

Brian Kim Stefans: An Interview With Jeff Derksen

BKS: My first question centers on the essay "Inside Looking Out: On Community," in which you make a distinction between "audience" and "community," the former "defined less as an ideologically imagined group... but more as a group of consumers," while within the latter, you write, there is "a pressure to imagine the group or site as a cohesive or coherent body based on aesthetics or some other point such as class, gender, sexuality, race or ethnicity." You continue to write that communities, whose internal definition often implodes by a contrary "drive to differentiate," are also "defined as well by structures or discourses outside of themselves." Without going too far into this theme of dual pressures, from both perceived necessities for coherence coming from the "inside" and the more pernicious pressures from the "outside" to become a marketable whole (which I feel reappears often in your essays, like in your review of book art for the magazine Fuse a few years back, and which I would like to discuss later), I was intrigued by the following:

"It is critical to note that the constitutive outside invokes the movement from community to audience as a positive and necessary step: this has similar consequences for both an avant garde and writers of colour. So the structure or discourse that can not initially make sense of a community enacts expectations, which are often internalized, that dictate how this community can become (to use some current metaphors) "visible" or "make their voices heard." This, of course, may not be what this community set out to do. For not all communities measure their effectiveness by being visible to the panoptic gaze of a dominant culture."
(St. Mark's Poetry Project Review. 2/3 97, p. 11)

Coming from the viewpoint of Asian American discourse as I know it in the United States, I find this striking, since I've always thought that such metaphors such as making oneself "visible" arose from deep within the minority communities, as can be seen in very small press publications (in the United States) such as "Breaking Silence," an important anthology from the early eighties, and "Voices Stirring," an anthology of Korean American poetry from 1993. As Asian American literature has moved to wider "audiences," the titles of anthologies have taken on a more ironic tone: "Charlie Chan is Dead," for example, published by Anchor - - though one still finds titles like "Native Speaker," a hybrid of the ironized and metaphor of "being heard." This is just a rough sketch based purely on titles -- it works within the writing as well -- but I feel that expectations, in the States, from Asian American writers (ie. what they have to do to "break through") involves ironizing one's difference rather than narrativizing it in a politically "oppositional" way, which is perceived (I believe) as being a bit earnest and "correct" by the mainstream. There is an erotics implied here, but I don't want to describe it just yet (though you can).

So the question is: do you see there being a sort of fault line between multicultural discourse in Canada and the United States (only one example of which I provide here)

which may be centered around the very notion of a "constitutive outside."? Also, are there minority communities -- specifically not avant garde ones -- that don't wish to occupy a place, either weak or strong, within the visibility of the "panoptic gaze of the dominant culture"?

JD: Canadian multiculturalism has to be approached within its own historical and cultural context and formation and not as a generalized recognition of plurality and diversity. From first being introduced as policy in 1971 to its enactment of law in 1988, Canadian multiculturalism is tied into Canadian unity questions as well as the management of diversity. Without going into a long placement, official multiculturalism sought to attach rights to the individual (following Pierre Elliott Trudeau's classic liberalism) which countered Quebec's attempts to have group rights recognized. Trudeau and this policy is then able to play off the rights of the individual as a universal against the more particularized rights of other groups (in this case Quebec). So a tension between universalism and particularism is initiated. This is outlined clearly, but without the real antagonisms that exist, by Charles Taylor.

So, on one hand, multicult is seen as a guarantor of individual rights that will allow an "ethnic" or racialized citizen equal access and full participation in Canadian society. But analyzed as a discourse or as a technology ◆ as Smaro Kamboureli and Roxanna Ng do - the Act (for it is an official government act) is read as an articulatory practice that is necessary in the construction of a national identity (and unified nation) to complete the sign of Canada by subsuming the ethnic and racialized subject into a national subject. Instead of being a liberatory gesture, multiculturalism can be seen as a powerful homogenizing interpellative act: the interpellation into the race labour system of Canada. Multiculturalism then is the ideological and economic management of diversity and is best analyzed within the matrix of race, class, gender, and ethnicity (as a set of real relations) and the relations to the means of production and reproduction. Attempts, such as Charles Taylor's views of a happy dialogic multiculturalism, to look at official multiculturalism as merely cultural lift these relations outside of the geoeconomic system that articulates ethnicities and "race."

As an act (and as an Act), official multiculturalism becomes the discursive exterior that designates "multicultural" identities: the categories of race and ethnicity are naturalized, again lifting them out of a set of relations. In a move that completes the "mosaic" of Canada, race is collapsed as a category into ethnicity (and class is dropped away) which ameliorates difference and antagonisms. This undifferentiated multicultural group is then subsumed into a universalizing Canadian identity which is said to be able to accommodate and recognize difference. This is the assimilationist and integrationist moves of multiculturalism.

Identified as a discursive act, multiculturalism can then be opposed, as it is no longer a naturalized set of relations. Judith Butler's work on iterative acts and how interpellation takes place within a discursive act is useful in this analysis because Butler proposes an agency that can come from the tactical refusal to be articulated as a subject by a discursive act that may grant materiality but does so under hostile conditions. She

proposes that there can be a turning away from the interpellative hailing. A positive way to think of this is not a doomed refusal to be "material" but rather as a rearticulation of the relations of materialization. The subject walks off the job: there's a protracted strike and a new contract is written. I find the idea of a rearticulation much more optimistic and enabling than "opposition" which implies resistance but not a reordering.

It seems to be not a matter of getting outside of this discursive exterior (I'd amend or drop my ocular metaphor from the community piece) but rather taking up a constitutive site and to begin a rearticulation. Officially there have been some striking successes: the Japanese Canadian redress movement was able to challenge the whole racist history of their internment. I feel as if I am being too proscriptive here (becoming a discursive act myself): but I'm pushing at the idea that if such discursive exteriors that interpellate subjects into a repressive set of relations are seen as a sutured totality rather than a bolted-down hegemony, then the process of rearticulation is set in motion. I'm leaning on Laclau and Mouffe for this sense. What I find compelling within the Canadian multicultural field is that there is an articulated movement to resist this seemingly liberatory law (which on the surface seems to appease a politics of recognition). This antisystemic activity is specific within different communities and an overview of various "multicultural" writing in Canada would show how texts resist or become in excess of multiculturalism itself. A Ukrainian writer from Northern Alberta, George Ryga, infused class relations into his realist novels which brought multicultural identities back into the relations that constitute them.

BKS: This distinction that you make between an "opposition" and a "reordering" is actually quite fascinating, since it seems an element of "language" poetics that is not often made, or is merely brushed over. Of course, many readers, and even writers, of "language" poetry regard the poetry merely as writing that foregrounds the artifice or materiality of language, but follow up with certain politicized arguments of "resistance" as a negating act to create an argument for the poem's positive social role, and hence the poetry's justification. While this seems cynical, it does appear true that this late in the "moment of language writing" that certain acts of "resistance" are taking on a quaint, commonplace character, and that the resisting element of the poetry itself is actually assured a degree of acceptance -- even transparency -- once it is mated with its proper theoretical tag.

My question, to relate back to the earlier issues discussed regarding "multiculturalism" in Canada, is how you feel these new "oppositional" strategies -- ie "reordering" strategies -- have been conceived and used that move them beyond the initial stage of creating the opaque non-subject, and whether you think that there is an inevitable debt to be paid to the oppositional strategies of the "language" poets, or whether these poetics, especially among ethnic communities, have created "reordering" poetics via an entirely dissimilar path.

In your article on Fred Wah, "Making Race Opaque," for instance, you write of an "alienethnic" poetics, a poetics that "risk identity throughout the representational sign, but do not abandon a politicized identity." This is held up against a monolithic Canada that has constructed a discourse of difference, or a machinery of assimilation, that homogenizes differences of ethnicity into a (to use our mutual friend Peter's term) a "gumbo" -- hence the need to create differences specifically so that they are not assimilated. While such a configuration of Wah's (much reduced here) could be applicable to poetics of some of the "language" poets, it would be completely absent from those that have completely sacrificed the "representational sign" for a freed signifier. On the other hand, this description could be suitable for a poet who has had no relationship at all with "language" poetics.

So, how are these "reordering" strategies being utilized, and who is doing them?

JD: Perhaps I can be more concise and shift the term reordering to rearticulation. And I do this to widen the possibilities of a social artistic practise beyond "opposition" -- with its implications of being reactive -- to a more active role as an articulatory practise. So I'm moving these terms from Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Hegemony and Socialist Strategies) into the artistic field in order to try and locate the different levels that a poetics can operate as an articulatory practise. As well, I'd like to foreground that different communities take different tactics in their articulatory practise, that each cultural site or moment articulates or de-articulates elements within their own sets of relations. What is "oppositional" for one community may not be a position that is available or desirable for another community; what is complicit for one community may be an articulatory practise that enables a new set of relations for another community.

The draw to this model of articulation is that, within it, hegemony is not seen as a totality that one can then oppose, but that hegemony is seen as a sutured totality which is open to rearticulation. This model can slide down from the construction of a nation (or a national literature), to the composition of communities, to the formation of the subject. At the level of the subject, it is a performativity that denies a homogenous position and looks for links between positions while denying a totalizing effect of a discursive exterior.

What I'm ultimately interested in is how (to paraphrase your last question) these articulatory practices are used by different communities and how these practices relate to the social field that they take place in. To move into a troubled relation of aesthetics and intentions, I look at textual/artistic devices as a contingent articulatory practise: how does this device articulate a set of relations in the text, and how does that extend from the text to the social field. I don't mean how is the "word in the world," but how does a text propose a rearticulation of social relations. At different times, different devices take on an articulatory role within different communities. What may seem tired "oppositional strategies" for language poets may be a precise articulatory move in a different community. I want to be very clear that there is no sort of aesthetic Darwinism in which avant garde aesthetics are grown into by differentiated communities. Politicised aesthetics are contingent and perhaps become transparent not when they are absorbed into a mainstream or the "academy" but when they are no longer in a position or relation to

the social field that allows them to have an effect. So I'm not so worried about a process of banalization and debanalization but about a kind of effectiveness of aesthetics. Devices are not timeless. Communities of writers make tactical decisions based on their position within the literary and social field.

The problem of how a device or even a writing scene may seem to be transparent or tamed in some way, a sort of aesthetic lapdog, perhaps doesn't lie so much in the devices, but in how the text has been read. Language poetry has been read in a variety of ways that place it as a classic avant garde to a reaction to the breakdown of public meaning in America. That such a social project can be reduced to a depoliticized move to foreground the materiality of language instead of a project that took language as always ideologically saturated is troubling. But these texts could be read as an articulatory practice that is taking extreme measures to rearticulate a set of social relations by using a homology of language and social order, or of the reader and the relations of production. The problem then lies not in the devices but in the critical method that the texts are squeezed through. At the "Assembling Alternatives" conference in New Hampshire on the Labour Day weekend in 1996, it seemed that there were a number of people who were beginning to articulate a cultural poetic method that would allow for texts to be read more as an articulatory practice rather than a symptom or a reaction to the social field. Barrett Watten's "/////////" from the Impercipient Lecture Series is also coming from the same angle.

A "proper theoretical tag" that renders an aesthetics transparent within a certain site is also an articulatory practice in that it brings a text, or community, into a specific set of relations. What seemed most exciting to me, in the early and mid-eighties about the Language project, was that they were defining their own work theoretically before it could be articulated into a more dampened set of relations. It's too easy to imagine an absorption into the academy as the ultimate resting place, a sort of scrapheap of rusted out texts that are pilfered for parts when the "new" needs to be renewed. It would seem to be an ongoing process of articulation and rearticulation by and at different sites.

I also think that a lot of this "reordering" or rearticulation will have a belated effect: a curious gap given that, as I've said above, aesthetic/ideological decisions are made within the context of a rapidly changing set of social relations. The work done by emergent writers in Vancouver beginning in the mid-eighties has yet to be looked at in any detail; and that scene is already dispersed and been reformed. The relationship of "Vancouver" to these texts and the fierce rearticulation of a class politics within poetry that I think stands as a great "resistance" to the smashing of the Left by the right wing provincial and civic governments. The work of some younger racialized writers who are trying, as a part of their projects, to open identity politics to a contingency and a proliferation of positions is a hard-won rearticulation of agency within a text. Again, my interest is to see how these differentiated and differently positioned communities approach their textual projects as an articulatory practice. Without assimilating each practice into an avant-garde position, I am interested in how devices which have been defined as avant-garde (for instance the foregrounding of the materiality of language, or the distrust of normative syntax) are tactically used from different positions, within different moments. Avant

garde can be a useful term, precisely because it can be contested, but it does imply that there is one "front" instead of a suturing of linked moments which are open to rearticulation.

BKS: If, as you write, Canadian governmental policies "lift [racialized communities] relations outside of the geo-economic system that articulates ethnicities and "race," do you see a sort of return to the sort of "ethno-poetics" as being one course of community forming? Can a speech-based, or performative, poetics develop out of "a desire to not be articulated" (Butler) as a "subject." I think, in asking these particular questions, of one poem from Dwell which seems to confront these two poles with its echoes of Williams and Olson on the one hand, recognizing speech-based poetics at its literary origins, and on the other the "oldest city / known to typography," which seems to suggest the various "virtual" sites that are a favorite trope of Bernstein's.

The pure phrases are aggressive
and our only contact
is commerce. A tiered role model
is "speaking up" physically.

This is the oldest city
known to typography
an exclamation point
off the coast. It's undone

business of history
by the sea, the fort
at the end of the point
is a military base. "Todo
por la patria" is red,
yellow, and sedimentary.

This trope of "rearticulation" obviously calls into play the Language Poets early attempt to divorce themselves from the "speech-based" poetics of such groupings as the Beats and the Black Mountain poets one thinks of the too famous "I HATE SPEECH" declaration, the sort of textual equivalent of the title of Ginsberg's equally polemic title "Howl," which came alive, according to historians, during the variously-dated famous gallery readings (at which he would, of course, become "naked"). Perhaps it would be a misapplication of the term to see "Howl" as an attempt at a rearticulation of community relations, and yet it does embody an attempt at describing the sutured quality of the totality of the American fifties considering the interstitial life-style of the aristocratic Burroughs purchasing drugs amidst the mainstream commerce of Times Square, this working within the seams occurred on a biographical level as well even if the final phase of the Beat project was the "tune out" mentality.

How does a rearticulatory poetics confront the issue of performance of the "lyrical" or "epic" self (take your pick) on the stage of culture, which is to say, how does the author work in rearticulatory praxis? This question is pointed, especially as many of the sections from Dwell seem almost lyrical in structure. Does rearticulation necessitate the author's concurrent articulation of private self, of singular (temporal) being? How does a poetics of rearticulation operate in terms of the monologic suppositions of a speech-based poetics? Consequently, how does such praxis develop upon the purportedly "authorless" literature of a free play of signifiers?

[TBC]

[unpublished, but this chunk of it is archived in the Wayback Machine that keeps dead pages and links of the internet]

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