliman argues that the "disjunctive contextualization" which he notes in Spicer's work (and which I note in Kiyooka's), is "antithetical in its nature to the association method of collage technique" (171). Thus both Jameson and Silliman seem to disparage collage as an inadequate term for the disjunctive relations produced in the poetry, since collage implies an "associational method" which would be at odds with those relations.

Kiyooka actually published an explanatory poem to accompany the collages in the issue of *El Corno Emplumado*:

> if some one should ask
>
> how they were made
>
>
>
> tell them he made them

from a handful of paper & paste.

if they should want to know what
they are about tell them

they are about things waiting
to reveal them-selves;
a wanting to conceal him-self.

if they should persist
and want to know more tell then [sic]

his hand is waiting
to reveal them, too. (Kiyooka 1965, 94)

If we accept the poem as a rhetorical 'explanation' of the collages, his comments that they are "about things waiting / to reveal them-selves" would situate the series not within an associational frame in which something new is created through heterogeneous juxtaposition, but within what later comes to be described by Jeff Derksen as an "aestheticized rearticulatory practice": in which the disjunctive contextualizations reveal ideologies previously disarticulated. On the other hand, "about things waiting / to reveal them-selves" could also suggest a productive role for the reader, or perhaps the need for historical distancing. Moreover, if the series also betrays "a wanting / to conceal him-self," we could read this as a postmodern effacement of the artist as locus of creative authority – although given the drive to re/vision Kiyooka's earlier work as early articulations of a racialized subjectivity,

these lines could also serve as a reminder of the effacement of that racialized subjectivity throughout the 1960s, both in terms of the reception of Kiyooka's work as well as his own insistence that he was a "Canadian artist." The question of the relation of Kiyooka's collage works to the poetry he was producing contemporaneously with those works, and on which side of this 'disjunctive / associational' divide each respective medium falls, will require further research. At this point I raise the issues to remind us of the fact that first and foremost Kiyooka was a visual artist, and that we should not presume a seamless continuity between his work in images and in language. These are also issues that will confront me when I look at Nancy Shaw's practice, or the collaborations between poets and artists in 1980s Vancouver. Kiyooka's work demonstrates that the productive dialogue between writers and artists so characteristic of the KSW scene in the 1980s was already occurring in the 1960s.

"A colloquy with history": *periodics* and the New Prose

> "Gk. Περίοδος peri-odos. A going round, circuit, complete sentence"
>
> --inscription on the back cover of *periodics* (issues 2-7/8)

Looking back at the 1970s, we might observe that the activities and concerns of a younger generation of writers across North America, but especially in the Bay Area, New York, and Vancouver, demonstrated several coincidental tendencies which, as the writers slowly discovered one another, resulted in a continental network which was part continuation of, part innovations on, a network which had arisen in the 1960s. One of the most powerful of these tendencies was a renewed interest in the new possibilities presented by prose in light of the innovations of the preceding decade: no longer the straightforward vehicle for the transmission of news, opinion or

narrative, the prosody of prose – of the phrase, the sentence, the paragraph, the story - became the object of scrutiny just as the line had two decades prior. This investigation would take place most famously in the pages of magazines such as *This* or *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (periodicals which, while not devoted exclusively to prose, brought together the writers in the U.S. most committed to innovations in the form), and would culminate in Ron Silliman's seminal essays of the late 1970s and early 1980s. One essay in particular, "The New Sentence," has become so influential that it seems impossible to consider any contemporary innovative prose work without bearing in mind its central tenets: sentence length becomes a unit of measure, the paragraph organizes the sentences quantitatively rather than logically, the attention of the reader remains at the level of the sentence, and syllogistic movement is primarily from sentence to sentence rather than integrating "upwards" into a coherent narrative. What seems equally crucial in Silliman's essay, however, is his claim that the new sentence "occurs thus far more or less exclusively in the prose of the Bay Area" (Silliman 63). While I do not necessarily want to quarrel with this claim, it has the danger of leading to a literary history that reads the Bay Area as the epicentre of prose innovations during that period, innovations which were subsequently exported to the rest of the continent.

One small magazine that has been somewhat elided in this history[14] was Daphne Marlatt and Paul de Barros' *periodics: a magazine devoted to prose*. Running from 1977 to 1981, and publishing a total of 8 issues (the last being a double issue), *periodics* was notable in the extent to which it nourished a cross-border conversation between both established and emerging writers in Canada and the U.S. –

[14] In this instance the elision occurs in both Canada and the U.S.: Ken Norris' study *The Little Magazine in Canada 1925-80*, for example, does not mention *periodics* in its summary of "The Little Magazine in the Late Seventies" (Norris 1984).

a conversation which perhaps reflected the national backgrounds and contacts of the magazine's editors. Besides the editors, writers from Canada (such as George Bowering, Robert Kroetsch, Steve McCaffery, Gerry Gilbert, and bpNichol), and from the U.S. (including Larry Eigner, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Michael Palmer, and Barbara Einzig) contributed prose work to its pages which, in retrospect, seem to offer a partial overview of the innovations of prose taking place in North America at the time. An interesting feature of the magazine was its "News," "Views," and "Reviews" sections at the back of each issue, sections which provided a space for announcements of developments on other fronts but which also offered a site for exchange and dialogue on the contents of the magazine and the issues raised by earlier contributions. This idea of a space for imminent dialogue has been one desired by many little magazines but which all too often does not materialize: the significant exceptions in Canadian magazines to that point being *TISH* and *Open Letter* (and, perhaps, *NMFG*). One contributor, Donald Phelps, saw *periodics* providing "a mobile, ongoing catalytic *context* for readers' and writers' various ways of observing and thinking about their common tides of experience [...] not a flea-market assemblage of 'found objects'...but, a series of proposals for more intense, more thoughtful and responsive observation of one's own landscape" (Phelps 1978a, 79). Rather than function as a museum or showroom for synchronic, isolated pieces, *periodics*, for Phelps, functioned more like a narrative in that it was both diachronic and dialogic in form. In his essay "Some Notes on a Misplaced Art Form," which he published in the fourth issue, Phelps declares the little magazine a "signally American art form" (Phelps 1978b, 65), a site which gauges "the rhythms of American experience" by encouraging an imminent, 'raw' poetic dialogue rather than, in Phelps' words, "deliver [art] from one's vest-pocket in a presentably-wrapped jewel-

case" (66). Phelps writes of "the little literary magazine's colloquy with history," of its "covenant with its times, which is to say, with its audience, its commitment to an elected identity which is also organic" (69), and argues against a rigid editorial policy, maintaining that the magazine must be "an agent of connection and association, for suggesting the continuities of experience, and the recombinations possible" (70).

The cultural nationalism behind Phelps' argument – the contemporary, practical American art form versus the obsolete, effete European – was received somewhat bemusedly by both de Barros and Marlatt. De Barros remarks that Phelps has "unwittingly dropped his essay into a nationalist zone" (de Barros 1978, 77) and that his essay "takes on a different set of meanings by being published here, because of Canada's push toward decolonisation, than it would elsewhere – an ironic corroboration of his argument about *contexts*" (77). His and Marlatt's collective editorial position, de Barros declares, is that "we are open to any writing that grows out of where it comes *from*, and thereby proposes an internationalism and/or multi-culturalism that does not *blur* the border (*any* border!) but which underlines it, by defining it" (77). For her part, Marlatt sees in Phelps' essay "another example of American ignorance of the actual otherness of Canadian experience and Canadian literature" (Marlatt 1978a, 79), but qualifies this somewhat:

> [T]he way in which an editorial voice asserts itself is in the juxtaposition of work by work, that the editor is acting as 'an agent of connection and association' in offering a new perception on what has been said – news in a truly contemporary sense. This, it seems to me, defines the nature of editing regardless of whether the particular magazine is American, Canadian, or European. Context: connection,

> the connection of disparate voices, what they have to say *to* each other, speaking out of their own particulars. Context highlights particulars.
>
> And similarly, though in this particular case we have had to state it to avoid a possible mis-reading, *periodics* does NOT represent the desire for a unification of Canadian and American writing. Hopefully, it does represent a space in which different voices can be heard in the context of each other, sounding their own disparities and particularities. (79)

In light of Marlatt's later mitigation of her own nationalism, perhaps a result of the radical feminism she was to embrace in the early 1980s, this passage underscores the pervasiveness of Canadian cultural nationalism in the 1970s - even in Vancouver, a site traditionally suspicious and even hostile to such centralizing and homogenous constructions. Yet she also demonstrates a desire to account for individual difference within a continental frame which acknowledges national boundaries, anticipating challenges to an anglo-Canadian cultural dominant which would arise in the 1980s from various positions of difference (gender, race, sexual).

Phelps was perceptive in recognizing a diachronic, dialogic character to *periodics* which has often been absent from other periodicals, and I want here to isolate certain strands and trace their developments over the magazine's run. More specifically, I want to read Marlatt's writing that she published in the magazine – she published several pieces – in relation to some of the American contributors: namely Eigner and Hejinian. My purpose is not to try and develop some argument about a new 'Canadian' prose as opposed to an American, but to try and see what might have been some of *periodics*' contributions to a continental investigation into prose. To narrow my focus further, I want to consider the different (and similar) ways the

writers explore the possibilities of the comma within the extended sentence in their writing at this stage, bearing in mind Gertrude Stein's famous denunciation of commas in "Poetry and Grammar" as "servile" and as having "no life of their own" (Stein 219). Like Olson's dismissal of the "descriptive functions" in "Projective Verse," Stein regards commas as weak and lazy, as drawing the life from a sentence. Moreover, Stein notes that commas offer a way of notating breath, but again she sees this as weak notation:

> A long complicated sentence should force itself upon you, make you know yourself knowing it and the comma, well at the most a comma is a poor period that it lets you stop and take a breath you ought to know yourself that you want to take a breath. It is not like stopping altogether which is what a period does stopping altogether has something to do with going on, but taking a breath well you are always taking a breath why emphasize one breath rather than another breath. (221)

Stein seems here to see the comma as merely a way of notating breath, or as a rest stop for the reader. She does not consider (at least in "Poetry and Grammar") how the comma's grammatical functions might be otherwise used in prose – a potential which the writers of the late 1970s appeared more eager to explore.

In the premier issue of *periodics* (Spring 1977), Marlatt published a piece entitled "2 – Night (Isla Mujeres," an excerpt from her book *Zócalo* which was published later that year by Coach House Press. *Zócalo* blends the forms of journal and travel writing, recording the events of a trip to Mexico by a white Canadian woman and her Japanese-Canadian lover, as well as her own thoughts and observations, producing an ongoing dialogue between interior and exterior which at

times seems close to stream of consciousness techniques. Here is the last paragraph of the excerpt published in *periodics*:

> & lying beside him, her anger ebbing away, she could imagine the dark as an element that surrounds them, something, like fish, they encounter each other in, as water washes around the island & even in this room they lie not in each other's arms but in an element their arms move through, to touch each other – even as she reaches up to kiss him as he reaches down, & their mouths meet, even as his tongue enters hers & rubs its wetness against her own, she remembers suddenly what it is, she remembers, not the wall as they turn the corner, not the white building that says "water board, water, potable" (cisterns? wells?) not the arch & gate as he walks on, but the cemetery she saw glimmering, low buildings like round heads or native houses rising out of the dark, & it's those words as she ran to catch up with him, do you know what's there? (his tongue is rubbing, even now, away from her own) a village of the dead, existing there, beyond the wall. (Marlatt 1977a, 51)

According to Douglas Barbour, the "long, intricate sentences" of *Zócalo* "'score' the mind's movements over the material of the day – the confusion of perceptions and responses to perceived events, all gathered into an accumulation of information registered minutely in the ongoing movement of Marlatt's prose-poetic line" (Barbour 235). Contrary to Stein's dismissal of commas as devices used merely to transcribe breath, here their projective function is secondary to the grammatical: the comma's conjunctive and connective potential is used to convey the double-movement of both continuity and discontinuity in the thoughts of the structuring consciousness of the

narrative: "she could imagine the dark as an element that surrounds them, something, like fish, they encounter each other in, as water washes around the island." In what is basically a "long complicated sentence," Marlatt in the above passage uses the comma to postpone closure; yet at the same time the comma's function as a 'stop' akin to the period (which Stein notes) also comes in to play. Unlike the use of a stronger stop such as the period, the various clauses which are separated by the comma and the strands of thought they evoke (considerations of the dark, of their relationship, of a physical encounter, of sights earlier that day) are both referentially disjunctive (perhaps humourously, as in the image of the woman kissing her lover while contemplating cisterns) and metonymically conjunctive (the dark as contiguous with the surrounding water, itself contiguous with the lovers etc).

Larry Eigner's "Like inn ruption S," also published in the premier issue of *periodics*, uses commas in a rather different manner from Marlatt. Here is the first sentence of the single-paragraph piece:

> Playing piano, well in limits, two fingers (one for some period decades ago), various both at one time, largely catching successive but chords too more or less (partial), successions as well, pattern come time spacing, no business of difficulties, making life yourself wide north/south arduous sporting climates mountains seas for your own very existence , nothing from now too easy, occasions might be semiautomatic or just about always, footboards fit slant ample under, go to some Trout, Moldau sine gay stream rocking, Schubert A-, enough is headlong, abundance stays back, while looking out a window was like shooting, we still have the yard. (Eigner 1977a, 52)

Unlike Marlatt's excerpt from *Zócalo*, here the commas augment the discontinuities already at work in the clauses between them, discontinuities formed through syntactic contortions ("nothing from now too easy"), temporal enjambments ("while looking out a window was like shooting"), enigmatic contradictions ("occasions might be semiautomatic or just about always") and Eigner's perhaps signature device of placing several words of the same grammatical case together ("slant ample under"; "climates mountains seas"). In his "Afterword" to his collection *Country Harbor Quiet Act Around: Selected Prose*, Eigner notes that "Like inn ruption S" was the only piece included in the collection that was written recently, the rest being written from 1950-56 (Eigner 1978,158). This suggests both that the piece marked something of a return to prose for Eigner, and that he would distinguish it from the poems in prose he had produced to that point. While "Like inn ruptions" seems to share some stylistic tactics with the prose he has written over two decades prior, particularly at the syntactic level, it differs from them in its lack of a stable narrative frame. In the passage I cite above, for instance, the motif of "playing piano" which begins in the first few clauses seems to be abandoned (perhaps returned to with the reference to "Schubert A-") and we are left with very little to frame the prose. Indeed, throughout the piece the only real narrative frame we are provided is one we almost always find in Eigner's work: the isolated poet observing an intensely localized world, his observations triggering memories which collapse the distinctions between past and present in his relation of that world's particulars to us.

Lyn Hejinian published two pieces in *periodics*: "A Fantasy is the Real Thing" in issue 3 (Spring 1978), and "The Supplement" in the final issue (7/8, Winter 1981). "A Fantasy is the Real Thing" was submitted and published at a turning point in Hejinian's life and career; as she notes in an interview with Manuel Brito, she moved

to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1977 and into a scene in which the literary activities of people such as Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Rae Armantrout, Tom Mandel, Kit Robinson, Carla Harryman, Steve Benson and Bob Perelman were "coinciding," as she puts it (Brito 76). In a letter to Marlatt a month before her move to San Francisco, she responds to Marlatt's earlier inquiries about her essay "A Thought is the Bride of What Thinking" with the remark that the work she was submitting to *periodics* was "more simple on the surface" than "A Thought" (Hejinian 1977). Although written at a relatively early stage in Hejinian's career, "A Fantasy is the Real Thing" is marked by her signature collisions of reflections on and of consciousness, domestic detail, and metapoetic workings within a rather pastoral milieu. Here is a brief excerpt:

> At home, lunchtime is haphazard, she said. Everyone just makes their own – sandwiches, or someone heats up leftovers. There's always coffee on one burner and water for tea on another and milk for the kids. Nothing efficient. Then it all gets cleaned up.
>
> suggest, to some degree, the attention of which it is capable, and accompanying shifts
>
> flow over the whole gamut, Guido d'Arezzo's 'great scale'...the the field in physics, and, by analogy, the ranging landscape, and music that important...
>
> Those ellipses, he said, like bird tracks, interpreted as reflective of the environment, 'quite simply, where you live,' he added – it pleased him to do so, and, after all, it was possibly correct.
>
> Once dead, they are, full of news, lost to one.

This passage is representative of Hejinian's tactics throughout "A Fantasy," in which she flips the referential frame with the start of each new 'paragraph,' or line. This

shift is more pronounced in some instances (such as the jump between the domestic details of the first paragraph rendered in conventional prose and the following line's metapoetic commentary) and less so in others (i.e. between the second and third 'lines' or paragraphs). The troubles I am having in terminology, whether to refer to the textual divisions as paragraphs or lines, attests to Hejinian's blurring of these divisions. As she comments in the interview with Brito,

> [l]ine length and line break can alter perceptual processes in innumerable ways, for both writer and reader. Retardation, flicker, recombination, the extension of speed, immobilization, and myriad other effects are dependent on qualities of line. And of course thoughts don't occur in divisions, in fact the experience of thinking is more one of combination. So while a line may isolate stages of thought it may also multiply and strengthen the connections in which thought emerges. This occurs especially when line and sentence don't coincide, where the end of one sentence and the beginning of another may combine in a single line. (Brito 89)

Hejinian further remarks that in the early 1980s, when Silliman was presenting an early version of "The New Sentence" in San Francisco, she was finding the sentence "extremely limiting and even claustrophobic": "I hoped that I could open its terminal points (the capital at the beginning and the full stop (period) at the end) by writing in paragraphs, so that sentences were occuring in groups, opening into each other, altering each other, and in every way escaping the isolation and *completeness* of the sentence" (89). In the excerpt from "A Fantasy," as I point out above, she seems both to open the sentences into one another *and* to use their "terminal points" to more clearly delimit the divisions.

But Hejinian here also works to open the sentence from within. "My major goal has been to escape *within* the sentence," she tells Brito, "to make an enormous sentence – not necessarily long ones, but capacious ones. Somewhat paradoxically, I sometimes try to create this capacity with different compressive techniques – metonymy is the most consistent form of *logic* in my writing. But sometimes long, convoluted sentences from which many conditional clauses depend are instances, for me, of intense accuracy, of a direct route" (91). "A Fantasy is the Real Thing" demonstrates an early attempt at both strategies of working to make the sentence more capacious (and it is through this desire for a more capacious prosody that her poetics overlaps with Marlatt's), and for Hejinian the comma serves both strategies. "Once dead, they are, full of news, lost to one" demonstrates the compressive, slippery logic of metonymy of which Hejinian speaks, with the comma as the point at which the movement of (dis)association pivots. On the other hand, in the sentence beginning "Those ellipses" and ending with "it was possibly correct," the commas mark the directional shifts in attention through one of those aleatory sentences of Hejinian's which appear distracting as you meander through but which, upon completion, paradoxically convey a sense of directness – perhaps because these sentences seem most mimetic of consciousness.

Despite the similar desire for a more capacious sentence, the work Marlatt was publishing in *periodics* did not involve the same degree of movement between association and disassociation that we see in Hejinian's writing at the time, nor of the sense of radical discontinuity grounded in a firmly located consciousness that we see in Eigner's. Marlatt's work appears more directly an attempt to render a consciousness which, however 'opened' to a flood of exterior voices, remains contained within a stable narrative frame:

> of Woodwards back door on Cordova, under the overpass, under the awning in what is a dark street anyway that block simply a gulf between the store and its 1930's parking lot. always the people lined up on a saturday waiting for buses outside the window filled with neatly packaged towels & sheets & blankets all in blue, shades, of people waiting for someone waiting for a bus with what they've bought by midmorning saturday in the hurry & the grey.
>
> he was simply part of the stream going one way, me in the other in red & him in blue, blue-checked shirt that caught the blue of his eyes. it's always his eyes, & the gravity of their humour in the way they hold mine, large & waiting for me to show myself, say what i know, & of course it was our eyes that met, even in my hurry to get by. (Marlatt 1979, 51)

These are the opening paragraphs to "in, to the dark," a piece Marlatt published in issue six. In addition to the referential or metaphoric equivalencies which "in, to the dark" shares with the earlier "2 – Night (Isla Mujeres" – such as the comparison of people with water and the uneasy relations with a male – the prosody of the later work does not seem to mark much of a departure from her writing two years prior: the comma is used to extend the sentence and to provide a more capacious structure for the speaker's observations. On the other hand, this piece is distinguished by its first-person address as opposed to the third-person free indirect discourse of *Zócalo*, and actually lacks the earlier piece's movement between clausal disjunction and conjunction.

In her essay "The Measure of the Sentence," Marlatt describes a collision of two "contexts" she sees at work in her "proprioceptive (receiving itself) prose" (91), a prose which she sees born at the writing of her book *Rings* (1971):

> ...there was a kind of potential context i had learned from shortline poetry where the isolated word hums in the space of the page, calling up connections. But there was also the act-ual context of the moving sentence spinning meaning in its movement, accumulating significance as it moved rhythmically toward its end, its own silence. The counterpoint of these two contexts fascinated me & i saw that i could use punctuation within the sentence in much the same way that linebreaks function within the poem, & that i could also retain the more arbitrary linebreak of the right margin (the edge of the page) just to keep the sentence conscious of its movement toward, & against, conclusion – that as a measure. (1982, 91-92)

We find in Marlatt's writing of this period less "grammar as prosody" than "punctuation as prosody." Marlatt notes a counterpointing of two contexts – the isolated word and the internal structure of the sentence – but elides a third: the surrounding prose, both immediately neighbouring sentences and the larger quantitative structures such as paragraphs. And that appears to be the most significant difference between her work and that of Hejinian, Eigner or other writers of the Bay Area scene: while they are all concerned at this time with the internal workings of the sentence, the sentences of the Bay Area writers seem more contextually relational (the sentences move against one another as discrete units) whereas Marlatt's are more internally relational (the individual word as rhythmic counterpoint). We might then extend this taxonomy to say that Marlatt's concerns at the time were more the

'internal' possibilities of a new subjectivity, as opposed to the 'external' situation of that subjectivity in a social context.

Like other important magazines of the 1970s and early 1980s which nurtured a dialogue among a certain continental network of poets (*This*, *Hills*, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*), the brevity of *periodics*' run belies its influence (though the American magazines lasted somewhat longer: *This* published twelve issues over eleven years; *Hills* nine issues over ten). Eventually tensions in the editorial relationship between Marlatt and de Barros would spell an end to the magazine (tensions palpable in de Barros' final editorial in the "News" section of issue 7/8). Marlatt apparently regarded *periodics* as having successfully staged (however briefly), a "colloquy with history"; de Barros was somewhat more ambivalent:

> And so regarding my goal that the magazine make some statement about my contemporaries, first, it seems I didn't know how many or how diverse my real contemporaries were (a pleasant surprise) and second, there doesn't seem to be any clear current drawing them all together. Nevertheless, I'm pretty confident that we did connect with the trunk line: it's just that the poetics remain to be more clearly focused by some future editor. (*Writing* magazine, c/o David Thompson University Centre...has taken up some of the slack.) (1981, 196)

With the benefit of hindsight it appears that de Barros was prescient in identifying *Writing* as the magazine which would "more clearly focus" the poetics of this "trunk line": the north/south "colloquy" which *periodics* maintained would be extended throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s by the Kootenay School of Writing. However, during this time the Vancouver writers who contributed to the magazine

would gravitate further towards the poetics, still somewhat nascent, of the Bay Area and New York writers as demonstrated in *periodics* and away from the directions which Marlatt was pursuing at the time. Moreover, while *Writing* or Kathryn MacLeod's magazine *Motel* (which ran from Summer 1989 to Fall 1991 and published a number of important writers including Hejinian, Derksen, Hannah Weiner, Bruce Andrews, Ray Dipalma and Abigail Child) were notable for what appear in hindsight perceptive editorial decisions, these magazines didn't really provide the sort of context which Phelps rightly saw in the pages of *periodics*. Rather, the contribution of the later magazines (*Raddle Moon* being an exception) was to juxtapose the work of important American and Canadian writers with emerging ones on the Vancouver scene, specifically those associated with KSW. In their strategy of juxtaposing isolated pieces – often excerpts from works in progress - both *Writing* and *Motel* seem to me more synchronic than diachronic in their orientation, which would also distinguish them from *periodics*. What is harder to recognize from the magazines themselves was the degree to which the collective editing process contributed to the formation of a community. Antonio Gramsci points out in "The Organisation of Education and Culture" that the editorial boards of certain reviews "function as cultural circles" and that the process of putting together a magazine – reviewing submissions, writing correspondence, copy editing, proofreading and so on – "creates the conditions for the rise of a homogeneous group of intellectuals trained to produce regular and methodical 'literary activity' (Gramsci 128). While I would not use words such as "homogeneous," "regular" or "methodical" to describe the editorial boards of *Writing* or *Raddle Moon*, these little magazines contributed greatly to cementing social relations among a number of poets, as well as developing a common ground for shared poetic strategies.

Fred Wah and the 'Kootenay School'

In the "Preface" to his 1981 book *Breathin' My Name With a Sigh*, Fred Wah relates a lesson of one of his early "teachers" (namely, Charles Olson): "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" (Wah 1981 n.pag) – that "the individual development of every organism...repeats approximately the development of its race" (*OED*). This relation of the collective to the individual is something which this entire study attempts to trace, but I am just as interested in the opposite movement. As an early teacher of many of the prime movers of the Kootenay School during its incarnation at the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, a founding member of the KSW collective, a long-time resident of the Kootenay region of B.C., and as an important and (for some of the KSW writers) influential poet, Wah might be seen as the ontogenesis of a "phylogeny" of poets. Yet to situate him and his writing simply as origin would not only overstate the impact of his poetics on the following generation of writers, but would ignore his dialogical relation to that emerging generation and the extent to which his own writing was transformed by the poetic upheavals wrought in the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, Wah's poem "Picket Line" (1987) presents an interesting collision of an ostensible "work writing" content with some of his more familiar devices and references:

> on the picket line
> we could dance like a bird
> old magpie, woodpecker
> raven the thief
> caw and peck
> wiggle and get sassy

speak the spike

strut the truth (Wah 1986)

The devices and references I am thinking of here would include the short lines, animal imagery, a reference to dancing and the blending of language, the body, and experience ("speak the spike / strut the truth"). Because Wah is a writer who has always worked in a deliberately limited register – he speaks in one interview of certain images continually haunting him, "over his shoulder" so to speak – and because his poems tend to blend into one another rather than remain as isolated objects, it is especially hard to identify "breaks" in his poetics – we can speak more accurately of evolutions.

Jeff Derksen has noted a critical elision of the racialized context of Wah's writing, more specifically of his Chinese-Canadian background, ascribing this oversight to two main factors. He describes first a historical understanding of the *TISH* writers as an autonomous avant-garde, in which the "socially conscious and community based aspects the *Tish* project were obscured" by critics (Derksen 1995/96, 65), and along with them "the content of Wah's Chinese-Canadian history" (67). He then notes a larger cultural phenomenon, best articulated in *The Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, Bill C-3 (1988), which enacts what he calls "an integrationist grammar": "race equals ethnicity; ethnicity equals immigrant; and immigration equals the Canadian experience" (68). In his "Sights Taken as Signs" essay Derksen identifies a similar integration of particulars into universals, and differences into identity (through an ideology of difference *as* identity), with respect to regionalisms in Canada: "[p]oems were read for particulars that strengthened an idea of the local, which was, ironically, an affirmation of the national" (1994, 148-49). Ethnicity and regionalism, then, are linked by the common denominator of an integration of

particulars into universals. This obfuscation seems especially misleading when considered in relation to Wah's work: as a poet who not only works *in* particulars (such as the signature repetitions of Wah's writing, both with respect to device and referential index) but *with* particulars (namely his own life and environment), Wah's poetry largely anticipated the negotiation of cultural identities (racial, ethnic, regional, national) within a global context which has become an increasingly important concern in recent decades. To this extent his particularized localism, as opposed to a generalized regionalism, could be read as a model for the KSW writers' own negotiations of the local and global.

This is not to say that Wah was unsympathetic to regional constructions. British Columbia is a province which seems historically unique in the strength and diversity of regional 'scenes' outside of its metropolis: I'm thinking here of Prince George, Nanaimo and the rest of Vancouver Island, Salt Spring Island, and of course the Kootenays. As an educator and writer, Wah played an important role in the growth of cultural regionalism in the Kootenays through the 1970s. Such was the intensity of activity in the area over this period that the journal *CVII* saw fit in 1979 to devote an issue to "Writing in the Kootenays." Mark Mealing published an article in that issue entitled "In the Kootenays," which served as an introduction to the poetry sampler which followed. While Mealing notes that "[i]t's a flip cliché that Canadian writers reflect their regional landscape" – a cliché to which Derksen would later ascribe important consequences – he argues "the interaction of writer and mountain valley makes historic, social, and aesthetic sense in the Kootenays" (Mealing 3). Mealing asserts the specificity of Kootenay experience with Olsonian bravado ("[t]he style of barroom stories may be the same in Saskatoon or T.O., but the content differs, citizens" (3)), and links the maturation of its literary culture with megadevelopments

by B.C. Hydro. Although none of the later KSW writers published work in this issue, Mealing establishes a mythos about Kootenay writers which would be continued by the later Vancouver poets: a diversity of occupations, often working class ("So who writes here? Old timers, country people, trailer people, bar people, students, teachers, skidderdrivers, goatraisers, linguists, potters" [4]), an irreverent, obnoxious stance ("Some of us...went to read at Vancouver, so we cheered and catcalled each other like highschool basketballers. Kind of crass, but what would you expect from compost-pilers?"), an insistence on the importance of local context ("we listen for our place, our time, our words"), and an understanding of literary production as a fundamentally collective practice ("So who writes here? We – not you, and she, and I, and him" [4]).

Wah has over the past couple of decades situated both his own work and the work of others he admires under the rubric of "hybridity." "[T]he hybrid writer," he writes in his essay "Half-Bred Poetics," "must (one might suspect, necessarily) develop instruments of disturbance, dislocation, and displacement" (Wah 2000, 73). For Wah, the hyphen has become "a crucial location for working at hybridity's implicit ambivalence," and although the hyphen, "even when it is notated, is often silent and transparent," he desires a poetics which would "make the noise surrounding it more audible, the pigment of its skin more visible" (73). Although Wah's notion of hybridity is developed within the context of a racialized poetics, we could compare his understanding of hybrid poetics with a Bakhtinian social dialogic. According to Bakhtin, "[e]very utterance participates in the 'unitary language' (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)" (Bakhtin 272). For Wah, the job of the hybrid writer is to foreground these heteroglossaic "forces" in the writing, the

centrifugal marks of difference, in resistance to the centripetal forces of the unitary language – which would include both the "standard" Englishes spoken by native speakers of western Canada as well as the homogenizing and centralizing assumptions behind the Multiculturalism Act. Drawing on Mary Louise Pratt's notion of "code switching," Wah tells us "code-switching can act to buttress the materialization of the hyphen, an insistence of its presence in foreignicity and between/alongside claims of source, origin, and containment" (83). Without attempting to attenuate or elide the racialized context of Wah's thinking on hybridity, we might also approach his work as a hybrid of the particularities of place and genealogy, or more specifically of region and race/ethnicity.

As Susan Rudy has pointed out, the hybrid elements of Wah's work are discernable in his oeuvre long before his decision to write overtly about racialized poetics. For Rudy, these workings were ongoing "before Fred Wah – in his daily life – had conscious awareness of it, much less a deliberate language" (Rudy 5). One example - which Rudy also cites - might be his poem "Among" (composed in the 1960s):

> The delight of making inner
> an outer world for me
> is when I tree myself
> and my slight voice screams glee to him
> now preparing his craft for the Bifrost
> Kerykeion he said, the shore
> now a cold March mist moves
> down through the cow pasture
> out of the trees

among, among (Wah 1972, 7)

While I would note a couple of explicit "doubles" in this poem - inner and outer worlds, "me" and "him" - the more subtle juxtaposition of differing elements takes place between social registers. The poem has a certain symmetry in this respect: the first four lines and the final four lines share the similarities not only of a more simple, pastoral and localized diction, but of a more naive, almost childlike tone: a "slight voice" possessing more negative capability, perhaps. These bracket the middle two lines which mention a "Bifrost / Kerykeion" – a reference which appears jarringly disjunctive in its obscurity and foreigness, not to mention the lines' disruptive syntax. "Kerykeion" is a Greek word referring to the herald or messenger's staff, and while this reference might integrate somewhat with the rest of the poem (the Greek messenger god Hermes was also associated with poetry, and "Among" is ostensibly about poetry), its overall effect is to signify its discursive difference from the rest of the poem. "Among," like much of Wah's work, is heterotopic in its hybridity of registers.

As I mention above, Wah's relations to KSW and to the poetics that emerged from the school should be understood reciprocally. Throughout the 1980s, as he has done throughout his career, Wah 'workshopped' poems which would later comprise entire books – such as the poems of *Music at the Heart of Thinking* (1987) – in the public pages of various journals, and a project which focused more exclusively on Wah's work might attempt to map out his revisions of certain texts and consider the broader implications of these revisions. *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, which was awarded the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1986, includes as one section a revised version not only of a group of poems, but of an entire book, *Breathin' My Name With a Sigh*. In *Waiting*, for instance, the order of the poems is changed, lines

are revised (e.g. "to get it how the river in its mud flows down stream" [1981, n.pag] becomes in the later version "getting at how the river in its mud banks flows downstream" [1985, 15]), and entirely new texts are added, such as this one which appears early in the second version:

> Relation speaks. Tree talks hierarchy loop subject returns.
> Knowledge a bag of things to be changed later to
> knowledge. Statement of instructions horoscope Wah
> language reads reading out of order in order to speak to
> itself feed picked up lists family and complete branches/
> worlds end there. (1984, 4)

This is a densely metapoetic text. Each of the four sentences refer to both the processes of writing and to the interrogation of genealogy characteristic of *Waiting for Saskatchewan* as a whole. The two words "relation speaks," for instance, could be read as another version of "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," in that our relations "speak" through us; but it also implies a relational sense of communication – something which Wah would share with later writers such as Derksen, Ferguson or Davies. The passage also reflexively "comments" on the revisionary project of *Waiting*: "Wah / language reads reading out of order in order to speak to / itself." I would hesitate to make a similar argument about Wah's revisions as I do about Kiyooka's in "The 4th Avenue Poems," not only because the temporal gap between texts here is much shorter (about four or five years as opposed to 25) but also because, as I mention above, Wah's work is more evolutionary. Take the word "tree," for instance: the title of one of his early books, "tree," like "scree," has become an important word in Wah's oeuvre. But whereas "tree" in "Among" becomes a figure

for a sort of proprioceptive process, here Wah unpacks the metaphoric implications of the "family tree," in which "complete branches" signify the end of "worlds."

In his introduction to Wah's selected poems, *Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek*, George Bowering describes Wah's family background as paradigmatic of the western Canadian: "His father's side of the family was Chinese, & his mother's side Scandinavian. Thus his background was atypical, but symbolic for the creation of our west" (Bowering 1980, 9). Citing this passage, Derksen would later claim Bowering's discourse "still falls inside official discourse on multiculturalism even as it is critical of other aspects of cultural discourse" (Derksen 1995-96, 70). It is unclear from the context of Bowering's statement, however, whether he sees Wah's ethnic background as "symbolic for the creation of our west," or whether this symbolism rests in his regional migrations; Bowering's entire paragraph reads as follows:

> His father's side of the family was Chinese, & his mother's side Scandinavian. Thus his background is atypical, but symbolic for the creation of our west. He first saw the world in 1939 on the prairie, but moved to the mountains when he was four, to grow up in Trail & Nelson & the surrounding forest. (Bowering 1980, 9)

Here once again ethnicity and regionalism are linked, this time by proximity. If Bowering does in fact mean that Wah's background was "symbolic" in its hybridity of ethnicities, this does not necessarily fall "inside official discourse on multiculturalism" as Derksen claims. While this official discourse is one which would, according to Derksen (following Smaro Kamboureli), collapse racial difference into ethnic difference, and then equate ethnic difference with national identity, papering over historical conflicts and differences in power and status, that is

not necessarily what Bowering's sentence implies. The Chinese and Asian fact in western Canada is as historically long as the Scandinavian and Northern European fact, but while the latter were valued as immigrants by the British majority in that, with the passing of generations, they could become anglicized with no corporeal marks of racial difference (difference being reduced to the sign of the surname), the former were used for cheap labour but feared as a threat to British/European dominance in the northwestern part of North America. Granted, Bowering does not foreground this history in his description of Wah's background as "symbolic for the creation of our west," but his statement does not refuse it either. Perhaps more to the point here, the cultural impact of both European and Asian settler-invaders can be seen not only in place names or the diversity of restaurants in Vancouver, but in the choices of poetic genres as well.

What does it mean, for instance, for Fred Wah to work in a Japanese poetic form? The late 1980s witnessed a series of *utanikki*,[15] or poetic diaries, written by Wah, including "Limestone Lakes Utaniki," "Uluru Utaniki," and "Dead in My Tracks: Wildcat Creek Utaniki." Printed together in his 1991 book *So Far*, the poems also share the similar frame of a travel diary - more akin to Basho's "The Narrow Road Through the Provinces" than to Shiki's "The Verse Record of my Peonies." As Wah informed me in conversation,[16] however, he was first turned on to the *utanikki* form not through readings of Japanese poets, but by bp Nichol, about whose *continental trance* George Bowering would write "[t]he *utanikki* does not sing about the response to country one passes through and eyes; it is the voice of the land

[15] Note the discrepancy between Wah's spelling of "utaniki" in the titles of his poems and of my spelling of "utanikki" here. My spelling is derived from Earl Miner's, but since the word is an anglicization of a Japanese word neither spelling should be regarded as authoritative.
[16] 26 March 2001

speaking in phrases from whatever mouths it can find mature enough and still alive" (Bowering 1988, 198). Thus listening becomes more important than seeing, and there is ironically an effacement of the poet as he writes in the intensely personal diary form. The genre term "utanikki" is, as Earl Miner tells us, not one which the Japanese poets would have used but is a 20th-century and, at least in part, a western academic term: "although *utanikki* (poetic diary) probably sounds unfamiliar to Japanese, it has in fact been used by Professors Konishi Jin'ichi in 1953 and Hisamatsu Sen'ichi in 1964 to describe works [like "The Tosa Diary" or "The Narrow Road Through the Provinces]" (Miner xi).

"Dead in My Tracks: Wildcat Creek Utaniki" was composed in summer 1989, around the same time as the Tiananmen Square student uprising and subsequent crackdown by Chinese authorities. Throughout the poem, Wah seems to treat these historical events as tangible particulars, much like melting snow or scree:

> While we set up camp during the afternoon I'm in a global mode, you know, the simultaneity of the world going on right now. Paris. Kyoto. Beijing. The pavement of Tiananmen Square, the hotlines sniffing out the dissidents, CBC bulletin even e-mail media drama of the last two months still in the air, even up here, radioless, only antennaed in my bones (our name is bones, and your name is my name).

My Borders are Altitude
and silent
a pawprint's cosine
climate from the lake to the treeline
all crumbly under foot at the edges

cruddy summer snow melt

soft wet twig and bough-sprung alpine fir

but more than this

height

is my pepper

(China

don't) (1991, 76-77)

What intrigues me most about this poem is the extent to which Wah's traditional grounding in the world's particulars becomes situated in relation to global processes; despite being in a high, remote area of the Rocky Mountains near the B.C./Alberta border, Wah does not see himself as removed from contemporary history: "But at this rate the hike's all history, pleistocene" (77). "History" here means at once geological time, political time, and the genealogical time of Wah's family history, each prompting contiguous reflections of one another:

when deconstruing rock

hold back the crude and the harsh

or take "reality" for simple target

the sun

a nation as large as China

is just another scheme for thirst and war

another centered project tunneling earth

(my father's fingers poked wet into the mud of

a rice paddy (78)

In this poem Wah occupies an ambivalent position, what he might term a "synchronous foreignicity": "the ability to remain in an ambivalence without

succumbing to the pull of any single culture (cadence, closure)" (2000, 62). Corresponding intimately with his ground, in this poem the mountains of Western Canada, Wah contemplates China through Western, Canadian eyes. And yet the imperial gaze is undercut by his own position of difference, in which the phylogeny of the poet's family is present in the ontogeny of his moment - China translated into the "here" and "now":

> All these rocks. Constant mirror and prescence in my eyes. More rocks than grains of sand in the whole world, I bet someone. Intricate pattern, surface, keeps stopping boot in pitch for eye to zoom. Sometimes I stop and try translating the imago-grammatic surfaces. What do I look for? This I-Chinging the earth for some other Gate of Heavenly Peace, monotoned loudspeaker in the Square signalling "Go home and save your life," old, embedded said-again family bone-names? (82)

It is this evolution of Wah's proprioceptive stance, developed over the 1960s and 1970s, away from the material particulars of the earth to the material particulars of history that Wah shares with many of the younger KSW writers - a shift perhaps best connoted by Jeff Derksen's re-writing of the closing lines of Olson's "Maximus, to Himself" in *Dwell*: "Cranes dot the skyline in an homage to the domination of *economic* over *place* - it is unbuilt business I'm talking about, the Pacific Rim lapping at my ankles" (1993, 16).[17]

In discussing the relation of place to ethnicity in Wah's writing I am reminded of one of the great embarrassments of the Kootenay School: in a pair of decades

[17] Derksen's lines are also more colloquial, and less hubristic, than Olson's, who situates the heroic poet as central and expansive source: "It is undone business / I

which witnessed the rise of poetic communities associated with the politics of difference and identity, particularly of racial identity, and in one of the most ethnically diverse cities in Canada and thus the world, KSW remained a remarkably "white" institution. Moreover, most of the writers I discuss in this study have surnames which suggest an Anglo-Saxon or Celtic background typical of the anglo-Canadian dominant: Davies, Ferguson, Burnham, Creede, Shaw, Robertson, Browne. One exception would be Derksen, but even in that case his Mennonite background is somewhat obfuscated through the anglicization of his name (from the more 'foreign' "Doerksen"). This situation may perhaps have to do precisely with the rise of differing communities during this time, as well as with KSW's "avant-garde" reputation. And yet the writers certainly do not ignore ethnicity, nor do they seem to assume a position of normality against which difference is measured. The collective stance seems most similar to that of Wah in a poem such as "Dead in My Tracks: Wildcat Creek Utaniki": the situation of particulars - both with respect to ethnicity and place - within the overlapping frames of the local, national, and global.

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speak of, this morning, / with the sea / stretching out / from my feet" (Olson 246).

CHAPTER TWO: COMMUNITY

Any attempt to describe or analyze the contributions of a literary community requires an approach which would consider the work collectively, while at the same time recognize and respect individual differences and idiosyncrasies. A tension between the individual and the collective is only one of the problems we encounter when we discuss cultural groups: as Raymond Williams has pointed out, unlike more organized institutions, the principles which unite a cultural group "may or may not be codified" (Williams 1980, 40). Williams further warns that in the case of a less institutionalized group, we might identify a "common body of practice or a distinguishable ethos," but only through a process of reduction in which "simplification, even impoverishment...are then highly probable" (40). It is because of these difficulties, perhaps, that although the cultural or literary group has had enormous impact on the development of western literatures, literary history seems uneasy with such groups:

> The group, the movement, the circle, the tendency seem too marginal or too small or too ephemeral to require historical and social analysis. Yet their importance, as a general social and cultural fact, especially in the last two centuries, is great: in what they achieved, and in what their modes of achievements can tell us about the larger societies to which they stand in such uncertain relations. (Williams 41)

An analysis of group formations, Williams implies, offers us a unique perspective on the relations of art to other social practices. Questions of context, of the relation of the individual to the collective, of difference and equivalence among the group, of codified or implied principles: all of these are especially pertinent to broader social

questions, if only because the social organization of a collective determines to a large extent its social and political impact.

In *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century*, Michael Davidson outlines three "frames" by which a political stance can be viewed, "each of which contains elements of the others":

> The first frame refers to social practice (what writers did and thought), the second to cultural practice (what writers represented as a collective sign), and the third to aesthetic practice (how writers' poetics embodied the tensions and possibilities of contemporary history). (Davidson 26)

While this chapter will approach the work of the writers associated with KSW through all three frames, the focus will be on social and cultural practice, postponing a focus on the aesthetic to the following chapter in which I will also address the work of several individual writers more closely. That is, my focus will be on the social organization of the school as an alternative pedagogical site, the relations forged between KSW and other cultural formations, and what the poetics that emerged from that context have to tell us about broader transformations in the local, national, and transnational contexts.

In focusing on KSW as a community or collectivity, I will also in this chapter look at their social relations to other communities and collectivities. In their "Introduction" to *Writing Class*, Klobucar and Barnholden go to great lengths to show how KSW managed to extend itself into 'extra-literary' spheres (trade unions and the Solidarity movement, for instance) as part of their commitment to a "politically relevant and class-conscious aesthetic" (4). Although Klobucar and Barnholden repeatedly stress the importance of writing practice to the writers, of "an ongoing

interest in discourse itself" (6), the implication of much of their "Introduction" is that poetry remains an autonomous sphere whose political impact is as limited as its audience (and the impact there being further limited to shifting the consciousness of individual subjects). In response to this anxiety, the assumption goes, the politically committed artist needs to forge relations with extra-artistic sites in order to have social and political impact. While I do not want to deny that KSW did manage to establish important social relations with such sites, I want here to take a different approach. I start from the assumption that literature and politics converge first in literary politics, and that transformations in the cultural sphere are not socially insignificant nor solely the product of external forces. To support his claim that "a new poetics implied not only formal innovation but also discovery of alternative social forms," Davidson quotes Robert Duncan from *Bending the Bow*: "Surely, everywhere, from whatever poem, choreographies extend into actual space" (Davidson xi). While here Davidson (and Duncan) appear to be claiming that formal innovation can provide a sort of cognitive 'mapping' towards a discovery of new social forms (a claim I am not disputing), the 'choreographies' I am primarily interested in here are already social – canons, cross-disciplinary relations, identity politics – and my purpose is to consider poetry's role in shaping – and being shaped by – such choreographies.

Thus this chapter will attempt to recover a context through an examination of bureaucratic documents, testimonies, but most importantly literary texts. To this end it may appear, in certain cases more than others, as though I am reading the work as more symptomatic rather than provocative of social change. For instance, in the first section I look at early work by Colin Browne and Jeff Derksen as a means of contesting the importation model of poetics, which would rehearse the familiar story

of a cross-border influence from the south. Similarly, in the final section I briefly address the work of three women writers associated with KSW, not specifically to see how their work opens up a space for the articulation of a female subjectivity, for instance, but to trace broader developments and transformations in global (anglo) feminist poetics. Moreover, because the organization of the sections is roughly chronological, and because the mandate of this chapter is more historical than formally investigative, my focus for the most part is on the earlier poetry of the writers, poetry which might show the cracks and strains of apprenticeship more than their later, more accomplished work.

The chapter begins with a consideration of the impact of the 1985 "New Poetics Colloquium," an event that cemented KSW's place not only on the Vancouver scene, but in a broader, North American context. I then move on to look at the "Split Shift" colloquium of the following year, and more specifically at differing models of "work writing." The following section briefly addresses KSW's relation to the visual art community, and by extension poetry's relation to visual art. I conclude with a look at the KSW writers included in the British anthology *Out of Everywhere*, and consider KSW's place not only in an international context, but in a gendered one as well. This chapter will flesh out some of the historical context of 1980s Vancouver, and introduce some issues which will be returned to in the following chapter, which attends more closely to the work of several individual writers.

KSW, "Language Writing," and the 1985 New Poetics Colloquium

> Canadian poetry is at the moment, it seems to me, in a state of crisis. The breakthrough that occurred on the international scene early in the 20th century led in turn to the (among other developments) flowering of Canadian poetry in the 60s and 70s. Now, in the 1980s, the poetics that led to that flowering has in turn collapsed. The project outlined here is calculated to renew the theoretical base of Canadian poetry.

> This is an ideal project and it comes at exactly the right time. By confronting the confusion of alternatives that is evolving at the moment, Canadian poets will be able to announce new intentions, new directions. The organizers of this project have hit upon appropriate speakers with an uncanny accuracy. They are obviously aware of all the new directions that poetical theory must take, and they have had the courage to remain open to all the alternatives. (Robert Kroetsch, 22 September 1984)
>
> 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. This recent decade has been a time when the explosiveness of the poetry and poetics scene in Canada has died away, and a program such as that proposed by Mr Browne[18] is what we need to get advancing again. (George Bowering, 19 September 1984)

The above passages are excerpts from letters of appraisal written by Robert Kroetsch and George Bowering in support of the Kootenay School of Writing's application for a Canada Council Explorations Program Grant for what KSW then termed "The New Poetics Project": a lecture series to be held in the fall and spring 1984/1985 and which would culminate in The New Poetics Colloquium of 1985. The application was successful, and the colloquium eventually held August 21-25, 1985 at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design. The participants included Bob Perelman, Michael Palmer, Barbara Einzig, Ron Silliman, Susan Howe, Michael Davidson, Michel Gay, Diane Ward, Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Barrett Watten, Sharon Thesen and Steve McCaffery. Bearing in mind the rhetorical conventions of such letters of appraisal (a hyperbolic insistence on the urgency of the project in question, the need to appeal to pan-Canadian interests, a construction of the organizers as keenly aware of all that is new and exciting) which should make one wary of reading them as sincerely representative of the writers' positions, there are similarities in both Kroetsch and Bowering's diagnoses of their cultural moment which I think reveal a

[18] Colin Browne wrote the grant proposal on behalf of KSW.

good deal about mid-1980s opinions on canonicity and the directions of literary production in Canada.

The most striking similarity between the two letters is their descriptions of a "state of crisis" facing the contemporary Canadian poetry field. Both excerpts briefly articulate a narrative of recent decline from the "explosiveness" of the poetry scene in the 1960s and early 1970s, and both champion an event such as the proposed colloquium as the means, in Kroetsch's words, "to renew the theoretical base of Canadian poetry," and in Bowering's, "to get advancing again."[19] Yet these letters were written in a year which witnessed the publication of Marlatt's *Touch to My Tongue* (Longspoon), Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies* (Coach House) and Dennis Cooley's *Bloody Jack* (Turnstone): three texts which have received substantial critical acclaim and attention, with Cooley's and Bowering's considered by many to be among their best works. 1984 also saw the publication of Phyllis Webb's *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti-Ghazals* (Coach House): her last book of poetry before an extended hiatus which would last the rest of the decade. The following year Fred Wah published *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (Turnstone), which would win the Governor General's Award for English poetry, and in the early 1980s Kroetsch himself was at the height of his poetic career, continuing to publish the eclectic and idiosyncratic books of poetry – from 1981's *Field Notes* (Beaufort) to 1985's *Advice to My Friends* (Stoddart) – which would eventually comprise part of his *Completed Field Notes* (McClelland and Stewart, 1989). Thus it seems to me that in 1984 reports of the decline of Canadian poetry were greatly exaggerated: again, the conventions and immediate context of letters calculated to secure funding from a federal grant

[19] Bowering articulates much the same narrative in his "Vancouver as Postmodern Poetry" essay, in which he discusses KSW at some length: "In my view, Vancouver

agency may explain Kroetsch and Bowering's rhetoric. Moreover, they may have been imagining the more localized context of Vancouver rather than Canada as a whole. But if we accept their narratives of decline as to some extent sincere (and for that matter accurate), how do we reconcile their positions with what appears to be evidence to the contrary?

Given the benefit of hindsight, I would suggest that the crisis perceived by Kroetsch and Bowering might have been generational: the renewal which Kroetsch desires is not of his own poetics, nor necessarily those of his generation (which would include the poets I briefly listed above), but of and for the following generation of poets. Despite Bowering's claim that "such a [colloquium] has never before happened in Canada." the parallels between the 1985 colloquium and the 1963 "Summer Poetry Course" at the University of British Columbia are numerous and significant: both events took place in Vancouver, both featured a majority of poets from the U.S., and both were arranged and calculated to introduce the 'new' to a younger generation of writers. Like Olson, Creeley, Duncan and Ginsberg in 1963, writers such as Hejinian, Bernstein, Howe and Silliman had by 1985 secured vanguardist, oppositional positions within the cultural field of American and indeed international poetics. Furthermore, I should note between the two events not only parallels, but continuities: the U.S. poets who attended the colloquium developed their poetics largely out of an interrogation of the speech-based principles of projectivism and Beat poetics, and have been repeatedly situated in critical studies, both by the poets concerned as well as by critics, as the inheritors of the American modernist experimental line. Bob Perelman, for instance, has argued that "[r]ather than being a symptom of postmodernism, language writing fits into the sequence of twentieth-

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poetry became very lively in the sixties, slacked off in the seventies, and became

century avant-garde poetic movements" (Perelman 15), while Silliman, Harryman, Hejinian, Benson, Watten and Perelman assert in their manifesto "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry" that their work "is part of a body of writing, predominantly poetry, in what might be called the experimental or avant-garde tradition" (Silliman et al, 261). In his study of the Language Poets George Hartley points out that while "avant-garde tradition" is an oxymoron, "most of the poets [he discusses] insist on seeing their work as a continuation of the American modernist project" (Hartley 2). Moreover, parallels or correspondences between 1963 and 1985 are also reflected in the fact that a number of writers and intellectuals participating in the 1985 colloquium were also in attendance at the 1963 event, including Bowering, Wah, Palmer, Marlatt and Pauline Butling.

I would like to address in this section two questions prompted by the 1985 colloquium. My main consideration will be the effects of the colloquium on the poetics and production of writers associated with KSW: was the relationship between generations one of direct influence, or was there more of an affirmation of already existing practices? Ann Vickery has recently asserted that the colloquium "marked the literary entrée of a new generation of language-centered writers in Canada" (Vickery 129), while Bruce Andrews has claimed the visit by the American writers helped "just a little to nudge a new cohort of Canadian poets into open flower" (Andrews 93). My second consideration, which is more accurately part and parcel of the first, will be the relation of KSW to so-called "Language Poetry," not only because many of the representative poets of that 'movement' were in attendance, but also because KSW has been repeatedly situated as a sort of Language Poetry "branch

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interesting again in the late 80s" (Bowering 122).

plant" or maquilladora.[20] In a recent column in *The Globe and Mail*, for instance, Russell Smith describes "Language Poetry" as a "highly influential movement, which dates from the late seventies in the United States – and which has occasioned thousands of pages of academic study as well as spinning off into its own school in Canada"; Smith later describes the Kootenay School as "the Canadian bastion of the movement."[21] KSW has also been linked to Language Poetry by less flippant and more informed writers. In their "Introduction" to *Writing Class*, Klobucar and Barnholden extensively compare the KSW writers with the poets associated with the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, both in terms of a shared poetics ("the work associated with the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, and Ron Silliman's essays on the 'new sentence' provide important touchstones in the evolution of a KSW aesthetic" [Klobucar 29]) as well as their political and cultural positions: "[a]lthough the poetics of both the KSW and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* offered strong critiques of consumer culture and the economics of capitalism that drove it, the writing movements experienced similar, often frustrating exclusions from conventional leftish and class audiences" (32). In his "Vancouver as Postmodern Poetry" essay, Bowering also situates KSW in relation to Language Poetry, extending a parallel which he

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[20] In a recent *Philly Talk* between Jeff Derksen and Ron Silliman, Derksen explains to Silliman that "[t]he KSW was talked about as a language-writing branch plant, as if we can somehow produce these texts at a cheaper rate of pay set up in Canada." Silliman asks Derksen "So KSW is basically a language poetry maquilladora?" To which Derksen quips: "Well, we do have a better health plan."

[21] Smith's article describes Language Poetry as "a poetry of beautiful nonsense, all about illustrating a complex linguistic and political theory," although he does address the critique of referentiality made by people such as Silliman and McCaffery. He further makes the all-too-familiar complaint about Language Poetry's obscurity and supposed desire "to remain a purely academic discipline, understandable only to specialists." Smith repeatedly acknowledges his own ignorance of Language Poetry, an ignorance perhaps most firmly demonstrated by his situating of his 'sources.' Toronto poets Christian Bök and Darren Wershler-Henry, as themselves Language Poets – something readers familiar with their work would no doubt find surprising.

maintains throughout his essay between the 1960s and 1980s: "[a]s the sixties group found sympathy with the poets who appeared in Donald M. Allen's 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, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and Robert Grenier" (Bowering 1994, 136).

In the correspondence collected in the KSW archive, there is a copy of a letter from Colin Browne to Richard Holden, director of the Canada Council's Exploration Program. The letter is dated 4 September 1985, just after the completion of the colloquium, and in it Browne reports 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 all feel as if we've been transformed by what happened. I'm not simply pumping it up to make it sound good. For a variety of reasons everyone was READY and EXCITED and OPEN and we all feel as if we've managed to turn a corner of some kind. (Browne 1985)

While the cultural and social effects of the event were relatively localized, and the colloquium has, much like the 1963 gathering, obtained a far more legendary status in the U.S. than in Canada, it seems clear to me that after 1985 something did in fact change in Vancouver, that there was a certain revitalization of the scene that KSW both prompted and would benefit from. But I want to stress that the "transformation" and corner-turning that Browne describes has more to do with an intensity of activity than poetic influences. That is, unlike the reaction to the visits of Duncan, Olson, Creeley and later Spicer in the 1960s, the Vancouver writers who attended the

colloquium were less excited by the siting of the new than with the recognition of contemporaries, of people working on similar projects in other places and with whom they could exchange ideas, texts, magazines, addresses. That Dorothy Trujillo Lusk and Kevin Davies, two writers who would come to be grouped in with KSW, were absent from Vancouver and the colloquium, but would return to find a community receptive to their work, suggests that the centre-periphery model of influence will not hold in this case. Despite the insistence from some quarters that KSW *not* be situated in terms of literary genealogies, I'm of a mind that there was far more of an organic continuity to developments in West Coast writing leading up to the mid-80s than such arguments would allow. But perhaps my argument might best be supported by an examination of the writing of a pair of KSW writers – Colin Browne and Jeff Derksen – and whether or how their writing may have been transformed after the colloquium.

While Browne would probably be best described as a film-maker first and poet second, his writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s demonstrates a number of similarities to texts being published simultaneously in *This* or *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, not to mention some of the more innovative work in Vancouver. One example would be his poem "Two Girls With Umbrellas" (see Figure 3), published in the Spring of 1981 in the journal *Brick*,[22] a full four years before the New Poetics Colloquium. Although the poem maintains a degree of narrative continuity through its descriptive focus (on a pair of "girls with umbrellas"), a New York School-inflected 'occasional' stance, and a second-person voice (however aleatory), the discontinuities between sentences appear similar to 'new sentence' practice: the limiting of syllogistic movement does keep the reader's attention at or very close to the level of the sentence, and meaning accumulates in the

[22] The poem was also published in 1980 as a Pulp Broadside by Pulp Press.

Figure 3

Two Girls With Umbrellas

Pleated
Blue skirts,
Chemises from
The People's Republic.
Cars. Fresh yellow cross-
Walk stripes. Rain. Pleats blue as
Sky's face fluted. A stink of dunked
Fried chicken tits in the hot evening.
Wet trucks. White shirts gleaming. Black
Hair drawn taut above each round collar, spilling
Through red elastics over olive-lovely necks, tumbling
Down each miniature back. And, secret beneath each white
Collar, tiny whirlpools and confusions of coiled black hair. My
Wandering tongue. Oh dont say you know. I'm not writing this for
You. Stand away. Over there. Please do not imagine you can interrupt.
Me, perhaps, it is possible. But to them I am you to me. A screen. They
Have passed. In perfect, starched shirts. The corners of East Pender and
Templeton. Look! Their shirts ascend, like gleaming paper dolls, solar wings
In movie space, lifting free of two girls with umbrellas. Soaring independently.
Mark, on their starched, sealed pockets (no one has slipped so much as a finger
Tip in), the exquisite, celestial embroidery. The intricate tintinabulation of their
Windy frictions, an inference of tiny animals at the door. Small powders dust me. Ashes.
The petals glitter beyond high gulls. I walk home carefully. With skill, undress. Hang
My garments in the cellar over battery plates. Find the small paintbrush I selected
Last year for tomatoes. Begin at lapels, licking each fibre apse. I burn my ties.
In space the shirts have become marshmallows. Specks I find lodged in pockets,
Wedged in cuffs w/ old cigar debris, in buttonholing, between the teeth of my
Fly. Some basements are smouldering yet, acridly. I chuck suit and brush
Into jewelled embers. The particles I empty into an erect orange poppy.
Its black eye, or mouth, squinting. Who killed Celia Sánchez? Not,
Consular gossip has it, natural causes. The question bites its tail.
Twenty-three years since rumour carved its possibility into the
Spine of the Sierra Maestra, after she, Bob Taber, and a
Cameraman slit their way into Palma Mocha for the first
T.V. newsreels, after pricking up on her red toes
To pin a star on the unfamiliar beret of the new
Major, *el gaucho de voz dura*, who cares? Will
You tune in to the blacklit formal inter-
Section of her limbs, the droop her eye-
Lids made, catch perhaps a golden
Smile of breast peeking in
Perfect languour through
The tropicana shirt
Front? Tell me,
Had she been
drinking?

Mira
Allá, allá
Can you see
The utilitarian
Bed, a simple tiled
Floor? You are probably
The only Canadian wondering
About these things, the sole
Canadian to wonder about these
Things in this century. Do you feel
Relieved? If so, it may be because you
Are not thinking about your own recently
Over-rated history. I do not want to know
What you think. I do not want to know, especially,
What you are feeling. Humour me. Raúl, I hear *Sr.* Bear
Hugs you, not your noisy brother. Forgive my sentimentality.
Was it a pistol? Was it even ballistic? Oh Celia, was living ever
As sweet as in your jungle hideaway, your lips ever as shiny with
Sweet juices? A cool January night, wind mauling palm fronds against
Louvred blue shutters, rain perhaps, sirens in the wet streets. She who
Was truer than your loyal Sierras, your lone link, Fidel, with the faithless
World, your *áncora*, was she wearing slippers? Ah *Hermanos*, I am standing on the
Slick corners of East Pender and Templeton Streets, looking at small lumps of wet,
Green grass on the mown boulevard, two girls with umbrellas turning onto Hastings with
Their mother, certain of what my marks nag and rattle, and the poem is dying. Euthanasia.
Melodrama. The river is muddy tonight and runs like spit. The smooth-bellied stones
Rollick, but look chucked-down pell-mell where we spied faces and eggy, peristaltic
Shrines. Those were the days! Victory followed victory! *¡ Venceremos!* But the
Segundo Frente never rests. You'll hear the spring trigger slam of your own
Back door. Clink of buckles when your head is altered. And on the sudden
Far side, among old smoke, arm chairs, and crumpled epaulettes, your
Own terrible brother. Aiming back. He is waiting. Two girls with
Umbrellas walk between you. They break from their mother's
Fingers. It begins to rain. Rául, we are getting old. Yes,
Brother, and your poems are growing longer. Rául, the
River is muddy. Do you remember when the rocks
Spelled out magic names? They will again,
Hermano. Celia Sánchez, the poem is
Dying! I smell bamboo. Girls, your
Shirts have fled! I had such
Desire. *Hermano*, I heard my
Name on your lips. Brother
Commence firing, until
The river clarifies.
Every gesture its
Own betrayal.

Colin Browne

This poem available as a Pulp Broadside, 572 Beatty Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6B 2L3

reader's intimate interaction with the text rather than being imposed as a linear narrative. The concrete or visual poetic form of the poem suggests that the 'paragraph' here becomes a unit of measure rather than of logic or argument (although Silliman's essays on the new sentence do not really address this similarity between visual poetics and the new sentence). Furthermore, the poem's political overtones are also similar to that of Silliman's work at the time, in which global flows and processes are ubiquitous, recognizable in the speaker's quotidian observations: "Chemises from / The People's Republic"; "catch perhaps a golden / Smile of breast peeking in / Perfect languor through / The tropicana shirt / Front?" And we can discern a broader narrative of political struggle through the Spanish words, names, and phrases, and an identification of the speaker with that struggle: "Those were the days! Victory followed victory! *Venceramos!*"

I make these comparisons not to suggest that Silliman was a direct influence on Browne's work (although it was possible, even probable, that Browne was reading Silliman's work – and that of other so-called Language poets – at the time), but to demonstrate that these poetic strategies and interests were simultaneous, ongoing, cross-border concerns in the late 70s and early 80s. I have to wonder whether the following passage was not written with "these things," that is, new poetic strategies and political stances, in mind:

> You are probably
> The only Canadian wondering
> About these things, the sole
> Canadian to wonder about these
> Things in this century. Do you feel
> Relieved? If so, it may be because you

Are not thinking about your own recently

Over-rated history.

Indeed, two years after the publication in *Brick* of "Two Girls With Umbrellas," Browne published a review in the same journal of, among other texts, Michael Palmer's *Notes for Echo Lake*. Of Palmer's book Browne remarks:

> I should say that this is the finest book of poetry I've read in some time and rereadings have only further convinced me of its excellence. If you're tired of the Canadian documentary impulse with its attendant righteousness, or the playful aberrations of local poetry boosters, this book may be your antidote. (Browne 1983, 35)

Browne's dismissal of "the Canadian documentary impulse" and "the playful aberrations of local poetry boosters" demonstrates a stance which would later become characteristic of KSW and many of the writers associated with it: an impatience with contemporary literary trends in Canada, a generational antagonism, and a disgust with what he regards as mediocre or overrated writing:

> Palmer is a meticulously intelligent poet. His work constantly subverts itself through contradiction, lapse, verbal dysfunction, derailment, repetition, and discontinuity, and this is the continuous joy which keeps language from defrauding itself, meaning from believing in itself, and the poet from suffocating. Subversion is the essence of art. In a country like Canada where the more didactic the gesture the more celebrated it seems to become, an engagement with the kind of treason Palmer seeks out must seem sinful. But if you would know something about poetry and not just politics, irony, or paradox, Palmer's your man. (36)

In the early 1980s, Browne would apparently agree with the narrative of decline related by Kroetsch and Bowering. Desiring a poetry that was politicized in form as well as content, Browne, like poets in Vancouver twenty years earlier, would find more acceptable models in the U.S. than in Canada. While the "Canadian documentary impulse" Browne refers to seems to me a (pardon the pun) well-documented category[23], it remains unclear which particular poets were performing these "didactic" gestures: at the time a glance through just about any poetry journal published in Canada (or for that matter in the U.S.) would reveal dozens if not hundred of such gestures.

Some of Jeff Derksen's very early poetry, published in journals such as *Event* (a "Journal of the Contemporary Arts" published out of Douglas College, New Westminster and later Kwantlen College, Surrey) and *Waves* ("A Triannual Literary Magazine"), might be described as "didactic" – especially when compared with his later work. For instance, in the Spring 1981 issue of *Waves*, at the age of 23, Derksen published a poem entitled "Image Projected Into Living Room" (with a note reading "News Report, El Salvador"):

> Nude brown bodies lie
> in mud, thin limbs cross,
> thighs intersect; you can
> hardly see the bullet holes.
>
> darkish dents with ragged edges,
> strategic as birthmarks.

[23] See, for instance, Dorothy Livesay's seminal essay "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre," where she claims the documentary poem emerges out of "a

The crowd has more
curiosity for the cameras
than the common occurrence
of corpses.

The soldiers responsible for both
the deaths and the discovery
are dutiful; they cover
the bodies with palm leaves
and ensure silence.

During the filming the
mud begins to dry
and the smoothness of young
skin cracks.

The soldiers are also
on the verge of smiling.

This interesting piece of juvenilia does demonstrate similarities with Derksen's later work: his concerns with the detachment produced by technological mediations of violence, his ethnographic interest in Hispanic colonial cultures, his at times morbid fascination with the ironies of contemporary existence ("The crowd has more / curiosity for the cameras / than the common occurrence / of corpses"). However,

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dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet" (Livesay 267). See also Frank Davey, "Countertextuality and the Long Poem" (1985).

these similarities are more thematic or content-based rather than formal. "Image Projected Into Living-Room," like other poems he was publishing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, appears closer in its formal strategies (or for that matter its political concerns) to Pat Lowther or even Margaret Atwood than to Colin Browne or the U.S. writers Derksen would later admire.

A year later Derksen would publish in *Event* a similarly ethnographic poem entitled "Tourists":

> We are chauffered through
> your city like a United
> Nations procession, obscured
> through tinted windows
> and breathing filtered air.
>
> We seep out
> of the bus at designated
> attractions and spread
> like dark dye dropped
> in water.
>
> We take motion
> pictures of monuments
> and misinterpret
> the shoe-shine boys.
>
> We leave when our

season is over.

Here, as in his later work, Derksen trains his critical gaze on himself, or more accurately on his complicity in a collective phenomenon (all four stanzas begin with the first person plural pronoun) in which no individual appears to demonstrate agency *per se* but rather performs an almost scripted role: "We seep out / of the bus at designated / attractions and spread / like dark dye dropped / in water." Here Derksen begins also to draw correspondences between a supposedly innocuous activity like tourism and broader geopolitical structures ("like a United / Nations procession"). Most significantly, history and culture are constructed in this poem not as recoverable facts but as semiotic processes, open to re-construction and misinterpretation: "We take motion / pictures of monuments / and misinterpret / the shoe-shine boys." And the poem demonstrates a keen (if ironic) awareness of the violence implicit in such cultural re/presentation.

While we can note in Derksen's early poetry the germination of a number of his later concerns, as well as a political stance that remains relatively consistent nearly twenty years later, both "Image Projected Into Living Room" and "Tourists" are more monophonic than his later texts. That is, he seems to accept the established conventions of the lyric voice and does very little to challenge or disrupt those conventions, preferring instead to use that voice to articulate a political commentary or make wry observations. This acceptance of the lyric voice as a position from which to articulate a narrative (however ornamentally or imagistically 'poetic') is probably what Browne had in mind when he dismissed a lot of the work of his contemporaries as "didactic." Of course, the deconstruction of the lyric voice was one of Language Poetry's earliest and fundamental concerns, perhaps best captured by David Grenier's audacious and cleverly self-reflexive 1971 statement "I HATE

SPEECH" in the pages of *This*. Although Derksen's early poetry does not appear to share these concerns, suggesting perhaps that he was not yet reading the work of the U.S. Language poets or of writers pursuing similar projects in Canada, by 1984 (a year before the New Poetics Colloquium) Derksen would publish excerpts from a piece he was working on entitled "Politic Talk Talk." The piece was published in the pages of *Writing* magazine (number 9), which the recently formed Kootenay School of Writing published as, in Klobucar and Barnholden's words, its "house organ" (5)[24]:

> was the talk is the way of
> the unreadable map of voice phone
> "to whom" Am I not speaking?
> meaning or content with what you're told
> today or yesterday meant and will mean
> circles, open mouth, words spill out
> spell what we take in the ear
> a circle also

This passage offers a curious collision of discontinuities and procedural meanderings. Here Derksen manages to evoke the different ways in which voices are themselves "deconstructed" by contemporary technological and social practices: from the Derridean "trace" and absent auditor (not to mention speaker) constructed by the space of the "voice phone" to the denaturalized speech of "one to one" communication which also echoes Derrida's critique of phonocentrism: "words spill out / spell what we take in the ear." That is, the movement here is from writing as the

[24]*Writing* 9 was the final issue published out of the David Thompson University Centre before the magazine would officially be taken over by KSW. A note on the credits page reads: "Although the provincial government has closed David Thompson University Centre and its School of Writing, *Writing Magazine* [sic] will continue to publish regularly. Your subscriptions are now more important than ever" (2).

simple transcription of a prior speech to speech as the articulation of an always already "written" code. This passage also demonstrates an early instance of Derksen's fascination with the pun, or what Steve McCaffery describes as the "paragram" (literally "writing beside"). Citing Leon S. Roudiez, who describes as paragrammatic a text whose "organization of words (and their denotations), grammar, and syntax is challenged by the infinite possibilities provided by words or phonemes combining to form networks of signification not accessible through conventional reading habits" (McCaffery 63). McCaffery declares "the paragrammatic path is one determined by the local indication of a word's own spatio-phonic connotations that produces a centrifuge in which the verbal centre itself is scattered" (64). To this let me add the 'local' inertias of syntax, conventional reading habits, and clichés. The paragrammatic logic of this excerpt from "Politic Talk Talk" would then direct the reader's attention to the minute syntactic movements from word to word: ""to whom" Am I not speaking? / meaning or content with what you're told." The pun on "content" as either "reference" or "happy" is not simply playful but exposes the extent to which meaning relies upon an auditor who is "content," that is, who happily accepts what he or she is told. ""to whom" Am I not speaking?" further demonstrates a consistent concern of Derksen's and of other KSW writers with the paragrammatic meanings embedded in the cliché: the rhetorical "Am I not speaking?" is betrayed as not only absurd but also, like the words that "we take in the ear," discursively bullying.

My point in looking at this earlier work of Derksen's is not to trace a simple lineage where an early concern with ethnography merges with a deconstruction of the lyric voice to produce later texts such as 1993's "Hold On To Your Bag Betty," a

series of "excursives" written during a trip to Spain and Portugal and published as part of *Dwell* (Talonbooks, 1993), although I do think that is an available narrative. Rather, I wish to show that prior to the 1985 colloquium writers such as Browne and Derksen were pursuing idiosyncratic projects that shared ongoing concerns with the projects of many of the American participants at that conference. Charles Bernstein's poetic "statement" for the New Poetics Colloquium,[25] from which I quote at length below, could be read as an admonition *not* to read a mentor / apprentice relation between the visiting writers and their hosts, but rather to recognise them as contemporaries pursuing ongoing projects:

> I've never been one for intellectualizing. To much
> talk, never enough action. Hiding behind the halls of theories
> writ to obligate, bedazzle, and torment, it is rather
> for us to tantalize with the promise, however false, of speedy
> access and explanatory compensation. *A poem should not*
> *be but become*
> [...]
>
> This is
> what distinguishes American and Canadian verse – a topic
> we can ill afford to gloss over at this
> crucial juncture in our binational course. I
> did not steal the pears. Indeed, the problem
> is not the bathwater but the baby. I want
> a poem as real as an Orange Julius. But
> let us put aside rhetoric and speak as from one
> heart to another words that will soothe
> and illuminate. It is no longer 1978, or for
> that matter 1982. The new fades like the shine
> on your brown wingtip shoes: should you simply
> buff or put down a coat of polish first? Maybe the shoes
> themselves need to be replaced. *The shoes themselves*: this is the
> inscrutable object of our project. Surely everything
> that occurs in time is a document of that
> time. (Bernstein 1985, 21-22)

The opening lines of this piece seem especially ironic in light of Paulette Jiles' description of Bernstein's contribution to the conference: "[t]he major speaker was

[25] "Being a Statement on Poetics for the New Poetics Colloquium of the Kootenay School of Writing, Vancouver, British Columbia, August 1985."

Charles Bernstein, an American, who is what you might call your main deconstructionist man and he can talk deconstructionist talk for hours. Bernstein said really complex things. I couldn't understand it at all. I mean honestly I could not understand two sentences one after the other" (Jiles 46). The talk Bernstein gave at the conference (the final talk of the gathering), recorded and collected in KSW's tape library, was a version of what would eventually become "The Artifice of Absorption." I wonder whether Jiles was lost in the continentalist jargon of 'deconstructionist talk' (especially in the mid-1980s) or was rather confused by the discontinuous structure to Bernstein's talks – a structure clearly manifest in "The Artifice of Absorption" as well as the piece I've just cited.

But Bernstein's stance is to a large extent self-parodic; in the above piece he attempts to undermine his patriarchal, not to mention intellectual, authority, not only in ironic statements such as the opening lines or "let us put aside rhetoric" but in his use of odd or consumerist metaphors such as "Orange Julius" or "brown wingtip shoes" as well as non-sequiturs, including his comments on nationalism and poetry. Strategies such as the unclear referent of the demonstrative pronoun in "[t]his is what distinguishes American and Canadian verse," or his decision to write "American and Canadian" rather than "American from Canadian," implying that the two might be together "distinguished," demonstrate a keen awareness of the differing national context in which he is presenting this talk but also take a stab at mechanically deterministic understandings of 'national traditions.' To me, the most illuminating passages in this piece are those addressing issues of history and contemporaneity ("It is no longer 1978, or for / that matter 1982": "Surely everything / that occurs in time is a document of that / time") as well as the two main extended metaphors for "the /

inscrutable object of our project": "not the bathwater but the baby" and "*The shoes themselves*" – both of which imply that the new is no longer distinguished by a shift in technique but by a transformation in our very ideas of the poem.

By 1985 Bernstein and others were already trying to move beyond the "language-based" impasse they seemed to have found themselves at: an impasse as much about naïve taxonomies gathering wildly differing and idiosyncratic writers into a coherent group affiliation as about a vanguardist desire for the new. Indeed, a promotional poster for the New Poetics Colloquium lists as one of its concerns "post 'language' writing": indicating that at that point "language writing" was seen as something to be moved beyond – or at least the possibility of moving 'post' was being considered. Historically speaking, though, writers such as Bernstein and, as I briefly noted above, the KSW writers, continue to be placed within the category of language writing, and a "post-language" writing continues to be sought after, with occasional sitings but few claims staked. A glance at the scholarship done on the U.S. Language Poets over the past two decades would reveal that the term continues to raise more questions than it answers – note, for instance, the obligatory disclaimer at the beginning of articles emphasizing the diversity of the poets under discussion and the impossibility of categorizing them within a single collective formation. I'm thinking here of Perelman's assertion that "there was never any self-consciously organized group known as the language writers or poets – not even a fixed name" (11-12), or of Jed Rasula's complaint that Jerome McGann "contaminates his reading of Language Writing by alleging an ideological consistency antithetical to what even he refers to as a 'loose collective enterprise'" (Rasula 1987, 317). For this reason it seems to me especially important *not* to situate KSW as a Canadian branch plant of language writing – and thus import a problematic term of questionable accuracy and value –

while continuing to recognise the relationships between and to draw on the useful theory and criticism of their contemporaries south of the border.

Working Through Writing: Gerald Creede

Because what attention KSW has received has tended to focus on the school as a locus for a certain language-centred writing practice, and since its emerging and better-known writers work primarily in poetry, it might be easy to forget or ignore the school's populist pedagogical roots in offering accessible, affordable, and flexible instruction in the theories, skills and crafts of writing – and in a diverse range of genres and styles. In addition to courses in poetry, KSW's course listings from Fall 1985 to Winter 1986 include workshops in journalism, feature writing, marketing the magazine article, publishing procedures, writing for theatre, fiction workshops, writing oral history, creative journal workshops, screenwriting and the writer and the law. Furthermore, because of the success and high-profile metropolitan location of the Vancouver 'campus,' it is also easy to forget that there was a Nelson branch. A column in the *Castlegar News* noted in 1985 that "[a]mong the individuals who found their way into courses [in Nelson] in the fall were a professional oboe player who wanted to learn how to write about music, a woman who wants to write a book about high-fashion sewing techniques and several senior citizens who wanted to write their memoirs or family histories." This history seems ignored by Klobucar and Barnholden when in the opening sentences of their "Introduction" to *Writing Class* they observe that the name Kootenay School of Writing corresponds with Voltaire's description of the Holy Roman Empire: "it is not in the Kootenays, it is not a school, and it does not teach writing (at least, not in the ordinary sense)" (1). Writing their "Introduction" in the mid to late 90s, at a time when KSW remains an important site

in Vancouver, Klobucar and Barnholden might be forgiven for ignoring this history. The name is indeed appropriate, giving a nod to KSW's roots in the class and regional politics of southeastern B.C., its continuity with the more institutionalized site of DTUC, and its initial stance "in opposition to the concept of 'culture industry' in its recognition that the theory, practice, and teaching of writing is best left to working writers" (KSW course brochure, Fall 1984). KSW's merger of an experimental pedagogy with a class-based politics brings to mind Antonio Gramsci's editorial comments in a 1919 edition of his communist newspaper, *Ordine Nuovo*:

> Are there not already workers to whom the class struggle has given a new sense of dignity and liberty who – when they hear the poets' songs and the names of artists and thinkers – ask bitterly: 'Why haven't we, too, been taught these things?' But they console themselves: 'Schools, as organised over the last ten years, as organised today by the ruling classes, teach little or nothing.' The aim is to meet educational needs by different means: freely, through spontaneous relations between men moved by a common desire to improve themselves. (Gramsci 19-20)

It is this intersection of a class-based pedagogy and politics, and its implications for the writing that emerged from the context of the writer-run collective, that I wish to explore in this section.

As I suggest above, it is unsurprising that the Vancouver chapter has become the most notorious, nor is it a surprise that it has become associated with experimental writing practices. It was precisely what might have been seen as the school's weaknesses – lack of financial stability, a mandate to be accessible to a low-income public, a reliance on volunteer labour, its insistence on offering commercially unattractive courses – which led to the development of the loose constellation of poets

engaged in formally audacious, socially oppositional writing. As a *Province* columnist explained in a 1986 column about the school,

> Willingness to starve, however, gives KSW faculty extraordinary freedom. One course this summer is dedicated to a five-week study of "A," a long and difficult poem by American writer Louis Zukofsky. Few academic programs could run such a course because the costs would be horrific. KSW can do it through voluntarily low overhead. (Killian n.pag)

My own study, of course, rehearses this focus upon KSW's role in the development of an innovative, idiosyncratic, and class-based poetics, because that is where I believe the school's social effects have been, and continue to be, the most pervasive and consistent. The school created a workshop environment which did not result in what is often disparagingly termed 'workshop poems,' such as those produced (with of course exceptions) in creative writing programs at universities across North America.

It seems to me that KSW's evolution was to some extent the product of a struggle, a struggle perhaps best represented by a comparison of the 1985 New Poetics Colloquium with the 1986 Split Shift Colloquium on the New Work Writing. "Split Shift" was held August 21-24 at the Trout Lake Community Centre, Vancouver, and was co-sponsored by the Kootenay School of Writing and the Vancouver Industrial Writers Union. According to promotional materials, the colloquium featured "18 writers, publishers, and educators from across North America to explore the practice and theory of the new poetry, fiction, and drama about contemporary daily work": attendees included Sandy Shreve, Susan Eisenberg, Erin Mouré, Clemens Starck and Leona Gom. A "Work Writing Section" of *Writing* (15, August 1986) was published in conjunction with the Colloquium and sampled the

writing of some of the participants, including Carolyn Borsman's "Deep Living," about fishing for halibut and catching dogfish; Shreve's poems about working in a university library; Starck's construction poems; Zoë Landale and Susan Eisenberg's domestic poems detailing poverty and the struggle to produce meals out of leftovers; and Lucius Cabin's "Two Prose Pieces" detailing methods of undermining one's employers or strategies of what the French term *la perruque* (literally "the wig"): an expression denoting the pursuit of one's own intellectual projects while on the job. Whereas Clint Burnham sees KSW as having "foregrounded a radical politics as part of its aesthetic, a politics that included spaces for more realist-seeming work and community writing" (Burnham 2001), I see an almost inevitable dialogic struggle developing over the course of the 1980s, between a confessional, narrative-driven poetics (the poetics, by and large, of the Vancouver Industrial Writers Union) and a language-based poetics (the poetics emerging out of KSW) which would undermine much of the ideolinguistic underpinnings of the former. Shared ideological sympathies, in my view, were and remain unable to resolve this contradiction. In his "Introduction" to this issue of *Writing*, Tom Wayman aligns this antagonism with a form/content binary:

> For much of the Twentieth Century the new in literature has appeared as experiments in literary *form*....But alterations in form do not represent the only possible aspect of the new. In the long history of English-language poetry, fiction and drama there have also been moments and eras in which the new is manifest as a major shift in *content*. (Wayman 1986, 3)

For Wayman, the new work writers are akin to the English Romantics in their production of what he calls "a major shift in content": "[t]hese writers have chosen to

break the greatest taboo at the heart of Twentieth Century life and culture. They are determined to show the actual conditions of contemporary daily work" (3). Writing with characteristic hyperbole about this "new work writing," Wayman is clearly trying to drum up an avant-garde fever comparable to the one experienced a year earlier in Vancouver. In a similar spirit of poetic competition, Roger Taus published a review of the "Split Shift" Colloquium in *Poetry Flash*, San Francisco's poetry newsletter, in which he comments that the "New Poetics (language writing)...appears positively modernist next to the rising star of work writing" (Taus 16). The derogatory "modernist" here I take to imply that the "New Poetics" replicated the supposedly autonomous, hermetic vanguardism of early twentieth-century modernism, as opposed to the actively politicized work writing.

Despite the alliances that were developed between KSW and the Vancouver Industrial Writers Union, or the *East of Main* anthology in which anecdotal and testimonial lyrics by writers such as Bud Osborne or Kate Braid are juxtaposed with the nascent language poems of Derksen or Ferguson, by the end of the decade the "skinhead formalists," to use Brian Fawcett's alarming term, were left holding the field. Perhaps my tone is too agonistic: if this was a war it was one of attrition, and this shift in the balance of power vis-à-vis the poetics investigated corresponded to a shift in pedagogical strategies: by the late 1980s the school's initial *raison d'etre* as a provider of accessible and affordable instruction in the language arts was also found to be redundant. In a letter to "Bryan" dated "September 12" (no further date is given), Nancy Shaw would write:

> We've noticed...that the classes we offer have been poorly attended. The collective discussed the situation and we've decided it may be wiser to focus our energies on readings, talks and workshops that deal

> with specific issues involving poetry/poetics, in relationship to visual arts, theory, popular culture, etc. In 1984 when the school first opened there was a real need in the community for general writing courses that were taught by practicing writers. Since the inception of the new SFU downtown campus, with its new writing and publication program; the increased activity of the B.C. Federation of Writers; the general writing workshops offered by community colleges and various arts groups, there in fact seems to be a proliferation of general writing courses in the Lower Mainland. Instead of duplicating these resources we are much more interested in providing a discussion between writers and artists through our visiting foreign artist program, our reading series, public lectures and issue-oriented poetics workshops.

Was Shaw suggesting that KSW never did in fact offer anything different from University Writing Workshops in the earliest days, when Browne, Wah and Wayman were busy establishing the school, and that it merely held the fort until the Socreds' restraint policies gave way to further investment in postsecondary education? Or was she suggesting that the school's pedagogical mandate was not being abandoned, but that its objectives would be better met through the sort of programming she lists here?

The sort of contradictions and antagonisms which characterized KSW's context through the 1980s that I've briefly sketched above – competing class-based poetics divided along form/content lines; a pedagogy that ranges from an instructor-led workshop to public readings and talks – can be seen in both the writing and persona of Gerald Creede. Creede moved to Vancouver from Windsor, Ontario in the late 1970s, after studying literature at the University of Windsor and working in the automotive industry in various parts manufacturing plants. A tangential figure to the

school – he published a couple of times in *Writing* magazine, attended readings and the odd seminar but never officially joined the collective – Creede's poem "Résumé" is nevertheless included and briefly discussed in the *Writing Class* anthology. Creede was also peripheral to KSW ideologically; in sharp contrast to the more strident ideological positions of both Wayman's "work writing" and Derksen's Bakhtinian/Russian Formalist inflected poetics, Creede, along with Peter Culley, styled himself as a "leisure poet." In a recent interview Creede discusses the evolution of the term. When asked if the stance he and Culley assumed was in conscious reaction to the "Split Shift" conference, Creede responds:

> Oh no, it must have been the starting point of this joke. [...] it mostly came from Kevin [Davies], he was always doing something. Peter and I were just talking about how we didn't do anything that day...we got out of bed, watched *Rockford Files*, then we watched *Hawaii Five-0*, then we smoked a joint and wrote for a couple of hours. (Creede 2000, 3)

Further in the interview Creede continues:

> But we were writing every day. But Davies was always doing more. And Peter and I were laughing, we didn't do anything all day except write a bit, & we were just real leisure poets. There were work poets whining about the line or the forest industry, but we didn't really do anything today. Did you ever laugh when you say to Kevin, "what did you do today?" He says "nothing except I went to the library for two hours, and I went to the Art Gallery, and then I had an hour discussion with Colin Browne about the next issue of *Writing* magazine, but I didn't really do anything." And we said "you're not a leisure poet!"

> And that's how that started. I think I said it first. And Peter heartily agreed. Or he said it first and I heartily agreed. But it was just a joke. (3)

Creede thus situates himself outside of the economies of both testimonial work writing (which often presumes a position of employment: Creede was unemployed and collecting social assistance at the time) and of Davies' world of intellectual rigor and community involvement: "we would do it at the Kootenay School of Writing when we were drunk, you know, 'We're leisure poets, you guys are jerks!'" As a 'leisure poet,' Creede opens up a sort of 'middle-ground' between the two class-based poetics most readily associated with KSW. His work also articulates important cultural and social phenomena in 1980s British Columbia: a situation of high unemployment and labour unrest, compensated by a social democratic tradition which enabled – relative to North American standards – generous social assistance, assistance which Creede and others associated with KSW (such as Derksen, Calvin Wharton, and Gary Whitehead) saw as legitimate sources of support for artists in the absence of specific cultural subsidies. As Peter Culley puts it in a 1991 talk on an "Everyday Life" panel at KSW, "our central thesis, as I remember it, was that, for whatever social, economic, or personal reasons, too complicated to go into, Gerry and I had an enormous, even limitless, amount of time on our hands" (Culley et al).

Creede's long poem "Résumé" provides a record of writing, both in form as well as content, and in so doing stages these antagonisms that I have described. The text's assemblage has an almost skeletal quality, in which the cracks and fissures and sutures are laid bare in contrast to a form which might seek a more organic integration. The poem is also characterized by a Bahktinian dialogic of various social and literary registers, from the textually opaque 'echo chamber' of internal rhymes

("that chick is shake of ship in placid / so facile the tone of the sheen amazes me / the char leases a shard lens, pleases" [*Ambit* 19]), to commentary couched in nonsense verse ("The shmoahs refute any connection to their calumbinds, and the shesharsee disconnect all literal ramifications and put the dindus on the shmoahs" [20]) to allusions to Whitman ("Now that lilacs are /in bloom she has / explosives" [18]) or Shakespeare ("Like as to make our appetites more keen" [19]). "Résumé" was originally published in the premier issue of *West Coast Line*, which featured many of the poets associated with KSW. It was also included in *Ambit* (Tsunami, 1993), Creede's sole perfect-bound collection which is actually characterized more by the experimental narrative prose of pieces such as "lark molt," "the flames don't look real" or "an off season in hell" than the lineated verse of "Résumé." To this extent, its publication in *Writing Class* as Creede's representative piece might be misleading. On the other hand, "Résumé"'s assemblage of disparate forms and registers seems to make the poem function, in the context of *Ambit*, as a mise-en-abyme for the book as a whole, and thus as an accurate representation of Creede's writing practice over the period.

From the opening lines of the poem we are continually reminded of the material fact of a body working, writing:

> I wrote him
> He didn't write
> He wrote: Now that lilacs are
> in bloom she has
> explosives.
> He painted his
> apartment

a shade called Fled Yellow

His life a series of small

deals that

fell through.

I burned my

bridges while they were still

in the erector set while father read the instruction

sheet

My life a series

of small deeds

that fell

through. (18)

Contrary to Klobucar and Barnholden's claim that "Creede's language actively disavows a speech in which the subject can articulate his or her position or agency" (36), here a subject position is articulated *serially*, a condition reinforced and emphasized by the appropriately placed linebreaks: "My life a series / of small deeds." Refusing at once to reproduce the received conventions of the lyric voice while at the same time avoiding a simplistic and hackneyed deconstruction of that voice, Creede's serialized subjectivity arises from a journalistic accumulation of at times intensely reflexive discursive acts. While Klobucar and Barnholden are right to point out the epistolary connotations of "I wrote him / He didn't write," the repetitions and recontextualizations in "Résumé" of the various writing subjects (denominated by pronouns ranging from "I" to "He" to "She") direct our attention to the material word: "I" quite literally wrote "him," as well as "to him."

In these opening lines Creede brings to the fore the fundamental relation between work and writing through, for instance, the childhood narrative in which "father read the instruction / sheet" (a nod to patriarchal influences circulating around Vancouver in the 1980s?) The recurring excerpts from various job descriptions[26] also conflate work and writing, especially this particular writing, through the repeated emphases on 'measure' and assembly:

> I worked for Charles Laue Ltd., a brake part manufacturer, where I was employed as a quality control inspector. I gained experience with micrometers, rules, shadowgraphs, and other precision measuring tools. (20)

> I was employed by Wesgar Industries, a sheet metal shop which formed and cut panels for computer hardware assembly. I gained experience in all stages of sheet metal set up, shearing, forming, drill press, and learned the use of basic measuring tools and gauges. (21)

This "work writing" stands in sharp contrast to Wayman's understanding of it as "a response to the job" (Wayman 1993, 8), for instance, or an articulation of "the humour, sadness, joy, anger, and all the other emotions that accompany our participation in the work force" (144). While the tediousness, alienation and occasional absurdity of contemporary industrial employment is definitely suggested

[26] I had originally thought these were excerpts from Creede's actual résumé. In his essay on Lusk and Creede, however, Clint Burnham reads them as a found text: "In Creede's 'resume' [sic], foundness reaches a sublime moment, when the found industrial text is revealed not only to be as 'obscure' as a language poem but to use similar tropes and spatial rhetoric of lines" (Burham 1999, 7). In an interview I conducted with Creede (15 September 2000), he confirms that the excerpts are indeed from his actual résumé.

by these lines, the tone is less moralistic than what you might find in, say, a Sandy Shreve poem. Here the industrial and pedagogical overlap – experience in Windsor's automotive industry informed Creede's writing practice as much as did his study of literature at its university. And what further removes this writing from Wayman's model is that the impact of industrial experience is on the form of the text, rather than its narrative content.

"Creede's struggle," as Klobucar and Barnholden put it, "begins in lieu of a résumé, in a cultural space between jobs, often on UI benefits with little hope, or even interest, that the state will respond" (36). Writing, widely regarded in anglo-Canadian culture as the work of idle hands (so that 'leisure poet' becomes a redundancy), is re-figured in Creede's poem as intense labour, not alienated in the production of use-value, but recorded as a value in itself. Insisting on the presence of the body writing, Creede's "Résumé" often collapses the temporalities of reception and production:

> I hear voices but
>
> I'm always listening to something
>
> else
>
> and miss
>
> what they say? (25)

The poem refuses us the habitual response of receiving the finished textual 'product' from which the writer's labour has been alienated. Rather we must read it as an assemblage – at times meticulous, at times haphazard – of disparate texts, each of which has been produced by and through differing procedural methods:

> I think: workshop it if you want, and then
>
> sit on it for about a month. It is a *résumé*.
>
> Did you leave anything out that ought to be

In? (Me, I wouldn't know...) (26)

Creede's work is *methodical* in conflicting senses of the word; neither plodding nor orderly, 'method' here appears to be another strategy of self-effacement. Not quite procedural verse, "Résumé" has a certain repetitive, formulaic quality, a formulaism that is nevertheless undermined throughout. If, as Jed Rasula has claimed, method can be "all too complicitously a forfeiture of agency to the experimental platform of an institutional provider," and that "the difference between subservience to method and the stimulus of method is immense" (1997, 30), then Creede's strategies in "Résumé" seem to waver between subservience and stimulus: a reasonable position for a leisure poet.

In his essay "The Politics of Poetry: Surrealism & L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E," Barrett Watten distinguishes between method and "technique":

> What is the difference between method and technique? One could say that *technique* is the principle of construction in the writing. In other words, how the writing is written, prior to the finished work. *Method* is the principle of construction that begins with the finished work, with the activity of the writer as a whole, the extension of the act of writing into the world and eventually into historical self-consciousness. *Style* might be the middle term. (32)

Watten's method appears to be to re-write (modernist) literary history to suit his texts, to situate them in a way he might consider they would have more social impact (I'm thinking, for instance, of his essays "The Bride of the Assembly Line: From Material to Cultural Poetics" or "The Secret History of the Equal Sign: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Between Discourse and Text"). Creede appears almost to reverse Watten's formulation: the socially significant moment occurs in the gathering of materials, and

the writer's social role appears to end at the moment of completion. For a self-styled 'leisure poet,' the world enters the work at the moment of composition, and the work then returns the world to itself, reassembled.

Installing Poetics: Cross-disciplinary Collaboration in 1980s Vancouver

Creede's involvement in the Vancouver cultural scene has not been limited to his practice as a writer: in the early 1980s he served as a model for Vancouver photoconceptual artist Jeff Wall's 1984 back-lit transparency "Milk," a still of a streetwise Creede crouching before a wall and squeezing a milk container. I mention Wall's piece to remind us of the role that social relationships play in the development of artistic communities. "Milk" is not the result of collaboration in the sense we have come to understand the word: while he was no doubt crucial to the success of the piece, Creede's role in the project was more mechanical than artistic. Because of Wall's position as director, choreographer, photographer – in short, *auteur* – this sort of collaboration does not problematize authorship in ways we might expect (a consequence, I'll admit, of Wall's significant international reputation). Yet Creede's presence in Wall's work should tune us to the fact that artistic production in Vancouver in the 1980s, as it had been since at least the early 1960s, occurred within the context of a community in which artists and writers not only read and viewed each other's work, but circulated within similar social circles as well. In such a scene production and reception become conflated in intriguing ways.

In his "Sites Taken as Signs" essay, Derksen asserts that "the KSW scene has not defined itself in terms of literary genealogies, but in terms of shared strategies – and these strategies come from visual art, time-based arts, cultural theory, a rather rigorous bar scene, as well as a diverse North American literary scene" (Derksen

1994, 155). We should note that the strategies Derksen mentions inform not only the poetics of the various writers, but also the social organization of the school as an oppositional site of artist-initiated activity. A.A. Bronson's chronology *From sea to shining sea: artist-initiated activity in Canada, 1939-1987* notes that KSW is "the first artist-run centre in Canada run primarily by *writers*," and as such "is open to the full range of language possibilities" (Bronson 145). What is not mentioned in Bronson's overview is that funding agencies such as the Canada Council, which had already responded to the rise of the artist-run centre in Canada in the 1970s by reorganizing its funding sections, refused to recognise the viability of a *writer*-run centre. That is, there was no bureaucratic imagination of the possibilities of writing as a collective practice; as opposed to artists who often worked collaboratively, and who installed objects in public spaces to be viewed collectively, writers were expected to practice in solitude, with the cultural product bought and consumed by similarly monadic subjects.

In recognition of this, in 1986 KSW established Artspeak Gallery, a parallel institution which would occupy the same office space as the school (at the time on West Broadway in Vancouver).[27] Artspeak's mandate was "to encourage a dialogue between the visual and language arts" (Bronson 145), a mandate which, through the direction of curator Cate Rimmer (who participated in the KSW collective), the gallery met not only through shows such as 1987's *Book Works* or 1988's *Behind the Sign*, but by reinforcing (some might say reviving) an already extant cross-disciplinary conversation between the writing and visual art scenes in Vancouver.

[27] *From sea to shining sea* mistakenly documents that KSW was forced through financial difficulties to merge with Artspeak, when in actuality it was KSW's financial difficulties which led to the gallery's creation.

Nancy Shaw, who joined the KSW collective around the time of the establishment of Artspeak, describes the role of the gallery:

> By day the room was a gallery, in the evening it was a classroom, and there was increased interaction between artists and writers on social occasions and at school events. Exhibitions began to reflect the emergence of a critically concerned text-based art. Collaboration between these two groups consisted largely of organizational duties and social and intellectual interaction between members and other interested people, but it was not overly manifest in the work produced. (Shaw 1991, 97-98)

Shaw emphasizes the social and organizational collaborations between the writers and artists involved, but downplays the effect on the work. But such day-to-day relationships cannot help but inform the way artists think about their practice, and the long-term effects on the writing scene of this interaction appear to me evident in hindsight.

Such a conversation between these artistic communities seems appropriate, not only in Vancouver but across North America. Poetry and the visual arts circulate largely within similar cultural and political economies: both are art forms largely ignored by the wider public, both are highly "intellectual" practices in both production and reception, and artists in both communities subsist largely on grants, though certainly there is considerably more potential for financial reward for artists pursuing careers in the visual arts as opposed to poetry. At the very least, social interaction between artists and writers has the potential to expand the audience for their work. But the relations between poetry and the visual arts are marked as much by difference as by similarity. In his *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, W.J.T.

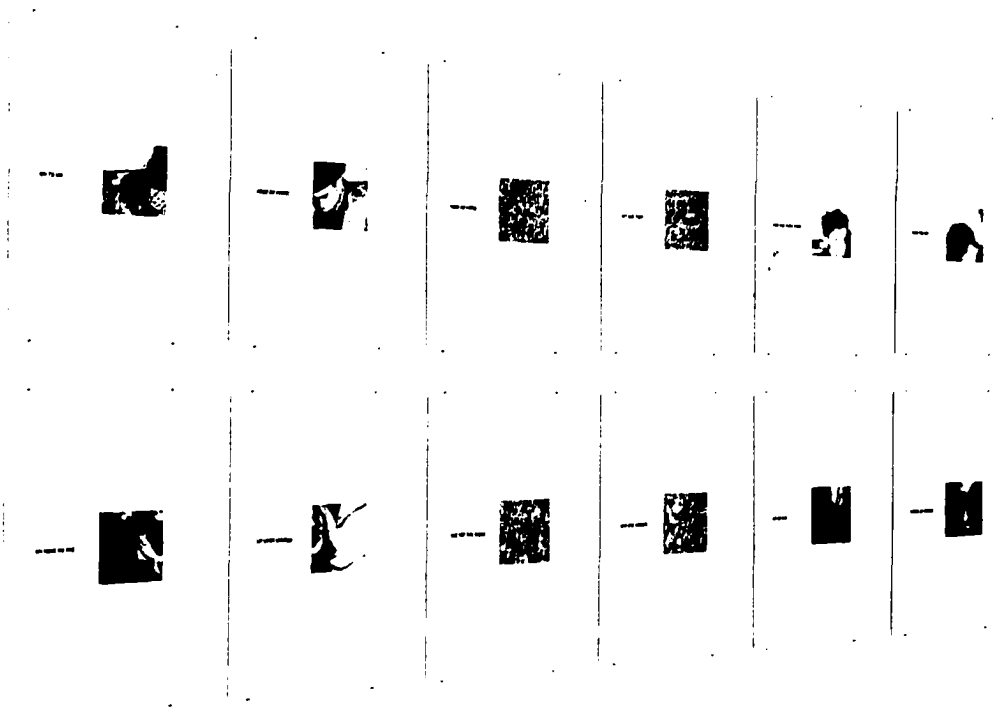
Mitchell describes the historical correspondences between poetry and visual art as dialogic, and even antagonistic:

> ...the differences between words and images seem so fundamental. They are not merely *different* kinds of creatures, but *opposite* kinds. They attract to their contest all the contrarieties and oppositions that riddle the discourse of criticism, the very discourse that takes as one of its projects a unified theory of the arts, an 'aesthetics' which aspires to a synoptic view of artistic signs, a 'semiotics' which hopes to comprehend all signs whatsoever. (47)

For the KSW writers this historical antagonism which Mitchell describes, far from posing a problem, was embraced as contingent and productive. And yet we need only point to the frequent use of text in 20th-century visual art practices, not to mention developments such as concrete or visual poetics, to recognize that the "oppositions" between word and image which Mitchell regards as fundamental have become problematic, as much of the work of the writers associated with KSW as well as that of their contemporaries working in visual media demonstrates. Critics such as Benjamin Buchloh appear to resolve this opposition in favour of poetry, or more broadly the linguistic. Buchloh regards 1960s Conceptual Art as constituting "the most consequential assault on the status of the [visual art] object: its visuality, its commodity status, and its form of distribution" (119). This was because the proposition inherent in Conceptual Art, Buchloh maintains, "was to replace the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone (the work as analytic proposition)" (119). In the work of the writers and artists that I discuss in this section, I see less an absorption of the visual by the linguistic, the mapping of the linguistic onto the perceptual, than a reciprocal (albeit asymmetrical) "mapping" of

the perceptual onto the linguistic and vice versa. In this section I want to consider the implications of this cross-disciplinary conversation through an examination of a pair of artistic projects. The first will be Jeff Derksen and Roy Arden's collaborative piece *Through*, mounted for the *Behind the Sign* exhibition at Artpseak in 1988. The second will be Nancy Shaw's 1987 chapbook *Affordable Tedium*, one of Tsunami Editions' first and, I believe, finest works. Far from attempting to formulate a semiotics "which hopes to comprehend all signs whatsoever," my method here will be to formulate a cross-disciplinary hermeneutics which maintains and explores the productive tensions between the two media.

The culmination of the activity around KSW and Artspeak was the 1988 exhibition "Behind the Sign," curated by Rimmer. In her essay "Expanded Consciousness and Company Types," Shaw notes that the *Behind the Sign* exhibit was mounted, ironically enough, after KSW and Artspeak were forced due to financial pressures to separate into parallel organizations (98). The show consisted of five collaborative pairings of artists and writers: Derksen and Arden; Deanna Ferguson and Stan Douglas; Peter Culley and Sara Leydon; Calvin Wharton and Donna Leisen; and Kathryn MacLeod and Doug Munday. For the most part, the artists provided visuals and the writers text, the one exception being the collaboration of Ferguson and Douglas, in which Douglas also contributed text toward the production of their chapbook *Link Fantasy*. Derksen and Arden's *Through* (figure 4) consists of a series of twelve silver prints mounted on rag paper in two horizontal rows of six. The prints are cropped, found archival photographs of Vancouver's 1938 Bloody Sunday riots, riots sparked when police used tear gas and truncheons to evict hundreds of unemployed who had been occupying the post office, the Hotel Georgia and, interestingly enough, the Vancouver Art Gallery. The four prints in the middle of the



Roy Arden and Jeff Derksen
Through (1988), silver prints mounted on rag paper with Record Gothic Bold letterpress.

Figure 4

installation are long distance shots of the rioting crowd; the remaining eight flanking them are close-ups. Accompanying the prints on each panel are Derksen's laconic, capitalized phrasal units consisting (with a couple of exceptions) of alliterative monosyllables. Here are the units in the order they appeared in the installation:

> ON TO ON | FROM ON WHOM | THAN AN HAND | YET SHE
>
> THEY | FOR THE THEY THEN | THEY THE HE
>
> ON NONE NO ONE | UP UPON UNUSED | SHE YET THE THERE
>
> | ARM ARC ACROSS | ON GO NO | TACTIC AT STATIC

Nancy Shaw claims these units are composed "only of pronouns and prepositions" (99); while this is not exactly correct, they do create an overall textual effect of vacillation between movement and stasis, diexis and disjunction, specificity and anonymity, as though the units did solely consist of words denoting location and various subject and object positions. Curator Cate Rimmer saw *Through*'s fragmentation of text and image as an attempt "to undermine a comfortable or accepted reading of information represented in the work" (6). Shaw reads the piece as problematizing historical representation in a similar way:

> In combination, these visual and linguistic units allude to the historical incident, but, instead of infusing this representation with "truth," *Through* focuses on the mediated nature of representation. Any history will be incomplete and fragmentary, invested with gender- and class-based differences inscribed at the level of the signifier. The overriding implication of the work is that rebellion and protest must include a consideration of the sociolinguistic determinants of public action. (99)

For Shaw, all of the collaborative projects in the *Behind the Sign* exhibit provided a critique of social structures which was "theoretical, rather than performative" (98) and

that "rather than being activist or otherwise utopian, [the work] involved a retreat into and investigation of the elements limiting social change." Furthermore, she sees this retreat as part of a broader phenomenon of increasingly "inward" and "introspective" art practices in Vancouver in the 1980s, as opposed to the more "outward" and "activist" practices of groups such as Intermedia and the N.E. Thing Company in the late 60s / early 70s.

While I would agree with Shaw that, broadly speaking, oppositional art and poetic practices became increasingly introspective during the 1980s, I find *Through* a somewhat more performative piece. Although the installation's visual fragmentations and textual disjunctions draw our attention to the problems of mediating historical representation, at the same time they are oddly mimetic of the historical moment they ostensibly "represent." That is, the confusion of bodies, cacophony of voices, and stark divisions of power that constitute a riot seem to me powerfully evoked in the piece. I also find the installation convincingly relates the reduction of individual subjects to an anonymous mass, and the transfer of agency from the single to the collective. Furthermore, Derksen's text is not simply disjunctive but, when read in conjunction with the cropped photographs, offers a shrewd commentary, seeming at times to pay tribute to the rioters ("FOR THE THEY THEN"), to describe the chaos and violence of the incident ("ON TO ON"; "ARM ARC ACROSS"), to critique exploitative systems of labour and distribution of wealth ("FROM ON WHOM"), or offer a self-reflexive commentary (in agreement with Shaw) on the political efficacy of the project ("TACTIC AT STATIC"). Thus the piece is indeed performative, and not merely theoretical or worse, an example of a theoretical paradigm. Shaw's use of "performative," though, has more to do with the socially transformative potential of collaborative art practices – a publicly interventionist spirit that she sees KSW and

Artspeak as eschewing, perhaps in recognition of the limitations of those earlier strategies.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this piece for me is the recontextualization of Derksen's writing into the space of the gallery and the effects of that shift on the performance of the words. There are similarities with Derksen's "signature" style: the anagrammatic flow of the phrasal units is similar to his later piece "Neighbours" (from *Dwell*); indeed the writing reflects his ongoing fascination with anagrams and paragrams. Yet the words seem more detached; there is less a sense of an ironic voice than you find in his other work (including a similarly laconic piece such as "Temp Corp" [again from *Dwell*]). This could of course be a result of his collaboration with Arden, and *Through* was created five years before the publication of *Dwell*. But the visual art context also has an effect here: the size of the capitalized letters; their dialogic juxtaposition with the photographs; their installation in a more public space where they can be seen collectively: all these factors direct our attention to the materiality of the word, *and* aestheticize the language in a way that we do not always see in published texts. That is, whereas a concern for the visual appearance of the words on the page might be a secondary consideration when producing texts for publication in books, journals etc., here the attractiveness of the words in the gallery setting would have been a primary concern. Hence, I think, his decision to use monosyllabic, anglo-saxon, anagrammatic clusters rather than polysyllabic, latinate sentences: the former encourages more attention to the contours of the individual letters.

Just as Derksen and Arden's *Through* demonstrates the productive differences between visual and textual media and their respective means of dissemination, Nancy Shaw's *Affordable Tedium* introduces visual elements to the chapbook form in a way

that goes beyond ornamentation or illustration. *Affordable Tedium* confounds the boundaries between gallery and book, or rather stages the book as installation space. Much like Derksen's text in *Through*, the text in the slim, stapled chapbook is relatively uniform, consisting of a series of isolated sentences, from four to seven per page, and each of a length no more than one line, with the single exception of one sentence that extends to two lines by the length of one word: "How real this can be – of tangible objects perpendicular to the / plane" (n.pag). The sentences maintain only tangential syllogistic connection to one another, once again echoing Silliman's new sentence, though there is a single exception to this rule as well:

> Light encased closure of illusionistic depth, or
>
> Identity of self as memory. (n.pag)

Yet even in this case the connection implied results more from syntactic inertia than logical argument.

When the sentences are considered cumulatively, however, correspondences and connections begin to emerge, not only in the immediate context of a page, but throughout *Affordable Tedium* as a whole. Here are the first three pages of the text (page breaks indicated by //):

> From the far room a voice returns as so many facts.
>
> Wrapped lips encumbered gently in her younger days.
>
> Some days he takes long walks.
>
> Along the beach they wept in solitude.
>
> And now only long glances across the view.
>
> She was to have married soon on another Sunday.
>
> Some streams *are* blue. //
>
> On another walk she recalled fancier memories.

My gist is weeds, leaves and pigeon feathers.

Turquoise glistens fashionable retribution.

In his own backyard, the barbecue, salad, and freezer-burned trout. //

You hear but plead ridiculous.

Sheets, towels and a doorstep.

I went for a walk at midnight, remembered forlorn in other screens.

Shelves of books contain harrowing tales.

In a clay vase stood flowers.

How real this can be – of tangible objects perpendicular to the plane. (n.pag)

The relatively consistent length of the sentences, coupled with Shaw's enigmatic distribution of various personal pronouns lacking definite referents (she, her, he, they) as the subjects of similar activities (such as walking) produces a textual effect that is more spatial than linearly temporal. She creates an environment into which we as readers move rather than a narrative that we receive. Shaw juxtaposes narrated recollections ("On another walk she recalled fancier memories"; "Wrapped lips encumbered gently in her younger days") with imagistic 'still-lifes' ("...the barbecue, salad and freezer-burned trout"; "Sheets, towels and a doorstop"), transforming movements into moments, actions into icons, while at the same time galvanizing the still-lifes: "In a clay vase stood flowers." Thus the text constructs a dialogue between stasis and motion that correlates with the reader's engagement with the text – as well as with contemporary art installation practices. In an article on the phenomenon of the "virtual museum," Shaw places a good deal of emphasis on the importance of interactivity, "defined as a social relationship rather than a technological instrument" (1996, 31), a description which we could extend to her practice in *Affordable Tedium*.

The movement is from a conception of art as a revolutionary technology which provokes social change, to an understanding of social change as "reflexive, incremental, contradictory and full of unintended consequences" (30). In a reversal of the effect of Derksen's text in *Through*, it is as though Shaw's more mannered text has been removed from the space of the visual art installation and returned to the book, without attenuating any of the strategic effects gained by the use of text in physical installations: our attention remains directed to the materiality of the words, their situation in spatial rather than strictly temporal contexts, and to a disruption of the cozy distinction between public discourse (advertising, warnings, directions) and the 'private' discourse of poetry.

Furthermore, *Affordable Tedium* does not consist solely of text, but includes reproductions of photographs taken by Shaw of what appears to be areas in and around the lower mainland of B.C. These photographic representations range from pastoral landscapes with coniferous trees in the foreground and mountains and ocean in the background to small-town or suburban neighbourhoods to what appears to be a conjunction of landscape at the bottom of a photograph with a more abstract, enigmatic subject matter at the top, a rippling border dividing the two images. Shaw appears during the development process to have reproduced several versions of the same image with differing degrees of shading, producing at times an overlapping effect most pronounced in the "centrefold" series (see Figure 5) of homes. To a viewer unfamiliar with the context of the photographs, these are decidedly ambivalent images. The class demographic implied by the homes' architecture, for instance, seems to me confused: while they appear to be of substantial size and therefore, given current property values on the west coast, house an "upscale market," they are also

Figure 5

quite crowded together, appear older and are constructed of wood – all of which imply a more working class neighbourhood. The effect of the juxtaposition of the same images in different shadings, which creates the impression of a large, stylistically uniform development, and the social commentary this implies, also seems to me ambiguous – perhaps appropriate given the conflicting and paradoxical semiotics of class in the lower mainland. Is this a celebration of working-class dwellings and perhaps a utopic vision of a working class space, or does it provide a critique of the manic overdevelopment on the coast and the uniformity of architectural style (the 'McMansion' phenomenon) which tends to accompany such developments? The text of *Affordable Tedium* is not silent on these issues: concerns with development resonate throughout its textual environment:

> Against prefabricated backdrops, pertinent hallucinations.
>
> A house on every corner looms.
>
> "I was to have had cocktails in the taxi."
>
> Flowered grids signal geometric reverberations.
>
> And now only arborite and feathers on asphalt. //
>
> An island projects interior erosion in the midst of a city. (n.pag)

The last two lines cited bracket the central image of houses that I have briefly described above. "And now only arborite and feather on asphalt" seems to gesture back to the line "My gist is weeds, leaves and pigeon feathers," implying a dismay over the loss of natural spaces to overdevelopment and real estate speculation. "An island projects interior erosion in the midst of a city" wryly rearticulates the common metaphoric description of urban sprawl and inner city decay. An "island," which might, say, be drawing wealthy homeowners from the city to the promise of lower property taxes, cheaper land, and a faux-rural lifestyle actively "projects interior

erosion": the dynamic such a line constructs is not the familiar one of laissez-faire capitalism in which agency in the flows of capital and people is dispersed and unlocatable, but rather is refigured as active, locatable and violent.

In an article on Shaw's *Scoptocratic* (1992), Juliana Spahr describes the various tactics Shaw deploys in that text to contest and transform, as Shaw herself has put it, "the government of the eye or the rule of the gaze" (Spahr 93). Spahr situates this challenge to the 'scoptocracy' within part of a larger project of Shaw's engagement of, again in Shaw's words, "critical positions, demi-interventions [which] appear as the only viable site of resistance and transformation" (92). In other words, rather than simply posing one genre against another, Shaw's tactics are partial and situated within the liminal spaces between and among genres (and media), liminal spaces that are extant but which Shaw's work also operates to widen and re-shape. Thus much of the text in *Affordable Tedium* offers a running meta-commentary on the semiotics of the gaze performed by the accompanying photographs:

> In a window gazing outwards – filtration of opulence.
>
> Check the roster, summarize the points to get the full picture.
>
> In behind the view a shot was taken.
>
> I remind myself that the gaze remains insular. (n.pag)

The second sentence in this series could be read as a parodic instruction on how to efficiently and absorptively 'get' Shaw's text: scan the 'roster' of sentences and note the recurring elements in order to construct a full 'picture'—an intentional pun no doubt. Shaw puts into play a dialogue between interiority and exteriority, passive observation and active construction of 'views,' but shifts that dialogue from a specific focus on the gaze to the wider terrain of subjective / objective interactions which inform all artistic practices, including poetry. This metacommentary does not mean

that her text would be subject to her critique of the *Behind the Signs* exhibit: that it is more theoretical than performative. Although Shaw's text confounds the boundaries between print and visual media, including the critical discursive frames surrounding those media, she is not in search of, again to use Mitchell's words, a semiotics which hopes "to comprehend all signs whatsoever." Her tactics are rather partial, situated and locatable – not necessarily transferable from instance to instance, but arising imminently in the specific practice at hand.

Works such as Derksen and Arden's collaborative installation, or Shaw's mixed-media chapbook, emerging as they do from an interdisciplinary social context, require use to develop and equally interdisciplinary hermeneutics. The respective argots of both poetics and visual arts overlap in useful ways, and theoretical developments over the past few decades have allowed us to consider the more "temporal" art forms spatially and vice versa. As I mention above, I don't think we want to fully merge the discourses of art and poetics in the attempt to formulate some sort of universal semiotics which treat word and image as signs differing in degree rather than kind. What I envision, rather, is the development of a cross-disciplinary hermeneutics which is contingent, immanent, and inductive, and which considers the linguistic and the perceptual in reciprocal yet asymmetrical relation.

This dialogue between the writing and visual arts communities resulted in important consequences for the gendered social organization of KSW, consequences which might be illuminated by reference to the historical relationship between gender and genre which Mitchell also address in *Iconography*. In a discussion of G.E. Lessing's *Laocoön*, Mitchell notes the historical oppositions that have regulated aesthetic discussions pertaining to painting and poetry, including space / time, natural sign / man-made sign, imitation / expression, body / mind, external / internal, silence /

voice, beauty / sublimity, eye / ear, all of which historically correspond to the gendered differentiation of woman / man. Mitchell points out that "the relation of genres like poetry and painting is not a purely theoretical matter, but something like a social relationship – thus political and psychological, or (to conflate the terms) ideological" (112). Shaw's work, more than Derksen's in this instance, demonstrates an awareness of the gendered and ideological baggage which accompany her chosen media, and by situating her work in the liminal spaces confounding (rather than bordering) the media, her project confounds the bounds of gender as well.

This seems strategically aligned with and appropriate to her feminist politics as she has articulated it in other venues. In a review of "Politically Speaking," a 1988 show at Women in Focus in Vancouver involving the visual artists Rita McKeough, Mary Scott and Marcella Bienvenue, Shaw laments what she finds lacking in the work collectively, namely "an analysis of the complex and contingent nature of patriarchal power and the variety of different positions that women occupy according to race, class, sexual orientation, etc." (1988, 37).[28] This emphasis on the embodied subject occupying an ensemble of contradictory subject positions simultaneously reflects, as I argue below, a broader shift in feminist politics in North America towards the late 1980s. Focusing on the more specific context of late 1980s Vancouver, it is perhaps unsurprising that the transformation of the gendered make-up of KSW, which had been overwhelmingly male from its inception, seemed to occur in and around the same moment when the merger with Artspeak took place. At the risk of sounding simplistic and mechanically deterministic, we could perhaps draw a further

[28] See also Shaw's piece written with Catriona Strang, "The Idea File of Contingency," which both articulates and demonstrates the "disparate and uneven sources" informing their poetics. "Our negotiations," they write, " are of the precarious boundaries of the political, historical, social, and aesthetic, and consist of microgestural contentions of the social world's rules and resources" (Strang 35).

correspondence between the genders of the prime movers of the early KSW (Browne, Derksen, Wayman, Wharton) and Artspeak Gallery (Rimmer, Shaw, Kathryn MacLeod) and the historically constructed 'genders' of their corresponding media. Shaw's work, however idiosyncratic and particular, is typical of that of many KSW poets in that its negotiations, while drawing on historically gendered categories, undo or confound the borders between these categories to provide what they, and I, consider a politically useful position. Again, we must remember that such tactics are manifested not only in the art and poetry, but in the social-organization of the writer-run centre itself. Shaw is among the women writers that Klobucar and Barnholden list for whom "involvement with the Kootenay School of Writing demanded a redress of the disproportionate number of male writers who initially constituted the collective" (42) and who recognized that "most efforts to explore ideology within the school's programming tended to subordinate gender issues to those of class" (42-43). I might raise the question as to whether the sort of feminist politics embraced by Shaw and other women associated with KSW – a politics which, in its problematizing of the very categories of gender, offers a more enabling position for men sympathetic to feminist concerns – reflect their recognition of sympathies on the part of the male writers and a desire to forge strategic alliances with those male writers, or whether the male-dominated social organization of the school forced an attenuation of the more antagonistic (and, some might say, essentialist) politics which dominated feminist discussions in Anglo-America during the early 1980s.

KSW and Feminist (Trans-)Nationalism

Susan Clark's "Preface" to the premier issue of *Raddle Moon* (1983) cites Pier Giorgio di Cicio from the last issue of *From an Island*, *Raddle Moon*'s precursor:

"[a]t a time when people are threatening nuclear war...it's time to transcend barriers, not put them up...I look forward to a time when Canada graduates...to internationalism" (Clark 1983, n.pag). *Raddle Moon* 1 reflects this internationalist spirit, publishing poems in Italian (by Antonio Porta), French (Pierre Reverdy), and Spanish (Marco Antonio Flores), Robin Skelton's translation of a poem by Hungarian poet George Faludy, and a poem by the Nigerian poet Richard Stevenson. Two issues later Clark would offer further editorial comments on the magazine's international scope, again lamenting a residual parochialism in Canada: "[p]erhaps because we come from an island ourselves [Vancouver Island] and recognize the symptoms, we begin to see Canada as a tiny isolate land. And feel nationally 'bushed'" (Clark 1985/86, 5). Clark also notes that "internationalism seems to have come upon a number of us [Canadian little magazines], all at once" (6), suggesting a noticeable shift occurring in the mid 1980s. The earlier issues of the magazine included editors at large from Italy, Japan, Britain and Ireland, the U.S., the Middle East, and Africa. Over its run *Raddle Moon* has gradually narrowed its focus with respect to gender, not excluding male writers entirely but certainly publishing woman writers to such an extent that it could now be considered a "feminist journal." Yet in so doing it has managed to retain its internationalism, a quality that distinguishes it from other important Canadian literary feminist journals such as *Tessera*, *A Room of One's Own*, *CVII*, or *Fireweed*. As an organ of the Kootenay School of Writing, *Raddle Moon*'s internationalism could be said to reflect transformations in the feminisms, and in the feminist poetics, practised on the west coast and indeed throughout Canada.

Although writers such as Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt have international reputations, and while Erin Mouré, for instance, has always drawn on a variety of linguistic and national poetic traditions in her own work, these three writers

– whose work might be seen as touchstones of Canadian feminist poetics in the 1970s and 1980s – also helped develop and nurture a feminist literary tradition specific to Canada. This was a feminism heavily influenced by French poststructuralist theory, one characterized by a sexualized as well as gendered activism, and which championed texts which seem to me now more formally exploratory at the syntactic level but which were often contained within more conventional narrative structures. Through the journals I mention above, as well as events such as 1983's "Women and Words / Les femmes et les mots" conference in Vancouver, discussions of feminist poetics in Canada from the late 70s to early 90s were to a large extent conducted within a national frame. This is not to say that these writers were all strident nationalists, or even that they theorized their feminisms as Canadian. It is to say that texts were shared, ideas exchanged, and relationships forged amongst a number of people who held two categories of identity in common: gender and citizenship. The result was a community that, while not "de-linked" from or ignorant of communities and ideas in Britain or the U.S. (they would have been familiar with debates amongst women writers in the Bay Area, for instance, or within the Chicana community), could be characterized as "Canadian" in a way that many other poetic communities focusing on a specific category of identity were not. The situation was such that the feminist community was the first cultural community in modern history to bridge the gap between francophone Quebec and anglophone Canada, seen for instance in the make-up of *Tessera*'s editorial board or in Marlatt and Brossard's collaborations.

Ann Vickery has recently written of the gender divide which was manifested at the New Poetics Colloquium, a divide which was reflected in the structure and organization of the conference: a series of paired speakers in which a male speaker always preceded a female, thus "setting up the primacy of male critique" (Vickery

130). As Vickery points out, this gender divide was recognized and questioned more by Canadian women participants such as Jiles or Janice Williamson, perhaps a result of the "Women and Words" conference a couple of years prior, and that "[t]he American Language writers approached the colloquium with enthusiasm and with little sense of the heightened, radically feminist atmosphere that they were entering" (130). Vickery illustrates what would come to be a familiar binary: the male speakers used "a linear, academic mode of argumentation," whereas the women "emphasized openness and lack of continuity" (131). According to Vickery, this organizational bias in favour of the men, the gendered differences in styles of critique, and the at times problematic sexual imagery deployed by certain writers (Vickery cites Ron Silliman's *Paradise*), "did much to damage the early reception of Language writing in Canada" (132-133). Pauline Butling, however, in response to Paulette Jiles' condemnation of male aggression at the colloquium, resists this attempt to divide the conference along gender lines. While Butling writes that she was "struck by the aggressiveness of the participants, to the point of feeling assaulted at times," she felt that to characterize the event in terms of "males as aggressors" and "females as passive observers" was "too simple" (Butling 1986, 61). For Butling this aggression had less to do with gender and more with a certain oppositional tradition in U.S. literature:

> I see these writers as a continuation of the Ginsberg – Burroughs line in American writing, the writing of a people who, moved by a mixture of anger, anguish and despair, work at the extreme edge, resisting, challenging, fracturing, and fragmenting in order to expose and reconstruct a more meaningful centre. (62)

Still, I would have to agree with Vickery on her point about the colloquium having damaged the early reception by women of language writing in Canada. What mattered was not so much the authentic cause or source of aggression, but the perception of female participants: and Jiles' article clearly demonstrates the isolation felt by many Canadian women attending the colloquium. Although, as I argue later in this chapter, KSW would indeed generate "one of the most innovative and strongly feminist of poetic communities existing in Canada today" (133), the fact remains that many feminist writers who may have been excited by or at least sympathetic to the Language writers' attempts to fuse innovative form and oppositional politics in their writing – as innovative feminist writers in Canada had been throughout that decade – for the most part rejected the models presented at the colloquium.

Earlier in this chapter I briefly addressed the transnational relations that were forged by KSW in the mid-80s, and the shifts in poetics and emphases these relations produced. I want in this section to look at how this transnational shift is reflected in global and national feminist debates and KSW's role in these debates. Nationalism has always seemed a rather patriarchal category, so it seems paradoxical that feminist poetics in Canada would develop within a national frame first before extending out globally. Such a paradox is one that Lisa Robertson, Christine Stewart and Catriona Strang seem to exploit with their parodic manifesto "Barscheit Nation":

A. WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS TO BE SELF-EVIDENT:

1. Dissensual language is a machine of enchantments.
2. This machine, with all its archaisms, is a means of locomotion towards polysexual futures.
3. Wrenched history is our machine's frontier.

B. THE MACHINE IS THE NATION

> **Borders:** We cannot contain our pleasure.
>
> **Language:** Stolen without ransom.
>
> **Trade Policy:** Those whose fantasies condemn them.
>
> **Currency:** We have no currency.
>
> **Constitution:** Camped in the hinterland, basking in the rectitude of our intentions, we renounce entropic capital; we renounce the bogus repertoires of gender; we renounce post-historical gloating; we renounce proscribed rebuttal of memory; we renounce boredom. We know that beyond the Fantasy Empire lurks an improbable nation of subjects composed of countless tendrils, each with a new little sensory tissue at its tip. We travel there. (Robertson et al 185)

The 'nation' imagined here is perhaps best compared to Queer Nation: a transnational spirit of collectivity which exceeds the political borders of mere nation states, the "Fantasy Empire" which is both the nation state and patriarchal hegemony, to embrace "an improbable nation of subjects composed of countless tendrils." As Klobucar and Barnholden put it, this manifesto describes "a type of exaggerated nationalism taken straight from the pages of the high modernism tradition" (43). It might seem odd to draw the language of a feminist manifesto from the patriarchal discourses of nationalism and high modernism: for Klobucar and Barnholden, such exaggerations allowed Barscheit Nation to challenge not only "the misogynist derivations of high modernism, but the equally problematic search by conventional women writers for an essentially feminist language or mode of thought" (44). In a thorough overview of the history of the manifesto, Janet Lyon points out that "to write a manifesto is to announce one's participation, however discursive, in a history of struggle against oppressive forces" (Lyon 10). For Lyon, the manifesto does not

simply speak to an extant audience, but calls an audience into being: "the manifesto provides a foothold in a culture's dominant ideology by creating generic speaking positions; the nascent audience interpellated by 'we' is then held together as a provisional constituency through linguistic contract" (24). While the putative creation of a feminist collective constituency through the manifesto form of "Barscheit Nation" might be seen as a good thing, it could as easily be seen as presuming to speak on behalf of others, others who might not share the same interests as the authors. And yet "Barscheit Nation"'s parody of the manifesto form works to undo presumptions of collectivity: the republican echo of the "Declaration of Independence" with which the manifesto begins is followed by several declarations which seem hardly "self-evident," and remain in fact rather esoteric. As a result, this manifesto appears to speak on behalf of a very specific, discrete community. And yet for all of its renunciations "Barscheit Nation" appears to build upon an established feminist ground: the sensory and the erotic ("We cannot contain our pleasure"; "each with a new little sensory tissue at its tip"). Just as the manifesto purports to advance a "[d]issensual," technocratic language, the sense I get from this text as well as from the writings of Strang and Robertson is of a dialogic tension between cerebral detachment and erotic tongues, with the latter always threatening and occasionally overwhelming the former.

Just as feminist formations around KSW have always been internationally oriented, so too has the international community looked to Vancouver and KSW when considering Canada's place in a transnational avant-garde (one recent example would be Charles Bernstein's inclusion of Deanna Ferguson's work in his "99 International Poets" issue of *Boundary 2*). In 1996 Reality Street Editions of London published an anthology entitled *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in*

North America and the U.K., edited by Yorkshire poet Maggie O'Sullivan. As O'Sullivan notes in her brief introduction, the title is lifted from a transcribed discussion several years prior involving Rosemarie Waldrop, one of the poets included in the anthology. During a question and answer period after the discussion, an unidentified audience member comments that women poets like Waldrop who have traditionally been excluded from or marginalized within the publishing world because of their gender might now find themselves excluded from available feminist sites because of the exploratory, innovative, or "difficult" nature of their practice. "Each poet featured here" O'Sullivan maintains,

> does not *represent* a familiar world and therefore cannot be read in familiar ways. Consequently, many of them, through brave insistence and engagement in explorative, formally progressive language practices, find themselves excluded from conventional, explicitly generically committed or thematic anthologies of women's poetry. Excluded from 'women's canons,' such work does, however, connect up with linguistically innovative work by men who have themselves also transcended the agenda-based and cliché-ridden rallying positions of mainstream poetry. (O'Sullivan 9)

This anthology, then, emerges from a situation in the mid-90s in which feminist communities, much like other identity-based communities, found themselves in debates concerning the efficacy of formally exploratory writing: whether the critique of representation and the deconstruction of the lyric voice offered by contemporary innovative practices can have pragmatic social effects, or whether such critiques are actually pernicious given that marginalized subjects have only recently gained access to sites to offer counter-representations and articulate other voices (a conflict similar

to the one I describe in the 'work writing' section above). As Clair Willis puts it in an excellent essay on Lyn Hejinian and Denise Riley (both of whom are, incidentally, included in *Out of Everywhere*), "the recurrent fear in discussions of women's experimental writing is that such formal experimentation will become merely formal, and therefore unable to carry the weight of a feminist politics" (Willis 37).

Out of Everywhere, then, is offered as a polemical remedy to a doubled exclusion: gendered *and* aesthetic. However, some of the writers featured in the anthology are less excluded than others – particularly many of the U.S. poets who have forged relationships with male writers in that country working with similar language-focused concerns, and have as a consequence been included in recent anthologies attempting to sample the range of new, linguistically innovative poetries in North America over the past two decades. I am thinking here of anthologies such as Paul Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry* and Douglas Messerli's *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990*, and of writers such as Waldrop, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, Diane Ward, Leslie Scalapino, Bernadette Mayer, Marjorie Welish, Carla Harryman, and Rae Armantrout. With the exception of Nicole Brossard, apparently the *sine qua non* of Canadian women's experimental writing, the Canadian writers included in *Out of Everywhere* – Karen Mac Cormack, Deanna Ferguson, Catriona Strang, and Lisa Robertson – have not enjoyed nearly the same degree of mass exposure in Canada. While the differences in the political economies of poetry between the U.S. and Canada should certainly be recognized as one of the reasons for this neglect, it is also, I will argue, a product of differing literary histories, more specifically of differing histories of linguistically-exploratory feminist writing. In the case of Ferguson, Strang and Robertson, this neglect is exacerbated by the Canadian literary infrastructure's ignorance and lack of support of

KSW, a situation which has resulted in a lack of recognition – in Canada – of the male writers as well.

In attempting to situate this anthology vis-à-vis the specificities of feminist experimental writing in Canada, I might begin by looking at some of the names themselves 'out' of *Out of Everywhere*. One might have expected that the Canadian contingent in an international anthology of women's experimental writing might consist of names like Marlatt, Mouré, or Lola Lemire Tostevin. Brossard makes it in, but she appears to be an exceptional case – not only as the only writer working in French included, but also because, according to O'Sullivan, a collection such as this "would be inconceivable without her pioneering work" (10). Her "Taking it Easy on my Spine" is among the earliest of the work featured in the anthology, from *Méchanique Jongleuse*, translated in 1980 as *Daydream Mechanics*. The poem also appears as one of the more narratively feminist pieces, with its suggestive lesbian-erotic overtones:

> ravenous cell
>
> tender
>
> pronounce lips on the vein
>
> ridiculously
>
> to embrace you----------mobile
>
> rather a series of perturbations
>
> than strange acceptance of the circuit
>
> fades and recurs the echo
>
> emerges again (my tongue in her
>
> ear relay and machinations)

a means of suspension above

the veinous blue (if I drain her

it is because she inverts my circuits

more throbbing than anything else) (109)

This piece, with its combination of a technological with an erotic lexicon, anticipates Barscheit Nation's manifesto by almost two decades. "Taking it Easy on my Spine" is included here, I would argue, not so much because of its homoerotic index of tongues in ears, throbbings, or pronounced lips on veins, but for its line breaks and enjambments which produce a text which is paratactic rather than hypotactic, discontinuously meandering and investigative rather than linearly narrative and representational; in other words, for its formal rather than referential audacity. Yet much the same could be said about Mouré's *Search Procedures* or Tostevin's *Gyno Text*, and in fact Mouré's practice continues to move towards an increasingly disjunctive poetics. Why then their exclusion?

The vagaries of literary politics cannot be dismissed, particularly in a cultural field so discretely localized as poetry. "Localized" has of course become a troublesome term: poetic communities may now be global (as *Out of Everywhere* demonstrates), but I would argue they are no less parochial: the exigencies of the political economy of poetry – the lack of widespread public interest, the limited resources and sites available for publishing the work, the abundance of poetry being produced – are such that a community of writers may often provide the sole readership for their work. Thus the inclusion of Catriona Strang and Lisa Robertson probably has a lot to do with their involvement in the KSW scene and especially *Raddle Moon*, which has published many of the poets included in *Out of Everywhere*

– including its editor. I would point out that supposedly 'global' communities are usually co-equal with a global metropolis, and thus it should come as no surprise that an anthology with an international focus would faithfully reproduce the standard metropolitan view of Canadian literary activity: each poet included works out of Vancouver (Ferguson, Strang, Robertson), Toronto (Mac Cormack) or Montréal (Brossard). Though for that matter, so do Marlatt, Tostevin and Mouré.

The doubled exclusion which *Out of Everywhere* attempts to rectify offers another explanation: Mouré, Marlatt, and Tostevin have all enjoyed access to a feminist literary infrastructure – in the form of journals, anthologies, conferences and the like – in Canada throughout the 1980s; indeed they could claim much of the credit for the successful entrenchment and expansion of that infrastructure throughout the cultural landscape. Thus these writers' success would account for their omission from the pages of *Out of Everywhere* (though Brossard would still appear to be an exceptional case), and would remind us that the other four writers included are part of a generational shift taking place in Canadian feminist circles and indeed Canadian literary power in general. I want now to look at some of the texts published in the anthology by the three writers associated with KSW, and consider whether and how this generational shift has been accompanied by a shift in poetics.

Earlier in this section I loosely summarized some of the broad characteristics of experimental feminist poetics in Canada from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, including a demonstrable influence of continental theory, a sexualized as well as gendered activism, and texts which were more formally exploratory at the syntactic level but which were often contained within more conventional narrative structures. Excepting Brossard, of the Canadian writers included in *Out of Everywhere*, it is Lisa

Robertson whose work appears to maintain the most continuity with that community and its texts. The anthology includes an excerpt from her *Debbie: an epic* (1997):

> I see girls who as if armed and in
> formation one figure seated and one
> other standing – or two seated love
> approaching – flaunt the pliant display of
> tenderness
>
> others folding clothes one slight
> ly bent to place her folded garment her
> companion turning around ribboned
> thigh to watch her bend compel you to enter
> those rooms
>
> another will want to dream just
> of those animals associated
> with deities or Queens yet still display
> the abstinent charm of insouciant
> Venus (Venus after Venus stepped
> Out)
>
> some are called sweetheart and polish the
> sexual lens as if it were a blurred
> age
>
> one's exact rage ranks an acrid point (177-78)

Although she deploys disjunctive tactics such as line breaks to heighten ambiguities and rupture the monologic voice, usually at the service of a homoerotics in which the boundaries of subject and object, body and world collapse ("thigh to watch her bend

compel you to enter"; "others folding clothes one slight"), Robertson's text remains more narrative-driven than most of the poetry offered in the anthology. And, in its entirety, *Debbie: an epic* extends this explicitly lesbian-feminist position diachronically: Robertson's text offers taunting, irreverent apostrophes to male epic poet precursors ("Virgil, sweetheart, even pretty fops need / justice" (ll.167-68), and its numbered lines are another parodic move given the text's polyphonic mixture of visual poetics. The text pushes the limits of other epic conventions such as the extended list within the subordinate clause, exploiting the potential for the subordinated to briefly disrupt narrative development. *Debbie: an epic* continues Robertson's project – demonstrated in her earlier *Xeclogue* – of critically inhabiting inherited European genres (or, to paraphrase Peter Gizzi, renovating obsolete forms) in order, as Scott Pound puts it, to transform the genre with its promise of containment into "an agent of disruption, cutting up and deterritorializing and catalyzing the language" (Pound 38).

Like *Debbie: an epic*, Catriona Strang's *Low Fancy* (1993) takes on an older European form in offering a book-length translation of the *Carmina Burana*. "Language" Strang has written elsewhere,

> and in particular its aural and visual qualities rather than its semantics, is the point of connection between the *Carmina Burana* and my translation. I have tried to translate the robust sound and particular look of the Latin text, and have used the *CB* more as a place of departure than as an object for faithful reproduction in another language – while I have tried to keep the sound of my text close to that of the Latin, I have excerpted, repeated, cut, etc....[T]his kind of translation refuses the idea, central to most translations, of a single

source meaning to which all languages are ultimately referable, and blurs the boundaries between "original" and translated text. (Strang)

Strang's interest in translation, in her case homophonic translation, is in keeping with similar feminist concerns in Canada and elsewhere. And if we look closely at her indeed "robust" translation, we could note its corporeal texture, both in its referential index and through its thick, paradoxically anglo-saxon driven lexicon:

> Omit a must, you'd
> etch culled despair
> and carp a most delicate vent;
> your toothy era nets
> an apt senectitude, or
> resets an intender's series
>
> *It's a perturbing luxe*
> *our studied vex detains:*
> *as lascivious as sugar*
> *a tender, roused invention.*
>
> No stray veer humps
> labour's proper tactic –
> our vital's patched; it
> macerates a carnal cure.
> All bloody stops inhabit us, deter
> a picked guard or, no, I'm
> numb – our minute familiar's
> a moribund tussle
>
> *It's a perturbing luxe*
> *our studied vex detains:*
> *as lascivious as sugar*
> *a tender, roused invention.* (101)

Responding to critical dismissals of her practice as incomprehensible and elitist, Strang has remarked that her poetics approximates "sensory, affective, and kinetic forms of communication" in order to counter "logocentric certainties" (Shaw and Strang 35). Although, like most homophonic translations, *Low Fancy* resembles nonsense or surrealist verse, suggesting that its social engagement would be limited to synchronic, syntactic disruptions of meaning, the second person address and the

inclusive "we"s and "our"s create a dialogic space for the reader. The agonistic tone of the entire piece, clearly demonstrated in this excerpt, suggests that this dialogic is not necessarily intended to make the reader comfortable; rather it seems geared towards disturbing a reader's habitual response. Strang's engagement with the *Carmina Burana* here is not simply a feminist re-writing or appropriation of a patriarchal text or an elitist European art form; the *CB* offers what Strang (along with Nancy Shaw) has called elsewhere "tools and vocabularies" (34) which prepare her for "an investigation of socially-constituted and technologically mediated communication" (34-35). Her uses of tradition, much like Robertson's, are thus tactical, pragmatic, and reconstitutive: her work re-deploys the inherited resources of tradition in a contemporary context while critically transforming those resources. "Shedding the baggage of the past's traditions," Strang maintains, "we sustain useful methods and techniques to guide our future-oriented, conditional, sometimes counter-factual, and maybe even counter-intuitive practices. Who needs tradition's alibi?" (34). Yet at the same time Strang is not ignorant of the historical significance of a text like the *Carmina Burana*, which she notes was itself created through the potentially subversive act of translation, the writers of the opera recognizing that "the translation of decidely vernacular sentiments into Latin, the language of religious and secular power, undercut authority in authority's own words" (Strang 1991, 71). In a sense, here, Strang translates the Latin back into a vernacular: English. What might be slightly more problematic, historically speaking, is the translation of the obsolete language of "religious and secular power" into the contemporary hegemonic language of corporate and cultural power. More to the point, what these excerpts, and the writers' own comments on their practice, demonstrate is the extent to which Strang and Robertson are among the most "internationally" oriented of the writers associated

with KSW, and this internationalist orientation is directed related to their feminist politics.

Despite the similarities in the writing and theoretical stances of Robertson, Strang, and Shaw, we must be wary of presuming a uniformity of poetics among women writers associated with KSW. A case in point would be the work of Deanna Ferguson, the third member of KSW included in the anthology:

> Crude cleave garbled that cadenza
> look it up. Good gone as deed. Double
> digit bum-out. Like so much cake
> and *having* to eat it, the girls
> are hungry the ladies
> weak the dames
> dead and same please
> should beasts be freer than we? Please
> I'm a thinking thing, a public stew
> (pussy melt hearts through the kidneys)
> a tall blonde dumbell with a vegetarian nugget
> (Goodness Goddess Idleness)
> elles like chicken le cheap like fish. I've
> had it to my neck, imaginary bowel, soured
> tummy, hit the lights
> hampers chompers coast
> wreck cut this deck various
> logics capture thee. Drunk
> having sex with mom

in the lavatory. (131-132)

To be sure, there are important aesthetic equivalences between Ferguson's work and that of Strang and Robertson: piled up enjambments, oxymoronic collisions of radically differing lexicons, and again an agonistic tone come to mind. But Ferguson's work, more than that of Robertson or Strang, performs its critical investigations of language from a multiplicity of subject positions, including gender. Unlike the more mannered writing of Shaw, the sexiness of Robertson or the intellectualizing of Strang – all of whom hold strong working class sympathies – in Ferguson's writing the working class register is front and centre. I'm thinking of the collision of vocabularies and ambiguities produced by line breaks which result in a decidedly lewd, unembarrassed voice ("Drunk / having sex with mom / in the lavatory"), or the contradictions inherent in the position of the working class intellectual ("Please / I'm a thinking thing, a public stew"). But at the same time the text is spliced with French or with archaisms such as "thee" in order to foreground the degree to which such languages are not hers, and to establish a dialogic between antagonistic social languages. As Clint Burnham has commented on the work of Ferguson as well as that of Robertson and Strang, "the admixture of such rhetoric in these writers indicates a commonality of working through various registers because no one of them can be trusted anymore: a carnivalism of voice in opposition to the older earlier postmodern stress on some proprioceptive or treetrunk voice" (Burnham 1998, 32).

If we accept Chantal Mouffe's position that we must conceive of the social agent as constituted by an ensemble of at times contradictory "subject positions" (gendered, raced, classed, sexualized etc), and that we must approach this social agent "as a plurality, dependent on the various subject positions through which it is

constituted within various discursive formations" (Mouffe 372), then the practices of the three writers I have discussed here appear in different ways to offer appropriate poetic strategies to articulate this plurality. They also seem to have developed a method which permits them to voice resistance without falling into an essentialist position which excludes difference and refuses to recognize a subject's simultaneous subordination and complicity in existing power relations. If much of the experimental feminist writing in Canada over the past 20 years has been vulnerable to critiques of essentialism and of privileging a white, bourgeois perspective, then the practice of these writers (white though they may be), seems less vulnerable to such critiques.

Marjorie Perloff, in a recent article in which she discusses some of the work in *Out of Everywhere*, has claimed that "the transformation which has taken place in verse may well be more generational than gendered" (Perloff 106). This is a tempting proposition, particularly if we note that these writers did not publish perfect bound books until the 1990s. However, rather than situating these writers as "new" or "younger," a more accurate and enabling term would be "emerging." This would account for the fact that these writers were active over a decade ago and have only recently begun to receive critical attention; it would also recognize that a previous generation continues to write and, if Mouré's work offers any indication, to become themselves influenced by this emerging poetics. Moreover, I think that Perloff might be too hasty to dismiss the importance of gendered poetics in the assembly of this anthology; in the case of Canada at least, the inclusion of these writers and consequent exclusion of others suggests a shift in feminist paradigms within the sphere of poetics. Regardless of whether a woman's writing adopts an overtly feminist stance, any politicized, critically engaged poetry written in a contemporary context will necessarily intersect with feminist debates. And, as Johanna Drucker

reminds us in the pages of *Raddle Moon*, "[e]ven if NOTHING in the writing process had to do with gender, then almost EVERYTHING ELSE which has to do with the writing – publishing, seeing it received, being identified with it publicly and professionally, querying its historical position, etc. are ALL involved with gender issues" (Drucker 13). If *Out of Everywhere* attempts to account for gender difference within a transnational, emergent poetic, it has as much to tell us – particularly if our national focus is Canada – about emergent differences within feminist poetics.

CHAPTER THREE: POETICS

The early 1990s marked the high tide of KSW's influence in Vancouver, at which time a number of careers and organizations reached certain milestones. *Writing* magazine ceased publication in 1993 with issue 28. Jeff Derksen, Lisa Robertson, Kevin Davies, Deanna Ferguson, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Dan Farrell, Nancy Shaw and Gerald Creede all published their first perfect-bound books between 1990 and 1994, and while Derksen, Lusk and Shaw published with relatively large presses such as Talon and ECW, the rest published with Lary Bremner's Tsunami Editions.[29] To this extent the early 1990s were watershed years for Tsunami (excuse the pun) – although the press almost failed to make the jump from chapbooks to perfect-bound books. In a letter to Fred Wah on New Year's Day, 1992, Bremner informs him that a "[d]rastic fund-drain over the last 6 months...means that the Tsunamis in the works for 1992 are on temporary hold":

> Gone the disposable income. Gone too, (or swallowed temporarily) the independent "unfunded" pride. This flaw in my time-scheming is particularly frustrating since *Pause Button*, the book by English Canada's National Treasure (I speak, of course, of Kevin Davies), is going to be the first perfect-bound Tsunami, and I am more excited by Kevin's text than I have been about any other since the series began....BC money for small (*minuscule*) presses looks good, later on

[29] These would include Derksen's Down Time (1990) and Dwell (1993) and Lusk's Redactive (1990) with Talonbooks; Shaw's Scoptocratic (1992) and Strang's Low Fancy (1993) with ECW; and Davies' Pause Button (1992), Ferguson's The Relative Minor (1993), Farrell's Thimking of You (1994), Creede's Ambit (1993), and Robertson's Xeclogue (1993) with Tsunami.

> in 92, according to Dawn Wallace. But for now I need to see at least two projects off to the printer's before I leave for Japan, leaving distribution (and the choosing of 3 new projects) to the competent triumvirate of Catriona Strang, Deanna Ferguson, and K. Davies. (Bremner 1992)

Bremner then proceeds in the letter to ask Wah if he would consider becoming a "subscriber," to provide the press with a temporary cash infusion (Bremner asks for $100.00) to tide them over until the "BC money" comes through – which it eventually did. Ultimately *Pause Button* was published, and acknowledges on the colophon page the generous help of "subscribers" including Wah, Charles Bernstein, George Bowering, Colin Browne, Louis Cabri, Susan Clark, Charles Watts, Scott Watson, Peter Ganick, and Robert Mittenthal. That the publication of the book relied upon the generosity of a number of fully-employed people (there are several professors listed) was certainly not an unusual situation facing the small press publisher in North America, and provides an example of the way in which KSW was a manifestation of what has come to be termed "civil society," that is, not entirely government funded (note Bremner's pride at Tsunami's "unfunded" status), nor a market-driven organization, but one rooted in a specific community and relying upon unorthodox and sporadic funding schemes.

In this chapter I want to look closely at four of the writers who were part of this explosion of first publications in the early 1990s: Davies, Ferguson, Robertson and Derksen. Whereas my method in the second chapter was to focus on the KSW writers' relation to collectivities, here I want to attend to their individual differences and idiosyncracies. To this end I have selected writers whose poetics, while overlapping in significant ways, vary widely enough to evoke some sense of the

diversity of practice and stance which characterized the Vancouver poetry scene at the time. I have also chosen them because of their relative notoriety on the North American and even international stage. Despite the title of this chapter, my intent is not necessarily to extrapolate a uniform "poetics" from close readings of the poets' work, but to note certain consistent tendencies and concerns, and to work out a vocabulary that might be useful in further discussing their writing. Certainly what I say about syntactic overdetermination in Davies' work might also apply to Derksen's, just as my examination of irony in Derksen's work might be useful in considering Ferguson's.

What has become increasingly clear to me is the inadequacy of a post-structuralist inflected vocabulary to discuss the work of the writers associated with KSW. That is, the critical discourse which developed in and around language writing and which placed emphases on the deconstruction of voice, the productive role of the reader and the materiality of the sign does not seem adequate to productively discuss the work of these writers. Rather, as I have tried to do in these pages, each poem seems to demand and to gesture towards its own idiosyncratic critical method: one as grounded in context (both of production of the text and of its subsequent reception) as the poems themselves. Certainly aspects of critical methodologies developed out of an engagement with one particular poem could productively be used in addressing work emerging from another context: methods overlap in reading strategies just as they do in writing. But ultimately critical discourse addressing the work of these poets should begin to resemble, perhaps we could say become analogous to, the social constellation of this particular community of writers. This is not to imply that the critical community which addresses the work should be localized geographically, but

that it should approach the work from a perspective which is idiosyncratic and localized, rather than abstract and universal.

Elisions and Revisions: [Self] Censorship in Kevin Davies' *Pause Button*

In a 2000 "Phillytalk" with Diane Ward, Kevin Davies describes himself as "an occasional poet, in two senses: I write (or assemble) for specific occasions (readings), and I'm occasionally a poet" (Davies 2000a, 4). Indeed, the one consistency throughout Davies' writing life (a life now entering its fourth decade) is the paucity of his publications or, for that matter, public readings of his work. There is a sort of humility to his self-construction in public forums such as his conversation with Ward (in which he claims "I've nearly always faltered or withdrawn at or before the point of publication" [2] and that "I lack...trust in my own writing" [3]), a humility which could be seen as ranging from false-modesty to outright disingenuousness, depending on the degree of one's cynicism. This "humilitas" allows Davies to "unmake himself" in a counter-heroic self-effacement, an effacement which finds its textual equivalent in his attempts to undermine the lyric 'I' in his later work (and while I gesture here towards Olson this is much more of a Spicerian tactic). And, in a time in which the quantity of verse being published in North America seems equalled in its volume only by its mediocrity, a poet who practices such rigorous self-censorship seems to me a welcome relief. As Peter Culley puts it, "[a]s a poet whose reputation stands in inverse proportion to the scarcity of his publications, Davies' few public appearances are lent a density and a force far beyond that which by habit and inclination he would bring to them" (Culley 1993, 189). In a round table discussion on Davies' recently released *Comp.* (Edge Books, 2000) held at the Kootenay School of Writing, a number of participants also saw fit to mention his reticence in sharing

his work.[30] Davies' 1992 book *Pause Button* – both his and Tsunami Editions' first perfect-bound book – stages this process of self-censorship, in the manifold manner of censoring one's writings before their publication, of an ongoing textual censorship through the use of parentheses, and of censoring the self as such.

Pause Button is a long poem made up, in Davies' words, "of the interruptions, rewritings & 'translations' of many poems & poem series, most of which were originally written or assembled for public readings" (1992, 79). The book concludes with a page containing a number of dates, the most prominently displayed (in large, bold type) being "1979, 1984-91," which I take as a nod to the dates of the writing of the pieces which would eventually comprise *Pause Button*. The book is thus shaped by synchronic re-visions of the diachronic documentation of a particular life moving through particular sites (ranging from Italy to Toronto to Vancouver). Of course, many writers work through just such a process of revising accumulated jots and scraps of writing, not the least many of Davies' contemporaries in Vancouver and New York (Dorothy Trujillo Lusk and Bruce Andrews come especially to mind). But this is, for Davies, a particularly deliberate compositional method, drawing in part on Spicer's (or Blaser's) notion of seriality without necessarily embracing dictation as a compositional principle. In his conversation with Ward, Davies elaborates on this method in more detail, implicitly contrasting it with Ward's description of her own method. Ward's comment that "a first line becomes an entrance to a PIECE, a last

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[30] "Drone, cackle, threnody, duct tape, expression, pasta, glaze, the skull bones of snipers: a round table on the book *Comp.* by Kevin Davies" was held September 10, 2000. The participants in the round table – Clint Burnham, Gerald Creede, Peter Culley, billy little, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, George Stanley, and Reg Johanson – published brief written pieces before the talk. In her piece "Mine Comp.," Lusk warns that anyone owning *Comp.* "should guard against Davies's tendency to annotate copies out of existence" (Burnham 2000, 8) while Culley claims "Kevin's scorched earth archival policy has rendered both the prose and poetry of this period difficult to access" (10).

line an exit – almost arbitrary" [3]) Davies hears as "simultaneously very classical and very romantic":

> I'd say that the one thing I don't do, whatever my intentions, is approach a piece of writing. The words, on hundreds of scraps of paper, get accumulated over a given period, during which I am in the midst, as are we all, of various rhetorical situations, both as speaker and as auditor. Most of the "notes" are either assertions or shields. A few are silos. One or two might be reedy exhalations with vegetal imagery. I take it all personally, even the bureaucratese and excerpts from how-to manuals. Or especially those. Sooner or later, someone asks me to give a reading, at which time I look for a box arbitrary enough to jar some of its own produce. The struggle then, usually in the week before the reading, is to force the liveliest and most contrary piglets to arrange themselves serially within the container. I ask them to please try to be interesting. (4)

Mixed metaphors aside, Davies says much that is of interest here. His claim that he "take(s) it all personally," even the found texts which he brings into his work, might belie my claim above that Davies' methodology is designed to resist the enunciative 'I,' or even the will-to-arrange, of a heroic subjectivity. But I read his use of "personally" here as a nod to what he rightly understands as the intersubjective nature of reading and speaking (that we find ourselves "in the midst" of rhetorical encounters, always already implicated as both speaker and auditor). This accumulative phase of his writing, in which he draws on and of and from the world, gives way as the moment of public articulation approaches to a self-effacing method which clearly owes a debt to Spicer, and not just in Davies' mention of "serially" but

also in his irreverent, quotidian, and bizarrely agricultural vocabulary of 'silos,' 'produce' and 'piglets.' George Stanley also reads Davies' poetry in relation to Spicer; in his "Notes on Kevin Davies' *Comp.*" he writes

> This language comes first of all from the outside – from language actually existing in the world – not from the writers' mind. Then Davies does things to it – he works on it – like a 'technician of the absurd' – transforms it, slices & splices its syntactic structures, recombining them in new & unsettling ways – ways that make them say more and less than they had: more because the changes Davies rings free them from the limitations of their original narrow purposes (commercial or ideological) so they seem to speak the unstated intentionality of the culture (largely USAmerican postmodernity), and less of course because they had little to say from the start. (Burnham et al. 3)

What Stanley has to say about *Comp.* would also offer a useful way of reading *Pause Button.* Addressing the earlier book, Stanley argues Davies finds words that are somehow "devalued or downsized" and then "pries them loose from their matrices....[t]hey are then *revalued* by their passage through the workshop of his originative yet pristine – careful yet carefree – mind" (3). This position seems similar to Derksen's notion of "rearticulation": in both arguments language is somehow "redeemed" through the compositional method of the writer, though I doubt either Derksen or Stanley would much like the religious or spiritual overtones of the word 'redeem' here. The crux of both arguments, of course, rests on the prefix 're-,' which immediately invites us to look back at the root word and, in Davies' practice, the root text. And despite what I established above as Davies' lack of public production, he

did publish in several places prior to the 1992 book. One site was Gerry Gilbert's magazine *B.C. Monthly*, which published a single poem ("The Confluence") in March 1980, ten poems (The Gore of the Personal," "Still Lives," "Fur Flies," "Preliminary Remarks," "Stop Turning Vegetables into Faces," "Interlude: Everyone Smokes," "Here is a Picture," "A Sixty-Sonnet Cycle Concerning," "Wind," and "Table of Content") in April 1983, and five sections from "Extraneous Detail" in February 1986.

The five sections from "Extraneous Detail" are of particular interest to readers of *Pause Button*, because they are reprinted (revalued, rearticulated), in permutated form, on pages 9-16 of that book. If certain sections of *Pause Button* had their genesis not only in miscellaneous scraps, but in "completed" and published poems, this seems to me to complicate Davies' own description of his method, not to mention Stanley's position. If what Stanley suggests is valid (and I think he offers a useful hermeneutic), how do "the changes Davies rings" here from the 1986 publication to the perfect-bound Tsunami Book "free [the syntactical structures] from the limitations of their original narrow purpose"? That is, what happens when a writer's earlier text becomes part of that 'outside'? At the very least, a comparison of the changes Davies makes in the transformation of the first publication into the second could tell us a good deal about broader transformations over the intervening years, not only in Davies' own understanding of his practice but to the poetic or cultural field in Vancouver as a whole.[31] By placing the earlier text "in relief" against the later, the formal arrangements of *Pause Button*, and their effects, become that much more apparent.

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[31] This is similar to my comparison of different versions of Kiyooka's "4th Avenue Poems," though in this case the transformations occur over a matter of years rather than decades.

The most obvious difference between the two texts is the division of the earlier piece into roughly regular four line stanzas. As a result, the line breaks occur both randomly and with regularity: Davies' arrangement of his prose in the predetermined form results in a somewhat stilted and artificial phrasing:

As a man I am a

bit of a woman & have received the letters in the
mail. Beauty of flash light on even the
most ravaged face. Oh exactly so. I've
never had a dream in my life & don't plan to

start now. Born in a barn, died in a kennel.
Cars zipped by & their contents. As a
woman I am a bit of a man & have posted
the correspondence. (1986, 4)

In *Pause Button*, Davies replaces the rigidity of the stanzas with a variety of strategies of organizing text: from a lineated verse of differing line lengths (both left and right justified) to lines isolated by extended spacing with what appears at times tenuous semantic correspondences between them, producing a more openly social dialogic. Here is the 'same' text as above as it appears in *Pause Button*:

As a man I am a [
] & have received the letter in the
mail.
Beauty of flashed light on
even the most ravaged face.

Born in a barn, died in a kennel.

Cars whipped by & their

contents.

As a woman I am a [

] & have posted the correspondence. (1992, 10-11)

The replacement of certain phrases with the bracketed elisions is certainly revealing. In the section from *Pause Button*, the parallels between "as a man" and "as a woman" are less clumsily rendered: Davies allows the equivalences in syntax, lineation and context to "complete" (or "post"?) the correspondence between the lines. To give another example, the section entitled "If they grow over the fence we own them" (a title rendered as a "complete" poem in itself in *Pause Button*) is reproduced in the later text with a bracket at the beginning, only here the amount of text "elided" is unclear as the 1986 version had an extra three stanzas that don't find their way into *Pause Button*:

The kind of feeling that so

suddenly inhabits one when,

loping down lane on a mission from

headquarters, one realizes ones

good fortune in having one friend

with one long side-burn, an

agile tenacious way with kitchen-

ware, & an inclination to drop it

all at a moments notice & light out

for Saskatoon. Slater did not
expect that Barber would double-cross
him; nevertheless the pistol rose

a little in his hand, an involuntary
movement. Punch-drunk & frivolous,
making holes, delivering versions. (1986, 5)

--- [ ] a little in his hand, an involuntary
movement. Punch-drunk & frivolous,
making holes, delivering versions. (1992, 13)

It's almost uncanny how the lines "Punch-drunk & frivolous, / making holes, delivering versions" imply a reflexive historical awareness of Davies' ongoing revisionary, redactive project. When read in relation to the earlier text, *Pause Button*'s signature device – the parenthesis – takes on manifold significance. I would like now to focus on the different ways Davies puts this device to work in his text.

The most pervasive use of parentheses in *Pause Button* is as a sign of elision. Klobucar and Barnholden read these elisions as unfilled gaps and refusals, points at which signification is 'paused.' While I think this reading at times has merit, I see the bracketed elisions for the most part operating quite differently. In most instances, meaning is hardly refused: rather the device foregrounds the degree to which meaning remains *overdetermined*, be it rhetorically, syntactically, morphemically, contextually and so on.

My use of the term "overdetermination" here might best be understood with reference to Louis Althusser's remarks in his essay "On the Materialist Dialectic," at a

point at which Althusser, like myself, feels a need to clarify his use of the term (a term which he repeatedly reminds us he finds unsatisfactory). Althusser is insistent that his use of the concept is *relational*:

> Overdetermination designates the following essential quality of contradiction: the reflection in contradiction itself of its conditions of existence, that is, of its situation in the structure in dominance of the complex whole. This is not a univocal 'situation.' It is not just its situation '*in principle*' (the one it occupies in the hierarchy of instances in relation to the determinant instance: in society, the economy) nor just its situation '*in fact*' (whether, in the phase under consideration, it is dominant or subordinate) but *the relation of this situation in fact to this situation in principle*, that is, the very relation which makes of this situation in fact *a 'variation' of the – 'invariant' – structure, in dominance, of the totality*. (Althusser 1970, 209, emphasis in original)

This 'invariant' structure I understand as a sort of conceptual horizon, never fully articulated but obtaining in the accumulated tropes of its own representation, tropes which the invariant structure itself determines in a reciprocal relation. Althusser follows this passage with the qualification that while this 'relational situation' is "no longer univocal."

> it has not for all that become 'equivocal', the product of the first-comer among empirical pluralities, at the mercy of circumstances and 'chance', their pure reflection, as the soul of some poet is merely that passing cloud. Quite the contrary, once it has ceased to be univocal and determined once and for all, standing to attention in its role and essence, it reveals itself as determined by the structured complexity

> that assigns it to its role, as – if you will forgive me the astonishing expression – complexly-structurally-unevenly-determined. I must admit, I prefer a shorter term: overdetermined. (209)

Notwithstanding Althusser's playful simile of a romantic understanding of the poet, my use of overdetermination here shifts, or rather narrows, the focus from social relations as such to language. The "structured complexity" which Althusser describes should be understood in my use of the term here as the possibilities permitted by syntax: of the various determinations (the grammatical imperatives of English, the conventions of poetry, spelling, local context, social rhetorics and so on) that work collectively as an overdetermination of the concrete instances of poetry.

The first appearance of parentheses in the text immediately establishes what will become the sort of recurring 'unconscious' of the text: the sense of impending violence, of an intersubjective exchange in which agency is seemingly unlocatable:

> Information-needy, 26. Seeks [ ] for [ ]. Absolutely pyjamaless. Check [ ]. Yank hair into place, thrust face forward, hit.
>
> Remove the rug, replace it with the floor, sit, pluck splinter, spit. (8)

Here the rhetorical conventions of the classified ad (laconic description, reference to the self in the third person, a desire to supplement a lack) are the overdetermining outside. These conventions create a sense of intersubjective exchange, even in the [literal] absence of a locutor; the directions "Yank hair into place, thrust face forward, hit" suggest both masochism and domestic violence. There are a number of points throughout *Pause Button* where this violent unconscious of the text emerges; in most of these instances parentheses make an appearance, almost as a form of censorship:

> [ ] heated myself therein
> & was very violent. (13)

That's what happens
when you give a [ ] a [ ] & tell it to start shooting. (28)

-- After the raw-meat drill [
] radiant immunity

In this model
ready to kill for

Very much, thank [
] *you* economic catastrophe

becomes the [b-b-body] [ ] of the [m-m-m-m-m]. (51)

This last example actually supports Klobucar and Barnholden's take on the parantheses more than mine (I get the sense almost of static). What is most remarkable about the text's self-censorship is the degree to which it exacerbates the violent overtones of the passages; the text allows for the juxtaposition of "economic catastrophe" and a "model / ready to kill for" with both an assertion and a refusal of a correspondence between them. The text establishes free-floating *relations*, and the reader is implicated in their syntax.

The poetic consequences of *Pause Button*'s syntactic overdeterminations might be more clearly elucidated with reference to Roman Jakobsen's essay "Linguistics and Poetics," particularly his famous axiom that "*[t]he poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination*" (Jakobsen 27, italics in original). Jakobsen basically suggests what distinguishes the poetic from other functions of language, its "empirical linguistic criterion" (27), is that whereas some degree of equivalence is always an overdetermining factor along the paradigmatic axis (the axis of selection, of metaphor, of reference), in poetry equivalence also overdetermines possibilities along the syntagmatic axis (the axis of combination, of metonymy, of syntax) – an axis typically based on contiguity. While Jakobsen's dictum works well if we attend to

factors more characteristic of "closed" verse (regular rhythms, rhyme, fixed word boundaries), his argument runs into trouble when we approach a more "open" form such as Davies' text, particularly considering his use of parentheses as a device. Whereas the "pauses" and gaps in syntax imply, theoretically, infinite possibilities of substitution (and would thus appear to offer the reader a position of productive agency), their actual effect is as often as not precisely the opposite. *Pause Button* at times turns Jakobsen's dictum on its head, promoting contiguity rather than equivalence to the "constitutive device of the sequence" (Jakobsen 27). That is, the syntagmatic overdetermines the available options along the paradigmatic pole. Jakobsen of course would claim that this is always the case: syntax and grammar necessarily circumscribe the available dictional possibilities in any utterance. *Pause Button*'s innovation is that *social context* becomes the primary overdetermining grammar to the various bits of text. What might appear at first to be a gap with a potentially infinitely substitutable content (and implicitly a slogan of economic abundance)

A bank on every corner & a [ ] in every pot (22)

becomes, in the context and rhetorical echoes of the sentence (the would-be 'empowering' rhetoric of corporate North America and the populist hucksterism of the political promise), an unsettling recognition of the vacuity of such promises.

As I note above, the various morphologies of English also constitute an overdetermining outside; or, more accurately, the role of these morphologies in overdetermining meaning is laid bare. I am thinking here specifically about the habitual inertias of punctuation ("[ ]'m [ ] shoulder blades" [16]; "[ ]'s no good / them just *giving* us breakfast, we've got to take it" [29]) and of spelling:

-- [...S]eeing you take
to the television as though to your childhood

duck pond. (24)

-- [D]utiful but soon (26)

-- [ ]ing saucers
are displayed. (34)

-- [ ]agnificent (56)

Here, the reader is at once situated in a productive role (in the sense that she "fills in the gaps") but a role clearly overdetermined (the possibilities available are not at all endless, and are in fact forcefully circumscribed). To return to (and expand upon) my initial point about Davies' continual undermining of the grounds of his own authorship: Davies does not simply shift the authority or productive locus of meaning to the reader in the spirit of poststructuralism or early L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E texts; rather both subject positions (of writer and of reader) are betrayed as overdetermined. The brackets in this sense enact or perform a critique of property relations more explicitly stated at various places in the book ("You have *my* permission to sleep on *my* porch" [50]) by undermining the position of author (or reader) as either original source or empowered selector of meanings.

Such tactics, as troubling as they are to questions of agency, might appear politically reckless or nihilistic to some readers, particularly readers invested in political struggles for whom the availability of agency is paramount. However *Pause Button* offers, I think, a cogent and radical critique of contemporary structures of power: laying bare or betraying the workings of ideology so as to allow for both a sustained critique and the imagination of alternative possibilities of social (and poetic) organisation. Furthermore, Davies often uses the device of the parenthesis in more proactive, declamatory tactics, from Lacanian ontological assertions ("all members of society contain [ ]" [30]) to Wordsworthian witticisms ("That difficult stage /

[between birth &] late middle age" [67]). Consider also the "hometowns are" refrain, in which Davies offers a number of (each unsatisfactory) possibilities:

-- hometowns are [*psychological*]

-- hometowns are [*mistaken in their assumptions*]

-- hometowns are [*retirement meccas*] (72)

-- [Hometowns are] *destroyed by fire*. (75)

The motif of the "hometown" extends outside *Pause Button* to become a refrain which echoes throughout Davies oeuvre. In "Thunk," published in *Open Letter* in 1998, for instance, he writes (sans parenthesis) "Hometowns are *reformist idiots*" (74), which again appears in *Comp.* in the section "Karnal Bunt" (65). In this sense, then, the bracket (and what it contains) shifts from a device which undermines the subject position of the author-as-source-of-meaning to a "signature" device or phrase which re-inscribes the author function "Kevin Davies" as the unifying common denominator of a body of texts. However (and it is not insignificant that this signature invokes "hometowns," the site of often painful and inescapable social origins), the repetition at the same time constructs this author position as fluid and undecided.

As I suggested at the beginning of this section, Davies' stance "in the world" seems to mimic or reflect the authorial self-effacement of his poetic procedures. It is ironic, however, that the result of this stance seems to have been to initiate a preliminary canonization process. I have already, for instance, mentioned the "Roundtable" discussion which took place at KSW to coincide with the release of *Comp.* in 2000, an event which marked the moment as an important one to the Vancouver community. In his essay "The Dynamics of Literary Change," Steve Evans concludes a *tour-de-force* overview of the thought of Hegel, Robert Musil, Bourdieu, and Adorno on literary change and emergent cultural formations with the

announcement that a specific group of poets – he lists Davies, Lee Ann Brown, Lisa Jarnot, Bill Luoma, Jennifer Moxley, and Rod Smith – have "helped settle for many people, myself included, a question pending since 1989 and pressing since 1993, namely, what would emerge to break the tranquil process of banalization that has so thoroughly contained and *dated* the project known as language-centred writing?" (Evans 49) While I would point out to Evans that he might have looked to Vancouver in the late 1980s/ early 1990s for an earlier answer to that question (and that he did not betrays how much debates over innovative poetics in North America remain circumscribed by cultural nationalism), his inclusion of Davies within a group of poets mostly working out of the metropolitan cultural centres of the northeastern U.S. such as New York and Washington D.C. suggests that Davies' position as author continues to be reified.

Language, Poetry and Difficulty: On Deanna Ferguson

KSW's affiliation with so-called language poetry has always been something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand it has helped place a number of the poets associated with the school in international view, and has provided a hermeneutics which could productively explicate some of the work. On the other hand, as I have discussed earlier, this association with the language poets has tended to obscure differences between poets and histories (just as the blanket term has obscure differences among the U.S. poets gathered under its sign). One of the most significant differences between the KSW poets and their contemporaries in the U.S. is that whereas poets such as Silliman, Bernstein, Perelman, Watten and Hejinian have collectively developed (through talks, statements and essays) a critical poetics which parallels or overlaps with their "creative" practice, the Vancouver writers, with a few

important exceptions (Derksen and Shaw) have not. In the case of a writer like Deanna Ferguson, this refusal to provide a contextual or hermeneutic frame to explain her work is part of a broader refusal on her part to engage with the cultural/discursive apparatus which frames the reception and production of poetry in Canada, especially the academy. Louis Cabri has discussed the phenomenon of what he calls, following Roland Barthes,[32] "second-order commodification" with respect to the innovative poetries which emerged in Canada in the late 1980s:

> Second-order commodification refers to a myth-inducing condition in which there is simultaneously (a) the emergence ("here") and arrival (from "there") of primary writing only later to be identified as "new" (for instance, as "language-centred") with (b) the emergence/arrival of a metalanguage (in this case, the term "language-centred") identifying the work as new. Second-order commodification results from a cultural context in which primary language without a name, and its metalanguage that brings a name, temporally co-exist. One reception-effect of second-order commodification is to have poetics stances appear clearly staked, already amplified, distinctly audible, a critical lexicon already worked out and available to draw from in identifying aesthetic tendencies in possibly opposing, even reductive ways. (Cabri 13)

[32] In *Mythologies* Barthes argues that myth is a "*second-order semiological system*" because "it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it" (114, italics in original). He then proceeds to call myth a "*metalanguage* because it is a second language, *in which* one speaks about the first" (115, italics in original). Cabri's shift from "second-order semiological system" to "second-order commodification" seems intended to foreground the degree to which this metalanguage is reified, packaged and sold.

For Cabri, this is not an inescapable condition, and in fact became for a number of poets in Canada a form of "poetic knowledge" informing their practice. Citing Ferguson's poem "Received Standard" (published by Cabri and Rob Manery in *hole* 4), he describes her strategy as "resolute intransigence": "[t]he reader is beckoned to exempt herself by deliberately recontextualizing the process of second-order commodification as a 'rigged game' ornamentalizing the importance of context – and critique – itself" (15). Jed Rasula has written, however, that "[l]iterary history is not really about priority but about agency: not who did it first, but who coordinated doing with knowing, poetry with poetics" (1997, 30), implying not only that poetic agency results from a conscious awareness of what it is one is doing, but that a poetics should be coordinated with the poetry. Thus Ferguson's refusal to coordinate her poetry with an articulated poetics might be seen as a failure to coordinate doing with knowing. And yet her "resolute intransigence" might be seen as a way of privileging *doing* over *poetics*. "Resolute intransigence" becomes then an apt way of describing not only one of Ferguson's poetic tactics but her very stance in the cultural sphere – an instance in which poetics and lived practices converge.

In the case of KSW, the second-order commodification which Cabri describes may have manifested itself in, say, a tendency to read any form of discontinuous prose poetry (such as that of Gerald Creede) through Silliman's "new sentence" theory, or to reduce the work of radically idiosyncratic writers to a critique of the commodity fetish à la McCaffery. But probably the most pervasive – and damaging – manifestation was an immediate dismissal of the work as deliberately 'meaningless' or 'difficult': a critical approach which confuses opacity with nonsense, rigour with elitism, the local with the parochial. One of the most glaring examples of this was Brian Fawcett's review of Wayman and Wharton's *East of Main* anthology entitled

"Skinhead Formalists," reprinted in his book *Unusual circumstances, interesting times and other impolite interventions* under the title "East Van Uber Allës." Ignoring for the moment Fawcett's rather offensive implied comparisons with neo-nazism, in the review he cites (he claims at random) a passage from Ferguson's "Swoop Contract" and a passage from Derksen's "Grasping at Axles." Fawcett claims the two passages share a "common characteristic":

> They're articulations of the self/language/world matrix that allows almost any response or interpretation. They're deliberately written in such a way that there's no specific meaning. The reader's interpretation of the poems – or rather, what they invoke in his or her language/self matrix – is theoretically of equal verity to whatever the authors have inscribed within them. Interpretation itself is unimportant, because the true subject is formal. The medium is the message, and that's what they confine the reader to think about. The result is a poetry of rather arid theoretical demonstration. (Fawcett 97-98)

While Fawcett condemns the writing for what Cabri might term "second-order commodification" ("a poetry of rather arid theoretical demonstration"), his critique is far more symptomatic of the condition than is the poetry of Derksen or Ferguson. That is, rather than reading the work as generative of its own interpretive frames, he approaches the work with a received theoretical stance, and selects passages to exemplify how the poetry demonstrates the theory.

I do not wish here to summarize Fawcett's subsequent arguments about what he calls "LCW" (language centred writing) except to note that he describes KSW and their U.S. contemporaries (Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman – whom

Fawcett calls "the wise men three of LCW" [96]) as a nihilistic secret society guilty of the exclusions produced by "Kabbalarian syntax" (100). Here Fawcett's argument appears to be implicitly populist, a stance which might invite sympathy were it not so inconsistent with what he writes elsewhere in the review. For example, at the beginning of the essay he is careful to remind us of poetry's lack of popularity ("in a culture where no one at all is reading poetry except poets" [93]) but concludes with the argument that "[p]oetry, like any other artform, has to be public communication" (101). While this might seem less of a contradiction if we read Fawcett's assertions of poetry's lack of popularity as a lament, and his identification of "Kabbalas" as somehow contributing to this lack of popularity, he seems to construct a chicken-and-egg argument of which the only point appears to be to lay blame. If poets could ignite public interest in poetry simply by writing immediately accessible verse, then a good deal of the anecdotal writing in the *East of Main* anthology would do the trick. The poets associated with KSW (and with what Fawcett calls "LCW") recognize that if poets are the only ones reading poetry, then this has to be taken as an opportunity, hand wringing aside.[33] Klobucar and Barnholden summarize Fawcett's position as a reproof to language-centred writing and to KSW "for abandoning a more practical and communicative alliance with the labour movement" and for refusing "a more

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[33] See, for instance, Charles Bernstein's perhaps audacious claim that poetry's lack of popularity should be embraced rather than lamented. Thinking more specifically of the poetry *reading*, Bernstein writes: "...I would turn around the familiar criticism that everyone at a poetry reading is a poet to say that this is just what is vital about a reading series, even the essence of the poetry reading. For poetry is constituted dialogically through recognition and exchange with an audience of peers, where the poet is not performing to invisible readers or listeners but actively exchanging work with other performers and participants [....] the value of the poetry reading as a social and cultural form can be partly measured by its resistance, up to this point, to reification or commodification. *It is a measure of its significance that it is ignored*" (Bernstein 1998.23). Although Bernstein is talking specifically about the reading as a public event, his recognition of poetry's unique, socially dialogic character extends to the printed form as well.

systematic strategy of cultural opposition" (Klobucar 32-33). This would return us to the antagonism which I identify in the section on 'work writing' above, and Fawcett's review could be read as one of the more agonistic moments in that struggle.

But, to return to my earlier point, the main problem with Fawcett's take on the writing he cites is that he does not appear to actually read the poetry, preferring instead to use it as a launch pad for an argument against "Language Centred Writing" as such. Here is the passage of Ferguson's Fawcett cites, from "Swoop Contract" (the poem was eventually included in her book *The Relative Minor*, and all citations are from that collection):

> Sometimes the subordinate clause is while you still have friends. Causality abets restless energy; ensues credit. If stool the size of an infant's head is removed from one's cadaver, it's a sign. Adjust connective degenerations. What appears to the eye and touch after twenty or thirty years is the same after forty or sixty, singing, cords, casts, stuck to the bottom. (Ferguson 1993, 51)

Far from allowing "any response or interpretation," meaning in this passage seems to me intensely contingent upon context, both of the surrounding extended poem and of the local context of Ferguson's Vancouver and its corresponding class and gender power structures. That is, the poem is not politicized in the simple sense of being 'writerly,' of collapsing the writer/reader position and offering the reader a position of agency in the production of meaning. Rather the text seems to me, when not clearly personally enigmatic, to generate politicized meanings out of a contextual relation to the poem as a whole. The third sentence, for instance, contributes to the accumulation of a discourse of disgust, ill health and the clinical sterility of modern medical practices throughout "Swoop Contract," registered in such sentences as "Soon enough

proctitis, user failure, the common cold" (50), "a dirty minded dentist in our past" (50) or "More and more medicine and a clean smell of stepping into a new model" (51). Similarly, the puns of "singing, cords, casts, stuck to the bottom" echo the opening lines of the poem and continue a similarly accumulative discourse around opera, singing and performance: "Because an opera singer. Failing tomato juice, macaroni stuck to the bottom of the pot, she squawked" (50).

If "Swoop Contract" is an opera (and it is, in the literal sense of opera as 'work'), it is one that "squawks," "rathers heat over melody," that sings "alphabetically deranged." Where the poem indulges in lyricism, it does so in a vocabulary that is often quotidian, humourous and working-class:

> Better now with vegetables and
> for myself more and more hops, but some days shirt tails
> are creased and tense in unpopped knots. (*RM* 50)

Like Shaw's work in *Affordable Tedium*, Ferguson here creates more of an environment than a narrative. And it is an environment which is perhaps more accomodating to a reader sharing a similar class position; who might recognize the occasional necessity of a dinner of tomato juice and macaroni, or of a day care where "kids swear like crazy." Klobucar and Barnholden seem to agree with Fawcett's basic argument while differing from his ethico-political stance: "Ferguson is in charge of her language to the extent that she doesn't have to communicate, if she doesn't want to communicate" (42). Yet it is not so much that Ferguson refuses to communicate as that her scuffed up textual surfaces and syntactic enjambments *communicate refusal*. In this sense "Swoop Contract," from a certain historically gendered and classed position, may be read as intensely mimetic. In fact, critics such as Burnham or Barrett

Watten[34] have begun to advance critical paradigms which would read work such as this as analogical: as Burnham puts it, the work of Creede or Ferguson or Dorothy Trujillo Lusk often presents "a political content refracted through a quickly-changing syntactical and phrasal assemblage where the solidifying of phonemes into words and words into clause/sentence is an *analogy* for the possibilities of counter-hegemonic politics" (Burnham 2001, my emphasis).

Moreover, personal enigmas, while a sign of indulgence (and why should writers such as Ferguson not be permitted indulgences?) need not construct a "community of private realities connected only by a secret syntax" (Fawcett 100) but, as Jeff Derksen has argued, produce "condensed moments [which] are extremely contextual in their origin and are not the combination of reading and writing, but the writer (as subject) correlating with place" (Derksen 1994, 152). In this sense the continuous references to abuse (physical and sexual) in "Swoop Contract"—"Nomadic molesters sentenced to elementaries"; "Bruises to prove it"—might be read as personal testimonies of abuse[35], but also as the articulation of a locatable and recognizable class position.

Derksen has been a key figure in developing a more adequate vocabulary for discussing the work of his contemporaries. In the "Disgust and Overdetermination" issue of *Open Letter* (1998) which he edited and which includes work by Ferguson, he opposes a reading of these texts which sees them as solely formally disjunctive and refusing a position for the articulation of a politics:

> Taking language as a material, this work would appear to be disjunctive, jumping from discourse to discourse disregarding the

[34] See Watten's "The Bride of the Assembly Line: from Material Text to Cultural Poetics." *The Impercipient Lecture Series* 1.8 (October 1997): 1-36.

> syntactic linkages that would normally do the work of semantic unification. However, if these works are read as an *aesthetic rearticulatory practice*, they emerge as works of *conjunction*, creating linkages of social relations that are often disarticulated because they are imagined as simple contradictions or as outside of the aesthetic realm of the poem. (Derksen 1998, 9)

In "Swoop Contract," one immediate example of such rearticulations would be Ferguson's use of puns: "Yell timbre" or "The horses throat" are humourous conjunctions, particularly in the context of a poem replete with references to singing. Yet there are also more immediately political examples: "She sang and felt funny around the women. How to take them" (51). In this passage the violent overtones and connotations of social acceptance / unacceptance implicit in the idiomatic expression "How to take them" which are normally, in Derksen's words, disarticulated, are brought to the fore. But the most important conjunction that Ferguson's work creates, in "Swoop Contract" and throughout *The Relative Minor* as whole, is between 'high culture' and working class significations: "She sings a great deal. Her linguistic, dirty mouthed, her speech, acquiescent" (52) (to invoke her personal history, Ferguson once had aspirations to become an opera singer). But even as these conjunctions are forged, Ferguson's work also reminds us that certain class schisms are insurmountable: "Red flush because in that museum talked about, more station representation. Some will never conjure culture, grab their coats, slink. Some stink of their own manoeuvre" (51).

My claim above that Ferguson has refused to provide a discursive contextual frame for her practice, to articulate a poetics, should be qualified somewhat. There

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[35] It should be pointed out that in an interview with me (September 2000, Vancouver),

are a number of moments in *The Relative Minor* where the text provides reflexive commentary from which a poetics could be extrapolated, although such moments are always undermined by Ferguson's resolute intransigence, which often manifests itself in irony or parody. An example would be her definition of "lyric" in the section of definitions in the middle of the book: "**lyric**, the principal that at a fixed temperature the pressure of a confined idea varies inversely with its volume" [59]. This intransigence also takes the form of suggestion or indirection, as in, for instance, the opening lines of "Cross Words":

> grandiose in Canadian province
> ice immediates the author, branding
> word partly burnt Coal River
> the music of syllable is an optimal statement
> a brain, a child, an inquisition (71)

This passage seems to invoke a thematic take on "Canadian literature" in which the landscape proprioceptively (and deterministically) "immediates" the writing, but also brings to mind Olson's equation of the syllable with the brain: "the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE" (Olson 19) as well as his personification of syllable and line as children: "But the syllable is only the first child of the incest of verse (always, that Egyptian thing, it produces twins!). The other child is the LINE" (18).

Ferguson uses a similar strategy of evasion, contradiction, and suggestion in a talk she gave at the Kootenay School in the early 1990s entitled "And Weep For My Babe's Low Station." The talk is as heteroglossaic a composition as *The Relative Minor*: Ferguson begins with an analysis of the various sociolects – "the polarities of speech utterance" – spoken on the television program "Star Trek: The Next

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Ferguson hotly contested this reading.

Generation," which she reads as a utopian, "virtual heteroglossaic reality, democratically negotiating communicative strategies." She then cites and expands upon Charles Bernstein's comment from *A Poetics* ("State of the Art") that "Poetry should be at least as interesting as, and a whole lot more unexpected than, television" (Bernstein 1992, 3), and follows with a brief song about famous women such as Lady Godiva and Betsy Ross. The talk also includes a childhood narrative about her father, a reading of some of the mock dictionary entries I mention above, parodic horoscopes about poetic tastes, a rejoinder to Fawcett's "Skinhead Formalists" which rearticulates his arguments as a starship captain's log detailing an encounter with strange new beings, an adolescent prayer to god, and a narrative about Kevin Davies as he was about to leave for New York City. Ferguson concludes with a reading of part 24 from Kit Robinson's poem "Dayparts," which suggests that the "public communication" which Fawcett insists is the proper business of art is no longer available as an option, even if a poet desired it:

> After the difficulties
> of correct spelling, serial
> murder, and extravagant
> gestures inappropriate to
> any context, the prospect
> of a simple, straightforward
> communication possesses
> a disarming appeal.
> That flight, however,
> is booked, and we are
> forced to go by ground,
> wending as we make
> up our way. In this
> way, we actually discover
> more to say, although half
> of it gets lost in translation.
> Finding places to stop
> and rest can be
> the best achievement of
> an ordinary day—
> an occasion fit
> to be tied up

by a redoubling
of every effort
until the moment spills over
and it's time to get back
to luck. Late arrivals form
the basis of a new
century, part figment, part
chill, a situation no one
could have predicted. (Robinson 86-87)

Coincidentally, Cabri also discusses this poem of Robinson's in the same essay in which he describes Ferguson's strategy of "resolute intransigence" ("Dayparts" was published both in Robinson's 1992 book *The Champagne of Concrete* and in the second issue of Cabri's magazine *hole*[36]). Cabri notes that the opening lines invoke "[t]he apparently self-evidently damning title of the language-centred magazine, *The Difficulties* (ed. Tom Beckett), Bernstein's poetic device of the spelling error, serial poem as 'murdering' sequential lyric" (Cabri 12)" – all accurate observations I believe. However, these lines also remind me of certain characteristics of Ferguson's practice, just as Robinson's work in *The Champagne of Concrete* as a whole shares important ground with Ferguson. The "difficulties / of correct spelling" to me suggests the problems faced by a poet lacking formal education, and "extravagant / gestures inappropriate to / any context" reminds me of some of the more lewd passages in Ferguson's verse ("drunk / having sex with Mom / in the lavatory"). Note that "the prospect / of a simple, straightforward / communication possesses / a *disarming* appeal" (italics mine): attempting such a communication might appear (to Fawcett say) more politically efficacious, but it is actually naïve and reduces the possibilities for resistance as the poet lays down her arms. In both her writing practice and as a cultural worker, Ferguson has been a sort of guerilla figure: "forced to go by ground," and "wending as we make / up our way" gestures not only towards

[36] Kit Robinson, "Dayparts." *hole* 2 (1990): 9-19.

such a provisional, tactical stance, but also invokes the "processional" nature of both Ferguson and Robinson's poetry – that is, the degree to which "process" is foregrounded in the writing. Finally, I cannot help but read the final lines with the KSW writers in mind, due both to the perception that they are "Late arrivals," that is, culturally belated, but also because of their situation in fin-de-siècle Vancouver: writers whose work may perhaps "form / the basis of a new / century."

Throughout "And Weep For My Babe's Low Station" Ferguson continually undermines her own discourse: "This wretched rhetoric, this sickening irony, makes me want to tear back to the red-necked wrong side of a bad town where I belong." But despite these seeming renunciations, her talk does offer us some insight into her intellectual understanding of her own practice (we can tell that she was reading Bakhtin and Bernstein, for instance). And while the detachment her rhetorical strategies create makes it difficult to cite any passage from her talk as "Deanna Ferguson's position," at one point she invokes in a rather circumlocutionary way some issues which I believe are at the heart of her thinking on poetics:

> Much has been said about poetry. Some of that that has been said has said that a poetry that would privilege language as a primary site to force new meanings and possibilities is problematized, because it is severed from the political question of for whom is new meaning being produced? That an ideal reader is an endangered species, and the committed reader has an ideological agenda both opened and closed, flawed and acute.[37]

[37] Ferguson cites here Erica Hunt from her essay "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics," in which she argues "there is nothing inherent in language centered projects that gives them immunity from a partiality that reproduces the controlling ideas of dominant culture." Hunt further writes: "One troubling aspect of privileging language as the primary site to torque new meaning and possibility is that it is severed from the

> This 'language poetry' would not be recommended reading on the starship *Enterprise*, because instead of advocating openness and pluralism in the interests of specific identities, or specific groups – Betazoid, Human, Klingon, Ferengi, and maybe someday Romulan - it would instead seek out and destroy the elaborate underlying principles and total controlling devices within the social technology, calling for writing as counter socialization, unveiling the fundamental building blocks of sense which reside at a lower level and the fundamental structure of the sign, which function systematically to reinforce a certain conception of identity by reinforcing conceptions of dialogue, communication, and the understanding of codes and mediums which govern our lives.

Here again Ferguson's 'argument' echoes Bernstein's in "State of the Art," where he argues against a poetry that would serve a pluralistic model of diversity, or would seek to preserve or resurrect a 'common readership' and reduce racialized, gendered and classed positions to content for 'official verse culture's' uniform mill:

> We have to get over, as in getting over a disease, the idea that we can "all" speak to one another in the universal voice of poetry. History still mars our words, and we will be transparent to one another only when history itself disappears. For as long as social relations are skewed, who speaks in poetry can never be a neutral matter. (Bernstein 5)

In the early 1990s in Canada, the literary landscape was continuing to shift under the critiques and interrogations advanced by different – and differing – communities.

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political question of for whom new meaning is produced. The ideal reader is an endangered species, the committed reader has an ideological agenda both open and closed, flawed and acute, that we do not address directly" (Hunt 204).

While there are some parallels in the rise of 'multiculturalism' between Canada and the U.S., the specific circumstances of the Canadian situation, with its institutionalized multiculturalism, its continual regional and bi-cultural tensions, and its more secular, cosmopolitan and urban population, has to be taken into consideration. Ferguson and the other KSW writers may have identified more with writers from the U.S., and were apparently reading the writings on issues of identity and difference of people such as Bernstein and Erica Hunt more than, say, Smaro Kamboureli.[38] But because the schisms that emerged between writers interested in a politicized writing characterized by formal innovations and those advancing a more conventional writing politicized by its articulations of gendered, racialized or classed difference took a different shape – and resulted in different consequences – in Canada, their writing needs to be situated within those circumstances. That is (and to perhaps generalize too broadly), whereas in the U.S. the poetry and poetic community that Bernstein ostensibly advances and speaks for in "State of the Art" has developed into a nation-wide constellation challenging what he calls 'official verse culture' for poetic hegemony, and thus continues to marginalize writing emerging from differing communities, in Canada KSW remains on the fringe of the cultural field, and could be compared in size, readership and cultural power to writing communities forged along gendered, regional or racial lines.

The main point I wish to make here, however, is that Ferguson appears to align her practice with this 'language poetry': a guerilla poetry that would "seek out and destroy" the ideological underpinnings of the "social technology" and propose instead writing as "counter socialization." This is not to say that her writing is not concerned with identity and difference; on the contrary, a book like *The Relative*

[38] I'm thinking here of Kamboureli's landmark essay "The Technology of Ethnicity:

Minor, read as a whole, produces in all of its carnivalism a sense of a very specifically gendered, raced and classed social subject. Neither operating within a hermetic, vanguardist vacuum as Fawcett claims, nor deigning to imagine a poetry that could speak over and across difference, Ferguson's writing, with its vacillations between disclosure and concealment, assertion and misdirection, is *relational* in its simultaneous orientation towards, and disorientation of, an other. Reading Ferguson's work is not 'productive' in that the reader can choose whatever meaning she wants; it is evaluative in that it demands recognition on the part of the reader of the social relations it maps, but also of the reader's position within those relations. As Ferguson concludes *The Relative Minor* in "ad ream": "She is something; a spot cognizant because others are here" (86).

Renovating Genre: Lisa Robertson

In February 1994, four KSW writers were guests on the CBC radio programme "Arts Tonight." The writers – Jeff Derksen, Lisa Robertson, Nancy Shaw and Catriona Strang – were in New York City as part of a tour of the northeastern U.S. dubbed the "Canadian Emergency Tour." The tour was organized by Peter Gizzi, a poet and at the time graduate student at Brown University, who was also interviewed by telephone on the programme, responding to questions about the Kootenay School of Writing. Asked by host Shelagh Rogers to describe their work, Gizzi responds with the following:

> I would say that their work is at once lyrical and also historical, and I'm interested in that as a mode of operation. For instance, Lisa Robertson and Catriona Strang kind of renovate archaic forms and

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Law and Discourse." *Open Letter* 8.5-6 (Winter-Spring 1993): 202-217.

> bring them forward into a modern time by questioning the authority of the voices. Actually, all five [sic] of them, when they write, have a very vivid language where they bring in advertising, latinate nouns and verbs, as well as just everyday quotidian information. It all seems to be swirling and mixed to reinvent what one would call the 'location': a state, a home, a village, also a theoretical state of mind or position. ('Canadian Emergency')

Gizzi further claims they are "reinventing the present...making the space have more potential." Later in the programme Robertson responds approvingly to Gizzi's comments, sharing with Rogers some of her thoughts on pastoral: "It's a representation of nature and eroticism that still filters through our own sense of lyric poetry. And I'm interested in renovating these ideas and making them useful to me now."

Robertson's work could be differentiated somewhat from other writers associated with KSW (I say 'somewhat' because, as I point out in chapter two, her practice and that of Strang overlap in important ways). Whereas the literary tradition that seems to have had the most impact on the majority of her contemporaries in Vancouver are the twentieth-century North American modernist lines, Robertson seems to engage more extensively with the broader British, European and classical tradition. Certainly the influence of nineteenth-century French literature on the work of people such as Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Peter Culley, or Gerald Creede is apparent, but with those writers the influence seems more tangential. With Robertson, an engagement with the broader western tradition has been fundamental to her creative practice throughout her career, from *The Apothecary* (1991) to her dialogue with

Virgil in *Debbie: an epic* (1997).[39] Her *Xeclogue* (1993, pronounced 'exec-log') uses – renovates – both the pastoral and dialogic conventions of the eclogue, her initial model being Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's "Town Eclogues" of the early eighteenth-century. *Xeclogue* consists of a prologue ("How Pastoral: A Prologue"), ten eclogues (Honour, Beauty, Liberty, Cathexis, Fantasy, Nostalgia, Exile, Romance, History, Utopia) and an epilogue. True to convention, it features a recurring dialogue of lament between two women: "Lady M." and "Nancy," as well as a chorus ("the Roaring Boys"). As she notes at the back of the book, *Xeclogue* was partly constructed through citations from and mistranslations of a multitude of sources, from Virgil and Frank O'Hara to Rousseau and Dryden to contemporary popular musicians such as Patti Smith or P.J. Harvey to gardening and natural history writers (Robertson 1993 n.pag). Yet despite this heteroglossia of sources and dialogic of voices, when read diachronically her text maintains relatively consistent tones, rhythms and diction.

The opening paragraph of the first eclogue, "Honour," establishes a pattern which Robertson's writing iterates throughout *Xeclogue*: a confusion of bodies, plants, and language in a heavily descriptive prose:

> I have felt regret but turn now to the immensity of a rhythm that in the midst of her own mettle was invisible. I'll describe the latinate happiness that appears to me as small tufted syllables in the half-light, greenish and quivering as grasses. Ah, the tidy press of the catalogue, the knotted plantlettes of a foiled age, the looming test of our grim diaphany, let me embrace these as the lost term 'honour' while I lace this high pink boot I call Felicity.

[39] As my colleague Dr. Stephen Guy-Bray pointed out to me, Robertson's career has followed a *cursus Virgilianus*, that is, a career which begins with work in a 'lower' genre (such as the eclogue) and ascends to a 'higher' genre (the epic).

From the outset, Robertson's text inhabits and transforms a historically gendered epistemology which would oppose the intellect and the body, technology and nature, and by implication man and woman. Here a traditional pun on books and trees (which pivots on the image of the leaf) is given an interesting spin as 'small tufted syllables' are compared to grass, and the catalogue is paralleled with the "knotted plantlettes of a foiled age" (or foliage, or 'folio age'?). Faced with an apparent choice between inhabiting a traditional semiotics available to women, or abandoning it to embrace a male symbolic order, this fin-de-siècle feminist writer chooses the former, however ambivalently. It is a project that appears to have some urgency:

> those peculiar monikers
>
> those russet quivering stalks
>
> those lags
>
> those plantlettes
>
> those elegant and massy coils
>
> Nancy, how can these be *Thought*? (from "Eclogue One: Honour")

Lady M's address to Nancy here concludes with an ambiguity: is "Thought" here a noun, or a verb? And if it is a verb, does its transitive action transform "these" into the noun form "Thought"? While I do not necessarily think Robertson has William Carlos Williams in mind here, I can't help but hear echoes of "no ideas but in things." But the concluding line appears to problematize what many take to be an axiom of Williams, either directly (how can "these" things be 'thought,' or ideas) or by implying the impossibility of 'thinking' certain things (due to a patriarchal epistemology). In his *Autobiography* Williams offers some explanation of the phrase "no ideas but in things", which initially appeared in his long poem *Paterson*:

> But who, if he chose, could not touch the bottom of thought? The poet does not, however, permit himself to go beyond the thought to be discovered in the context of that with which he is dealing: no ideas but in things. The poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought, and that in itself is the profundity. (Williams 390-391)

Williams writes these words in the context of a diatribe against critics, both for using the poem as a point of departure for their own thinking, and for deigning to write poems in which the form becomes the vessel for a critical argument. The spirit behind his remarks seems to be an argument for a sort of unprocessed, organic approach to writing: ideas should enter the poem as 'things' arising imminently in the composition, not as preconceived rhetoric. In this respect, Robertson's text – despite its own metapoetic commentary – remains true to Williams' position. In fact, it is precisely the book's metapoetic reflexivity which makes it so difficult to explicate critically without being reductive.

Bruce Fogelman's essay "'Pan With Us: The Continuity of the Eclogue in Twentieth-Century Poetry" defines the eclogue as "a brief, highly conventional monologue or dialogue, usually in a rustic setting, in which some contrast is debated or implied between simple (natural, innocent, rustic or primitive) and complex (urban, urbane, or civilized) attitudes toward human existence and interaction" (Fogelman 109). Citing examples from a list which includes Frost, Yeats, Auden, and John Crowe Ransom, Fogelman further argues the eclogue in the twentieth-century "has taken two distinct directions":

> In one, following Tennyson's attempt to recapture an earlier phase of the tradition in a contemporary context, the setting is a recognizable variation of the conventional *locus amoenus*, and the dramatic episode

> remains brief and inconclusive. Its characters are less developed than those of the drama, but are often revealed in greater detail than their simpler prototypes. Though irony is used frequently in these poems, it is usually verbal or dramatic, like Tennyson's, and is subordinate to more conventional pastoral elements. Contrastingly, irony is central to the structure of poems written in the other direction, and pastoral conventions are generally used or referred to in ways that show them to be unserviceable to the poem's sensibility. They are either altered to such an extent that their relationship to traditional uses is barely recognizable, or they are evoked in their traditional forms as irrecoverable possibilities of another place and time and another frame of consciousness. (115)

Robertson's *Xeclogue* does not easily fit into one or the other 'direction' which Fogelman identifies. As I note above, she does employ a number of the conventions of the eclogue, and rather than demonstrating how those conventions are "unserviceable to the poem's sensibility," her 'renovations' appear to be an attempt to recover something serviceable from the past for use in the present. But the eclogue genre – and Robertson's renovations of it in particular – could also be read as an analogue for the condition of poetry in North America at the end of the twentieth-century: a chaotic and convoluted present which looks back on a seemingly orderly past, not so much with nostalgia as with a blank stare. And, of course, the feminist politics of Robertson's text, indeed of her entire oeuvre to date, situates this dialogue between past and present within a gendered frame: "I needed a genre to gloss my ancestress' complicity with a socially expedient code: to invade my own illusions of historical innocence" (Robertson 1993, n.pag).

If, as Fredric Jameson has suggested, "it is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten to think historically in the first place" (Jameson 1991, ix), then Robertson's text attempts this very 'postmodern' thinking. Yet even if we have forgotten *how* to think historically, I would argue that our age, perhaps all too aware of this situation, is particularly obsessed with its own historicity. What distinguishes Robertson from Lady Mary Montagu is not only, to invoke T.S. Eliot, that Robertson knows more than Montagu (and Montagu is that which she knows), but that she seems to have a uniquely reflexive understanding of herself as a historical creature (notwithstanding Montagu's own remarkable historical contributions and advances). This seeming paradox is mirrored repeatedly throughout the text by Robertson's ambivalent, often contradictory stance: an ambivalence no more clearly displayed than in her attitude towards the very genre she deploys, especially its nostalgia:

> Dear Nancy,
>
> It's the same day. I had meant to read you the word in my purse – a word like lipstick, petulant and sentimental as a dress, yet complicit with your smudged revolution. But I let the moment pass, and now 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 expedience of hope. But yield to the evidence. And do not decline to interpret. A smooth span of nostalgia dissects the crackling gazebo. I closed my eyes. (from "Eclogue Six: Nostalgia")

"Lady M" here appears aware that by invoking nostalgia, she is risking censure, but claims it is crucial to "the politics of girls." Similarly, if the "language" which was being "raised as a girl" is "a system of dreaming fake dreams," then these eclogues, in their discontinuities and artifice, hyperconform to this language – an ambivalent, reflexive inhabitation of received conventions being Robertson's apparent strategy.

In his essay "Time Out of Motion: Looking Ahead to See Backward," Bernstein writes of Oscar Wilde and Charles Algernon Swinburne that "[t]heir commitment to artifice – not easily understood by the motto 'art for art's sake' – reflected the idea of a language that does not depict a separate external reality: art produces continually new Reals" (Bernstein 114). Written in a different but perhaps no less decadent fin-de-siècle, *Xeclogue* bravely attempts to imagine a new world, or rather construct one from the shadows of past worlds. In so doing the text struggles to maintain a balance between rejecting utopic thinking at one moment and advancing a feminist utopic vision the next. In "How Pastoral: A Prologue," Robertson writes of an "ancestress" who bore "no verifiable identity" and whom the speaker tracks "among the elegant tissue of echoes, quotations, shadows on the deepening green." This ancestress appears to the speaker in deep sleep, and narrates 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. [...] 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.

What follows in Robertson's text, then, is a parading not only of an obsolescent genre, but I would argue an obsolescent – for the contemporary North American writer – language. This is a language which is heavily descriptive and modified, latinate, characterized by archaisms – in short, a language more European than North American, more of the past centuries than of the present. What Robertson hopes to create, the implication here seems to be, is a utopic vision, "anagrammatic" to the current social world but, in its artifice, clearly separated from it.

Robertson's use of archaic, obsolete or rare words performs a function similar to her renovation of an obsolete genre. The archaisms she uses, strangely enough, often have a negative connotation: *pudor* ("shame"), *puling* ("whining," "plaintive"), or *froward* ("obstinate," "unreasonable"), for instance; yet these pejorative overtones must be historicized within the book's gendered frame. These are words that would probably have been often applied to women, and Robertson appears to attempt here to recuperate them into a more positive, active context for the female speakers ("Yet could not draw the forward girl / She's small and slim and so will slip away" [from "Eclogue Two: Beauty"]). Often a word such as "fard" will have a rather fortunate double-entendre: "fard" means both to paint the face so as to hide defects and improve the complexion, but it also means to embellish or to gloss over anything – a nice example of Robertson's conjunction of bodies, social practices, and language. Moreover, she uses not only archaisms, but a specialized vocabulary as well, especially botanical or fashion terminology (again locating and deploying an historically debased – because 'feminine' – lexicon): "quincuncial," "russet," "luping," "selvage," "umbelliferous" and pistillate." *Xeclogue*'s lexicon might appear

at first glance to be unusually large, but many of the more unfamiliar words are actually repeated, usually according to the eclogue in which they appear – for instance, "whippet" in "Eclogue Eight: Romance" or "pudor" in "Eclogue Two: Beauty." This seems to be the result of the dialogic structure of the genre: a word is introduced by one or more speakers, and the others incorporate it into their responses.

The distinction I am making between 'American' and 'European' languages, between a 'contemporary' and a 'classical mode' if you will, might be further clarified with a reminder that Olson, in "Projective Verse," admonishes against the descriptive functions:

> The descriptive functions generally have to be watched, every second, in projective verse, because of their easiness, and thus their drain on the energy which composition by field allows into a poem. *Any* slackness takes off attention, that crucial thing, from the job at hand, from the *push* of the line under hand at any moment, under the reader's eye, in his moment. (Olson 20)

I do not intend here to situate Olson as a synecdoche for twentieth-century American verse writ large; merely that he rearticulates an emphasis, from Pound to Williams to Creeley and, to return to the context of Vancouver, Davey, Bowering et al in the pages of *Tish*, of precision and economy of diction, and a rejection of received understandings of poetic language as ornamentalized or as ordinary language prettied up. The writers I invoke are all male of course, and an argument could be made that this rejection of ornament might be the result of a patriarchal impulse, although writers such as H.D. and Denise Levertov share common ground with the men on these points. But I want to stress here a difference in place and time rather than gender, and argue that Robertson's writing, not only in its heavy or even baroque use

of description but also its uses of simile and archaisms, seems to be an audacious rejection of twentieth-century North American poetic mandates. This is not to say that Robertson rejects the twentieth-century as a field of reference (she acknowledges a variety of twentieth-century influences in her "Note" at the end) but that her writing seems a conscious attempt to 'forget' some of its lessons.

The opening paragraph of "Eclogue Four: Cathexis," provides a good example of Robertson's heavily modified verse:

> All the flowers are glass flowers and looking
> into them the senses would vibrate in a
> gelatinous thrum. Each leaf's a sumptuous
> dervish; hurled from the vasty sun, its fretted
> points so hard and bright and tangy, it leaves
> a feeling of dangling – yet, with an oily
> ease, fronds like a fern's give hint to the
> deep blue minutes the green boys take. The
> hot dark stippled tints are indefatigably
> pleasurable and like windows or hairpins the
> mitten-shaped leaves are really those pleas-
> ures that do not, like those of the world,
> disappoint your expectations. All these
> briskly flecked notions sieve through a giddy
> tissue, unnatural red and rubbed grainless as
> if a green touch had deferred or shucked
> history.

As Robertson perhaps self-consciously puts it, in *Xeclogue* "all the flowers are glass flowers" and "each leaf's a sumptuous dervish." We are a long way from a rose is a rose is a rose. Despite the differences in lexicon and ornamentation which I am drawing between Robertson's work and much of twentieth-century North American work and, by inference, the other writers associated with KSW, her tactics here result in the familiar effects of opacity and indeterminacy. And, like many of her contemporaries, the paradox of her poetry is that although it is hermetic, idiosyncratic and dense, implying exclusivity, it also implies inclusivity in its plural, collective pronouns and urgent second-person address.

What further distinguishes Robertson's work from that of the other KSW writers is that her poetry is less contextually local than, say, Shaw's or Derksen's or, at the extreme, Ferguson's. A text such as *Xeclogue*, notwithstanding its apparent difficulty, appears to resurrect the concept of an 'ideal reader' both by its renovations of a classical genre and with its highly stylized 'beauty.' Robertson's poetry, more than any of the writers I have discussed, would probably travel the best (a condition perhaps related to her more 'internationalist' stance which I address in Chapter 2): at home on the shelves of both language poets and Renaissance professors, of interest to the editorial boards of both *Tessera* and *W*, recommended reading for both graduate students and autodidacts. This is not to say that Robertson is the most talented of the KSW writers, nor (on the flip side) that she is somehow lacking in integrity or originality; neither is it to say that she is simply extending a patriarchal, European canonical line. It is to say that the (ambivalent) historical self-awareness demonstrated by the structuring consciousness of *Xeclogue*, the speaker of "How Pastoral," extends to Robertson's own awareness of literary history and of her own artistic project. Although I have suggested that Robertson for the most part appears to

eschew a twentieth-century modernist line, in her contradictory, eclectic and idiosyncratic relation to tradition, not to mention her unabashed aestheticism, she seems comparable to Robert Duncan, a self-described "derivative poet" whose "Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar" Michael Davidson describes as "a poem 'of' derivations even while it creates its own 'mosaic' or field of conjecture" (Davidson 148). Much the same could be said of Robertson's writing in *Xeclogue.* Yet I would argue that Robertson's – and Duncan's – radical intertextuality pushes their work further into the hermeticism and relative autonomy of 'poetry' – understood both as an inherited archive and the isolated work on the page. While most of the other writers associated with KSW appear to desire an integration or the development of conjunctions between the literary and the social fields, Robertson's work, *pace* her own "ardent, political address" ("Eclogue Ten: Utopia"), remains best considered within the relative autonomy of the literary field.

Distance and Dissonance in Jeff Derksen's Writing

Jeff Derksen's relation to the history and social organization of KSW – an organization he played a crucial role in founding – is paradoxical. He is arguably the best known writer among them and staunchest advocate of their importance in Vancouver's literary history, yet his extensive critical output and statements on poetics distinguish him from a scene usually characterized by a refusal to produce such explanatory documents. Derksen's critical/theoretical articulations of poetics occasionally take the form of explicit statements, but often are embedded in reviews or critical commentary on other works. These would range from such publications as "North Of," his review of Steve McCaffery's *North of Intention* published in *Poetics Journal* 8 (1989) and reprinted in *hole* 1 (1990), his statement "Exploded View" in the

premier issue of *West Coast Line* (1990), and his long and seminal essay "Sites Taken as Signs: Place, the Open Text, and Enigma in New Vancouver Writing" in the collection *Vancouver: Representing the Postmodern City* (1994). He has thus produced a critical exterior to his work which provides a context for reading and a vocabulary to discuss it - a situation both helpful and problematical to critical approaches. That is, there is a temptation to read Derksen's poetry as a demonstration of his poetic theory, and given his intelligence and commitment to that theory this would not necessarily be a reductive approach. Yet his 'creative' or primary texts also delink from their author, producing unpredictable excesses and unfolding in unforeseen ways. The task is to situate his poetry in the context of his critical writings and to map these departures.

One of the primary concerns for Derksen, and for most of the writers around him, has been the construction of the subject in writing: how to balance a resistance to official notions of 'voice' with a desire for agency and a position from which to launch an ideological critique. In "Exploded View" Derksen describes a tendency he sees in much of the writing of the early 1990s:

> Obviously, a lot of recent poetry has contested the centrality of the subject – of a monologic, single-voiced poetry – but in work that is returning to examine the exploded view of the self, there is a tendency to have the diverse elements of the poem subsumed to defining the self. This produces a 'self-realized' writing that is a stable discourse attempting to stand outside of the dialogization of language, outside of the dialogic nature of reading and the self – other discourses are not excluded as they once were, but are objectified by the gaze of the subject. 'I am stabilize, retract, sworn.' (Derksen 1991, 145)

The quotation concluding this excerpt, from Derksen's 41-stanza extended poem "Solace" (also published in the premier issue of *West Coast Line*), seems to problematize a reading of this passage as critique. While the language sounds critical of a "tendency to have the diverse elements of the poem subsumed to defining the self," of a "stable discourse attempting to stand outside of the dialogization of language," Derksen's citation of his poem appears intended to be exemplary. Given his extensive reading of Bahktin in the 1980s, and his commitment to a dialogic and centrifugal approach to writing and the subject, this seems contradictory. Derksen further explains that from this position, the "subject still operates as a centre, as if all other discourses define only it and are seen only from its perspective" and that "[t]his leads to a writing that is still accumulative, drawing in and authenticating the self by looking at discourses as objects that do not have a reciprocal effect" (145).

Despite this seeming confusion, Derksen concludes his statement with a description of how his practice diverges from these tendencies in recent poetry, again providing examples from "Solace":

> 'Solace' itself plays with accumulation and dispersal, both in its paradigmatic patterning and in defamiliarizing shifts in established patterns ('I am steam, number system, gapped at standard') and perspectives ('Clouds and pores'). Shifts in attention and the focusing on sound clusters seek to break the 'automaton in it' – an intent or attempt to create an erotics in this attention....Devices that arise from writing as a social activity, devices that seek a reciprocal effect. The self is more than the sum of its discourses – there is the personal in there – but the self also shifts, effecting contexts and being affected by contexts. The gaze back has to be anticipated. (145)

"Solace"[40] does indeed create a series of recurring, paradigmatic patterns which shift and morph within their iteration. Such patterns include recurring motifs (such as the "hammer" or the language of postage), the first person indicative "I" followed by a series of three descriptives ("I am ringed, calculate, hitched" [48]; "I – was solid, soluble, rational" [52]) or a chronological notation of the days of the week ("Completely useless / therefore forgotten Thursday" [37]; "Although, / Monday headache impinged" [41]; "Saturday is a birthday" [48]) which creates a sense of temporal brackets or limitations around the production of this discourse. Rather than emerging from the self as a defining centre, Derksen's writing situates the self as constituted and circumscribed by discourse, often 'pinned' or overwhelmed by everything from the weather to economic circumstances:

> Biographical details give a sense
> of place from the neck up
> to mountain. If not for the rain
> I would walk. The gap is management,
> blue and temporal, and very real
> (jacked up as evidence). The hammer hits –
> then sound proves popular negotiating
> a specific day I was sixteen. No
> image. Haven't verified so wet is
> upper case, me mouthing. Hemmed
> in by economic margins, equally keeping
> dogs and cats. Coins in the grass
> or oil on asphalt. Sip at edge

[40] "Solace" was reprinted as part of Derksen's first perfect-bound book *Down Time*

to slight sway walk down the stairs

wake, wonder, postage due. (40)

In this stanza we have, as Derksen has put it elsewhere, "the writer (as subject) correlating with place" (1994, 152) – Vancouver is not so much described or observed in the poem as it is suggested or evoked: as mountains, as rain, as loading docks, as poverty; in short, as a context which constitutes and determines the writing subject in a reciprocal relation: "Biographical details give a sense / of place from the neck up / to mountain." The subject is not so much a stable centre but is observed from an "exploded view," the voice shifting from first person conditional ("I would walk") to third person indicative ("me mouthing") to what sounds like second person imperative ("Sip at edge / to slight sway walk down the stairs / wake, wonder, postage due").

In "Solace," as in much of his poetry, Derksen self-reflexively comments on his own imminent act of writing, a tactic which works to make visible the writing subject as constituted in a reciprocal relation with material discourses:

Reduced to a roost, with a hard floor

a ruse that carpet's one's knees. Functional

but finicky, I find myself

folded, turned in at elbows. Bracketed

I bow out

begin a frustrated walk

that wants of. High turquoise

tiles that prove hard

to spell. Advise before leaving

looms or integrates looks for an aesthetics

(Derksen 1990). All following citations are from that text.

in itself. How do I look. A body

stands as algebra

or adds up in a non-closure

of underwear. Creator, instigator,

a dyslexic DJ. (45)

The material fact of the body is also insistent in this passage, but it is a body not only constituted in but described *as* language, as a system of signs: "A body / stands as algebra"; "Bracketed / I bow out." This is almost a reversal of a feminist "body writing" – as opposed to introducing the corporeal into the linguistic (or rather revealing the presence of the body in language), this writing introduces the linguistic into the corporeal. In "Solace" and throughout Derksen's work in the 1990s the body becomes almost grotesque, the passive recipient of violent and contorting forces – perhaps a materialization (rather than a metaphorization) of the condition of the subject: "I find myself / folded, turned in at elbows." A distance is created between the writing subject and the subject in writing, and the reader is often implicated in this distance. For instance, the humour of the lines "Creator, instigator, / a dyslexic DJ" rely upon the reader's as well as the writer's "dyslexia" – their recognition of "DJ" as a dyslexic reversal of Derksen's initials.

There is a difference, then, between a simple objectification of and distancing from discourses and what Derksen describes as an "erotics of attention," the arrangement of these discourses in a dialogic structure, or better an aestheticized structure which reveals the inherently dialogic nature of the discourses. This dialogism has consequences for our understandings of textual dissonance, the 'voice' of the speaking subject, the writer/reader relationship, and of a trope which exists at the intersection of each of these: irony. Irony, as Rae Armantrout has pointed out,

"seems to have become problematic in the postmodern poetry world" (Armantrout 674). For Armantrout, a contemporary discomfort with irony arises out of a perception that it is "supercilious," but as she further points out "[t]he supercilious relation between the informed and the ignorant may be inherent in the structure of knowledge, echoed in all relations between the knower and the known or even between one thought and the next which revises it" (674). Linda Hutcheon also remarks on one of irony's "traps": "the complacent smugness and condescending stance of the ironist who feels both politically correct and ideologically self-aware" (Hutcheon 79). In order to avoid such a smug, supercilious and (the implication is) politically inept stance, the distance produced by irony's dislocations must be closed or inhabited somehow, and the objectified discourse (irony's implied detachment from intention and locution necessarily objectifies discourse) must be read in a reciprocal relation to writer and reader.

Derksen's long poem "Interface," from *Dwell* (1993), seems to have become something of a "signature poem" of his, given its inclusion in anthologies such as *Writing Class* and Sharon Thesen's *New Long Poem Anthology* as well as Derksen's use of a similar form – serialized, aphoristic statements or citations – in other poems such as "If History is the Memory of Time What Would Our Monument Be" (also in *Dwell*) and in his recent chapbook *But Could I Make a Living From It.* It is also among his more ironic poems, particularly in its use of decontextualized quotations from unacknowledged sources:

> "We can see the day when borders will mean nothing more than knowing where to cut your lawn." (1994, 2)

"It's only with plain talking, and a give and take on both sides, that will ensure there are forests in the future." (4)

"Racism has no place in the battlefield." (17)

While each statement clearly creates an ironic distance between the citation and the progressive reader (and the assumption that the reader is "progressive" is both utopian and unsettling), their 'meanings' remain context dependent. The first statement could be read as a comment on an agenda of globalization in which the disappearance of borders between nation states is simultaneous with the reification of property rights and the suburbanization of North America. The second, terrifying in its absurdity, points out the limitations, indeed the hopelessness, of resource management when left to a corporate/labour/activist dialogue. The third is the most ambivalent, because whereas racism clearly remains one of the prime motivators and justifiers of war, the statement could still hold in an era of "clean war" and "collateral damage," not because racism does not factor into military decisions, but because the idea of "battlefield" is becoming obsolete (at least from the perspective of western hegemony). At first glance each of these statements might be seen as humourous – and indeed the dissonances they create are amusing – and thus imply a certain self-satisfaction in the writer/reader exchange, a nod or knowing glance. Yet their implications, particularly of the second one, are so depressing that self-satisfaction soon turns to disgust at one's powerlessness. The statements share the common thread of being spoken by a person in authority, almost as if by the detached, unlocatable voice of hegemony: only they all remind us that hegemony *is* locatable at moments. While corporate executives and free-trading politicians and military officers may often sound stupid or even insane, they are the people making micro-

decisions with macro-implications. This is not quietist or nihilistic or complacent writing. If it might be said that "irony is politically paralyzing, that it delights in pointing to problems instead of imagining solutions" (Armantrout 675), then irony serves an important function to the extent that problems need to be pointed out, that the disarticulated unconscious of our culture needs to be made visible. The imagination of solutions cannot occur until the problems are identified: as Armantrout writes, "[a]rt is the play of resonance and dissonance. To the extent that it can foreground social dissonances, it can serve a political end by increasing people's discomfort" (675).

As I allude to above, the implied reader in this text is clearly one who would be sympathetic to the critique performed by, for instance, the citations just discussed but also by such statements as "The percentage of blacks in the U.S. Armed Forces is higher than many other industries – this was talked about as a progessive step" (6) or "General failure of hippies" (10) or "The structure I hate also hates me, but it makes me, and that's where the problem starts" (2). The 'position' which obtains here might be comparable to earlier oppositional movements (say the antiwar movements of the 1960s) with its critiques of authority, racism, and military aggression, but it is clearly an "anti-liberal" position which refuses to imagine an outside, indeed is only too aware of its own complicity in that which it critiques. Following Alan Wilde, Linda Hutcheon has suggested that "postmodern irony is the structural recognition that discourse today cannot avoid acknowledging its situation in the world it represents: irony's critique, in other words, will always be at least somewhat complicitous with the dominants it contests but within which it cannot help existing" (69). "Interface" (and for that matter most of *Dwell*) encourages or betrays a double-complicity: the reader(s) are complicit with the 'voice' in the text, or with the stance of its authorial

signator, in which case the text's readership becomes an oppositional community of sorts; at the same time the text's readers (and its author) are complicit in the wider structure which they "hate," but which also hates and makes them.

Irony remains only one trope which creates this dialogic between resonance and dissonance, between recognition and exclusion. Like much of the work emerging from the context of KSW, Derksen's writing is highly enigmatic – a condition that is a sign of its contextual localism. In "Private Enigma and the Opened Text," Alan Davies reads the "private enigma" as a signature device of authorship:

> The enigma may be no more enigmatic to the reader than is the rest of the text, which may seem 'of a piece', or deliberately and equally not of one. But for the writer, the enigma remains a sign of himself in the text of himself, a unique entry of himself upon his language. It is that part which he obstinately holds to as he gives it all away. The presence of the reader is implicit in the pleasure of enigma; the author is a voyeur, enjoying as he writes, the pleasure of his reading of his text. (Davies 71)

Derksen's use of enigma is far less author centred: like his use of irony, its effects hinge upon the reader's participation, recognition, and evaluation of the social codes of his text, and thus implies a more social or collectivist stance. One of the more obvious and popular enigmas in "Interface" are the listing of isolated statistics, in descending order, throughout the poem: "Soviet Union 24.9%" (2); "United States 18.3%" (2); "Great Britain 17.1%" (4); "France 8.9%" (6); "China 6.3%" (8); "West Germany 5.4%" (10); "Italy 5.4%" (11); "Japan 3.5%" (13); "Sweden 2.5%" (14). No explanatory context for the statistics is provided directly, yet the reader might be able to discern or create his or her own context through the recognition of certain

cultural economies at play in the names of these nation states. The position of "Great Britain" in the ranking just below the U.S.S.R. and the U.S., for instance, might provoke a recognition that the top three are the main allied victors in the Second World War, a recognition all the more likely when it is noted that countries of comparable or greater economic power - West Germany, Italy, and Japan, the defeated powers in that conflict – all rank far below. What is inevitably mapped here, at least, is a certain global hegemony or division of powers at the apex of the Cold War. The key to this code is actually provided outside of the synchronic confines of "Interface," in "Lap Top," the following poem in *Dwell*:

> The statistics of arms
> sales in the "world market"
> are very distant
> now. The adjectives mark
> that for me and take me
> back, maybe five addresses. (21)

Yet direct knowledge of the referential matrix of the statistics, while certainly informative, is not necessary for the enigma to produce its effects: it is the relation of the nation states and the statistics to one another, and the sort of global grid that the reader maps out among them that is important here. For some readers, the absence of Canada from the list might also provoke its own mappings. In fact, Derksen's enigmas often operate to reify national and cultural 'borders,' at least with respect to the recognition or construction of contexts – I'm thinking here less of overt Canadian historical references ("At no point in Canadian history has a federal government been so unpopular: January 1991" [9]) than of references to the "Rocket Richard riots" (8)

or a diction that includes "grinder" or "bonspiel" – a more localized, culturally contingent matrix.

If Derksen's writing might stand up to accusations of ironic smugness or complacency, or enigmatic hermeticism, the distances and detachments which I have argued mark his writing might also suggest a lack of emotion or feeling in the work. As Fredric Jameson has suggested (mistakenly, I would argue), "the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centred subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling" (1991, 15). Jameson further argues, following Jean-François Lyotard, that these older emotions of alienation and anxiety have been replaced with the euphoria of "intensities," and that an aesthetic characterized by "schizophrenic disjunction" (29) (he famously provides the example of Bob Perelman's poem "China") leads us to these intensities. Yet Derksen's work, while displacing a "centred" subject, does not refuse a subject altogether – a subject-in-process is rather situated in a reciprocal, dialogic relation to an objective social context. An argument that Derksen's writing results in what Jameson has termed the "waning of affect" might seem more persuasive if we consider the overall detached or cynical tone of the book: "feeling" and "sincerity" having become apparently inextricable in our assumptions. But does distance necessarily imply a lack of sincerity, and does dissonance refuse the possibility of feeling?

"Temp Corp," the final poem in *Dwell*, with its isolated, laconic words, phrases and fragments, might appear at first to reach the heights of enigmatic, ironic detachment. Yet the poem addresses a classic topic: death, in this case the death of a loved one and the consideration by the poet of the question of mortality. The title

nicely juxtaposes the two "opposing forces" – temporality and corporeality – that are returned to repeatedly throughout the poem. Yet the title also invokes a corporate context that is never far from the surface in Derksen's work – "corps" often use "temps" as a cost-saving strategy – and the invocation of such a context in relation to a poem about death might seem troubling to some. Yet that is what is most interesting about "Temp Corp": its refusal to sentimentalize death or to mark it off as in excess of corporate domination, and to recognise how ideology permeates our most intimate spaces:

> its cusp temporal
>
> or corp
>
> with an industrial
>
> façade (76)

Like all of the poems throughout *Dwell*, in "Temp Corp" the writing often erupts from a generally enigmatic, disjunctive textuality into moments of directness and clarity:

> names an
>
> X
>
> felt-penned
>
> on her abdomen (77)
>
> lymph rhizome
>
> not a benign blossom (86)

The second example I provide here also appears to question a signature device of Derksen's oeuvre – the use at times of a highly theoretical register – through a reminder of the corporeality of the rhizomatic metaphor's vehicle (Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic schema being very much in vogue at the time of *Dwell's* composition and publication).

Even in a poem dealing with as intimate an event as the death of one's mother (*Dwell* is dedicated "*for Peggy Derksen / December 10, 1930 – April 2, 1993*"), Derksen interrogates or refuses the lyric voice which might express grief directly. Instead, the speaker is situated within a history, a genealogy, grief accumulates collectively, and the event permeates all aspects of the social world rather than remaining exclusive to the interiority of the monadic subject:

an anxious

male generation (85)

genealogy

stroked in

plastic on a wrist

where I fit
in (94)

now I

hate the phone (95)

In the sense that death is a temporal event, temporality comes to inhabit the corporeality of the grieving subject, the response to the event slowly becoming "habitual" in the sense of Bourdieu's notion of "habitus": "a worried, lived" (75) or

every

day

to
everyday (80)

Far from being devoid of emotion, "Temp Corp" is a remarkably touching poem, all the more generative of powerful feeling when juxtaposed with the distances, detachments and dissonances that mark much of *Dwell*. Of course, *Dwell* is an intensely emotional book overall, marked with tones of anger, frustration, regret, grief and at times joy or exuberance in the recognition of beauty.

My procedure in this section has been different from that in the section on Ferguson's work, for instance, in that I have largely anticipated critiques rather than responded to existing ones. In this sense I might be seen as setting up a series of critical straw men which I then proceed to knock down or dismantle. Yet while no one to my knowledge has published an argument which accuses Derksen's work of lacking emotion or of being smugly ironic, I have heard these arguments made both in informal discussion and in settings such as the graduate classroom (I will discuss a specific incident momentarily). Moreover, in making these arguments about Derksen's writing I am attempting to respond to broader criticisms which have emerged from different directions of contemporary innovative poetics in general – that it is elitist, hermetic, emotionless, vacuous, cynical and politically disabling – arguments that have been made usually from the left (Fawcett, George Stanley and to some extent Jameson) since the right pretty much ignores such writing. Writing about

the "Language School" in the pages of *Poetry Flash* (July 1985), Tom Clark accuses several Bay Area poets (Barrett Watten in particular) of being "'long on theory,' short on feeling," and of being "over-cerebralized and absolutely lacking in the kind of formal transposition of emotion which good poetry – or good writing – always possesses" (Clark 11). Although Clark is not writing about Derksen here, the latter's work certainly demonstrates correspondences with that of Watten or Silliman; moreover, Clark's claim that their work lacks a "formal transposition of emotion" is accurate. Derksen's poetry does not operate as a shuttle moving the cargo of the lyric poet's emotions across to the reader, but this does not mean it does not demand an emotional response.

One of the anecdotal situations I refer to above occurred in a graduate seminar early in my PhD program called "Difficulty, Poetry, Theory: Reading Present Feeling," given by Susan Rudy at the University of Calgary in 1997. During our discussion of *Dwell* the class divided into two camps, camps which also happened to correspond with gender divisions in the seminar, with the female students making the arguments that, to paraphrase, Derksen's writing lacked "emotion," was "patriarchal" and, because of its "postmodern" assumptions was politically disabling, and with the male students in the position of defending his work. That the class divided so clearly along gender lines remains both illuminating and troubling for me, as does my suspicion that personal friendships and animosities influenced our readings and arguments. The seminar had included on the syllabus a quotation from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, in which Woolf asserts that contemporary poets are distinguished from those of the past because "the living poets express a feeling that is actually being made and torn out of us at the moment" and that "[o]ne does not recognize it in the first place; often for some reason one fears it; one watches it with

keenness and compares it jealously and suspiciously with the old feeling that one knew" (Woolf 22). Woolf's insight should be kept in mind when reading contemporary writers such as those associated with the Kootenay School, and to others producing "unrecognizable poetry": new feelings demand new forms, and new forms anticipate new feelings.

CODA: THE KOOTENAY SCHOOL INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

This project has focused for the most part on the period from the establishment of the Kootenay School of Writing in 1984 to the moment of the early 1990s which witnessed the publication of a number of first perfect-bound books by Vancouver poets associated with KSW. I have chosen to bracket my research in this way for two reasons. First, it provides something of a historical distance which I feel is necessary for a project dealing with contemporary writing. This historical distance allows me to observe, for instance, which of the writers have continued to publish and receive recognition, and this observation further allows me to justify my selection of writers to be looked at closely in my third chapter. Moreover, my research has brought me into close contact with current members of the KSW collective (such as Aaron Vidaver, Reg Johanson and Mike Barnholden) as well as with others on the Vancouver scene (such as Clint Burnham, Roger Farr and Roy Miki), and the relationships I have developed with such people, while certainly useful in discussing my project, might further problematize a research method perhaps already too reliant on anecdotal information, rumours or opinion, had I chosen to extend my focus to the more immediately contemporary writing and workings circulating around KSW.

Secondly, and this is perhaps related to my first point about historical distance, it seems that in the past half decade or more nothing has yet occurred at KSW to rival the New Poetics Colloquium, or the establishment of Artspeak, or the number and variety of writing seminars, or the flurry of publishing activity which occurred in and around the school in the 1980s and early 1990s. This is not to say that the scene has become moribund, nor is it to suggest that KSW should continue to chart a similar course. One of the school's strengths has always been its willingness to transform itself to meet changing circumstances. For instance, as I pointed out in my second

chapter, when it became clear that the need for the seminars KSW was offering was being met elsewhere (at accredited postsecondary institutions, for instance), the school switched its focus from teaching to programming, or rather began to emphasize readings over courses. The 1990s have been characterized by a series of such attempts at institutional transformation.

From 1994-1995, the board of directors of the school instructed the collective to restructure to include 50% people of colour on the board and the collective.[41] According to Michael Barnholden, this course was decided upon "to address a perceived problem pointed out at both the board and collective level as well as noises from granting agencies" (Barnholden n.pag). Efforts were made to bring in more writers of colour to read, such as Nathaniel Mackey, Larissa Lai, Phindar Dulai, Makeda Silvera and Rajinderpal S. Pal. According to the minutes from the 1995 AGM, all Canada Council funded readings, as opposed to readings funded by admissions charges and beer sales, were allocated to writers of colour. While the efforts of the collective to accommodate writers of colour working on an oppositional poetics are laudable, they ended ultimately in failure. There are several reasons for this, not the least of which would be a lack of interest on the part of writers of colour to join the collective – a lack of interest which may be the result of a desire to resist "tokenism," a sense of belonging to other communities, or a hostility to the innovative poetics associated with the school which might be seen as attacking "voice" and thus removing the ground for an oppositional stance. At the same time, perhaps writers working in more "conventional" forms which still presume the lyric conventions of voice, such as Marie Annharte Baker, were seen as too conservative to certain members of the collective. Efforts over the past twenty years to achieve a more

[41] From the minutes of the 1995 Kootenay School of Writing AGM (n.pag).

adequate representation of racial diversity in the private and public sectors through institutional mechanisms have proven, for a number of reasons (such as systematic racism and private and public sector downsizing), difficult to say the least: in KSW's case, reliant as it is on volunteer labour and personal relationships, it seems to me nearly impossible.

In 1995 Victor Coleman, a writer, publisher and arts administrator from Toronto, arrived on the scene and joined the KSW collective. Coleman soon decided that "KSW can no longer function as a 'collective'-driven organization and continue to fulfil its mandate" (Coleman n.pag). Sensing that the departure of "key members of the current collective" (I assume he means Derksen and Shaw) had left "gaping holes in the infrastructure" and that it was "in danger of becoming moribund," Coleman submitted for the collective's consideration "A Proposal for the restructuring of the Kootenay School of Writing." Coleman perceived that the current corporate structure of the KSW (i.e. the relations of the Board of Directors to the Collective) had become irrelevant, through the attrition mentioned above, "indecision, waffling and 'burnout' within the collective system of management." In other words, Coleman saw dwindling numbers attending collective meetings, and fewer projects being completed or even launched, and decided changes needed to me made to the collective structure. His proposal acknowledges that the 'Collective' should remain the *de facto* management committee, and that its members should commit up to five or six hours per month spent in some sort of administrative capacity. The lynchpin of his proposed restructuring, however, was the introduction of a position of "Director" who would "coordinate increased volunteer activity and concomitant programming and production" and "represent the 'collective' at all Board meetings and...coordinate the Board's fundraising initiatives" (Coleman n.pag). This part-time position of

Director would be assumed by a practising writer, and would be a paid position (Coleman budgets $6000 annually for the position).

Coleman's proposal, specifically the introduction of a centralized position of Director, was for the most part met with hostility by members of the collective. In a letter to Coleman, Barnholden, alarmed at "the latitude implied in that title," suggests that the title be changed to "coordinator." Barnholden reminds Coleman that "[t]he importance of the collective resides in the notion that writing and language and by extension all activities are collective by nature," and that this idea "is both political and aesthetic and seems to me to be central to the founding of KSW and its continuance." Peter Quartermain, who was at the time a member of the board, saw no benefits from the proposal except, he writes, "for the putative Director" (Quartermain 1). Like Barnholden, Quartermain saw the position of Director as a threat to KSW's collective structure, a structure which he perceived as offering more flexibility:

> Under the current structure, if anyone has any sort of project going, or that they want to get going, all they have (I mean s/he has) to do is get it going, move it, spend time on it, do a little work. Such anyone becomes Director for the duration – and works, may I remind us all, bloody hard in the process. When that project's over with, the next one comes along. (1)

Why formally "congeal power," Quartermain asks, in the hands of one individual? The potential benefits of such a move (organizational, financial) did not, in Quartermain's mind, make up for the loss of spontaneity and innovation which the collective structure provided. Quartermain closes his letter with a rhetorical question that reflects, I suspect, discussions and opinions among a number of members of the KSW collective at the time: "I guess a little Eastern Power Hunger hit us, hunh?" (Quartermain 2). "Eastern Power Hunger" suggests to me an entrepreneurial spirit, a

comfort with bureaucracy, and a desire to "take charge" which Vancouverites might have perceived and resented in a recent arrival from Toronto.

George Bowering also wrote a letter to the collective regarding the proposal, and his was one of the few, if not the only, supportive voice. In it he addresses this wariness of, as he puts it, "carpetbaggers from the east, telling us rubes how to do things" (Bowering n.pag). He points out that Coleman, "a margin-hugger all his life," has "a couple decades of experience in promulgating the arts in new kinds of underworld sites," and reminds them of Coach House Press, A Space, and the Small Press Fair, among other initiatives in which Coleman has been involved. Pointing out "the incontrovertible fact that the attending collective has been getting very small," Bowering suggests that KSW do one of two things: disband, which would not, he asserts, "be a cataclysmic occurrence," or restructure "along lines something like those suggested by Coleman." Bowering does not seem as alarmed with the idea of centralizing power in a directorship, and seems to assume that the putative director would indeed be Coleman. His main concern, as expressed in his letter, was that the alternative space stay alive because that space "is a venue for the really important voices in the art(s)."

At the 1995 Annual General Meeting of the Kootenay School of Writing, held September 9 of that year, Coleman's proposal was the subject of intense discussion, an intensity which comes across even in the perfunctory prose of the meeting's minutes. Coleman asserts that the position of "Director" was only intended as a fundraising position, i.e. that s/he could devote all of his or her time to the writing of grant proposals or the coordination of fundraising activities. Attendees of the meeting such as Quartermain, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Maxine Gadd, Penny Connell, Lisa Robertson, David Ayre and Charles Watts, objected to the title of director, and saw

the proposal as threatening KSW's "loose, anarchic structure" (Quartermain), its "ad hoc" spontaneity (Lusk, Connell), or its location as a place where young writers could "acquire public confidence" and be exposed to "getting things happening" (Robertson, Ayre, Watts). Gadd thought that the proposal had a "hierarchical quality" she disliked, and that its language seemed disrespectful of the volunteers who made things happen at the school. Eventually Coleman agreed to modify his term, perhaps to "coordinator" (the minutes don't say), but also added that "the consensus model is a dictatorship if one person can veto a proposal" – though as I've just shown a number of people voiced serious concerns.

Not much eventually came of these discussions. The collective continued to manage programming on an ad hoc basis, with an office manager hired to answer phones, clean, take care of correspondence and the like. If 1995 marked a crisis point for KSW, a point at which interest and attendance to the collective meetings reached historic lows, then the moment of Coleman's proposal seemed to have galvanized things once again, even if its recommendations were not adopted. Today, the KSW remains an important site on the Vancouver scene, continuing to host readings, offer writing seminars, and maintain brief residencies for visiting writers such as Denise Riley. The current office for the school, on Hamilton Street near the downtown east side of Vancouver, houses the Charles Watts Memorial Library, a significant collection of poetry which was donated to the school after Watts' death in 1998. In 1999 the school launched *W* magazine, a sequel to *Writing*, and while *W* has published interesting work by people such as Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Maxine Gadd, Louis Cabri, Clint Burnham, Lisa Robertson and Gerald Creede, I feel that it has done little more than its predecessor to provide a diachronic context for its synchronic contents. This refusal is a conscious one, however; much like the earlier editorial

boards of *Writing*, the editors of *W* (and, one assumes, the writers they publish) seem to regard the poetry / poetics distinction as a spurious one, and expect the poems not simply to "stand on their own," but to be read as the articulations of a poetics as well. As for Artspeak Gallery, it continues to direct most of its curatorial energies to encouraging a dialogue between writers and visual artists. As the gallery puts it in its mandate, "[w]e present a program of exhibitions of contemporary visual art by emerging and established artists and a program of publications, readings and events to explore the relationship between the visual and language arts. Of particular interest is work that crosses the boundaries between the two disciplines, exploring their common areas of praxis - a distinct aspect of the history of cultural practice in this region" (Artspeak Gallery Website).

It seems to me also that my own academic interest in the school has renewed interest among people in Vancouver and elsewhere not only in the current formation of KSW but in its historical role in the literary history of Vancouver and the ongoing development of innovative, oppositional poetics in contemporary North America. During my periodic visits to Vancouver to conduct my doctoral research, I was admittedly surprised at how helpful poets who were supposedly anti-academic turned out to be, and just how much people seemed to have invested in historical understandings of KSW and in readings of the poetry which emerged from its context. The Kootenay School of Writing will never be in a position of complacency, not only because of continually looming financial crises but because of repeated concerns internally about its relevance. Yet this constant sense of looming demise or creeping moribundity have forced the school to continually re-define and transform itself, and it is my prediction that it should continue to do so well into the twenty-first century.

Finally, I want to stress that this study of the Kootenay School of Writing was one of many possible approaches. Further research on KSW, whether it builds upon my work here or not, might approach the school from an entirely different angle or focus on different writers. My study has certainly neglected several fine writers associated with the school, in particular Dan Farrell, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Kathryn MacLeod, and Peter Culley. I have also for the most part situated my project within a "Canadian" frame: one which looks at the influences of and cross-border exchanges with American poets from the perspective of the Vancouver writers. Had I the time and resources for this project, a visit to the Mandeville Special Collections Library at the University of California, San Diego would have been most productive in providing some perspectives on KSW from the vantage point of American writers who visited the school, such as Lyn Hejinian, Charles Bernstein or Susan Howe. Having said that, I believe my project provides examples of the possibilities of the writer-run centre, and while the historical circumstances which prompted the creation and growth of KSW will not occur again (nor would we necessarily want them to), the lessons learned from this particular school, over and above the poetry which emerged from its context – the idea of writing arising from a collective effort, the possibilities of 'alternative' or at least independent sites for learning, the recognition that lack of resources should not necessarily result in a lack of activity – are fruitful ones for writers in centres large and small across North America.

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